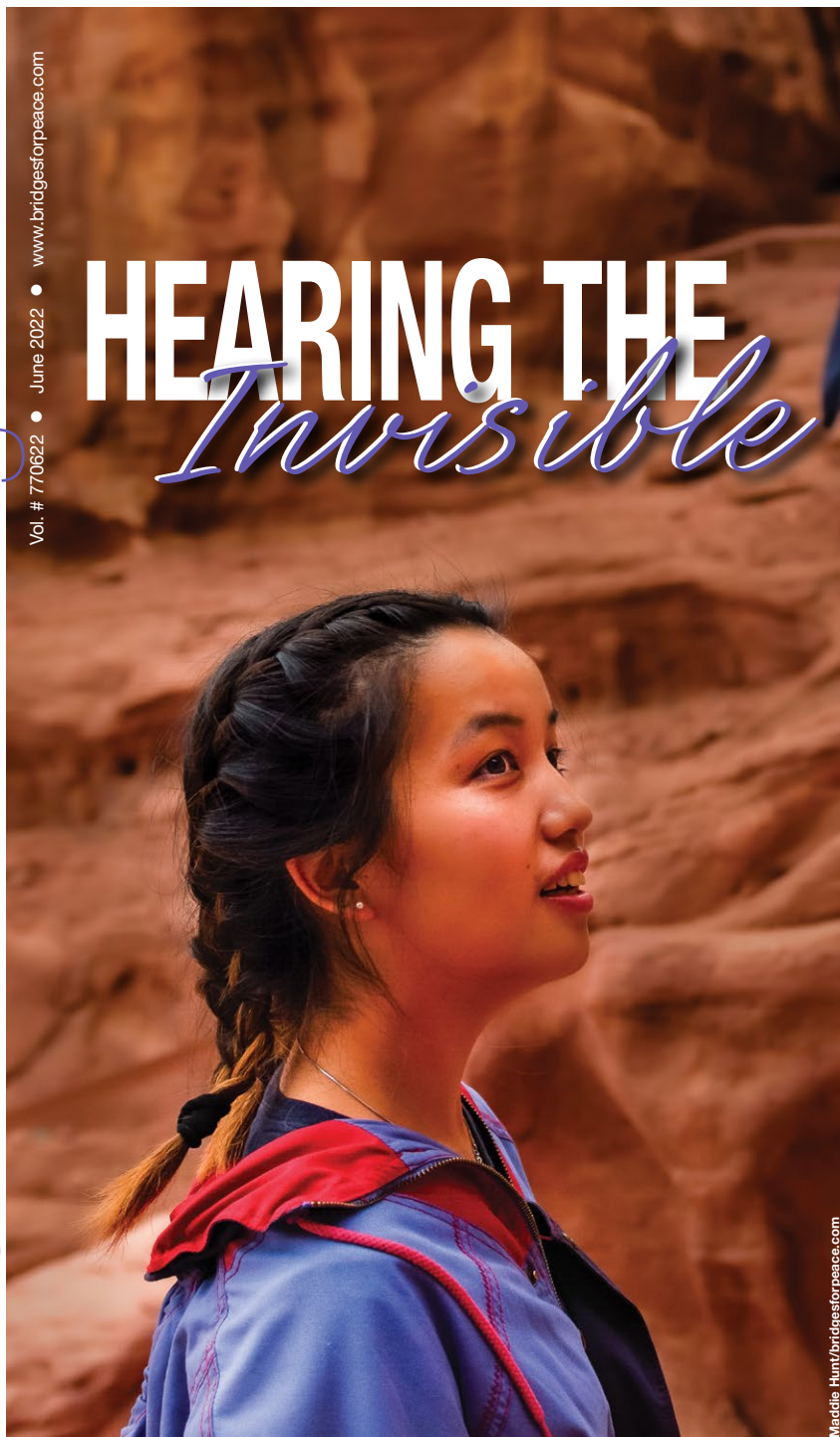


HEARING THE *Invisible*



THE VOICE

How often have you heard Christians commenting on what they understand as a lack of faith displayed by the Israelites? The question often is: “How could they have been so unbelieving after all they had seen?” After all, they had just witnessed the gods of Egypt defeated by the God of heaven. They watched in disbelief as the Egyptians surrendered their valuables to former slaves, sending them forth with the wealth of the greatest civilization of the Mediterranean world at the time. They witnessed the astonishing parting of the sea and stood in safety on the other side, watching as Pharaoh’s powerful armies were destroyed. A short time later, they huddled at the foot of Mount Sinai and saw the air filled with clouds and smoke, the blinding lightning and the entire mountain shaking before their eyes. And as they traveled, they were comforted by the sight of the pillar of fire at night and the pillar of cloud during the day. After seeing all of that, some ask, how could they have so little faith? Clearly, many in the Israelite camp struggled with trusting the God of their forefathers and His messenger, Moses. But I would like to suggest that the problem had little to do with what they were seeing. It wasn’t a problem of sight, but rather of hearing.



THE EYES HAVE IT

For hundreds of years, scientists have been studying the human senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. It was long believed that those five senses are hardwired in the brain and are equal in importance to all humans as the common means by which we interact with the world around us. The knowledge we gain from

those senses is so taken for granted that we don't question the origin of the belief. And certainly everyone would recognize the reality in statements such as grass is green or ice is cold. They're not subjective. We know they're true because...well, we sense it. But recent studies have proved otherwise.

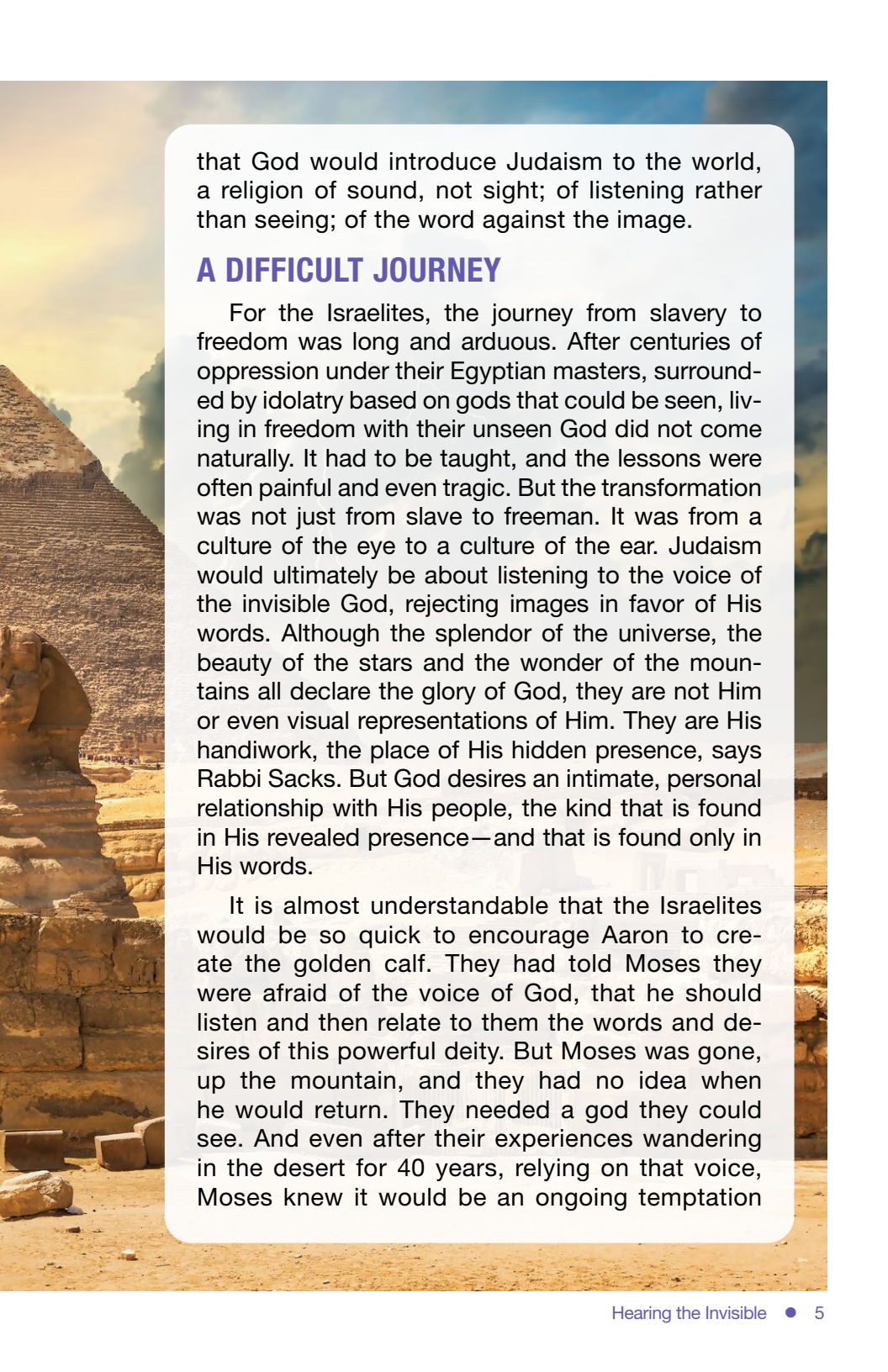
As anthropologists using modern technology have delved into the concept of the hierarchy of human senses, they have come to some startling conclusions. Researchers have discovered that the most important element in ranking the senses is not biology at all, but rather culture. Traditions and values play the basic role in determining which sensory impressions will be deemed most important. Studying 20 very diverse cultural groups around the world, scientists have learned that our basic assumptions have indeed been very wrong. While most western cultures prioritize sight over the other four senses, those living in very cold climates have a tendency to prioritize touch. Aboriginal cultures in Australia, on the other hand, rank smell as the most important of the five. The Bedouin have many words for sand, and the Inuit many words for snow. Meanwhile, some would find it difficult to discuss the sky because they have no word for "blue." And those western cultures that prioritize sight are firm in their belief that, although the other four senses may be important, it is only what we see that can actually be believed.

This, however, is not news to everyone. From 12th-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, one of the greatest minds in modern Judaism, Jewish scholars have long recognized the tension between what they call "cultures of the eye" and "cultures of the ear." Rabbi Sacks believes the distinction is so fundamental that it finds its origin with Adam and Eve. "The sin of the first humans in the Garden of Eden was that they followed their eyes," says Rabbi Sacks, "not their ears. Their actions were determined by what they saw, the beauty of the tree, not by what they heard, namely the word of God commanding them not to eat from it." Thus was born the universal human predisposition to worship the creation and not the creator. After all, it is the creation that can be seen.

CULTURES OF THE EYE

Most ancient Middle Eastern civilizations were cultures of the eye, including the Greeks, who contributed so much to our current western society. They were the supreme masters of the visual arts: sculpture, painting, architecture, theater, drama and athletic games. Their gods were embodied in all size and manner of statuary, and their cities were filled with extravagant temples populated with visual representations of gods whose reality was unquestioned because they could be seen. This was also true of the Romans, who actually absorbed much of the Greek pantheon into their own. This led the apostle Paul to comment regarding the Greco-Roman world in which he lived: *“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man...”* (Rom. 1:22–23a).

Today scholars tell us that it is the Egyptians, however, who get the prize for pagan worship with literally thousands of gods. To date, only about 1,500 of them are actually known by name. Their temples, statues and depictions were everywhere, and their demands on their worshippers permeated every aspect of life. It was in this visual, pagan society that Moses grew up and from which he made his way to the hills of Midian, where he encountered the real God. This was, however, not a God he could see, but a God in a bush that burned but was not consumed. Suddenly, Moses could not trust what his eyes were telling him. Like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob before him, Moses met the one true God who came not as a visible presence, but as a voice—“a commanding, promising, challenging, summoning voice,” says Rabbi Sacks. It was through Moses



that God would introduce Judaism to the world, a religion of sound, not sight; of listening rather than seeing; of the word against the image.

A DIFFICULT JOURNEY

For the Israelites, the journey from slavery to freedom was long and arduous. After centuries of oppression under their Egyptian masters, surrounded by idolatry based on gods that could be seen, living in freedom with their unseen God did not come naturally. It had to be taught, and the lessons were often painful and even tragic. But the transformation was not just from slave to freeman. It was from a culture of the eye to a culture of the ear. Judaism would ultimately be about listening to the voice of the invisible God, rejecting images in favor of His words. Although the splendor of the universe, the beauty of the stars and the wonder of the mountains all declare the glory of God, they are not Him or even visual representations of Him. They are His handiwork, the place of His hidden presence, says Rabbi Sacks. But God desires an intimate, personal relationship with His people, the kind that is found in His revealed presence—and that is found only in His words.

It is almost understandable that the Israelites would be so quick to encourage Aaron to create the golden calf. They had told Moses they were afraid of the voice of God, that he should listen and then relate to them the words and desires of this powerful deity. But Moses was gone, up the mountain, and they had no idea when he would return. They needed a god they could see. And even after their experiences wandering in the desert for 40 years, relying on that voice, Moses knew it would be an ongoing temptation

for them to create a god of their own making. In the book of Deuteronomy, he gives his final discourse to those who are about to cross the river and build a nation like none other before it. And he was firm in his warning against idolatry:

“And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice...Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth. And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which the LORD your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage” (Deut. 4:12,15–19, emphasis added).

It was a stern admonition that spoke of severe consequences. God is a jealous God, Moses warned them, and if they forgot that it was the voice of the God of their forefathers that sustained them and they lapsed again into idolatry, they would pay dearly. It is no wonder that the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel,” centerpiece of Jewish prayer)—God’s direction to *hear*, to *listen*, to *obey* and to remember that the invisible God is one God, the only God—is the foundational tenet of Judaism.

There are verses throughout the entire Bible that reiterate the importance God places on hearing and obeying His voice, sometimes even when He seems to be talking about seeing rather than hearing. Again, as Rabbi Sacks points out:

“The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah: Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: ‘I reared children and brought them up but they have rebelled against me...Hear the word of the Lord’ (Isa 1:1–2).”

We are told that this is a “vision” that Isaiah “saw.” Yet there is no visual imagery to be found. What Isaiah “saw” was the voice of the Lord; He “saw” the words of God, not a sight or a scene or a symbol. The key words are “hearing” and “listening.”

A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER BOOK

That theme certainly carries on through the Epistles and the Writings of the Apostles (NT) as well. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God, Paul tells us (Rom. 10:17). The apostle John says it is the one who hears the words of God and believes them who will have eternal life (John 5:24). As Jesus (Yeshua) prays for His disciples in John 17, He doesn’t relate all the miracles He performed, the people He healed, the blind to whom He gave sight or the deaf who could now hear. He simply says, *“For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them”* (John 17:8a).

What an important lesson for us even today! Few of us ever have the opportunity to hear the audible voice of God. We will never stand at the foot of Mount Sinai, but we have in the Bible the very voice of God, of which Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul and John



spoke. We are privileged to hold in our hands the living and powerful Word of the Creator of the universe. It is not a book like other books. It is vital and active and contains the very words that bring life. Listen, God is saying, hear My voice. Don’t look outward at your

circumstances, at the constant visual distractions around you, at the global disasters that permeate the news. Listen. Pick up the Book often and faithfully, and listen to the voice of the Lord.

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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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