Listening and Seeing: Thoughts on Parashat Re'eh

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Talmudic discussions are often introduced by the phrase “ta shema,” come listen. The connotation is that we are to apply our intellects to analyze a particular passage, to “listen” to alternative interpretations, to iron out possible contradictions. “Shema”—listening—calls on us to utilize our intellects.

Discussions in the Zohar, the classic work of Kabbalah, often are introduced by the phrase “ta hazei,” come see. The connotation is that we need to use our “vision,” to go beyond the realm of pure logic. When we are challenged to “see” a text or teaching, we are asked to do more than “listen.” We are asked to draw on other human resources—imagination, creativity, aesthetics, faith.

Parashat Va-et-hanan includes the famous passage: Shema Yisrael…Listen Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. This verse, recited in our prayers several times each day, calls on us to be attentive to the reality of God and God’s unity. As Rambam taught, proper faith in God is based on intellectual striving and philosophic analysis.

Parashat Re’eh begins: “See, I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse.” We are told that if we observe the mitzvoth we will be blessed, but if we fail to observe them we will be subject to negative consequences. The Torah uses the word “re’eh”…see. What does seeing have to do with blessings and curses?

The Torah states that blessings and curses are correlated to our observance of the mitzvoth. The implication should be that religiously observant people enjoy blessings and religiously non-observant people receive curses. But in our experience, we see that this correlation does not always seem to hold. There are fine pious people who suffer terribly, and there are highly immoral people who

enjoy good health and prosperity. If we rely only on our “listening”—our power of reason—we cannot understand why bad things happen to good people, or why good things happen to bad people.

So the Torah teaches: when it comes to comprehending blessings and curses, “listening” isn’t enough. We need the power of “seeing”—going beyond surface understanding.

Sages and philosophers over the ages have sought explanations as to why good people suffer and bad people thrive. Some have explained that the blessings and curses relate not to external conditions, but to internal life. Righteous people, even if suffering, find meaning and blessing in life. Their faith sustains them. Wicked people, even when seeming to be successful, may actually be extremely unhappy. They are cursed with all sorts of anxieties and frustrations that sap their lives of real joy.

Blessings and curses are not objective conditions in themselves, but are connected to how we relate to them. Different people may be undergoing identical physical sufferings, but one deals courageously and finds meaning in the suffering; while the other wallows in pain and self-pity. Different people may be enjoying identical blessings, but one expresses humble gratitude to the Almighty; while the other is dissatisfied and always wants more.

The Talmud (Hagigah 14b) tells of four great sages who entered the "pardes" i.e. the world of profound speculation. Ben Azzai died; Ben Zoma lost his mind; Elisha ben Abuya became a heretic. Only Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and emerged in peace.

Elisha and Akiva listened to and saw the same things. Why did they come to opposite conclusions?

Elisha relied entirely on “listening”—his faculty of reason. He concluded that the world seems to operate without Judge and without justice. Things are random. There is no correlation between righteousness and blessing.

Akiva relied not only on “listening” but on “seeing.” He was just as aware as Elisha of the intellectual problem before them. But Akiva “saw” beyond. He was wise enough to be able to live with intellectual questions and to recognize that there is a dimension of understanding that transcends cold logic. A person of faith does not deny reality…but knows that there is a reality that goes beyond our power of reason.

If we rely entirely on “listening,” we sometimes come to a dead end.

If we also incorporate “seeing,” we learn to internalize blessings and curses as personal opportunities and challenges in our relationship with God. How we deal with blessings and curses is an indication of who we really are.