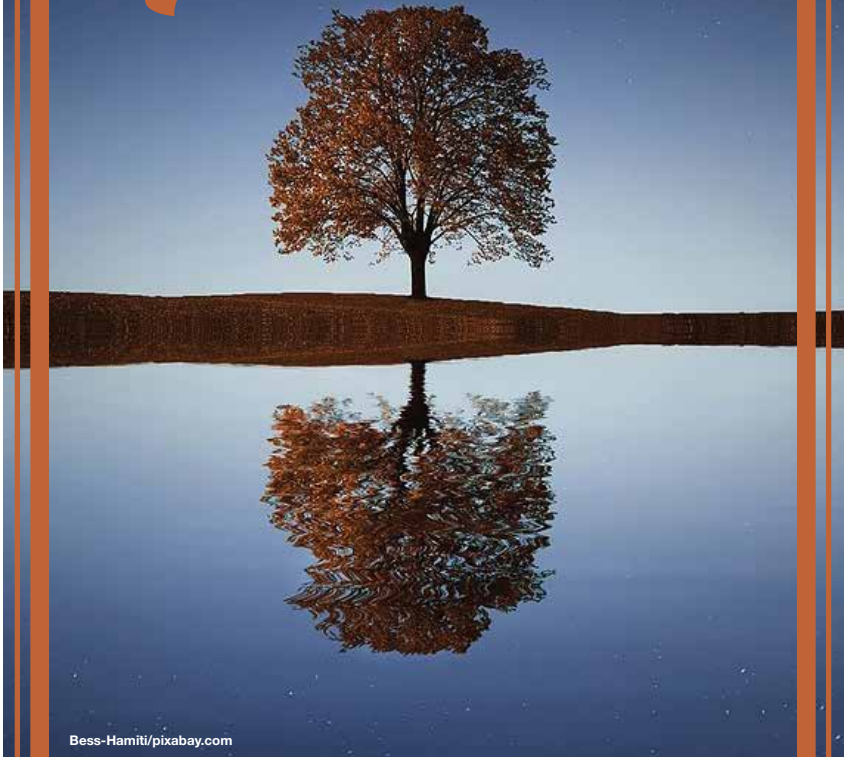


ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Still, Small *Voice*



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By Rev. Cheryl L. Hauer, *Vice-President*

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THAT STILL, SMALL VOICE...HOW WE YEARN FOR IT.

At first blush, it seems it should be so simple: just listen. Yet the busy life has plagued believers throughout time, luring the would-be faithful away from the prayer closet, where hearts and ears are open, and into the cacophony of life around us where that whisper from God is virtually indiscernible. Though our ancestors may have struggled to find time to be alone with the Lord and hear His voice, today's world of digital media has made our situation substantially worse than theirs.

A recent study indicates that Americans collectively check their smart phones 46 billion times per day, while an article in *Scientific American* finds them spending nine hours and 22 minutes each day in front of various screens. A similar study reveals that television, internet, tweeting and texting consume 90% of Canadians' time, while Australians spend more time tweeting than they do sleeping. The United Kingdom, Europe and South Africa report similar statistics, while South Korea and Japan find their citizens absorbed with their digital media six or seven hours per day.

Digital media is, for good or ill, here to stay, and it unavoidably permeates nearly every aspect of our lives. Our senses are constantly assaulted by sights and sounds that our forebears couldn't even have imagined, leaving us longing for that whisper from God that we so desperately need to hear. And a bit confused as well. With ears so accustomed to the din, how do we find that still, small voice? How do we hear it? More importantly, how do we recognize it when we do hear?

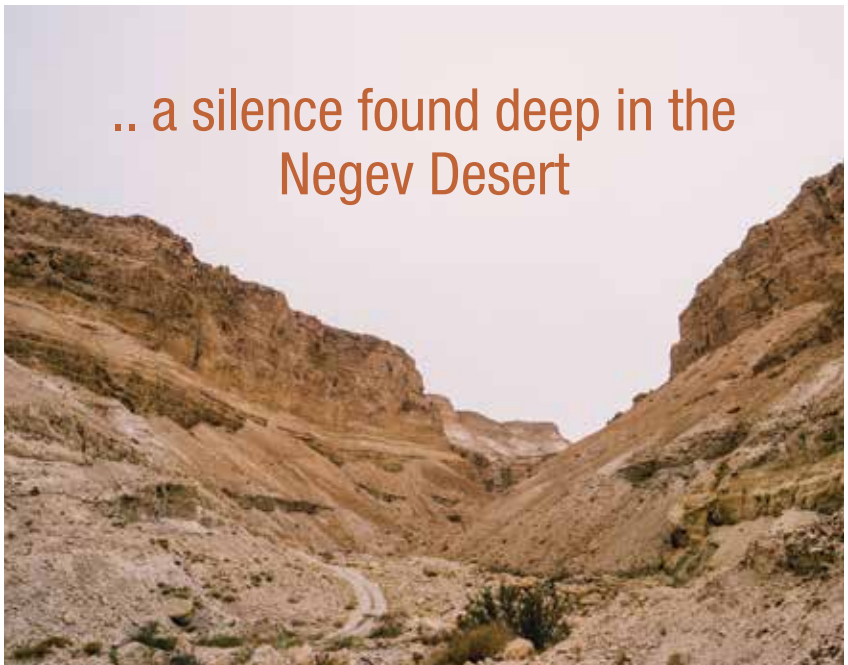
Quiet... or Not?

The most well-known biblical injunction to listen to the still, small voice is found in 1 Kings 19:12. The prophet Elijah has found himself desperate to hear the voice of the Lord. Most of our Bible translations seem to indicate that he finally found it in the still, small voice. The phrase in Hebrew is קול דממה דקה or *kol d'mama daka*, and many Christian and Jewish scholars agree that this verse refers to a quiet, internal whisper that we must train ourselves to hear. Literally translated, they say, it speaks of a "voice of thin silence." LearnHebrew.org.il adds to this definition with two idiomatic phrases: either a whisper or utter silence.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible agrees with the latter. It translates the phrase, "the sound of sheer silence." With our overworked ears, it's hard to imagine what sheer silence would be like. Some equate it with the "calm after the storm," and others liken it to the complete lack of sound found deep in the Negev Desert. Not a quiet, thin voice. Not a voice at all, except the voice of silence.

Other scholars take a completely opposite approach. In an article entitled "A Gentle Breeze or a Roaring Thunderous Sound?" the author posits that there was no whispering going on in Elijah's encounter with God. He suggests that the Hebrew phrase *kol d'mama daka* is unique in the Bible and is based on *damamu*, an Acadian rather than a Hebrew root. It refers to roaring and moaning. Based on his linguistic research and the pattern of theophany in the *Tanakh* (OT), the author believes a better translation might be "a roaring and thundering voice."

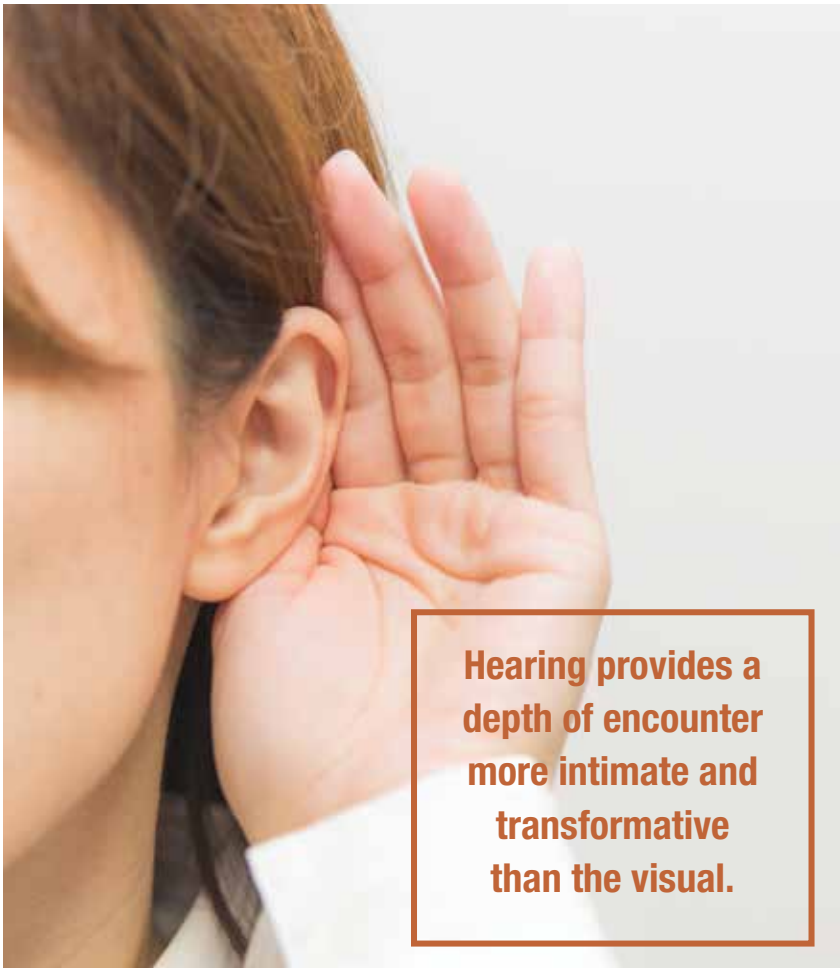
So which was it? Where are we to look?



To See or To Hear, That Is the Question

If someone were to ask you to quantify the differences between seeing and hearing, what would you say? Obviously, the one sense is visual, while the other is auditory. A person who is blind is able to understand his surroundings based in part on how they sound, while a deaf person perceives a soundless world of shapes and colors. In a very real sense, sight is external, a form of detachment. A sighted person could spend an entire lifetime as a spectator and not a participant, on the outside looking in as others win Olympic medals, perform in theater or simply live their lives around him or her.

Speaking and listening, however, are forms of engagement, the very foundations of relationship. Hearing provides a depth of encounter more intimate and transformative than the visual. Both are wonderful gifts from a loving Creator, but for Elijah, one sense clearly outweighed the other in spiritual importance.



**Hearing provides a
depth of encounter
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than the visual.**



It's all about Worldview

In his article “*Va’etchanan (5767) – Listen O Israel,*” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points to a difference in basic worldview as the culprit in this conundrum. Hellenism and Hebraism, the two great influencers of Western society, hold antithetical views on this subject. Ancient Greece, the rabbi says, was in many respects the greatest culture of antiquity, but it was a profoundly visual society. Its paramount achievements were in the visual arts, architecture and sculpture; in performance arts, the Olympic Games and theater.

The great Greek philosopher Plato believed true knowledge was a kind of depth of vision, somehow seeing beyond the surface to true form. The idea that knowing is seeing is deeply imbedded even in modern Western thought. Rabbi Sacks points out that our references to knowledge are peppered with metaphors drawn from the world of vision. We speak of insight, foresight and hindsight. We offer observation, we adopt perspectives, we illustrate, shed light on and when we finally understand, we say, “I see!” As a pagan society, the Greeks worshiped what they could apprehend visually: the sun, moon and stars; the sea, the storm and the great forces that surround us yet over which we have no control.

The revelation at Mt. Sinai introduced a whole new paradigm. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob announced Himself to the world as a God of relationship, a God who speaks and who listens, a God to whom intimacy is of supreme importance. He came not as an appearance or a visible presence, but as a voice.

A voice, Rabbi Sacks says, that commanded, promised, challenged and summoned, just as He does today. Scripture records over 4,000 instances where we are told that God spoke.

Because He is the God who, unlike the gods of the Greek pantheon, cannot be seen, Judaism is a religion of listening. Of course there are visual elements within Judaism, but their primary purpose is often to set the stage for that which is to be heard. Seeing in Judaism is ultimately about hearing. Israel is a nation called on to reject images in favor of words; to discard appearances and follow, instead, the commanding voice of the Lord. In Deuteronomy 4, God reminded the Jewish people that their initial encounter with Him was one of hearing and not seeing, so that they would not succumb to the temptation to worship what they could see. Although Rabbi Sacks recognizes that God is everywhere and we can connect with Him no matter where we might be on the globe, he explains:

Judaism's answer to paganism is that God is "found," first and foremost, not in the blinding light of the sun, nor in the majesty of mountains. He is not in the almost infinitely vast spaces of the universe, with its hundreds of billions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars. He is not even in the letters of the genetic code that give all life its structure and diversity. If this is where you seek God, you are looking in the wrong place. Indeed, the mistake you are making is that you are looking at all.

God is to be "found" not by looking but by listening. He lives in words—the words He spoke to the patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and priests; ultimately in the words of the *Torah* [Gen.–Deut.] itself—the words through which we are to interpret all other words.

God is "found"

You Shall Listen

Judaism and Christianity agree that God cannot be seen, but we can hear Him and He hears us. It is through the word—speaking and listening—that we can have an intimate relationship with Him as our Parent, our Partner, our Sovereign, the One who loves us and whom we love. We cannot demonstrate God scientifically. We cannot prove God logically. These are Greek, not Hebraic, modes of thought. Rabbi Sacks believes that trying to prove the existence of God logically or scientifically is a mistaken enterprise. God is not an object but a subject. The Hebraic mode is to relate to God in intimacy and love, as well as awe, reverence and obedience.

Interestingly, however, the Hebrew language has no word for obedience and no verb “to obey.” As a Bible-believing faith system, Judaism recognizes 613 commandments in the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) alone and certainly believes that God expects His people to comply. Translators of the *Tanakh* (OT) tell us that we are to comprehend, take heed, hear, obey, hearken and listen closely, obediently, carefully and attentively. But in all 1,143 instances, the word being translated is *sh'ma*, “Hear, O Israel,” the first word many Jewish children learn and the last word on the lips of countless Jewish people as they die. *Sh'ma* is better translated “listen,” and it means all the things the translators say, but also to internalize and respond. With it comes the understanding of active follow-through. To listen means more than to accept auditory stimuli. It means to pay very close attention and then embrace what you hear, so that you can partner with God to bring His will into being.

by LISTENING

The Bible Says...

There are countless examples in the Bible of what we might call sight versus sound. One of them is found in the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob was encouraged by his mother to pretend to be his brother Esau in order to receive his father's blessing. Dressed in Esau's clothes, carrying a serving of Esau's famous venison stew, wrapped in goat hair and smelling of the outdoors as would Esau, Jacob approached his father. Virtually all Isaac's senses failed him. Except one. *"The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau,"* Isaac said (Gen. 27:22).

The story of Joseph's meeting with his brothers when they came to Egypt in search of food contains another example. As Joseph's brothers faced the accusation of being spies, they believed their misfortune at the hands of the Egyptian leader had befallen them because they saw but did not hear: *"... we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear..."* (Gen. 42:21).

Some scholars say we see another example in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were what would seem to be a very happy couple. They lived in the most blissful place ever created; their needs were all supernaturally met; they heard God's voice in the cool of the evening and they were naked yet unashamed. All they needed to do was heed God's instructions to avoid eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All went well until the serpent pointed out to Eve how beautiful the tree was. He assured her that just one bite of that forbidden fruit would cause her eyes to be opened and she would be like God. She would see. The tree, the Bible says, was pleasant to the look at, and when Adam and Eve ate of it, their eyes were indeed opened. Later, when they heard the voice of the Lord in the garden, they hid because they were naked and afraid.





Those scholars suggest that the real sin committed by Adam and Eve was the choice to see rather than listen. God created mankind to be in relationship with Him, sharing and communing through speaking and listening. We see it in His interaction with Abraham and Moses, both men he spoke to as a “*man speaks to his friend*” (Exod. 33:11). The psalmist, the prophets and the apostles all heard the voice of God. But Adam and Eve opened the door through which evil could enter when they decided that seeing was more desirable than hearing.

Lessons from Elijah

We began our discussion with the story of Elijah and the *kol d'mama daka*, the still, small voice. Perhaps here is where we will find our answers. Elijah is a heroic figure in Judaism, a courageous prophet who stood up to the evil King Ahab and his equally evil wife Jezebel. He was a healer who actually brought the dead back to life. Today he is still honored every year at the Passover table with a special cup and is one of only two men in the entire Bible who didn't die but was transported to heaven in a fiery chariot.

The reign of Ahab and Jezebel was a particularly dark time in Jewish history, as the king and his foreign queen turned the nation of Israel away from the God of Israel, filling the country with the worship of Ba'al. Elijah was a courageous and passionate prophet who confronted the royal couple on many occasions, warning them of the fate that awaited them if they continued in their vile, pagan practices.

Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al



His heart was broken as he watched the people of Israel being deceived and the God of Israel dishonored.

After challenging 450 Ba'al prophets to prove the reality of their god and defeating them, he had hope that the people would turn back to the one true God. When they didn't, he became hopelessly discouraged and fled for his life from Jezebel.

His journey took him into the wilderness near Beersheva and beyond. In fact, he is the only recorded biblical character to make his way to Mt. Horeb, another name for Mt. Sinai, where Moses and the Israelites received the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) from God. We can only imagine that in his anguish of heart, he hoped that God would speak to him, as He had to Moses.

The Bible tells us in 1 Kings 19:9 that he “*went into a cave.*” Jewish tradition says it wasn't just any cave, it was the “*cleft of the rock*” (Exod. 33:22), where God hid Moses when he asked to see God's glory. After a night's sleep, God did speak and asked Elijah the simple question, “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” (1 Kings 19:9). Elijah's response was the unburdening of his troubled heart. He had been zealous for the Lord, but the children of Israel had forsaken God, worshiping pagan idols, and now they were out to kill him, the only remaining follower of the God of Israel. He needed a word, a sign and encouragement. Elijah needed to see God's glory.

God did not disappoint. He passed before Elijah and a strong wind tore the mountain, smashing the rock to pieces. It was followed by an earthquake and after the earthquake, a fire. But Scripture tells us that God was not in any of the three. Then came the *kol d'mama daka*. The silence. Elijah heard it, the Bible says, wrapped his mantle around his face and left the cave.

I don't think Elijah came to Mt. Horeb to hear the voice of God. If that were the case, the story would have been over before the fireworks began. God had already spoken. I think Elijah had decided that seeing was more to be desired than hearing. He was looking for exactly what God gave him: an overwhelmingly powerful visual demonstration of God's power, just as God had given Moses and the Israelites. He wanted to see the mountain shake, the fire rage and the lightning flash. But when it was over, there was nothing. Only silence and no resolution. He was still in turmoil and his heart was still anguished. The entire display had been for naught. Then he realized the mistake he had made. Elijah wrapped his mantle around his face to protect himself from visual distraction and went out of the cave.

When he did so, God spoke, and asked the same question again: “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” (1 Kings 19:13). It's as if God was saying, “*Why did you come all*

the way to Mt. Horeb, Elijah, when I was speaking to you all along?" His instruction to the prophet was simple: go back and do what you were called to do. Elijah was obedient, returned to his home and continued to honor God with courage and passion, passing his mantle to Elisha before God carried him to heaven in a chariot of fire.

So what was *kol d'mama daka*? Was it a whisper? Thunder? Or absolutely nothing? I don't think it matters. The lesson of Elijah is a simple one: God has given us eyes, but He is not found in the seeing. He has given us ears, but He is not found in the hearing either. *Kol d'mama daka* is about listening. Whether He thunders or whispers, He is looking for those who want only to hear His voice, to listen intently and embrace what He is saying, to love Him passionately and partner with Him to make His will reality. *Sh'ma, Israel...*

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- Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)



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International Headquarters
P.O. Box 1093, Jerusalem, Israel
Tel: (972) 2-624-5004

intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com

www.bridgesforpeace.com

