

Returning to our Senses #3: Ears

Rabbi Michael Zion | Text and the City | Yom Kippur 2015

Exploring texts and inspirations about our sensory organs, as a path to approaching Teshuva. This third piece reflects on the ears. (Check out previous installments: [the Eyes](#) and the [Mouth](#)).

*You have heard my voice:
Do not hide your ear at my breathing,
at my cry. (Lamentations 3:56)*

קולי שְׁמַעְתָּ, אֵל תַּעֲלֶם אָזְנְךָ לְרוֹחֵתִי לְשׁוֹעָתִי (איכה ג:נו)

Yom Kippur is the time of the ear. On the day in which we refrain from putting food in our mouths, keep our hands to ourselves, and direct our eyes inwards - our ears perk up, ready to do some work.

The first day of Rabbinical School. My teacher in pastoral counseling (and life) Dr. Michelle Friedman tells us sharply: “You might think you’re here to learn what to say to people, to acquire the Halakhic answers, the teshuvot. In fact you are here to learn how to listen. When people turn to Rabbis, they are rarely actually seeking advice. They are seeking to be heard. You are here to learn how to listen to people. You’re here to grow a pair of ears.”

Ears are quite awkward. Protruding, strangely shaped, and – unlike the ears and mouth – lacking a proper cover. What is the spiritual work of the ear?

The school of Rabbi Ishmael taught: Why is the ear made of stiff parts, but the ear lobe soft? So that if a person hears something improper, they can fold the lobe into the ear. (Talmud Bavli Ketubot 5a)

Before a trend of folded-lobes becomes a big thing, it is worth giving some depth to this idea. At first glance it is yet another knee jerk moralism, blocking out what the world has to offer in an act of self-ghettoization. But for Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, in his 16th century ethical-anatomical treatise “The Palm of Devorah”, it is about learning to hear the universe the way God does:

One ears should be ever open to hear only the good. Evil speech and ugly rumor should be barred from entering the ears, just as the Divine ears do not allow any cry of criticism or evil talk enter them. So too, a person should listen for the good and useful things; and anything which is angering - should receive no hearing whatsoever. ([Tomer Devorah Chapter Two](#))

Yet filtering out the bad and hearing only the good is just the first level.

Psychologists and Philosophers of Language have taught us just how hard it is to truly hear the other, to hear beyond hearing. This begins with differentiating between what *I* am hearing and what is being *said to me*. Our auditory input is experienced through veils of our own projections and interpretations, anxieties and concerns. Can we ever hear beyond all the veils?

Hearing beyond hearing begins with being attuned to oneself – so that all of my projections and anxieties can be set aside, in a pile of their own. Next, we seek to listen beyond the speaker’s own projections towards *us*, their reactions and messiness, to that which is at the heart of the matter. I am continuously jealous of a good therapist’s ability to say: “Here is what they are actually asking when they are saying this...”

Hearing beyond hearing should not be misconstrued as a dismissal of the express content of the statement. I still vividly remember my frustration when – as a child – I would have a tantrum and my parents would say: “You’re not angry about X, you’re simply tired”. If I wasn’t angry until then, I became angry once that was said (I now clumsily make the same mistakes with my children...).

Similar to the way every musical frequency creates multiple overtones without negating the fundamental tone, thus refining our hearing involves being able to hear and differentiate the various fundamental tones, overtones and harmonies created within what is being said – and registering each of them independently.

Hearing the Overtones

The ability to hear the overtones of all people is how [Rabbi David Cohen, the Nazirite Rabbi](#), understands Avraham. He interprets Avraham's name – *Av Hamon Goyim* – the father of many (*hamon*) nations, to derive from the Hebrew word המייה (*hem-ya*) which means song or harmony. Thus Avraham: Father who understands the harmonies of people. Abraham could hear both the individual tones and the overtones, truly hearing the yearning of the heart of each person and nation. And it is in the overtones where people who seem to be singing different notes are actually aligned and harmonious. To be Jewish, a child of Abraham, is to hear the music surging forth from every human being.



R. David Cohen, The "Nazirite"

For Cohen, Judaism is all about ears. His masterpiece, titled "[The Hebraic Auditory Logic](#)", claims that while Western logic is based on the primacy of the visual, that which can be seen and contemplated, Judaism is all about the auditory. Just as the

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English language continues to encode the assumption that eyesight is the path to truth (“Seeing is believing”, “seeing the light”, “world-view”, “I see” refers to comprehension, etc.) thus Judaism espouses an “auditory logic”: truth is achieved through the ears. *Hear O Israel* is much more central than *See*. God cannot be seen, but is achieved by hearing. To hear God means to obey him, thus the centrality of Halakha and actions in Judaism. According to Talmudic Damages, if one deafens the other, they must pay damages as if they took their entire life away. Functional ears are what make life worth living.

Between Hearing and Obeying

I am in synagogue, the Yom Kippur prior to my Bar Mitzva, reciting the viduy confessional of sins. Apparently beating my chest quite enthusiastically in the process. A compassionate face turns around and says: “You know, beating on the chest is not a form of self-punishment. We are simply knocking on our hearts. Hopefully it will hear the knocking and open up.”

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At first glance, Yom Kippur is a day in which we account for whether we heard God in the past year. We confess – sounding to our ears all the ways in which we failed to fulfill Gods word, *lishmoa be’kolo*, to follow his voice. But keeping Yom Kippur as a test of obedience is missing the point. *To obey* refers to a power dynamic, while *to hear* is first and foremost a relational category. Perhaps we didn’t always obey – but did we hear God nevertheless?

Not that hearing is any easier. Obeying can be done from a distance. Hearing God assumes proximity. It is a much scarier affair. Adam and Eve, having failed to fulfill God’s commandments, reflect this first:

“God called to the human and said to him: Where are you? Ayekah?”

He answered: I heard the sound of You in the garden,

and I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself” (Genesis 3:9-10)

According to the Midrash, God’s voice continues to call out, asking humans “Where are you? Ayekah?” Avraham was not the first human that God spoke to. He was simply the first who heard... and didn’t run the other way. He heard... and fulfilled. During *Mussaf* of Yom Kippur, we retell the story of the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies. At the experiential center of the retelling is the moment in which the High Priest, as part of his confession on our behalf, recites God’s explicit name, the *shem hameforash*. When the Israelites in the Temple, and respectively when

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we in synagogue, hear this recitation, we fall to the ground. The ripples of hearing God's explicitness in this world is such a visceral auditory experience that it makes us become embryonic once more. We turn hearing from a passive experience into a full body dance, repeated multiple times.

Yom Kippur is the day in which we reflect on our hearing God in the world. The externalities of it refer to obeying, but the internality relates to the ability to hear God's call to humanity. We knock on our heart and ask: Where are you? To hear the question - and not hide.

God, Hear Us

Neillah at the small and crazy Yom Kippur minyan I pray at in Jerusalem. The fast is all but over, most other synagogues breaking out the refreshments, the supernal gate about to be locked. But we're still singing: we've got our foot in the door, preventing the gate from closing. We cry out: "Hear our voice, God. Don't let your ear ignore our call, our cry. We ain't leaving until you do..."

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Like good Jews, we answer God's Yom Kippur question with a question. Time and again on this day, we open the ark and ask: *Can you hear us?* We demand: שמע קולנו, *Hear our voice!* We cajole: You have heard my voice: Do not hide your ear! The ark becomes God's ear, and we rise to meet it and to call out: Hear our voice. Make our lives matter. Don't ignore us.

At the end of the day, the sharp sound of the Shofar clears our ears - and God's. In the newborn year, may our ears be open – to God's question, to our own, to others.

Gmar Hatima Tova,
Mishael

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