

## May my teaching drop like the rain... like storm winds upon vegetation, and like raindrops upon blades of grass. (32:2)

The choice of vegetation and grass as metaphors for accepting the Heavenly message begs elucidation. A *shirah*, song (the song of *Haazinu* which commences with above *pesukim*), conveys a message employing the medium of prose/poetry. As such, it uses verses/terms that bespeak significance, that captivate the mind and penetrate the heart and soul. Who does not like a nice lawn? Nonetheless, grass does not play an important role in our lives. Clearly, when seeking to convey an eloquent message, the imagery of grass as the vehicle to communicate the depth of the message leaves somewhat to be desired. The metaphor of tall, standing grain, which represents both beauty and consequence for human pleasure and consumption seems more appropriate.

*Horav Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer, zl*, explains that the Torah is alluding to a powerful verity concerning our ability to communicate with others successfully. *Chazal* (*Berachos* 6b) teach, *Devarim ha'yotzin min ha'lev nichnasin el ha'lev*, "Words that come from the heart enter the hearts of others." In other words, one must speak with sincerity, and the listener must be open to listening and accepting suggestion. If the listener's heart is disengaged, all the sincerity in the world will not penetrate a closed heart. It will not be a total waste, but the brick wall created by the listener will impede the desired effect. His refusal to allow his heart to direct its attention to the message will preclude its positive outcome.

This is similar to the effects of rainfall, whose moisture is indispensable to what grows on earth. A soil that was ill-prepared, unfertilized and not weeded, covered from the frost, and sprayed so that insects do not harm its crops, however, will suffer and not produce a bountiful, healthy crop. Grass, on the other hand (likewise, most vegetation), does not require such preparation and care. Rainwater alone will do the trick and generate its growth. True, grass and random vegetation may neither be as pretty nor as beneficial, but they do not require human intervention to grow. This was *Moshe Rabbeinu's* prayer. His hope was for his words/message to reach and penetrate the hearts of every one of his intended listeners – even those whose hearts had not been prepared/attuned to listening. Thus, he asked that his words should have the efficacy of rain falling on fields of grass and vegetation, which will grow their products even without prior cultivation.

Listening is not simply a virtue – it is a requisite for growth, without which we are unable to truly serve Hashem. Interestingly, the Torah does not use the word "obey." Instead, it writes: "listen," because blind obedience without cognitive reflection and comprehension is the behavior of one who acts by rote, who simply "does" without understanding why. "What" and "why" he is "doing" such service will not last long, because its foundation is not based in concrete listening.

I recently came across an article about the spiritual act of listening. The author cited a powerful and (I think) frightening story which was related by Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and creator of logotherapy, a form of therapy which focuses on man's search for meaning. He tells the story of a

patient who called him in middle of the night to inform him that she was at the verge of immediately ending her life. She was neither hysterical nor did she seem to have taken leave of her faculties. She calmly stated that she had reached the end of her rope. It was over.

Dr. Frankl kept her on the phone for two hours, explaining how her life was important, her value to her family in particular and her community in general, was meaningful. G-d loved her and wanted her to live. He enabled her to realize that her life had meaning. After two hours of arguments, the woman just as calmly declared that she had changed her mind. She was willing to go on living. When Frankl saw her next, he asked which one of his reasons for living convinced her to change her mind. She replied, "It was none of your arguments. It was the fact that someone was willing to listen to me in middle of the night for two hours that convinced me that my life was worth living."

I once explained the *ben rasha*, wicked son's, accusation against his family, as a plea to be heard. True, he was acutely aware that his rebellious behavior was very disturbing (to say the least), but all he wanted was a place at the table and a listening ear to be heard. He just wanted to be heard – not ignored. He wanted to know that his parents cared more about him than about his repudiation concerning religious practice. [This is by no means a vindication, but rather, an approach toward understanding his resentment]

Following the Holocaust, many of the survivors who comprised the Displaced Persons Camp could not cope with the devastating loss of their family and friends; The Nazi murderers had obliterated their communities, leaving broken individuals as the sole survivors of what had once been vibrant Jewish communities. One fellow was so distraught and angry that he dropped *Yiddishkeit* altogether. [We must remember that one has no exit strategy from Judaism. Once born as a Jew, he remains a Jew his entire life. One who convinces himself that by reneging Torah and *mitzvos*, he absolves his errant behavior – errs terribly.] Someone suggested that he bring his list of "complaints" to the *Klausenberger Rebbe, zl*. The *Rebbe* had become the power behind the rejuvenation of the Jewish spirit in the DP Camp, despite the fact that he himself had suffered inconsolable losses.

The man finally agreed to visit the *Rebbe*. He walked in defiantly, without his *yarmulke*, and exited one hour later with his *yarmulke* back in its rightful place, a new man, one who was on his way back to religious observance. [He became a *shomer Shabbos* once again.]

The man's friends could not believe the sudden transformation. They knew that the saintly *Rebbe* was a miracle worker, but the alteration of this man's downward spiritual trajectory in the space of a short conversation was mind-boggling. What did the *Rebbe* do? In one hour, the *Rebbe* had achieved more than they had done in several weeks. Furthermore, he had succeeded, while they had not.

He explained, "I went into the *Rebbe* and opened up all about my family members who were murdered. As I spoke, I began to cry bitterly.

“The *Rebbe* listened, and then he said, ‘I, too, lost my family. I lost my wife and eleven children, and now I am alone; I have no one.’

“When he finished speaking, he took my hand in his and began to cry with me. We cried together for an hour, our tears streaming down our faces without letup. I felt that I had rid myself of all my grief. I felt that someone shared my pain – someone cared more about me than about my abandonment of *Yiddishkeit*. Someone had listened to me.”