

Ekev and Resilient Listening

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Part 1

Our parasha this week begins as follows (Devarim 7:12):

It will be, if you listen to these rules, and
keep them, and do them...

וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמַעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה
וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם

Then Hashem will keep, for you, the
covenant and the kindness that God swore
to your ancestors.

וְשָׁמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לָנוּ אֶת-הַבְּרִית וְאֶת-הַחֶסֶד
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ:

That first phrase is a bit odd:

עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמַעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה

“If you listen to these statutes -- or, perhaps, *as a result* of listening -- these good things will happen.”

We are familiar with the imperative to listen, *lishmo'a*. It's not that unusual in our tradition. But it's not as common as *lishmor*, to guard or keep, which is more often associated with the commandments, and of course made its way into the rabbinic lexicon, where we talk about *shemirat ha-mitzvot*, keeping the commandments, *shemirat Shabbat*, keeping Shabbat, and so on. We don't talk about *shemi'at ha-mitzvot*. Moreover, it's a bit more unusual that the verse instructs us not just to *keep* the commandments, *u-shemartem*, and not just to do them, *va'asitem*, but – also – to *listen*.

So why, then, does our parashah open with *shemi'ab*, listening, in addition to *shemirah*?

Rashi famously explains that *ekav tishme'un* reminds us to attend to the minor mitzvot, as much as the major ones.

If you listen even to those lighter commands, upon which a person steps with his heels (i.e., which a person is inclined to treat lightly)

והיה עקב תשמעון: אם המצות הקלות שאדם דש בעקביו תשמעון.

Now, Rashi's comment builds on a midrash in Tanhuma, but if you look back at the original midrash, it's clear that it's primarily concerned with the term *ekav*, not with listening. And despite this lovely *drash*, the *pesbat* of the term *ekav* is actually not that complicated. Here and elsewhere, it means "as a result of" or "following upon."

So we return to our question: Why does the parashah open with *shemi'ab*, listening?

We might turn the question around and ask it differently: what happens to us *ekav tishme'un*, or to be grammatical, *ekav nishme'an*, as a result of our listening?

Part 2

A few weeks ago, I found myself standing at a site called Beitar, on a hill overlooking a valley south of Yerushalayim, with a group of rabbis and other American Jewish leaders.

You may remember the name "Beitar" from Jewish history. It was the last holdout of the Bar Kochba revolt in the year 135. Once the fortress in this hilltop village fell, the people of Beitar were massacred. Our tradition teaches that, like many other disasters, this one also occurred on Tisha b'Av.

But we weren't standing on the hilltop, and looking down into the valley, to hear about ancient history. Instead, we were there to hear about the more recent past.

Our tour guide told us the story of how, in 1948, the village of Beitar was saved through ingenuity, and individual initiative, and a little bit of deception.

Apparently, the Jordanian Legion was encamped on the opposite hill, across the valley from Beitar. But the Jordanians were reluctant to attack the village, which would have to be approached from the valley, up the steep side of the hill. So the village was in a good position, militarily. The only problem is that the village had mostly been evacuated because of its location on the front lines. And if the enemy learned this, they would quickly take advantage of the situation and sweep into the village.

This is where the ingenuity and the individual initiative come in.

Knowing that his village was at risk, a villager by the name of Chaim Margolis came up with a plan to make it seem as if it were still populated and defended. He assembled a small team of young people, and together, they went around every day to light lamps in the empty homes, and hang laundry, and graze sheep in the fields.

To the Jordanians who were monitoring the situation, it looked as if the entire village were still populated by people going about their daily business. Day after day, Margolis carried out this plan. Until, in the end, when the fighting was over and the border was drawn, the village of Beitar was saved, and the villagers were able to come back.

You probably haven't heard the story of Beitar and its hero, Chaim Margolis. Because I just made it up.

The story that I *actually* heard, standing on that hill near the ancient village of Beitar, was about the Palestinian village of Battir. The army encamped on the hill across the valley was a unit of the Hagana. Between the two hills, in the valley below, the old railway snaked through, on its way down from Yerushalayim to Tel Aviv. The Hagana desperately wanted to capture Battir to protect the railway from being attacked, to preserve a lifeline for Yerushalayim. The Palestinian villagers, by all accounts, did not participate in the fighting. They just wanted to preserve their village and their fields. And the hero, Chaim Margolis -- his real name was Hassan Mustafa. In the village of Battir, he is still celebrated as the man who saved the village in 1948, through ingenuity and initiative and deception.

Part 3

What's interesting to me about this story is not its historical accuracy. I did a little research, and, like a lot of stories of heroism, this one is a little sketchy with the facts. Without going into too much detail, Hassan Mustafa did recruit a small team to help him pretend that the village was populated when it was not. But what the deception accomplished was not so much to defend Battir against an attack by the Hagana, but rather, to insert their claims into the negotiations between the Israelis and the Jordanians in 1949. Initially, the Jordanians were willing to cede Battir to Israel, in effect, to sell out the villagers.

So by refuting the premise that Battir was an abandoned village in No Man's Land, Hassan Mustafa was able to assert the rights of the Palestinians to their homes.

But as I said, what's interesting to me are not the details of what actually happened. Instead, what's interesting to me is my own reaction to it, as I listened to our guide telling us this story with great pride, and perhaps even a bit of triumphalism.

What happens to us *ekav nishme'an*, as a result of our listening?

I found the story of Battir powerful, delightful and quite moving. Why? Well, first of all, it's the best kind of war story -- because nobody dies. Hassan Mustafa's ingenuity and deception are defensive in nature, and manage to prevent conflict by keeping everyone where they are. They are a kind of non-violent disruption of the power dynamics in the situation. Nobody dies.

Second, I suppose that one could say that it's easy for me to hear the story because I know how it all ends up. The Palestinian villagers got to stay in Battir, but Israel did get control of the railway, not to

mention Yerushalayim itself. So whatever small tactical setback the Hagana may have suffered in that place – whatever “my side” failed to accomplish, whatever Hassan Mustafa’s deception accomplished – in the end, “my side” won. We thought we needed to control Battir in order to control the railway, but it turns out that we were wrong. We did not need to control Battir, and we could still control the railway. We got what we needed. That makes it a lot easier to be generous.

But beyond these reasons, I loved listening to the story because of the pride that I heard in the voice of our guide, as he told the story. I loved the story because, in listening to it, I felt like I got a little bit of a glimpse into the Palestinian experience. It’s just a glimpse, of course. And I am intentionally not using the term “Palestinian narrative,” because when we use that term, mostly we end up thinking about large-scale competing narratives. But for the purposes of this story, we don’t need to set up a competition between *Milhemet ha-Atzmaut* and the *Nakba*, between story A about Israel’s War of Independence and story B about the Palestinians’ Disaster, a forced choice that quickly moves into a zero-sum game of judging who is right and who is wrong. We just need to listen, to understand something new, to build a deeper and broader understanding of a complicated situation.

Part 4

So what was I doing in Battir in the first place? I was there, as I said, with a selected group of American Jewish leaders -- congregational rabbis, Hillel directors, day school heads, and others, from across the denominational spectrum, several of whom identify as Orthodox. These are all people who know Israel well, who have spent a lot of time in Israel studying and touring and visiting friends and family, and moreover, people who work on behalf of the Jewish people every day. In other words, these are people for whom *ahavat Yisrael* is a central, operative value of their lives, in the many senses of that term.

The organization that brought us to Battir, Encounter, has been doing this work for about 10 years, although this trip was more intensive than their other trips. One of the things that I admire about Encounter is the clarity of their focus on their educational mission. They are not a dialogue group. They are not in the business of peace-making or even policy-making. Instead, their purpose is to educate a specific group of people -- North American Jews -- about the complexities of the Palestinian situation and the realities of Palestinian lives. What we do with that complexity is entirely up to us.

So what happens to us *ekev nishme’an*, as a result of our listening?

Part 5

On the third day of the trip, we visited a small bookstore in East Jerusalem, where we listened to a fellow named Mahmoud Muna tell us about his life and his work. Mahmoud was educated at King’s College in London, and came back to East Jerusalem to build up a Palestinian cultural center based around the bookstore.

He speaks fast, and thinks fast, and I remember, sitting in the little assembly room in the basement of the bookstore, being really impressed with his analysis of the failures of Palestinian society and Palestinian leadership, but also, thinking that this was a guy who really understood Israel and Israelis.

Which is why it was so surprising when I heard him say that the Israelis bring drugs into Palestinian communities.

He had just been criticizing the rampant conspiracy theories in Palestinian society, the lack of acceptance of responsibility, the magical thinking, the absence of strategic planning to move towards communal objectives. And now it sounded like he was doing exactly the kind of thing that he was criticizing.

At the end of the session, three of us approached Mahmoud to continue the conversation. I wish I could say that I had the courage to ask him about what he had said, but actually, it was a woman named Rebecca who challenged him. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that Rebecca used to work for Encounter, and has known Mahmoud for several years.

In any case, Rebecca said something like this. "Mahmoud, I have to tell you, when you said that the Israelis bring drugs into Palestinian communities, I was really surprised. Because it sounds like the kind of conspiracy theorizing and magical thinking that you were criticizing. So I need to ask you whether you really believe that."

Rebecca had heard what I had heard, but she's a better listener than I am, because she found a way to really try to understand -- not to simply reject what Mahmoud had said, but to really try to hear. The folks at Encounter call this "resilient listening," hanging in there long enough, including pushing and probing if necessary, so that you achieve some understanding of the other person.

So Mahmoud responded.

No, he doesn't believe that there's an Israeli conspiracy to flood Palestinian communities with drugs.

But look, he said, think about what happens when the Shabak, Israel's security agency, has to get information about what's going on in Palestinian communities. They need to know what's happening on the streets and behind closed doors. That's how they do their job of protecting Israelis from Palestinian terrorism. They get their information from informants, and just like everywhere else in the world, police informants tend not to be most upstanding citizens of the community. So just like anywhere else in the world, just like right here in Boston, the agents of the Shabak hang out with drug dealers and low-level mobsters.

But the system only works if the informants stay on the streets, dealing drugs, engaging in whatever kinds of criminal activities they engage in. If they get arrested and jailed, they're not of any use. And Shabak doesn't care about the low level crime, because it's not their job to care about it. Their job is to protect Israeli lives, and by all accounts, they do that job very well. But as a side effect of doing their job, an inevitable consequence, they enable a flourishing drug trade in Palestinian communities.

Is this all true? I don't know. And if it's true, is it morally wrong? I don't know that either. I don't have a good idea about how to prevent Palestinian terror without using Palestinian informants, and without enabling them to continue to deal drugs. In my own defense, it's not really my field of expertise.

But what happens to us *ekev nishme'an*, as a result of our listening?

For me, this was one of the key moments of my experience on Encounter, because I heard something new, I learned something that I didn't understand before. Did I change my political views? No. Did I arrive at a new position on what ought to be done to resolve the conflict? No. But the very experience of moving from the initial rejection of what seemed like a conspiracy theory, to beginning to appreciate the complexity of the situation -- that experience opened me in some small way, made me just a little more curious, a little more able to see possibilities in conversation with people with different views.

Part 6

Many of us are familiar with the midrash on the famous verse in Shemot 24,

וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע

“[The Children of Israel] said, ‘All that God has said, we will do and we will hear’” (Ex. 24:7).

The famous midrash focuses on the odd construction of the verse, with *na'aseh*, we will do, coming before *nishma'*, we will hear. How can you do something before you hear what you're supposed to do?

But in Shabbat 88a, Rabi Elazar says:

At the moment when Israel gave precedence to *na'aseh*, we will do, ahead of *nishma*, we will hear, a Heavenly voice went out and said to them, “Who revealed to my children this secret, which is used by the ministering angels?” As it is written, “Praise God, O God's angels, mighty in strength, who do God's will and understand God's word” (Ps. 103:20) – first they do [God's will] and then they understand [God's word].”

בשעה שהקדימו ישראל נעשה לנשמע,
יצתה בת קול ואמרה להן,
מי גילה לבני רז זה,
שמלאכי השרת משתמשין בו,
דכתיב (תהלים קג, כ) ברכו ה' מלאכיו גבורי כח
עושי דברו לשמוע בקול דברו
ברישא עושי והדר לשמוע

The odd formulation *na'aseh ve-nishma* teaches us an insight about the way in which some kinds of understanding only come from doing. Practice is primary, not thinking. When we enact a practice, we learn what it's all about in a way that we would never do just by thinking about it. And when it

comes to the *mitzvos*, our attitude -- according to Rabi Elazar -- is that we should assume the obligation to do them even in advance of understanding their meaning.

That's the famous midrash on this verse.

But there's another midrash, somewhat less famous, that leans in the other direction. This one is found in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai 24:7, and it's based on the fact that there are other verses that simply say, *כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה*, "everything that God has said, we will do" (in Shemot 19:8 and Shemot 24:3).

The Mekhilta quotes the problematic verse:

(ז) ויאמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע

"[The Children of Israel] said, 'All that God has said, we will do and we will hear.'"

And then the midrash explains it as follows.

לפי שהקדימו בתחלה עשייה,

Since they had initially prioritized doing [over hearing or understanding, in the statements at Ex. 19:8 and 24:3],

אמ' להן משה: "וכי אפשר לעשייה בלא שמיעה?
שמיעה מביאה לידי עשייה!"

therefore Moshe said to them, 'Is doing possible without hearing? It is hearing that brings one to doing!'

In other words, Moshe seems to be alarmed at the idea that the people would acting blindly, without understanding. He thinks they're putting the cart before the horse. So,

חזרו ואמרו, "נעשה ונשמע," נעשה מה שנשמע.

They revised their earlier statement and said, 'We will do *and* we will hear,' [i.e.] 'We will do that which we hear.'

Apparently, there is something unsatisfactory and incomplete about the earlier formulations. Just saying "We will do" is not enough. Rote performance is not the goal. Moshe challenges the people to embrace a higher standard, beyond just doing: to listen, to seek to understand.

Why? Because he knows that, ultimately, our motivations are built upon on our understandings, and the more we understand, the more we will do. And, we might add, the more we listen and the more we understand, the more wisely we will act, the more humbly we will walk through the world, and the more *effective* our actions and our activism will be.

וְהָיָה עֲקֵב תִּשְׁמָעוֹן

“It will be, *as a result of your listening*,” these good things will happen.

Rashi had suggested that the verse is telling us to pay particular attention to the small things, the *mitzvoṯ kallot*. A life of *kedushah*, of sanctity and spiritual focus, is not only about the big moments; it’s also about the small ones.

With just a little bit of license, perhaps we can say that *shemi’ah* is precisely one of those *mitzvoṯ kallot*, those little things that are easily ignored, those things that we often leave by the wayside in our political and religious actions in the world, those things that get trod underfoot as we try to be righteous and try to seem righteous to others.

Ekev nishme’an, if we can all learn to listen a little more closely, a little longer and with greater resilience, to hear more, to understand more, even from surprising sources,

וְשָׁמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת־הַבְּרִית וְאֶת־הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֵּינוּ:

then God will keep the Covenant and the kindness, that God has promised to our ancestors.

Ken yehi ratzon.

Shabbat shalom.