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Seeing the Sounds

—קונטרס שבועי—
פרשת משפטים

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ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

By

The Weichholz Family

Seeing the Sounds

In this week's parsha, the Torah continues its description of perhaps the most significant event in the history of the world, Kabbalas HaTorah. Regarding this epic turning point in the development of Klal Yisroel, the Torah warns us, "Guard yourselves, lest you forget the events you saw with your own eyes."¹ The Ramban lists this warning as one of the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos.²

Why does the *possuk* stress that we Kabbalas HaTorah with our own eyes? It would seem that the mitzvos we heard with our ears were even more significant than the awesome sight of Har Sinai burning like a fiery furnace, and hovering in the air over our heads.

The Torah tells us that when Bnei Yisrael received the Torah on Har Sinai, they "saw Hashem's voice."³ Our Sages explain that they could see the sounds and hear the sights.⁴

The depth of this teaching can be understood in light of Rav Chaim of Volozhin's observation, that of all our senses, there is none as descriptive as sight. The other senses can sometimes deceive, but once a person has seen something with his own eyes, he has no doubt at all of its veracity.⁵ Therefore, for the majority of mankind, sight is the most significant of the five senses. "Seeing is believing," as people are wont to say.

However, Bnei Yisrael value the tradition we have received from the words of our forefathers, higher than our own sense of sight. For example, we cannot see Hashem, as the *possuk* states, "Man cannot see Me and live,"⁶ yet we are so certain of His existence that the Rambam writes, "Everything that exists in Heaven and earth, and all that is between them – have no existence other than what they draw from the ultimate truth of His own existence."⁷

What is man if not the breath of life that Hashem has blown into his lungs? This breath of life, the immortal soul, cannot be seen. Nor can we see the angels that constantly circle the world, doing Hashem's bidding. Yet we have no doubt at all of their existence, having received a tradition in an unbroken chain from generation to generation. For this reason, the Ramban⁸ and Sefer HaChinuch⁹ write

¹ *Devarim* 4:9

² *Sefer HaMitzvos*

³ *Shemos* 20:15

⁴ *Mechilta, Yisro*

⁵ *Nefesh HaChaim* III, note on ch. 11. See also *Bnei Yissaschar: Sivan*

⁶ *Shemos* 33:20

⁷ *Yesodei HaTorah* 1:1.

⁸ *Devarim* 4:9.

⁹ Introduction.

that our faith is founded not on what we perceive with our own eyes, but on the tradition we have received from our forefathers.

When Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Sinai, we were elevated to such an exalted level that we could “see the sounds.” This means to say, that we could recognize the veracity of the words we heard, as if we had seen them with our own eyes. At the same time, we could “hear the sights,” meaning that this visible, physical world became so distant from our thoughts, that it was as if we had only heard about it, and had never seen it with our own eyes.¹⁰

With this we can explain an interesting episode from the Gemara:

כי הא דיתבי רבי יוחנן וקא דריש: עתיד הקב"ה להביא אבנים טובות ומרגליות שהם שלשים על שלשים וחוקק בהן עשר על עשרים ומעמידן בשערי ירושלים. לגלג עליו אותו תלמיד השתא כביעתא דציצלא לא משכחינן כולי האי משכחינן? לימים הפליגה ספינתו בים. חזא מלאכי השרת דיתבי וקא מינסרי אבנים טובות ומרגליות שהם ל' על ל' וחוקק בהן עשר ברום עשרים. אמר להו הני למאן? אמרו ליה שעתיד הקב"ה להעמידן בשערי ירושלים. אתא לקמיה דרבי יוחנן אמר ליה דרוש רבי לך נאה לדרוש כאשר אמרת כן ראיתי. אמר לו ריקא אלמלא לא ראית לא האמנת מלגלג על דברי חכמים אתה נתן עיניו בו ונעשה גל של עצמות.

Rebbe Yochanan taught that in the future, Hashem will take gems thirty cubits tall and thirty cubits wide, carve from them openings ten cubits wide and twenty tall, and place them by the gates of Yerushalayim.

One of his students mocked this teaching. “Today no gem is even as big as a bird’s egg, and in the future such giant gems will be found?” he asked. Later, the student was traveling by boat when he saw in the Heavens a vision of angels carving the giant gems that Rebbe Yochanan had described.

“Who are these for?” he asked.

“In the future, Hashem will place these gems by the gates of Yerushalayim,” the angels told him.

The student then returned to Rebbe Yochanan and said, “Teach, Rebbe, teach. I have seen exactly what you described.”

“*Reika!* (empty one),” Rebbe Yochanan scolded him. “Had you not seen it, you would not have believed. You mock the

¹⁰ See *Meshech Chochma, Chukas; Meor Einayim, Beshalach*

words of the Sages.” Rebbe Yochanan then set his eyes upon him, and turned him into a pile of bones.¹¹

Why did Rebbe Yochanan scold the student only after he returned to verify Rebbe Yochanan’s words with his own testimony? Why did he not turn the student into a pile of bones when the student first challenged his teachings?

When the student returned to Rebbe Yochanan, amazed by the sight he had seen, he showed that he valued the vision of his own eyes over the tradition he heard from his rebbe, who based his teachings on *pesukim* from the Torah. This is what angered Rebbe Yochanan. The student had obviously attained a lofty spiritual level, having been able to converse with angels. Accordingly, he should have been able to “see the voice” of Rebbe Yochanan, accepting his Torah teachings as if he had seen them with his own eyes.

The punishment of being transformed into a pile of bones was *middah k’neged middah* (in equal and appropriate measure) to his sin. In outward appearance, the human body is no more than a bag of bones, held together by meat and sinews. It is enlivened by the invisible soul within it. Since the student valued only what was visible to his eyes, he was transformed into a lifeless pile of bones – all that is visible of man to begin with. Thus, Rebbe Yochanan called him *reika*, empty one, as if to say, “Are you empty of the holy soul, which you cannot see? Just as you believe in your own soul, you should believe my words.”

In a similar vein, the Gemara states elsewhere:

רב ששת סגי נהור הוה. הוּו קאזלי כולי עלמא לקבולי אפי מלכא וקם אזל
בהדייהו רב ששת. אשכחיה ההוא מינא אמר ליה חצבי לנהרא כגני לייא? אמר
ליה תא חזי דידענא טפי מינך. חלף גונדא קמייתא כי קא אוושא אמר ליה ההוא
מינא אתא מלכא. אמר ליה רב ששת לא קאתי. חלף גונדא תניינא כי קא אוושא
אמר ליה ההוא מינא השתא קא אתי מלכא אמר ליה רב ששת לא קא אתי מלכא.
חליף תליתאי כי קא שתקא אמר ליה רב ששת ודאי השתא אתי מלכא. אמר ליה
ההוא מינא מנא לך הא? אמר ליה דמלכותא דארעא כעין מלכותא דרקיעא
דכתיב "צא ועמדת בהר לפני ה' והנה ה' עבר ורוח גדולה וחזק מפרק הרים
ומשבר סלעים לפני ה' לא ברוח ה' ואחר הרוח רעש לא ברעש ה' ואחר הרעש
אש לא באש ה' ואחר האש קול דממה דקה." כי אתא מלכא פתח רב ששת וקא
מברך ליה. אמר ליה ההוא מינא למאן דלא חזית ליה קא מברכת? ומאי הוי עליה
דההוא מינא? איכא דאמרי חברוהי כחלינהו לעיניה ואיכא דאמרי רב ששת נתן
עיניו בו ונעשה גל של עצמות.

¹¹ *Bava Basra* 75a.

Rav Sheishes was blind. When everyone went to greet the king, he went along with them. A Sadducee then taunted him, saying, "Why does the broken bucket go to the river?" (Just as it cannot draw water from the river, so too you cannot see the king.)

"Come and I will show you that I can see the king better than you can," answered Rav Sheishes.

When the first contingent of the king's men passed before the spectators, there was a great roar of applause. "The king has come," the Sadducee told Rav Sheishes.

"He has not yet come," answered Rav Sheishes.

When the second contingent passed, there was again a great uproar. "Now the king has come," the Sadducee said.

"He has not yet come," answered Rav Sheishes again.

When the third contingent passed, there was silence. "Now the king has come," said Rav Sheishes.

"How did you know?" asked the Sadducee.

Rav Sheishes explained, "The kingdom of mortal men parallels the kingdom of Heaven, of which it is said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before Hashem. And behold, Hashem passed by him. Before Hashem, there was a great and mighty wind, which uprooted mountains and crumbled stones – but Hashem was not in the storm wind. After the storm wind there was a great noise – but Hashem was not in the noise. After the noise there was a fire – but Hashem was not in the fire. After the fire there was a faint voice...'"¹²

When the king came, Rav Sheishes recited a beracha, ("Blessed are You, Hashem... Who shared His honor with flesh and blood.")

The Sadducee then asked him, "Why do you recite a beracha over something you cannot see?" What was the fate of the Sadducee? Some say that his peers gouged his eyes out. Others say that Rav Sheishes set his eyes on him and turned him into a pile of bones.¹³

¹² *Melachim I* 19:12

¹³ *Berachos* 58a

This Gemara also teaches us that the truth should not be determined by what our eyes behold, but by what our ears receive. Rav Sheishes, who could not see at all, was more aware than the Sadducee not only of what occurs in Heaven above, but even of the mundane occurrences of this lower world. When the Sadducee obstinately refused to concede that he perceived less than Rav Sheishes, and went so far as to mock Rav Sheishes for reciting a beracha over what he could not see, he was punished *middah k'neged middah*, and his eyes were gouged out. Alternatively, he was transformed into a pile of bones like Rebbe Yochanan's student.

The Prophets describe the awaited Redemption, with the *possuk*, "And all flesh as one will *see*, that the mouth of Hashem has spoken.¹⁴" As it was when we first received the Torah, the truth of Hashem's word will be so obvious, that not only will we be able to hear it with our ears, but we will see it with our very eyes. For this we pray in the *kedusha* for Shabbos Mussaf:

וישמיענו ברחמיו שנית לעיני כל חי לאמר הן גאלתי אתכם אחרית כראשית להיות לכם לאלוקים

*"And in His mercy, He will let us **hear** again, before the **eyes** of all living things, 'Behold, I have redeemed you, at last as at first, to be for your G-d."*

¹⁴ *Yeshaya* 40:5