

Oh Somayach Light Lines

Published by OHR SOMAYACH INTERNATIONAL • Jerusalem, Israel

24 Shevat 5761 • February 17, 2000 • Parshat Yitro • No. 124

Light Insight

The Sight Of Sound

Twice a day, the Jewish People cover their eyes, meditate on the ineffable Unity of the Creator and intone, “*Shema Yisrael* — Hear! O Israel, Hashem our G-d, Hashem is One!”

The Shema is the basic credo of the Jew, his first declaration of G-d’s Unity and the last words to leave his mouth when he passes from this world.

Why is it that we say “Hear! O Israel?” Why don’t we say “Look! O Israel?”

When the Jewish People stood at Sinai to receive the Torah, they underwent an experience which was literally out of this world. When G-d spoke, the Torah writes that the Jewish People “saw the voices.” There was a dislocation of the natural perception of the senses. Kinesthesia. Seeing sound. What does it mean to see sound?

Sight and sound are very differently. Sight operates instantaneously. We see through the medium of light. Light is the fastest thing in the universe. It travels at 186,000 miles per second. Sound is relatively slow, moving at about 800 miles an hour.

The difference between the

speeds of light and sound symbolizes a fundamental difference between the two senses. With sight, we perceive a complete whole instantaneous. After this first sight, we may analyze what we are looking at in more detail, focusing on one element and then another, but the essence of vision is an instant whole.

Sound, on the other hand, is assimilated as a collage of different elements. We order these separate pieces of information, giving them substance and definition, and in the process, we understand what it is we are hearing. This process of assembly is not instantaneous. Our brain takes time to balance and evaluate what it is hearing.

When you listen to a lecture on a tape recorder, it’s amazing how much distracting ambient noise there often seems to be on the tape. You think to yourself: “That’s not the way it sounded!” When you listen to a lecturer in person, you aren’t aware of the constant drone of the traffic in the background, the noise of the fans and the air-conditioner. However, when you listen to a tape, those extraneous sounds vie for your attention. The tape recorder is not the human ear. The tape recorder is an indiscriminate “vacuum cleaner” of reality. The human

ear, however, takes the elements of what is available and it “hears” — it discriminates and balances.

This world is like an assembly line. The Hebrew word for “world” is *olam* which means “hidden.” You don’t see G-d in this world. He is hidden behind the facade of the world. You can’t see G-d in this world — but you can hear Him. If you tune your ears carefully, you can hear an unmistakable pattern in events. If you listen carefully to the un-historical history of the Jewish People, and weigh it in the balance of probability, you will hear G-d’s Voice. If you listen to all the seemingly coincidental events in your life, you will hear Him.

The reason we say “Hear! O Israel” is that, in this world, you cannot see G-d. You have to “hear” Him. You have to take the disparate, seemingly random elements of this world, and assemble them into a cogent whole.

There was only one time in history that you didn’t have to “hear” G-d’s Unity; one moment when you could actually see it. At Mount Sinai. There the Jewish People “saw” the voices. They saw with an incontrovertible clarity those things that usually need to be “heard.” Seeing is more than believing. When you see, you don’t have to believe. It’s in front of your eyes.

LOVE of the LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel

Ein Dor

Following the death of the Prophet Samuel, King Saul found himself facing a mighty force of Philistine invaders. When his efforts to gain Divine communication on how to proceed proved fruitless, he desperately sought to make contact with the spirit of Samuel through a woman

medium who lived in Ein Dor. The unhappy prophecy he received from this contact was that his army would be vanquished and that he and his sons would die in battle. (*Samuel I 28:3-19*)

Near this spot opposite Mount Tabor in the north of Israel is the modern kibbutz of Ein Dor.

Response Line

A Smashing Engagement

<Name@withheld> wrote:
My son is marrying, G-d willing, in June and we have heard of a pre-marriage ceremony called "The Breaking of the Plate." Would you be so kind as to share the significance of this ceremony as well as the actual performance. Thank you.

Dear <Name@withheld>,

Firstly, *Mazal Tov!*

When a couple decides to marry, they announce the occasion with an engagement party. In Yiddish this event is called a *vort*, which means a "word." At the *vort* the man and woman traditionally give their "word" and formally commit to marry.

There is a custom to break a ceramic plate at the *vort*. This symbolizes the seriousness of their commitment to each other: Just as breaking the plate is final, so too the engagement is final

and not easily terminated.

Breaking the plate also tempers the intense joy of the occasion, similar to

the glass which is broken under the chupah. It reminds us that the Temple is not yet rebuilt.

Customarily, the couple's mothers are the ones who break the plate. They hold the plate together and drop it onto a hard surface. It's important to wrap the plate well to ensure that no one gets hurt from the broken pieces. I once attended a *vort* where a flying splinter from a not well-wrapped plate went into the leg of one of the mothers.

Some have the custom to make a necklace for the bride from the broken pieces. Others give the broken pieces to eligible "singles" as if to say "may a plate soon be broken for you." Some break the plate at the wedding before the *chupa*.

Reading the Script

Larry Korn wrote:

Are you allowed to analyze someone's handwriting without their permission? Is that considered an invasion of their

privacy? Thanks.

Dear Larry,

In some cases, "privacy" is protected by *halacha*. For example, someone who causes a loss of privacy by knocking down a wall or constructing a building such that it overlooks another property may be liable for damages. It's prohibited to read someone's mail without their permission. Taking someone's notebook without their permission and reading it could be considered stealing.

But when you're allowed to read the writing — if someone sends you a letter, for example — there's no prohibition against picking up clues about the person's personality contained in the writing. It's not essentially different than making judgments about a person based on the way he acts, speaks or dresses. For example, if a person speaks very quickly and nervously, you are not "invading his privacy" by thinking "he seems nervous."

You should be wary, however, of indiscriminate use of your skill to pigeonhole others. We are commanded to judge others favorably and give them the benefit of the doubt.