

## Parashat Re'eh: Check Your Hearing, and You May See Better

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Re'eh begins with these verses:

“See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you hear the commandments of the LORD your God that I enjoin upon you this day, and curse, if you do not hear the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not known.” (D'varim 11: 26-28)

Two weeks ago, in Parashat Va'etchanan, we were commanded to hear, and now we are commanded to **see what we hear!**

The foundation of our civilization is that our senses provide us with objective information. Seeing and hearing are the basis of legal confirmation which can determine a person's fate in court.

But eyes do not actually see. They merely transmit information to the brain, which processes it to create an image. Parashat Re'eh suggests that the quality of the image our brain produces (whether it is a blessing or a curse) depends on our hearing!

In Hebrew, the word for hearing (שמיעה) shares a root with the word for meaning (משמעות). In other words, our hearing depends on the meaning we attribute to what we hear.

Jewish tradition reminds us that every Jew - whether he or she is born Jewish or has converted - stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and **heard** the Divine words. But tradition also says that every person heard something different, according to the nature of his or her personality and the root of his or her soul or ability to accommodate the message. From that time on Jews have always argued over what it was exactly that God said and what He commanded. After all, everyone heard a different version! Even Moshe himself heard more than one version of the Ten Commandments - one appears in Parashat Va'etchanan, and one in Parashat Yitro.

Tonight in Kabbalat Shabbat we will sing Lecha Dodi, which opens with “Shamor VeZachor” - Keep the Sabbath and Remember the Sabbath, echoing the two different versions of the fourth commandment. While God is infinite

and all-inclusive, human beings are finite, so they can only hear what they are capable of hearing.

In a beautiful midrash Our Sages tell us that a person comes into the world knowing everything he or she needs to know: everything he **heard** at Mount Sinai. In the course of her life, she will not acquire new knowledge, but rather “remember” that which she already **heard/knew**, but forgot at the moment of birth.

Based on this midrash, Rabbi Nachman explains the opening verse of our parasha in his book, Likutei Moharan: the disparity between blessing and curse that we **see** in our lives is the difference between our commitment to, or our denial of what we already know, of what we heard at “Mount Sinai”. Every one of us came into the world with a unique knowingness that he or she heard at Sinai. Within that knowingness lays everything we need for our life’s journey. If we are loyal to what we **heard**, we will **see** blessing in our lives. If we are not, we will **see** curses.

Human suffering, or curse - says Parashat Re’eh - does not stem from bad luck. Its source is the human being’s refusal to dedicate him/herself to God’s commandments which he or she heard at Sinai.

The blessing and the curse are like a mirror which accurately reflects back to us the degree to which we are true to the Sinai-commanding voice with which we arrived into the world, and to what degree we are willing to observe the mitzvot which derive from hearing that voice.

Tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh Elul, opening the month of forgiveness and soul-searching leading up to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

According to Parashat Re’eh, the reckoning we are each required to do is to what extent we have missed the mark (i.e. sinned, in Hebrew) regarding the knowingness with which we came into the world. This is the meaning of the verse I quoted earlier, which says: “... if you follow other gods, whom you have not **known**.”

This is not an art which is taught at school or at the local community center. It requires deep, inner work; the deepest we have ever been called to do.

Chodesh Tov and Shabbat Shalom,  
May it be a Shabbat of blessing, of listening to our inner Sinai-commanded knowingness, and may we be committed to it.

Elisha