

Listen and I Shall Speak

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Parshat Ha'azinu

Give ear, O Heavens, and I shall speak! (Deuteronomy 32:1)

That's a strange sequence. The Heavens are first asked to listen and only then will Moses speak. We would expect the sequence to be, "I am about to speak, O Heavens, so listen up!" But no; Moses will only speak once the Heavens have given ear. It's deeply puzzling.

And yet. . . . And yet. . . .

What is the point of speaking before there is an ear to listen? Who would want to place his or her words on the wind? Counter-intuitive though it may seem at first blush, it really does make sense – spiritually and psychologically – to ask for a listener before one starts to speak.

I have served as a chaplain in the mental health units of several hospitals, and my patients have included, in addition to the general run of mental health patients, substance abusers and eating disorder patients.

The words with which this Torah portion begins – **Give ear, O Heavens, and I shall speak!** – remind me of my eating disorder patients. Almost every eating disorder patient – especially the anorectics – feels that she (and over 95%

of these patients are female) is not heard. Many of them have loving parents, but the daughters feel that their parents just do not listen to them. The parents, of course, perceive it very differently, but the parents are not the identified patients and are not – usually – in danger of starvation. When I visited these patients, I made it a point to show them that I was listening, usually by repeating back to them what they had said to me. And so many of them then told me that nobody had ever listened to them before. And, once they understood that somebody was listening, they said things that they had never said before and they were able to reveal their deep feelings.

No; of course it's not so simple as that makes it sound. It's a lengthy process – weeks, months, sometimes years – developing the trust that enables the patients to be aware that someone is listening, testing that trust, and, eventually, relying on that trust, but the short description will suffice to enable us to understand what Moses is saying. **Give ear, O Heavens, and I shall speak!**

Our words – as Moses understood and as the anorectic patients, in their illness, somehow also understand – are lost on the wind if there is no ear to hear them. Really to hear us and to let us know that we are heard. If someone speaks and nobody pays attention, has anything been said?

May we soon understand how to listen, so that others may speak.

May we soon learn that others are listening, so that we may speak.

Shabbat Shalom.

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