



RABBI SHALOM

ROSNER

RAV KEHILLA, OHEL EPHRAIM IN NOFEI HASHEMESH

MAGGID SHIUR, DAF YOMI, OU.ORG

ROSH BAIS MEDRASH ENGLISH SPEAKING PROGRAM JCT MACHON LEV

The Spiritual Art of Listening: The Deeper Meaning of *Shema*

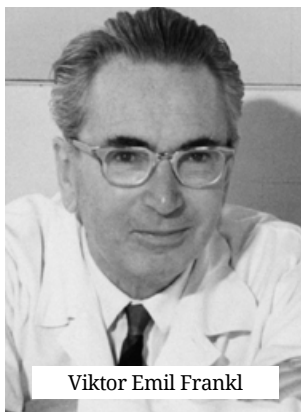
One of the most powerful and recurring words in Sefer Devarim is the word שמע (*Shema*). At first glance, it appears simple enough: *hear* or *listen*. Yet, the Hebrew word *Shema* contains layers of meaning that cannot be captured by any single English translation.

THE FALLACY OF TRANSLATABILITY

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks famously described what he called *the fallacy of translatability* - the mistaken assumption that every word in one language can be perfectly translated into another. Languages reflect cultures, values, and spiritual worlds. Therefore, certain words carry dimensions of meaning that simply do not exist elsewhere. The Hebrew language is especially rich in this regard. Words in *Lashon HaKodesh* are not merely labels; they express essence and spiritual reality.

Rabbi Sacks¹ notes that *Shema* is one of those untranslatable words. Depending on context, it can mean: to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to internalize, to heed, or even to obey. Indeed, various English

translations of the opening verse of Parashat Eikev render the word differently: “If you hearken...”; “If you obey...”; “If you pay attention...”. Yet none fully captures the depth of *Shema*.



Viktor Emil Frankl

The Torah’s concept of listening is not passive hearing. It is active receptivity. *Shema* means allowing another voice to enter one’s inner world.

LISTENING AS AVODAH

Listening is difficult. Seeing is immediate and effortless. Listening, however, demands patience, humility, focus, and emotional presence. True listening requires setting aside one’s own inner noise in order

to make room for someone else. Rabbi Sacks describes listening itself as an *avodah*, a form of spiritual labor. Modern life conditions people to speak, react, argue, and persuade. Rarely are we trained simply to listen. Yet some of the deepest human healing emerges not from brilliant speeches, but from attentive presence.

POWER OF BEING HEARD

Viktor Frankl once recounted that he received a late-night phone call from a woman contemplating suicide. For two hours he

1. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*

spoke with her, offering every conceivable reason to continue living. Eventually she agreed not to take her life. Later, Frankl asked her which argument had convinced her. She answered: none of them. What changed her mind, she explained, was the realization that someone was willing to listen to her for two hours in the middle of the night. That alone convinced her that life was worth living.

This story reveals a profound truth: to be heard is to be affirmed. Listening tells another person- *your existence matters. Your pain matters. You matter.* In many ways, the deepest human need is not merely to be helped, but to be understood.

LISTENING AS HEALING

Rabbi Sacks applied this principle in his own rabbinic work. He once described his involvement in resolving difficult *agunah* cases, situations in which husbands refused to grant a *get*. Surprisingly, many of these painful disputes were resolved not primarily through legal mechanisms, but through deep listening. By allowing each side to fully express their pain and sense of injustice, healing and reconciliation became possible. Listening is therapeutic because it restores dignity. Very often people do not become angry simply because of disagreement; they become angry because they feel unheard.

In Tanach we find the importance of attentive listening: דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים בְּנִחָת נִשְׁמָעִים - *the words of the wise are heard when spoken gently.*²

The ability to hear another person deeply is therefore not only an interpersonal skill; it is a Torah value.

MOSHE RABBEINU: THE GREAT LISTENER

This insight sheds new light on one of the Torah's great mysteries.

When Hashem first appeared to Moshe Rabbeinu at the Burning Bush, Moshe protested:

“בִּי אֶ-דֹּנִי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי... כִּי כְבֹד-פֶּה וְכֶבֶד לִשׁוֹן אֲנִי”

Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words... for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue

Why would Hashem choose someone who struggled with speech to become the greatest leader in Jewish history? Perhaps one who struggles to speak learns how to listen. Moshe's greatness may not have begun with eloquence, but with receptivity. Before he could transmit the word of Hashem, he first had to hear it. The foundation of Torah leadership is not rhetoric, it is listening.

In a world saturated with noise, true listening has become rare. People rush to respond before understanding. Conversations become performances. Even relationships often suffer because individuals seek to be heard more than they seek to hear. Yet the Torah teaches that holiness begins with *Shema*.

Shema Yisrael is not merely a declaration of faith. It is a call to cultivate an inner posture of attentiveness, toward Hashem, toward Torah, and toward other human beings. To truly listen is to recognize that another soul carries infinite dignity. Sometimes the greatest act of kindness is not advice, persuasion or brilliance, but presence. A listening ear can restore hope. A listening heart can heal pain. A listening soul can hear the voice of Hashem hidden within the noise of life.

May we merit to become not only people who speak words of Torah, but people who embody the Torah's deepest command: *Shema* - to hear, to understand, and to truly listen. ■

רפואה שלמה מהרה
לליעם יעקב ניסן בן אורה

2. Kohelet 9:17