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SEFER SHEMOS - IN MEMORY OF R' SRULY MILLER A"H

GRANDSON OF RAV AVIGDOR MILLER ZT"L, DEDICATED BY HIS CHILDREN

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# פרשת יתרו

WITH

# R' AVIGDOR MILLER ZT"l

BASED ON HIS BOOKS, TAPES & WRITINGS OF TALMIDIM

## An Ear that Listens

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## Part I. Career of Listening

### Among the Great

One of the more remarkable incidents in the history of the Am Yisroel is the fact that a gentile named Yisro seemingly came out of nowhere and became one of the great men in our history. There's no doubt that we are mightily impressed with Yisro's story; the truth is that if we look at all of the success stories that the Torah provides of men who became truly great, we could make a case for his being the most extraordinary of all. The mere fact that you have a *parsha* called Yisro is incredible – it means that his name is ensconced in a place of honor forever.

And not only does Yisro have a *parsha* named after him but he became a *source* of Torah. When Yisro spoke up and gave instruction to Moshe Rabeinu it says (Yisro 18:24), וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה – Moshe listened. Moshe should listen to somebody?! We all listen to Moshe Rabbeinu when it

comes to Torah! And yet here, Moshe is listening to the voice of Yisro. And not only Moshe listened; we *all* are listening! Hakodosh Boruch Hu told Moshe to accept Yisro's advice and his words became a part of the Torah.

### **A Prominent Family**

Now, if we think of Torah as merely a collection of ideas and thoughts and anecdotes, then it wouldn't be such a question. But we understand that it's much more than that – every word in Torah is a *dvar Hashem*; it's the words of the *Melech Malchei Hamelachim*, the Creator of the world. And the eternal *psak* of Hashem is according to Yisro's advice. He has accepted Yisro's words and now it's Torah! The *gemara* constantly quotes Yisro's words (See Sanhedrin 7a, 16a, 18a;b, 34b, 36b) to learn instructions for how to conduct the procedures of the *shoftim*, of the judges and courts. It's unbelievable! A stranger from a far-off land comes along and his words become the *Toras Hashem*!

And it wasn't a one time event; it didn't stop there because **בְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יָשְׁבוּ בְּלִשְׁבֹּת הַגְּזֵיזִית** – *the descendants of Yisro were among the chief sages of the Sanhedrin* (Sotah 11a). In the *lishkas hagazis*! The central Sanhedrin! Yisro merited to always have someone of his family in the central Sanhedrin of the nation. And that means that we were *always* listening to Yisro! Because to whom did the Jewish nation listen? They listened to their judges; and in all the generations Yisro's children were among our greatest judges. Up till today we have great men who are descendants of this man. Today we don't know who they are but among our great leaders some of them come directly from Yisro.

### **Early Beginnings**

Now, today when we open the *chumash* and we see Yisro, we think that he was born already with a *chumash* in his hand; we figure he was destined from the beginning to have a *parsha* named after him. But actually that's far from the truth – because if you look back at Yisro's first profession you'll find that he was a priest of idolatry! And not just a halfhearted idolater like you find among the priests today, a half-wit who does nothing with his life. Oh no, Yisro was an enthusiastic *oved avodah zarah*: “*Piteim agalim la'avodah zarah – he used to fatten the calves for idolatry*” (Rashi Bamidbar 25:11).

When the calf was brought to him to be offered to a certain idol, he didn't just charge his parishioner some money and take it and slaughter

it. “No,” he said, “I can’t offer up such a skinny cow – it’s not an honor for this idol.” And so, on his own he fattened it. He kept it a long time, feeding it, caring for it, until it became sleek and full. He spent time on that – time and good money – because he wanted to give the very best offering to that idol.

And it was from there, from being less than nothing – an idol worshipper is not zero; it’s minus zero – from there Yisro rose so high that he now shares with Moshe a place as a giver of the Torah! It’s unbelievable! How did it happen that Yisro rose from being a priest of idolatry to the greatest eminence?

### **He Heard and Came**

And it’s worth our while to understand what caused him to succeed because that’s something we would all like to achieve – to live successfully in the eyes of Hakodosh Boruch Hu. To rise to eminence in His eyes, what could be better? And so we have to ask ourselves, what was it that made Yisro become so successful that we still listen to his words?

And our sages tell us that the answer is written in the Torah. It says (Yisro 18:1), וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ – *Yisro heard, he listened*. What did he listen to? אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ – *to all that Hashem did for His people Yisroel*. The report of Yetzias Mitzrayim and Kriyas Yam Suf arrived in Midyan – that was the news of the day – and Yisro was listening.

The truth is that Yisro wasn’t the only person who heard. שָׁמְעוּ עַמִּים וְיָרָגוּן – *All the nations heard and they became agitated!* הִיל אָחוּ יִשְׁבִי פְלִשֶׁת – *A trembling took hold of the people of the Pileshes!* (Shemos 15:14). Something that never happened before had taken place! A nation should come out of Mitzrayim?! First of all, nobody ever came out of Mitzrayim. Once you got in, you were there forever! Even a cow that went into Mitzrayim couldn’t get out again (Sanhedrin 33a). And now an entire nation went out! And they went out in such a marvelous way, with spectacles that had never before been witnessed in history.

### **Be Affected by the News**

And so it was no secret – everybody heard the news. But for most people it was like water off a duck’s back. They heard it and then they forgot it. Don’t be surprised by that – it’s a remarkable fact how impervious mankind is even to the most spectacular events. A plane crashes in the ocean and 276 people perish! 276 souls lost and it’s news for one day! And even that one day, it’s just news – nobody is listening.

Or in Guyana; a crackpot collected a number of people to his cult and he took them all to Guyana to build a commune, a new society. And after a while he massacred all of them! 900 men, women and children killed themselves or killed each other! Such news should have been on the headlines for weeks and weeks with national investigation! It should have caused an uprising! What's doing here? How could such a thing happen? But everybody is stultified. That's the way of human beings; they're like a herd that keeps on treading the path toward the slaughterhouse without stopping for a moment to hear the message, to listen and to think.

That's how it was then too – the nations heard but they didn't listen to the lessons that the disturbances were intended to teach. Mitzrayim, Guyana, it's all the same – what's it to me? What does it have to do with me? That's the attitude of people – they hear but they don't hear anything. But Yisro was different – he heard the same thing that everyone else heard but *vayishma Yisro*, Yisro was listening!

### **A Listening Ear**

That's what made Yisro different: *Shama u'va!* – He heard *and he came*. He was so moved by what he heard, that he changed his life because of it. What made Yisro a success? He listened! And a good listener becomes great!

That's what our sages say; about Yisro they apply the words of the *possuk*, אֵזֶן שֹׁמְעֵת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים – A man with an ear that listens to the instruction of life (Mishlei 15:31). Instructions, messages, are always coming in only that most of us are not home to take them. But Yisro was always in; his ears were open and his mind was listening; he was receiving the messages. And that's why when he heard what was doing, it wasn't just water under the bridge. Oh no, he was impressed! He was so impressed that he was transformed; he was such a good listener that he was willing to turn his life upside down because of the messages he heard.

### **Clogged Up Ears**

Now, it takes time to get an ear like Yisro had. Some people only have an ear for television jokes; they sit for years and years listening to dumbbells speak to them from a box, so sooner or later they lose their ears – their minds become a mish-mash of ideas. Not only people who listen to the television or the radio – that *surely* means you don't have an ear –

but even the better people, people who don't do that, lose their sense of hearing. They go to weddings, to *bar mitzvahs*, other places, and they sit and listen to chatter – such things cause your sense of hearing to be stultified.

You think you have ears but they're not there anymore. All you're able to hear are silly things. You want your mind to be tickled or praised – those are the two options; anything else doesn't make an impression on you. When you hear good things, it's in one ear out the other – it makes no impression on you.

### **The Depth of an Ear**

And that means that all of us sitting here have to begin learning how to hear! Don't think you have it already because it's a practice that must be acquired; it only comes as a result of considerable training, of understanding that, **אָזן** – *What is an ear?* **שְׁמַעַת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים** – *It's only an ear if it's capable of listening to the instructions of life.* Otherwise it's just an appendage, something hanging on the sides of your head.

I want to quote for you one the words of Dovid Hamelech: **זָבַח וּמִנְחָה לֹא הִפְצַתְּ אֲזָנַיִם לִי** – *Hashem, You don't desire our sacrifices and our offerings;* **כָּרִיתָ לִי לִי** – *It's the ears that you dug out for me that You want* (Tehillim 40:7). Of course, Hakodosh Boruch Hu *does* want sacrifices but Dovid is saying that as great as a *zevach* or *mincha* is, the attitude of *shama u'va* – of listening well enough that your life is changed, dwarfs the importance of an offering and it makes it like **לֹא הִפְצַתְּ**, *as if* He doesn't desire it!

“And what is it that You desire more than my *korbanos*,” said Dovid? **אֲזָנַיִם כָּרִיתָ לִי** – *You dug out ears into my head.* Not “the ears that You gave me.” 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 ears; they are tunnels that are bringing the words that you hear to the most sensitive of all places in your body – to your mind.

And so, from Yisro's rise to greatness we begin to understand that hearing means something entirely different than what the world thinks – it means to be sensitive, to be receptive enough to make yourself a new person, to come to a new life. That's what hearing is. It means that if you read something or hear something somewhere and it makes an impression on you in the right way, then you have gained an **אָזן שְׁמַעַת**; you've achieved an “ear of hearing” just like Yisro did.

## Part II. Listening to Rebuke

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### The Hidden Instructions

Now, this *possuk* that the *chachomim* applied to Yisro, **אֵזְנוֹ שִׁמְעֵת** **תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים** – *An ear that listens to the rebuke of life* needs to be understood not in a superficial way. Because who was it that rebuked Yisro? Do you think somebody came to him and grabbed him by his shoulders and said, “Yisro! Look what happened to Pharaoh. The Creator is showing you something here!” Did somebody yell at him, “Do *teshuva!* Forsake idolatry! Go join the *Am Yisroel!*”

No! On the contrary, everybody was telling him, “The idol is worth serving and the idol should be propitiated.” That was the word on the street in Midian. “The idol is our salvation. The idol is our redemption!” All great things were attributed to the idol. Nobody was telling Yisro that it’s wrong and therefore where does it fit in the *possuk* about Yisro, **אֵזְנוֹ שִׁמְעֵת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים** – that he had an ear that listened to the rebuke of life?

The answer is that Yisro heard messages; he heard that Pharaoh was drowned in the water, other things too – *milchemes Amalek, Matan Torah*. He heard messages, that’s all. But Yisro was different from other people; he didn’t waste his faculty of hearing by merely letting it come in through one ear and slip out the other. He began to think about what impression it should make in his own life, what it was saying to *him*. And because of that, because he listened with his head to the hints, that’s what made him great.

### Accepting Rebuke

Now, if we take this example that’s supplied by Yisro, we see that listening refers not only to cases where someone speaks to you explicit words. When Shlomo said (Mishlei 1:8) **שְׁמַע בְּנִי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ** – “Listen son to the rebuke of your father,” it doesn’t mean that when your father hauls off and gives you a smack in the face and then you listen, so you’re fulfilling the words of Shlomo. In America if you listen to that, it’s already a virtue that calls for praise, but that’s not what Shlomo is saying here.

Of course, we shouldn’t disdain such rebuke; a good smack or some sharp criticism is valuable because otherwise you’re getting a bum steer constantly! You’re constantly being misguided! Nobody’s telling you anything! Maybe once in a while you’ll get a lucky break and your wife gets angry and lets loose a broadside at you. Ahh! A diamond! But most

people are too polite to tell you the truth. Even the Rav of your shul; what could he tell you already? He's afraid you'll run to the shul down the block; he'll never see you again. And therefore, if you're ever fortunate enough that someone speaks to you explicitly, there's no question that your ears should be exercised for the function of listening.

### **Listening to Hints**

But that's only part of the story. Listening means to have ears that are attuned to the hints, to the messages. It means that you *want* to hear things, that your ears are open to hearing things that will change the way you think, the way you live. It means you want to ascertain with all your ability what is *da'as Torah* about how you're living your life. "Am I walking on the right path in life?" "Are my character traits in order?" "Am I fulfilling my duties in a way that will be a benefit for me in the next world?"

That's what real listening is. *Shema bni* – "listen my son" means to emulate Yisro by becoming a person who knows how to listen. That's the great slogan of the Jewish people – *Shema Yisroel* – it means that we're expected to seek out instruction for living life.

We're not talking now about laws that every Jew has to know; that it's forbidden to shave with a razorblade. We're not talking only about keeping Shabbos or saying *brachos* on food. Those are elementary things – that goes without saying. But even Jews who keep everything must know that they're not keeping a great part of the Torah. They're not listening to the Torah. Instead they're listening only to what their neighbors say. They're listening only to what's the common public acceptance of Judaism. And that's why you'll find so many observant Jews who are deaf to the messages of the Torah.

### **Learning Mussar**

Now, one of the most important ways of hearing messages today is by learning the *sifrei mussar*. The *mussar seforim* are full of messages that are speaking to everyone; they are speaking in the name of Hakodosh Boruch Hu and they're filled with rebuke and advice and instructions. For the sincere Torah Jew who wants to hear the messages of how to rectify his faults, how to smooth out all of his rough edges in accordance to Torah principles the *sifrei mussar* are an excellent source

But just to learn the words, that's not enough. Sometimes you'll find people who are so pleased when they're looking in the *sefer*. Why? Because they see in the words a reflection of all their good things.

Frequently they find that they agree with what the *mechaber* wrote there – the good things: “That’s right, that’s right,” they’re thinking, “that’s me.” And if sometimes they come across something that seems to be in contradiction to their behavior, so they don’t spend too much time on it; they go on further.

### **It’s Not Knowledge**

That’s not called listening. You’re reading, you’re learning maybe, but *vayishma* for sure it’s not. You know, most people have an attitude when they’re learning *mussar*, that they’re trying to get *yedios*, to absorb information. They look at it as knowledge, something they can quote. Sometimes they’ll even repeat the words frequently with facility to show that they know it well.

But that’s not enough because such very little actually seeps into the recesses of your mind, into your *neshama*. That’s why sometimes later in life when you go back to it again you’ll say, “Why didn’t I understand that when I was a boy? Why did I miss out on such an important idea?” And the answer is that you learned it too superficially; you weren’t listening – you didn’t realize the words were talking to you.

### **Talk to Yourself**

A successful listener has his ears open; he’s waiting to hear something that’s talking to him. That’s what the Ramban says in his famous *igeres*, the letter he wrote to his son: **וּבְאִשְׁרֵי תְקוּמָה מִן הַסִּפֵּר תִּחַפֵּשׂ** – *And when you rise from your study, think, “How can I apply this to my own life?”*

It doesn’t mean only when you get up. You’re still sitting down in your place, but after reading a line or a paragraph, you think about yourself; about your own behavior. As soon as he hears something, as soon as he reads something, he’s already thinking, “Maybe that’s me! Don’t I do this all the time?! I’m the one it’s talking to! I’d better get busy.” Because he was looking for it; he knows that this is what the *seforim* are for; they’re talking to him, waiting for him to listen.

Oh, that’s already a listener; that’s a person who’s walking in the footsteps of Yisro. You’re hearing the words directed at you and you’re looking to apply it to your life, your own character. That’s the only way to succeed because **אִם אָדָם לֹא יַעֲזֹר אֶת נַפְשׁוֹ מִהַ יַעֲלִיחוֹ הַמוֹסְרִים** – If a person won’t “*mussar*” himself, if he won’t wake himself up, what will the *mussar* that he learns help? (Sha’arei Teshuva 2:26).

## **The Mussar Movement**

That's why Rav Yisroel Salanter's *shittah* in learning *mussar* was to sit down and to say a *maamar chazal* over and over to yourself, many, many times. He used to call people together, regular *baalei batim*, in a *mussar shteeble* in the evenings. And they sat down and each one would pick a *maamar chazal* and say it out loud, over and over. Each one would repeat the words over and over again – aloud. Aloud! Aloud! And by the end of the evening they were shouting. They became so excited about the words they were internalizing, that they were shouting. The people who left that place that evening were different people than the ones who came in the beginning of the evening. It completely changed them.

When I came to Slobodka, I experienced that – I discovered that they learned one line for a half hour every night. That was *mussar seder*. The same line for a half hour! And on *motza'ei Shabbos*, after *seudas shlishis*, we all sat in the dark. They didn't have any lights in the Yeshiva and so we were sitting in the dark, each one of us saying a line by himself, aloud. Louder and louder and louder and louder. At the end, everyone was shouting. The whole Yeshiva was shouting! All of our *kochos*, all our strength, went into that one line.

I must tell you that it was a tremendous experience. We concentrated on the words and you begin to feel what the words are saying. What are the words telling me? You begin to listen to the words. Oh, you're listening now!

I myself recall certain things that I always had known before, but because of those *mussar sedorim* in the Yeshiva it became illuminated in my mind and thereafter I could never forget them anymore. It was like going through a *mikveh*, a *mikveh* of fire, of *kedusha*. One line for an hour! It was electrifying! A full hour in the darkness!

## **Mussar in America**

It was a tremendous achievement! And it's an achievement that is available to every single one of us. The spirit of *mussar* is waiting. It's needed in America more than ever before, in order to awaken the greatness that is laying dormant in the Jewish people. You must know, young men and women today are thirsty. Not only for *gemara*. Of course, the men want *gemara*, they want *lomdus*.

But everyone is searching for the message that will translate our desire to serve Hashem into thoughts and actions, into feelings and

emotions of service of Hashem. There is a thirst for true *avodas Hashem* in this generation. People are thirsting for it but you have to know what to do, what to think. That's why you have to come to these lectures. Not only here. There are a lot of better places than here. But whatever it is, it's of the greatest importance that people should revive the spirit of *mussar* in their own lives.

Not only boys, not only men. Like the Gra used to say to his daughters; he told them that they should always learn *mussar seforim* – the greatness of *mussar* is available to everyone. If a girl learns all these things then she's a *gaon*; she's considered the same as if she became a *gadol hador*; she has learnt her Torah, she has achieved success no less than the greatest *talmid chacham*.

### **The Fundamental Guidebooks**

Now exactly what kind of *mussar*? I would advise, if you really mean business, to learn Mesillas Yesharim. It's full of *yedi'os*; it's a chest full of diamonds. Even if you read the Mesillas Yesharim only one time you're already a different person altogether. I personally have learned through that *sefer* four times and we're learning it now together between Mincha and Maariv. This is an opportunity that everyone should take advantage of and join in. I guarantee that if you learn Mesillas Yesharim with me from start to finish you'll come out a different person.

If you can't come then, make it your business to have a *seder*, a set time when you study Mesillas Yesharim properly. Now, you may have a taste for other *seforim*, I'm not saying not, but Mesillas Yesharim you have to know is tried and tested. Generations have succeeded by means of that *sefer*.

The Rambam too – his Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah, Hilchos Teshuva and Hilchos Dei'os should be studied by everyone. Also, Rabbeinu Yonah's Shaarei Teshuva and Chovos Halevovos are excellent guidebooks. Other *seforim* are important as well but these that I just mentioned, I think should be the fundamental *seforim* to study.

Opening up *seforim* and listening to them and internalizing them is one of the best ways of listening that is available to us today. It's true, Yisro was a great man and was able to listen without the benefit of such books but for all of us today, we must learn *mussar* because that's the way of developing an entirely new attitude that will guide you in life. And

don't say, "Someday I'll do it." Now is the best time to begin. Do it right now. Do it right now because that's what Hashem wants from you.

## Part III. Future of Listening

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### **Doors Will Be Opened**

Now, I understand that what we're speaking about here is not such a simple attitude to achieve; finding the right *seforim* that talk to you and then training yourself to listen to the words that criticize you and point out your faults is not easy – it takes work; a person has to struggle to get that attitude that what's written in the *seforim* is a message that Hashem is speaking to him directly. But once you get moving on the path, Hakodosh Boruch Hu opens up doors for you.

That's what happened to Yisro; he had trained himself to acquire a sense of hearing. And therefore, although everyone else 'heard' too, nobody heard what Yisro heard because nobody was listening. וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ – *And Yisro heard* means there was one man exceptional who listened. And because he spent time thinking about what he heard he thereby acquired tremendous opportunities because of that.

That's included in the *possuk* quoted by Chazal about Yisro: אֵזְרָא שְׂמִיעַת – תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים – בְּקִרְבֵי חֲכָמִים תִּלְוֶיךָ – *The ear that hearkens to the rebuke of life, that ear will lodge among the sages.* It means that as a reward for listening, Hakodosh Boruch Hu led Yisro to the sages – he found his way to more opportunities because בְּרָדְךָ שְׂאֲרָם רוּצָה לְלַכֵּת מוֹלִיכִין אוֹתוֹ – *if a man wants to go in a certain direction, Hakodosh Boruch Hu helps him along.* When you evince an interest in hearing, Hakodosh Boruch Hu says, "I see you're interested in *mussar*, in listening to rebuke, so I'm going to give you a push; I'll encourage you with more opportunities to listen."

### **A Good Sefer or Neighbor**

How will that happen? I cannot tell you exactly. It could happen in various ways. You might run across a good *sefer*. Sometimes a man's life is changed if he runs across a good *sefer*. Not just that it's a good *sefer*, but the *sefer* clicks with him. It's a remarkable thing how certain boys owe their entire career to the influence of a certain *sefer* that they encountered when they were young. Now, everybody else saw that *sefer* too but nothing happened. But *min haShomayim*, as a gift to the person

who showed that he desires to listen, it registered with him and it changed his life.

Other opportunities might fall into your lap. Maybe there will move in next door to you a fine Jew, a *Satmerer* let's say, or some other *chossid*, or any *talmid chochom*. That's a blessing, a gift from heaven. Now, every morning as you go down the street you see him on the sidewalk. He speaks to you a few words and that's worth diamonds. A few words from a real *talmid chacham* is worth diamonds to you. Or his wife or his children will associate with your family, your children. There are other ways too that you'll end up among the sages. *Harbei drachim la'Makom* – Hakodosh Boruch Hu has many ways to take a person who already shows an interest in listening and guide him *b'kerev chachomim*. Whatever it is, אִזְן שֹׁמֵעַת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים בְּקֶרֶב הַחֲכָמִים תִּלְיֵן – *the person who wants to listen to the criticism of life will end up among the wise men.*

### Discovering a Rebbe

How did it happen with Reb Yisroel Salanter? I told you the story once. Reb Yisrael Salanter was learning *torah* in Salant, a small town. But he was a kind of boy who was serious. He was serious in the desire to be a servant of Hashem, to make something out of himself. He wanted to listen but how much can a boy know already? So what did Hakodosh Boruch Hu do? A remarkable thing! Hakodosh Boruch Hu steered him in that small town to one of the greatest teachers of the generation.

In that town there was a man who looked like an ordinary citizen; he dressed like a plain, poor man. Rav Yosef Zundel, when he walked through the marketplace and a neighbor said, "Reb Yosef Zundel, I want to buy this horse from the goy. Can you tell me if the horse is a good horse?" so Rav Yosef Zundel acted as if he was an ordinary plain citizen. He picked up the horse's hooves and inspected the hooves; he opened up the horse's mouth and looked at his teeth – true story – and he gave his opinion. He looked like he was a man of the masses; he was a great man but he wasn't recognized by the people – nobody knew about him.

But Reb Yisroel, because of his desire to listen and become better, Hakodosh Boruch Hu helped him notice what other people didn't notice. He noticed that when Rav Yosef Zundel walked through the street, he was talking to himself. Now, Rav Yosef Zundel wasn't a silly man and so when Reb Yisroel noticed that he was talking and making motions as if he

was exhorting himself, urging himself, Reb Yisroel understood that there was something there.

### **Powerful Words**

And he was interested and he began to follow him; he followed him out of his town. As Rav Yosef Zundel walked through the fields, Reb Yisroel walked behind observing his ways. He was eavesdropping from a distance and he heard Rav Yosef Zundel talking: “Yosef Zundel! Don’t do that! That’s not right! Do this!”

Now, this story happened a number of times. Finally Rav Yosef Zundel, he had noticed this boy walking behind him constantly, so finally he saw it wasn’t mere curiosity; he saw it was a better caliber boy. He called him over and said a few words to him: “Yisroel! You want to be a *yarei Shomayim*? Learn *mussar*!”

Reb Yisroel said that those words went like an arrow into his heart. From that day on, he adopted Reb Yosef Zundel as his *rebbe* and he was a changed man. Anybody that knows about Reb Yisroel Salanter knows he became the world’s teacher because of the encounter with this great man.

### **Gaining The Prize**

But why was it that Hakodosh Boruch Hu guided Reb Yisroel’s footsteps to Rav Yosef Zundel? Many people were in that town, scholars, elderly sages, and none of them had discovered this man. What made Reb Yisroel the special one? The answer is that Reb Yisroel was a listener and when Hashem finds a good listener, He helps him listen even more.

That’s why we find that Yisro became the father-in-law of the best son-in-law of history. You know, Moshe Rabbeinu was a prize that any Jewish millionaire would give away everything for. Anybody would be willing to become a pauper to buy such a son-in-law. And still, nobody gained him except this man who was a gentile priest of idolatry. It’s a remarkable story!

You have to pay attention to that! Couldn’t Moshe Rabbeinu have been the son-in-law of some true descendant of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov? The *Am Yisroel* was lacking fine women in the hundreds of thousands?! Was it an accident that it should happen this way that Yisro merited to have the Moshe Rabeinu, our greatest sage, in his house? It’s a most remarkable incident!

## A Wonderful Guest

It's another fulfillment of this *possuk*: אֵזְרָן שִׁמְעֵת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים – Because Yisro developed an ear that listened to *mussar* so Hakodosh Boruch Hu helped him out. “If that’s the case,” Hashem said, “You’re showing Me that you want to be a listener, then בְּקִרְבַּ הַחֲכָמִים תֵּלִיךָ – you’re going to lodge among the wise men.

Imagine if the *Chovos Halevavos* moved into your house with you. Suppose you’re learning *Chovos Halevavos* for years and years until finally one day he knocks on your door. That’s what happened to Yisro! Only it was someone greater than the *Chovos Halevavos*, it was the greatest prophet, Moshe Rabeinu, who moved in with him!

That’s the great privilege that we’re being promised here by the *possuk*! תֵּלִיךָ בְּקִרְבַּ הַחֲכָמִים – you’re going to lodge among the wise men; “I’ll make sure,” says Hashem, “that you lodge among the great ideals of the wise men for the rest of your life.” To spend your days with the ideals of the *Mesillas Yesharim* and the *Chovos Halevavos* and the *Shaarei Teshuva* and the *Orchos Tzadikim* and all the good *seforim* – they’ll all lodge in your heart and you’ll become greater and greater from one day to the next.

## Sitting Among the Sages

But there’s still another meaning to this *possuk* that’s equally true. And that’s because Hakodosh Boruch Hu has His eye open for exceptional people. And therefore, if you keep at it, if you keep listening, then בְּקִרְבַּ הַחֲכָמִים תֵּלִיךָ – you’ll end up among the sages in other ways too. Perhaps you’ll become a sage yourself!

That’s another thing that happened to this great listener, Yisro! What happened to Yisro eventually? He ended up sitting up front with Moshe and Aharon and all the *ziknei Yisroel*! Because he listened, people eventually listened to him. We see that the entire Jewish nation including Moshe Rabeinu listened to him; Hakodosh Boruch Hu made it as if His voice speaking from Yisro’s mouth – Yisro became a source of Torah. And that greatness never ended because Yisro’s descendants ended up sitting in the Sanhedrin.

That’s what our *parsha* is telling us. אֵזְרָן שִׁמְעֵת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים – An ear that’s willing to listen, בְּקִרְבַּ הַחֲכָמִים תֵּלִיךָ – will eventually achieve all kinds of success. If you are the right kind of listener, then you’ll be led to the right people, the right *seforim* and the right ideals. And eventually you yourself

will become the right person! Listening makes you the right person in the eyes of Hashem.

*Vayishma Yisro!* That's what brought Yisro in! He came to the Am Yisroel and he became great – eternally great. And he's our model for success. If we spend our days listening to the “criticism of life” then we too “will lodge among the wise.” It means that we'll merit all of the successes that Yisro gained. And not only in this world. Because in the World To Come, there's no end to the glory that a listener inherits – he sits together with all of the great men of our history basking in the eternal glory that every listener to the *dvar Hashem* deserves.

### Have A Wonderful Shabbos

## LET'S GET PRACTICAL

### *Learning Mussar and Listening*

*The Rov zatzal said: “There is a thirst for true avodas Hashem in this generation. People are thirsting for it but you have to know what to do, what to think. That's why you have to come to these lectures.”*

*This week I will set aside five minutes a day to learn one of the mussar seforim that the Rav mentioned in this shiur. I will spend those five minutes listening to the words and internalizing how they apply to me.*

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

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# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך

Q:

**The Orthodox community in America has been protesting against the State of Israel because of the practice of doing autopsies on the dead even against the express will of the family and the nifter. Is it right for the Rabbis to lead protests that demonstrate internal strife among Jews?**

A:

And the answer is this: Suppose your landlord is not giving you any heat. He's a Jewish landlord and your family is freezing. And no private protests on your part elicit any positive response from him. Is it wrong to make a sign and stand in front of the building – a sign that says MR. SCHWARTZ, MY LANDLORD, IS NOT GIVING ME ANY HEAT. So the gentiles might pass by and they'll say, "Look at what Jews are doing to Jews." So what should you do, freeze?!

So when it comes to freezing, then you understand that you have to do what you have to do. It's wrong to freeze. You're not going to let your family freeze. But when it comes to autopsies, then not?! When it comes to autopsies, why should we handle it with silk gloves? We have already protested quietly in every possible way. We have spoken to them a hundred times! A thousand times! And all our protests have fallen on deaf ears.

TAPE # 45 (December 1974)

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