Listening, Not Just Hearing: Thoughts on Parashat Yitro, February 14 2009

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This week's Torah portion begins with the words "Vayishma Yitro"--and Yitro heard. News had reached him about the miraculous salvation of the Israelites at the Red Sea and about their battle with Amalek. A Hassidic master asked: why did the Torah specify that Yitro heard about these things? Everyone, not just Yitro, had heard about the exploits of the Israelites. The Rebbe answered: others heard, but Yitro listened. Yitro was special because he drew conclusions from the news he received. He realized that he should meet with Moses and the Israelites, that he should stand in solidarity with them, that he should find ways of helping them.

We are barraged by news, by demands, by problems, by requests: many people hear these things, but then tune them out. Special people listen. They try to understand what is at stake and what role they can play. And they act accordingly. Those who hear are those who stand back, who are "the silent majority". Those who listen are the ones who enter the fray and change the world for the better.

The parasha includes the Ten Commandments. Significantly, the Ten Commandments are in the singular--not plural--form. God speaks to each individual. The Midrash comments that God's voice reached each person according to his/her ability to comprehend. God wanted every person to listen to His words and take them personally; he did not want them simply to hear Him.

My wife Gilda taught me long ago: it is important for a rabbi to be a good speaker; it is even more important for a rabbi to be a good listener. This is wise advice for all people, not only rabbis. Listening is a quality that demands that we pay close attention to what is being said, that we be attuned to the feelings and needs of others, that we come to feel a genuine empathy with them. By listening, we then can decide on appropriate words and actions that may be helpful.

Yitro's ability to listen, not just to hear, distinguished him from so many others of his generation. So, too, each of us can learn to be better listeners, more sympathetic helpers, and more constructive participants in building better families, communities and society as a whole.

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