

תורת אביגדור

הגאון ר' אביגדור מיללער זצ"ל

SEFER SHEMOS - THE PENSON FAMILY EDITION

IN HONOR OF YEHOASHUA MORDECHAI'S UPCOMING BAR MITZVAH

TORAS AVIGDOR

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Service by Ear

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THE **PENSON FAMILY** EDITON

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פרשת תצוה

WITH

R' AVIGDOR MILLER זT"ל

Service by Ear

Contents:

Part I. Dedicating the Ear - 3

Part II. Appreciating the Ear - 6

Part III. Paying for the Ear - 9

Part IV. Opening Your Ears - 13

Part I. Dedicating the Ear

The Blood of the Ram

When the *kohanim* were inducted into the service of the Beis Hamikdash for the first time, we read of a ceremony that seems quite cryptic. Before the *kohanim* would be permitted to approach the *mizbeach* to bring *korbanos*, an *Eil Hamiluim*, a Ram of Consecration was sacrificed. And it was this inauguration service performed with the blood of the ram that empowered the *kohanim* to commence their *avodas Hashem* in the Beis Hamikdash.

And what was the first act that was done with this blood? וְשָׁחַטְתָּ אֹתוֹ - "And you shall slaughter the Ram," Hashem told Moshe Rabeinu, וְלָקַחְתָּ מִדָּמָו וְנָתַתָּה עַל תְּנוּפֵד אֶזְרָךְ וְעַל תְּנוּפֵד אֶזְרָךְ בְּנֵיז הַיְמָנִית - "and you shall take of its blood and put it on the *tnuch ozen*, the cartilage of Aharon's right ear and on the right ears of his sons" (29:20).

It was the ear of the *Kohanim* that was dedicated to the service of Hashem before anything else. Before the blood would be placed on their hands and on their feet to symbolize that the hands and feet of the *ovdei*

Hashem should be dedicated entirely to His service, it had to be placed on the ears of the Kohanim. And that's something that requires an explanation. Why is the ear the preface, the introduction, to *korbanos*?

The Value of Listening

Everybody remembers the story from *Shmuel Alef* – it's in this week's *haftorah* too – when Shaul Hamelech was sent on a mission by Shmuel Hanavi to wipe out Amalek. He was commanded to destroy them completely; there should be nothing at all left of them. And when Shaul Hamelech and his soldiers returned from the mission he greeted the *navi* and said, "I have fulfilled the word of Hashem."

But the *navi* wasn't satisfied with that: "What's this sound of cattle that I hear?"

So Shaul said, "The people spared some of the cattle so that we could bring them as an offering to Hashem. Why should we slaughter them on the battlefield in vain? Instead we'll bring them as *korbanos* to Hashem in gratitude for what He's done for us."

Now, at that time the *Navi* Shmuel made a declaration to Shaul Hamelech; he said some very important words that will help us understand why it was the ozen, the ear, that was dedicated to Hashem's service first, before everything else: הִנֵּה – Behold, I want you to learn something important now: שָׁמַע – To listen, to obey, מִזְבַּח טוֹב – is better than bringing offerings, לְהִקְשִׁיב – to hearken to what you are told, מִזֶּחָלֶב אֵילִים – is more important than the fat offerings of oxen" (*Shmuel I* 15:22). *Korbanos* are wonderful, they're very important. But the *Navi* is telling us here that to use your ears for listening – not just for listening but to be obedient – that's even more valuable.

The Value of Sacrificial Offerings

Now, if we're going to understand this *possuk* properly, we have to first make sure to not lose sight of the importance of *korbanos*. It could be that today we have lost perspective of what a sacrifice means, but for the Jew of antiquity, bringing a *korban* to Hashem was an impressive experience. Because when he wished to express to Hakodosh Boruch Hu his endless love and gratitude, he knew that מָה אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה – How could I ever repay You Hashem, כָּל תְּגִמּוּלוֹהֵי עָלַי, for all of the kindnesses that You've bestowed on me. "There's nothing I could give You, Hashem."

Like the *Navi* Micha said (6:7): בְּמָה אֶקְרָם הַשֵּׁם – With what should I come towards You? אֶכְפֹּף לְאַלְקֵי מְרוֹם – With what can I show my submissiveness to my G-d who is on high? הֲאֶתֵּן בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי – Should I give my firstborn for my sin? פְּרִי בְטֵנִי הַטָּאת נִפְשִׁי – The fruit of my body to atone for my iniquities?

That's what the *navi* said! You hear such a *hava amina*?! Now, we would never do such a thing because Hashem doesn't permit it but we have to realize that to offer up ourselves or our children would be the highest expression of devotion. Why not? What is a son? A son is a gift from Hashem. So how do you show your appreciation for such a wonderful gift? You had him for so many years, so now you take him and you bring him as an offering to Hashem.

Repaying The Loan

Let's say I lend you my car and you're riding around in my car enjoying yourself for a couple of days; and then I say, "My friend, can you please give me back my car tomorrow?" So you'll say, "What do you mean, 'Give back the car?! I'm enjoying it to no end. I don't want to give it back.'"

Of course, we know that Hashem doesn't want any of us to be sacrificed, but in logic it certainly has a place – of course it does. Only that Hashem's logic is higher than our logic. And therefore, it's only because Hakodosh Boruch Hu said, אַל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנֶּעֱר, – "Don't stretch out your hand; don't sacrifice your son", so we don't do it.

And so the *navi* said, "What should we do? We can't do that because You won't allow it." So in lieu of offering up one's self or one's son, the Jew sacrificed a living animal as a demonstration of his devotion. And when the lamb or the bullock was being slaughtered, the Jew of antiquity imagined *as if he himself was being offered up to Hakodosh Boruch Hu*. That was the purpose of the *korban* – it was intended to be a vicarious experience through which the one bringing the *korban* felt as if his own substance was being put upon the fire and burned to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. And that's why the *korban* achieved great things – the thinking man who brought an offering was no longer the same person; he had just undergone an experience that brought him closer to Hashem.

No Substitute for Korbanos!

Now, I understand that the modern world has been propagandized and bamboozled by the gentile writers who have belittled offerings. The truth is that they have done it for their own benefit, for the greater glory of the substitute religion. So they say that Judaism was a bloody religion – a religion of slaughtering and sacrifice – and it was only when *oso ha'ish*, that man, came along and began preaching a religion of love, *that's* when the world became better. He introduced a new religion of love that disdains the offerings! A new religion where instead of slaughtering cattle, from now on you slaughter Jews. That's what they've been doing for the last two thousand years after all – they've slaughtered Jews like cattle. But *korbanos*? Oh no; never!

But we, the Am Yisroel, know that bringing *korbanos* is of utmost importance. And that's why we hope that someday soon, **וְהָשִׁב אֶת הָעֲבוֹדָה לְרִבְרִיב בְּיַתְדֵי יְשׁוּעָה** – Hashem will bring back the service to His Sanctuary, **וְאֵשֶׁת יִשְׂרָאֵל** – and we will once again bring to Him the burnt offerings. Not just Moshiach we want – we look forward to the great day when once again we'll bring sacrifices! Don't make any mistake and think that we made improvements, that we're advancing from sacrifices to prayers. It's not advancing – it's retreating!

And therefore we look forward to the rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash* and to that great day when we will once again inaugurate the Kohanim for the *avodas hakorbanos*, exactly like was done in our *parsha*.

And yet, as important as this ceremony was for the Am Yisroel – the ceremony when the *kohanim* became the *kohanei Hashem* who would spend their days serving Hashem in the *Beis Hamikdash* bringing *korbanos* on behalf of the Am Yisroel – it was exactly at this moment that they had to be taught that before anything, even before the *korbanos*, the *avodah* of the *ozen*, the ear, comes first. **שְׂמָעָה טוֹב מִזְבַּח** – is better than bringing offerings, **לְהִקְשִׁיב מִהֶלֶב אֵילִים** – to listen obediently is more important than the fat offerings of oxen.” Because as tremendous as a *korban* is, as great of an effect it has on a person, we must know that listening is number one. And that's why the first thing the *kohen* did, even before he would be permitted to serve in the *Mikdash*, he had to dedicate his ears to be obedient in the service of Hashem.

Part II. Appreciating The Ear

A Great Form of Happiness

In the second *sha'ar* of *Sha'arei Teshuva*, *siman* 12, Rabeinu Yonah explains there that the ears, the ability to hear, is one of the greatest gifts that Hakodosh Boruch Hu gave us. You know, we're accustomed to thinking that this is how it's supposed to be – we were born with ears and we'll one day die with ears; they're always functioning and therefore we don't think about it at all. Many people might go their whole lives without thanking Hashem once for their ears.

But actually the ears are a great form of happiness. It's fun to be able to hear sounds! Hearing is an important part of our existence. We *live* by means of hearing; it's our lifeblood. Without it, a man is missing so much fun, so much of life, that it's almost as if he was dead. It's a terrible tragedy to not be able to hear.

If you learned a little bit you know that when you damage another person you have to pay him for the value you decreased. *Ayin tachas ayin*, an eye for an eye, means that if someone *chalilah* disables a fellow Jew's eyes, so he is liable to pay the monetary value of that man's eyes (Bava Kamma 85b). But it says there that, "*Chirsho, nosein lo dmei kulo* – If you make a man deaf, you have to pay the value of that person's entire self!" And that's because the deaf man is like he stopped existing.

Free Earphones

That means that your ear is very very valuable! Only that hearing is such a subtle gift that we forget about it. Some people are only happy when they buy a pair of earphones and they can walk someplace and listen to a walky-talky, a little radio or tape machine with headphones. *Ooh wah! That's fun!* If they can listen to a person talk with an artificial set of ears, then it's fun times – that they enjoy. But to be happy with their original earphones, that they never thought about.

Even the location of your ears is something to marvel at, something to appreciate. People are lacking in appreciation of the free earphones that are attached *in the most convenient place*. Your earphones could have been attached to your legs – why not? And if your neighbor wanted to talk to you, he'd have to bend down and speak to your soles. Imagine that! It would be a big *tircha!* But Hakodosh Boruch Hu conveniently situated your ears right near your fellow man's mouth.

Isn't that an interesting point – that the ears are on the same level more or less as the mouth of your fellow man? I'm sure there are more benefits to this position of the ears – I'm just telling you what my little head thinks. But the more time a person spends thinking about it, and thanking Hashem, the more he'll start understanding the great gift of these two little miracles on the sides of our head.

Did you ever see a man who is missing one ear? I did. I know a man in Manhattan, a very successful man, who's missing one ear. Whenever he's in a picture he makes sure it's with his profile – to make sure you don't see the other side of him. Now, if he could get back that ear, how happy he would be! How grateful he would be to Hakodosh Boruch Hu! He's a very wealthy man and he would give away a lot of his money to get his ear back. And here we are, most of us are walking around with two working ears! Did you ever stop to think about that? Take hold of your ear and think about that – hold on to your ear and say thank you to Hakodosh Boruch Hu! Don't do it when your wife is around because who knows what she might think, but make sure to do it once in a while. "Ahh! Ahh! My ear! What a *chesed* it is to have two ears!"

What Doctors Can't See

Now, the *chesed* is even greater than you imagine, because the ear isn't just an earphone, a piece of plastic with some wires. The ear is a compendium of miracles of staggering complexity! What the process of hearing involves is even today not understood. Ahh! The ear is such a complicated piece of machinery! The ear is the receiver for sound waves. As the sound waves come towards the eardrum it also hits the outside part of the ear. The ear is made like a funnel; it gathers together the soundwaves and funnels them into the hole where the eardrum is.

A physician once told me that most physicians never even saw an eardrum. "They go through the motion of looking into your ears," he said, "but most physicians never saw an eardrum." The drum is less than a tenth of a millimeter thick but it's composed of three separate layers! And it's especially constructed so that it should produce no after-vibrations that would blur the sound.

An ingenious system of bone levers connected to the eardrums magnify the sound waves that beat against your eardrum – three tiny bones that are connected to each other, the malleus, the incus and the stapes, miraculously magnify the movement of the waves so that when it finally pushes against the liquid in the inner ear, it creates a wave of motion that excite the 30,000 or so nerve endings that project into the liquid – and according to the force of the movement, so is the volume of the sound. And then the mystery begins! Because you don't hear in the ears – you hear in the brain! The message has to be transported to the brain.

Don't Laugh!

And the truth is that it's not only hearing. You need your ears for walking too. You learn how to walk when you're a child and once you learn it seems so easy but you should know that you're a trapeze artist when you walk. It takes a lot of work to balance yourself. And how do you do it so easily? It's because you have in your ears, in each ear, a bed of nerves.

There are nerves sticking up out of the bed of that little chamber in your ear. On top of that chamber of nerves is a stone, a loose stone. And when you move your head a little bit, the stone moves and it tickles those nerves – and the nerves warn you, "Straighten up!" Both ears have that. There's an ear stone in each ear – there's a little chamber in your ear and on the floor of the chamber there are nerves sticking up out of the floor and there's a stone lying on the nerves. And the stone is loose. And as you're moving like this, they tickle the wrong nerve – ope!

Straighten up! And you do it automatically. Nisei nissim! Nisei nissim!
Ears are so much fun!

Now, go and tell all of this to the unthinking people outside, they might laugh at you. They'll ask you what Rabbi Miller spoke about and when you tell them that we spoke about ears, they won't understand. But what that means is that they're not living according to the will of Hashem. It says *כָּל עֲצָמוֹתַי תִּאֲמַרְנָה* – *All my parts should praise You*. Each part speaks up separately and says: *הֵשֵׁם כִּי כְמוֹךָ* – “Hashem who is like You? (Tehillim 35:10). That's how you have to live – you have to spend time in this very important function of feeling gratitude to Hashem for each detail.

Now, even if we came merely for this it's worthwhile because you have to give a *cheshbon* to yourself. When is the last time that you thought about thanking Hakodosh Boruch Hu for the ability to hear? You know that some people even never thought about it! Very many people never even thought *once* about the great gift of two ears. So at least that we learned here tonight, that you must engender a feeling of gratitude for the ability to hear. And even if years may pass by before you actually appreciate it, it's worth all the effort you put into it.

Part III. Paying For the Ear

Nothing In This World Is Free

Most people don't realize how important gratitude is and that's a big problem because in this world you don't get anything for free. Every gift requires a certain payment and the price that we pay, the minimum price, is a feeling of gratitude to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. And therefore it's incumbent upon each one of us to think, “What is the proper way to express this gratitude?”

Of course, you might want to just *patur* yourself: “I'll say, ‘*Baruch atah Hashem* – Thank You Hashem for my ears,’” and finished. The truth is that even that is a good beginning but when we study the words of Rabeinu Yonah (*ibid.*) you see that much more is required: *Ha'adam chayav la'avod es Hashem yisborach b'eivarav v'yitzurav kulam, ki la'avodaso yitzaram* – *A person is obligated to serve Hashem with all of the limbs and creations in his body because they were created for that purpose.* *Kmo shekasuv 'kol pa'al Hashem l'maaneihu'* – *Everything that Hashem made is for His sake (Mishlei 16:4).* It means that nothing in this world is without a purpose in *avodas Hashem*, and if we were given ears, we must utilize them for serving Hashem.

Now, I know that all this is like water on a duck's back; I understand that the listeners think that it's just exaggerated propaganda. But I'll say it again and again because it's not exaggerated at all – it's actually a foundation of our *avodas Hashem*. Once you realize how much you're enjoying what Hashem is giving you, you're expected to demonstrate your indebtedness to Hakodosh Boruch Hu by utilizing the gift for His service. That's what Rabbeinu Yonah says is expected of us – to feel that in return for the gift of ears, you want to apply them to the service of Hashem.

What Are Ears On My Head For?

If the ears are such a great pleasure – of course not everybody's convinced of that yet; it still requires a great deal of talk and a great deal of practice until finally we arrive at the conclusion that it's fun to have ears – but once we start understanding the great gift of hearing, right away we should ask ourselves, "How can I serve Hakodosh Boruch Hu with my ears to demonstrate our gratitude for this gift? After all, it states, *כָּל פֶּעַל הַשֵּׁם לְמַעַנְהוּ* – *Hashem made everything for His sake* – and therefore, I'd better start thinking, what are the ears for?"

Now of course it sounds like an exaggerated demand on us. How are we going to serve Hashem with our ears? They're just there hanging on the side of my head; what am I going to do already? But there's no question that this is what the verse is demanding. In return for all of the great gifts – and ears are especially essential for our self preservation – we should endeavor to use them to serve Hakodosh Boruch Hu. It means we have to take our two ears and put them to use the way Hakodosh Boruch Hu wants. Did you ever think about that? You can't do whatever you want with your ears. You have to be aware of what you're doing with your ears! When we sit down somewhere, when we walk in the street, wherever it is we are, we should be aware that we're wearing our earphones now and we should be applying them for the purpose of *avodas Hashem*.

Digging Tunnels

It's a very big subject, the subject of ears and so we are going to listen now to what an expert said on this subject. I want to quote for you the words of Dovid Hamelech: *זָבַח וּמִנְחָה לֹא הִפְצִיטָהּ* – *Hashem, You don't desire our sacrifices and our offerings*, *אֲזַנִּים בָּרִית לִי* – *You made for me ears* (Tehillim 40:7).

Dovid Hamelech became king when Shaul Hamelech was deposed by Hakodosh Boruch Hu for putting *korbanos* before listening; and Dovid therefore learned very well the lesson that there's something so much greater than *korbanos*. So much greater that when we compare the two

it's as if the offering is nothing. Of course, Hakodosh Boruch Hu *does* want sacrifices but it means that Dovid understood the lesson of the placing of the blood on the *tnuch ozen*. As great as a *zevach* or *mincha* is, the service of the ears, listening and obeying is so great that it dwarfs the importance of an offering and it makes it like **לֹא הִפְצַתָּ**, as if He doesn't desire it!

“And what is it that You desire more than my *korbanos*,” said Dovid? **אָזְנַיִם כָּרִיתָ לִּי** – *You dug out ears into my head*. Now, we should pay good attention to those words of Dovid because he didn't say “the ears that You gave me,” or “the ears that you placed on my head.” He said it's the “ears that You *dug out in my head*, that's really what You desire.” It's a *chiddush* to most people that the ears aren't just hanging on the side of your head; that actually they are tunnels that lead into your brain and they're bringing the words and ideas to the most sensitive of all places in your body – to your mind.

Conscious Listening

And so, if we want to demonstrate gratitude to Hakodosh Boruch Hu for our ears, the first thing we should do is to make up our minds that from now on we are going to serve Him with these gatherers of information by gathering only the information that He wants us to hear.

Imagine that there are two funnels in the sides of your head into which you can pour important essential elements that will mold your personality. You wouldn't just pour anything in! The purpose of the ears is that they should gather all the necessary information which Hakodosh Boruch Hu is sending to you; and by means of using the ears for that purpose, we are fulfilling their function in life: **הִנֵּה שְׁמַע מִזְבַּח טוֹב** – *Behold listening is better than an offering*, **לְהִקְשִׁיב מִחֹלֶב אֵילִים** – *to pay attention is greater than the fat of offerings of oxen*.

Now, let's get this in the right perspective because we're not talking here merely about listening to information – we're talking now about serving Hakodosh Boruch Hu with your ears. So let's say you're a *yeshiva* man and you're going into the *beis hamedrash* to hear the *rosh yeshiva* or the *mashgiach* deliver a *shmuess*. Now, of course you're going to listen; of course you're going to pay attention and be interested and you're going to try to fulfill what you hear. But we're not talking about that; we're adding something new here. We're adding a new element now, that as you come in you're thinking, “I'm now taking my two ears, this great gift that Hakodosh Boruch Hu bestowed upon me, and I'm going to utilize those ears to serve Hashem in order to show my gratitude. I'm going to lean in with my ears to gather in the information Hashem wants me to hear.”

Inclining Your Ears

In the *Tanach* when we want to describe how someone should listen we find the expression, *hatayas ozen* – *Inclining your ear*. Now, actually you can hear without inclining your ear. You can lean back in the chair and relax and listen too. But when somebody leans forward, what he's doing is making a demonstration, "*Hineni muchan umezuman* – I'm now bringing my ears to You, Hakodosh Boruch Hu, and I am listening; I'm applying these gifts that You gave me to Your service." Isn't that a beautiful thing to do if you want to thank Hashem for your ears?

So next time when you come to a place where somebody is teaching or preaching some *divrei tochacha* or *divrei yirah*, so instead of leaning back like somebody who is taking a ride in the car and enjoying the scenery and his mind is asleep – no, that's not called listening. Instead, you demonstrate your gratitude by leaning forward – you feel you're bringing your ears closer to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. That's a thing you should practice. Some people even cup their ears – not because it's necessary, but because they want to emphasize the importance of listening. "I'm dedicating my ears to the service of listening to Hashem."

The Most Important Purpose of Ears

Of course, while the ears are still attached to our heads, we are permitted to use them for other things too. So when you're crossing the street, in addition to looking both ways – by the way, even on a one way street you should look both ways because boys with bicycles are a menace today – but you should use your ears to listen for cars as well. Why not? There are a lot of kosher things you can use your ears for.

But at the same time, the most important purpose of our ears is to act as funnels! Above all, a Jew must make up his mind that his ears are for the purpose of hearing what Hakodosh Boruch Hu is telling him in the Torah. The function by which we demonstrate most our awareness of the purpose of ears is by using them to funnel Torah information, Torah ideals and attitudes, into our heads.

Now, you'll find many observant Jews who are deaf to the messages of the Torah because they don't really listen. Even Jews who "keep everything" must know that actually they're not keeping a great part of the Torah because they're not *listening* to the Torah. Of course they "keep everything," but they're listening only to what their neighbors say. They're listening to the radio and to the words they hear on the street.

Listen to Tanach

You have to utilize your ears chiefly to hear Torah. And Torah means everything. It means *Shulchan Aruch*. It means *halacha*. It means

dinim. It means *mishnayis* and *gemara*. These are elementary things – it goes without saying – but if you want to listen to the Torah so you learn everything; Torah, *nevi'im*, *kesuvim*, everything you have to learn. If you don't learn *nevi'im* and *kesuvim* it's like taking the bran out of the wheat. Just white bread you'll eat? It's not nourishing.

You need Mishlei, you need Iyov, you need everything. You need it. And if you can't read it in *lashon kodesh*, I urge you to read it in English at least. Isn't that queer advice? No, it's not queer at all. If you have no time to learn Tanach so read it in English at least. Find out what it's all about!

You never read Ezra in your life?! You mean to say you're going to go your whole life without reading Ezra? How could you do such a thing? A newspaper you'll read, but Ezra you won't read?! Even if you read a *frum* newspaper, so you'll skip Ezra and Nechemia for a *frum* newspaper? At least once you should read Ezra and Nechemia. Read it in English! Why not? "I'll get around to it someday," he says. When he'll be 199 years old in the old age home – he thinks he'll still be there; so that's when he'll get around to it.

Listen To Rashi

You have to study the words of Rashi. Let Rashi's words enter into your ears. Rashi is full of wisdom. I myself have a compendium, a collection of statements from Rashi that you can live by. Rashi's statements – you could live by them! Gems of wisdom in Rashi! Rashi was a remarkable commentator and he put in a few words here and there – gems that you wouldn't see in the *gemara*. Good advice, how to live successfully and happily too.

And so, this never-ending amount of Torah information that you can be funneling into your head by means of the ears, is an important part of the service of the ear. You have to listen to the words of the Chovos Halevavos! And to the Shaarei Teshuva too. And what about the Mesillas Yesharim?! As much as possible you should be funneling the words of the *seforim* into your mind by means of your ears! Say it with your mouth and listen to what you're saying. Even if you read the Mesillas Yesharim only one time you're already a different person altogether.

Part IV. Opening Your Ears

Virtues of Obedience

Now, when we speak about the subject of listening, we must not limit ourselves to just filling our minds with Torah information. Because

there's another tremendous subject – it's part of the Torah but it's a separate branch – and that's the great subject of **אָזן שְׁמִיעַת תּוֹכַחַת הַיָּיִם** – an ear that listens to the instructions of life (Mishlei 15:31). It's not talking here about an ear that only hears words but an ear that is obedient to the words it hears; a person who reacts to what goes into his ears. “What am I supposed to learn from this?” he thinks. “How can I apply what I'm hearing to my own life?” “How can I get better?”

Because no matter what the people outside in the street say, no matter what's written in books and magazines, and what the radio says, we have to live with the ideals of Torah, and Torah tells us that listening, obeying, that's the great offering. Now I know that in our day, according to the winds that blow now in our culture, the word obey is an unpopular one, but truth is that the absence of that word is the cause of all our misfortunes. That's why the youth are running wild today.

Mankind must overcome the great propaganda that has been erected against the humbling of oneself before criticism. The principle of *shema*, obedience, must once again be learned because **אָזן שְׁמִיעַת תּוֹכַחַת הַיָּיִם** – *the ear that is capable of hearing the instruction of life*, that's one the great functions of our ears in this world.

With Friends Like These...

Dovid Hamelech, the one who taught us about our ears, said the following: **בְּקָמִים עָלַי מְרַעִים תִּשְׁמַעְנָה אָזְנִי** – “When the wicked rise up against me, let my ears hear” (Tehillim 92:12). Now, it's usually understood to mean, “Let me hear of their downfall,” but Rav Yisroel Salanter explained it a different way: “When the *merai'im* – those who want to say bad about me and criticise me, when they stand up against me, *let my ears hear their critique.*” Not like people think today, that if someone criticizes you then he's already your enemy. No! That's your best friend. That's the one to listen to because that's the person who's going to bring you to Olam Habo.

Rabeinu Yonah (Shaarei Teshuva 2:11) says that anybody who comes along and criticizes you, he's a *malach* from Hashem. You hear that?! And here you thought that your neighbor criticizing you is your enemy, and Rabeinu Yonah comes along and tells you that he's a *malach* from Hashem! What that means is that anybody who comes along in this world and says something to you of *mussar*, of rebuke, something that could be useful for you to hear, he's called a *malach* – he's your best friend.

Your Wife Knows the Truth

And so, if once, for a moment, the heavens opened up and there was a flash of lightning, a flash of clarity – let’s say your wife said something to you and you saw a little spark of truth – so don’t close your ears. Don’t huff and puff and make excuses, because she’s your best friend. A wife is an excellent opportunity for hearing the truth about yourself. Oh yes, a wife who criticizes you is a glorious opportunity! Lucky is that man whose wife has a big mouth and tells him what she sees. Because in the *kollel*, and at work, and in the synagogue, nobody is going to tell you too much about your sore points. Usually they’re too polite. Or it could be you put on a good show in public. Who’s going to tell you the truth outside the home?! Nobody! And after a while you begin to think, “Maybe I really am a good person after all.”

But your wife knows the truth! She knows you better than anyone else. So this important man comes home from shul and his wife deflates him – she sticks a pin in his balloon and it bursts. That’s a tremendous achievement; it’s a *shleimus*, a perfection of character to be put down to size once in a while. But if you don’t open your ears to it, so what is it worth?

Acquiring Diamonds

The truth is that criticism from anybody is a gift. Let’s say someone happens to hurl a diamond at you and it hurts – it pokes you – you’re not going to be angry at him; you’ll grab it and pocket it. Seventy years ago a homeless man, a bum on the street, told me something – he criticized me about a detail of my behavior. I’m not going to tell you what it was but to this day I still remember his every word. And I’m a better man because of it.

And so, if it happens that somebody will give you some criticism you have to seize it like a diamond because you won’t get many such diamonds in your life. All you’ll hear your whole life is perfumed spitballs; flattery and *shkarim*; and you’ll never open your ears to criticism and discover the truth – you’ll walk in darkness all your life.

Closing Your Ears

Now, before we end, we must not forget another function of the ear – to know when not to listen, to know when to close the ear. Now pay attention. The *gemara* (Kesuvos 5b) asks an interesting question: Why is it that the *alyah*, the bottom part of the ear, the lobe, is soft? Further up on the ear there’s cartilage, but here on the bottom there is nothing but soft tissue. Why is it that the bottom is soft? That’s the *gemara*’s question. A good kasha. So the *gemara* answers like this: *Im yishma davar she’eino hagun* – If you’re in a place where they’re saying

things that they shouldn't hear, so you should turn up the *alyah* and press it into your ear. You plug up your ear so you shouldn't hear it. I once did that. I was in a meeting of *rabbonim* and one of the people got up and he said something, so I closed up my ears. "What's that?" he said. I said, "It's a *gemara!*"

Now, if it wasn't for this *gemara*, we would have other ideas about the lobe of the ear. Because we know what when the outer ear gathers the soundwaves to funnel it to the eardrum, so the ear trembles a little bit from the soundwaves; it shakes. And that shaking would interfere with the sound. And therefore, Hakodosh Boruch Hu put a lobe down here on the bottom of the ear – the lobe doesn't shake because there's no bone at all in it, and therefore it absorbs the shaking. So we're able to hear better because the lobe absorbs the tremors that the ear would have experienced from the soundwaves. It's there to help us hear more clearly, more sharply. Otherwise we'd hear everything with a shake.

But along comes the *gemara* and says no – there's an even more important reason for the earlobe – it's there in order to help you close up your ears in case someone is saying something that is not worth hearing.

Toras Avigdor Should Be Prized

And that's because even one foolish remark can overthrow a hundred edifices of *avodas Hashem*. That's the language of the *Mesillas Yesharim*: *Leitzanus achas doche meah tochachos – One hundred rebukes can be pushed away with one wisecrack.*

Now these talks – I think we should prize these Thursday night talks. I'm not rebuking anyone here but I know that idealists come to this place and I try to raise myself up to talk to you on that plane of idealism. We talk about important things here. So let's say you listen to a hundred of these tapes – it's a good idea by the way; you and your wife should listen to one hundred tapes. Now let's say you did that – let's say you listened to a hundred of these tapes and didn't talk to anybody in between. So now, you are already at some *madreigah* of idealism. You're already a head taller than a lot of other people.

But now along comes a *leitz* – *leitz* doesn't mean a wicked person; people with beards can be *leitzim* too – so a *leitz* comes along and he says one wise-crack. Let's say your friend comes along and he says, "Oh, you're trying to be *frum*, heh?" And now the whole edifice of idealism, the whole skyscraper that you built up, all hundred floors, come crashing down. It explodes into smoke; nothing remains. That's what the *Mesillas Yesharim* is saying: One hundred rebukes, one hundred lectures –

serious talks on noble themes – and at the end, one *leitzanus* can overcome those one hundred edifices that you built in your mind.

It's Dangerous Out There

And therefore it's of the utmost necessity to keep away from shallow and foolish people. Now it doesn't mean only people who murder or people who are *michalilei Shabbos*. It means people who aren't interested in living lives of idealism, people who disdain the attitude of being *mivakeish shleimus*. As long as you're sitting here you're okay. But once you walk out the door you have to be very careful with your ears. Unless maybe you take along the tapes and they're glued to your ears until next Thursday night – otherwise it's dangerous out there. Once we understand that the ear must be dedicated to *avodas Hashem*, we begin to understand how important this tunnel to the mind really is.

It's because of the importance of the ear, because of its function as a tunnel to the mind, that's why the first thing the *Kohanim* did when they became inaugurated to serve in the *Beis Hamikdash* was to dedicate their ears to the service of Hakodosh Boruch Hu.

We Are All Kohanim

And actually what the *Kohanim* did in the *Beis Hamikdash* was a symbol of how we all are expected to live our lives. Because when Hashem told the *Am Yisroel* **וְהָיִיתֶם לִי קִגְלָה מְכֹל הָעַמִּים** – *You'll be for Me a special treasure from all the nations* (Shemos 19:5), what did He mean? What is our function as Hashem's treasured nation? So Hashem answers that in the next *possuk*: **וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת כְּהֹנִים** – *You're going to be to Me a Nation of Kohanim* (ibid. 19:6). Here Hashem declares that He has chosen us to be “Nation of Priests.” What that means is “a kingdom consisting of priests” – a nation in which every individual, man woman and child, is a *kohen*, trying to live a life of holiness in the service of Hashem. Hakodosh Boruch Hu said to the *Am Yisroel*, “All of you, are My *Mamleches Kohanim*, and I want you to act in the same manner as My *kohanim* – I want you to emulate the principles that I teach them.”

That's why the clarion call of the *Am Yisroel* is *Shema Yisroel*. “Listen!”

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל means you have to listen diligently – your ears must be dedicated to the service of Hashem. You have to open your ears and listen to how to fulfill Hakodosh Baruch Hu's will. It's a career of listening – that's our job in this world – to listen and learn.

Have A Wonderful Shabbos

— **This week's booklet is based on tapes:** —

9 - Illuminating the Mind | 24 - A Career of Listening | 231 - Service by Ear |
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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

שאל אביך ויגדך ויקניך ויאמרו לך

Q:

What should be our attitude towards those who become *shikur* on Purim?

A:

We have to know that the purpose of our lives is to acquire *da'as*, not to lose *da'as*. And so, when a person becomes very intoxicated and he is already *b'geder beheima*, he's like an animal, that's no praise for him at all.

However, sometimes in order to raise the airplane off the ground, you have to put high octane fuel into the tank to help it liftoff. And therefore, in order to make yourself more enthusiastic there's nothing wrong with imbibing a certain amount. But to get out of control, that's a mistake. It's not a *kiddush Hashem*; you make yourself look disgusting. No, I don't approve of that; it's very wrong.

And therefore, you have to be very careful that *nichnas yayin*, the wine should come in to you, and *yatza sod*, and the secret of the Jew comes out. \aleph is *gematria* seventy, and \aleph is also *gematria* seventy. So the seventy of wine comes in and it pushes out the secret that the Jew keeps inside him. The Jew has in his *neshama* a love of Hashem, only that he's too bashful to talk about it; he's embarrassed to show it. But when the wine comes in, the truth comes out and it shows his real *pnimiyus*. When he's a little bit intoxicated the Jew shows the real enthusiasm for Hakodosh Boruch Hu that he possesses, things that he never showed before.

And so, Purim is a great opportunity for people to demonstrate their loyalty to the Torah, their *emunah* in Hakodosh Boruch Hu who is protecting us at all times, and that eventually we will outlive all of our enemies. All this we are expected to demonstrate on Purim; and we do it by eliciting the greatness within us. We have it in ourselves! And a little bit of *mashkeh* helps bring it out, no question about it. Purim is a great day of *da'as* and therefore we should try to make it as much as possible important in the eyes of our children. Make a big fuss out of Purim! And the Purim *seudah* should be a very important affair. And by making Purim very prominent in our lives, then it becomes one of the most beautiful jewels on the *luach* of the Jewish year.

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