

Va-Etchanan 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick August 20, 2016

A few years back a group of Italian agronomists formed an NGO to help address issues of hunger in Africa. So they went to Zambia, to an area that had very little agriculture in spite of the fact that they had sufficient rain and fertile soil. The scientists were amazed at the lack of farming there. They had brought with them seeds from their native Italy for vegetables - tomatoes, cucumbers, squash etc. and they planted near the banks of the Zambezi River. The locals were not particularly interested in doing the farming, so the Italians had to pay them to come and do the farming. But instead of asking the Zambians why they were not interested in farming, the scientists simply said, "Thank Gd we are here!" Well, soon enough the crops began to grow, and they grew very well. The tomatoes were as big as melons and the cucumbers and squash grew in great number. The Italians were proud of themselves: "We have taught the Zambians how to save themselves!" Then when the crops were fully ready, in one night some 200 huge hippos came out of the river and ate all the vegetables!! So the Italians ran to the Zambians and said, "Why didn't you tell us?" And they said, "We tried, but you did not listen. THAT'S why we have no agriculture!"

They did not listen... They did not hear. For the Jew, the greatest of all mitzvot is to listen and hear. That's why our central prayer, the one that comes from this week's Torah portion is called the Shema Yisrael. And we usually translate this as "Hear O Israel..." But what it really means is, "Hear and Listen and Internalize. Concentrate. Strive to understand the words you are hearing." For us Jews hearing, listening with our ears and with our hearts, is the cornerstone of our faith. The Greeks were masters of visual art: sculpture, architecture and theatre. But we Jews said yes to an invisible Gd; a Gd who was only revealed through the Word. So our supreme act of religious commitment is to listen. That's why it is called the "Shema" - because it is through listening that Gd is revealed. Gd speaks to us, but we have to train ourselves to really listen.

The Italian scientists came to Zambia with the best of intentions. They only wanted to help. But the mistake they made was that they were both patronizing and paternalistic. Both words come from the Latin which means "father," but they are different. Paternalistic means we treat people whom we are trying to help as if they were our children. "I know better, and out of the goodness in my heart I will help you..." Patronizing means I treat them as if they were my servants. "If you really want my help then you need to do what I say." In either case, the net effect is the same. I know what is best for YOU. But what the scientists came to understand - what we ALL need to understand is that to really help another you must first listen. Shut up and listen. What is it that the person SAYS he or she needs? What is motivating them to speak in this way? Listen not just with your ears, but with your heart.

The first and most important step in learning to listen is humility. To know from the outset that you don't have the answers. To know that you might not be able to make a difference. To realize that the person you are trying to help might not want to be helped at all. Humility, above all else, is what makes us into better listeners, better friends, and better citizens.

But of course I need not tell you that we live in a society that does not place a great deal of emphasis on humility. We live in a world of competition, of self-advancement, of standing up

for oneself. And all of those can be, and in fact are, good traits to have. No one wants to be, as they say in Israel - a "FRYER" - a person others take advantage of. But our world, indeed each of us, can truly benefit from a healthy dose of humility.

The Torah says of Moses, "He was the most humble man of all." But how highly do we value humility? When you are making a job recommendation, or receiving one, how often do you hear humility mentioned? Not too much, I suspect.

The prophet Micah summed up man's highest duties when he said, "What does the Lord require of you? Only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your Gd." To walk with Gd in this world we need to be working on our own humility. To hear, to listen, to internalize, we must work on humility. To help others better we must approach each encounter with humility.

Humility allows us to be true to the words of the Shema. In order to listen, not simply with our ears but with our hearts, we must find a certain stillness in our souls. It is that stillness that not only brings us inner peace and stability, but opens us up to the world around us. It is with that spirit of humility that we now offer our Musaf prayers....