

The blessing: that you hearken to the mitzvos of Hashem, your G-d. (11:27)

The blessing – that you listen (hearken). Should it not have written *im tishme'u*, if you will listen? *Asher*, that (you will listen), sounds as if it is referring to one's ability to listen. I would assume that we all have the ability. It is only a question concerning our desire to listen. The Torah appears to focus on ability, rather than on desire. Perhaps the Torah is teaching us a lesson concerning listening: Listen with your heart – not only with your ears. Deep listening via the emotional compass of one's heart allows one to hear the "sounds" of those who are unable to express themselves orally. Furthermore, most of us are too busy listening for the purpose of offering a rejoinder to try to understand the speaker's message. It is a blessing to be able to listen, to hear beyond the sounds, to feel synchronous with the speaker.

There are people who, for various physical and emotional reasons, are unable to express themselves. It requires a gifted or very caring person to "hear" what this person is saying – even though he has not uttered a word. We all know the expression, "reading between the lines." This applies likewise to listening beyond the words. I think this incident took place with *Horav Chaim Brisker*, *zl*. A man came to him prior to *Pesach* and asked if it were permissible to use milk instead of wine for the four *kossos*, cups, of wine. *Rav Chaim* asked the man, "Why would you want to use milk instead of wine?" "*Rebbe*, I cannot afford wine," the man replied. *Rav Chaim* handed him a silver cup and said, "Take this and purchase wine for the *Seder*."

His *Rebbetzin* observed the exchange and came over and asked her husband, "Wine is not that expensive. You did not have to give him a silver cup just to purchase wine." *Rav Chaim* replied, "If a man is asking whether he may use milk for the *Seder*, it is an indication that he has no means to purchase chicken either. I gave him enough money to secure all of his needs for the *Seder*."

Rav Chaim listened with his heart. He understood that if the man had asked for milk, it meant he would not have any meat during his meal. Our heart's emotional compass allows us to hear what is not being articulated.

Horav Yeshayah Bardaky, *zl*, was the son-in-law of and successor to *Horav Yisrael Shklov*, *zl*, *Rav* of the *Ashkenazi Perushim* community of *Yerushalayim*, mid-nineteenth century. He was a caring *Rav*, who worried about the many trials and tribulations that his community was experiencing. First and foremost was the economic challenge of living in *Yerushalayim* during this difficult period. People were literally starving to death. There was little food and no money. People literally went from door to door begging. *Rav Yeshayah* understood their plight and went out of his way to address their needs.

Now for the story: One *Erev Shabbos*, a poor man appeared at his door and shared with him the fact that he did not even have a slice of bread for *Shabbos*. *Rav Yeshayah* wanted to help the man,

but, he too, had no money. It is not as if the *Rav* were paid. Poverty did not distinguish between *rabbanim* and community. They all starved, but the poor man had to turn to someone. Who else but the *Rav*?

Rav Yeshayah gave the man a small silver candlestick, saying "Go and sell this, and you will have sufficient funds to feed your family." The man thanked the *Rav* profusely and left. A few weeks went by, and the man was at the door again, asking for alms. *Rav* Yeshayah gave him his other candlestick. The *Rav* now had nothing. It was not long before the poor, wretched man was back at the *Rav*'s door seeking alms. The *Rav* told him that he no longer had anything. In order not to allow the man to leave his home empty-handed, however, he removed his *shtreimel*, fur hat (which was probably the only one that he possessed), and handed it to the man, saying, "Take this; perhaps you can sell it and use the funds to sustain yourself."

The man took the *shtreimel* and slapped the *Rav* on the face! This unparalleled act of insolence was accompanied by disparaging and shameful words leveled at the *Rav* for not doing more to help him. No adequate words can give meaning to what took place. *Rav* Yeshayah was a man known for his empathy, a righteous and caring person who certainly did not deserve this. He did not react to the man's humiliation of him. Indeed, when those who observed the scene demanded that he do something about what had just occurred, he replied, "If a Jew can act with such overwhelming bitterness, it is clear that he is hurting terribly. He is in such pain that he has lost his equilibrium." In other words, he had lost his composure, his self-control. Here we see how a *gadol* listened with his heart. He understood that no person in the right frame of mind would act with such impudence against the hand that had fed him. He was probably so morose that he had become temporarily unbalanced. How could he be faulted for his actions? A *gadol baTorah* looks at and notices the little things, the ones which the average person does not see.

Some individuals are seriously challenged, unable to express themselves; these people have feelings, but they are beyond our ability to discern. Someone who is mentally challenged has no way to share his emotions with us. We do not know what goes on in the mind of one who is so challenged. Rabbi Yaakov Bender is *Menahel* of Darchei Torah, a *yeshivah* in Far Rockaway, that in addition to serving its mainstream student body, goes out of its way to reach out to students of varied backgrounds and learning disabilities. This story is about Shai, a young boy who was unable to join in regular classes due to his mental challenges. Nonetheless, his father would bring him to Darchei once each week to interact with the boys, so that he might be exposed to Jewish learning. It was on one particular Sunday that Shai was in school when, during recess, the fifth graders were playing a baseball game. Shai was included as an honorary member of the team.

The game was getting intense. It was the bottom of the ninth inning, bases were loaded, and Shai was up at the plate. Understandably, he knew nothing about the game, other than what he had observed when his "friends" played. He barely knew how to hold a bat in his hand. Nevertheless, Shai took bat in hand and began to swing wildly. Strike one. Strike two. He had missed twice. Truthfully, no one expected him to connect with the ball, but, if it made Shai feel good, if it made

him feel like one of the boys, then he would “play.” The winning points were potentially in Shai’s next swing. More than winning, the boys all collectively wanted Shai to experience something he would probably never again have the chance to experience: Driving in the winning point. Two boys came over to Shai, put their arms around him, and held the bat with him. The pitcher (who was on the “opposing” team) left the mound and moved closer to the plate. He then very slowly lobbed the baseball towards Shai’s bat. The boys then guided Shai’s arms through the swing, until he connected with the ball, hitting it towards the base line. The third baseman “allowed” the ball to continue past him. All the boys began to chant, “Run, Shai, Run,” as they encouraged Shai to run the bases.

Shai began to run. Legs pumping, arms flailing, with no sense of direction, but guided by his friends, Shai ran, to the encouragement of “Run, Shai, Run.” When he missed first base, one of the boys caught him and turned him around, so that he could touch first base. He was shown in which direction to run – and he ran. He was never so excited in his life. He rounded the bases with everyone (on both teams) yelling, “Go for it, Shai!” When he came into home plate – all of the boys, both teams, were clapping and screaming, “You won the game!” He was hoisted upon their shoulders, as they all danced.

It was a glorious day for Shai. He had become part of the team; he had contributed to others. It elevated his personal esteem. You see, Shai – like all boys and girls whose lives confront challenge – have emotions, have feelings. They are often unable to express these feelings. Thus, it is difficult to “hear” them. These boys, however, listened; they heard, and, as a result, they not only helped Shai, but they changed their own lives and became better people.