Listening: Thoughts for Parashat Ha'azinu

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ha’azinu

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;
Let the earth hear the words I utter! (Devarim 32:1)

As Moses approached his death, he offered a final message to the Israelites. He called the heavens and earth as witnesses to indicate the eternal covenant between God and Israel. He underscored the importance of hearing, listening and internalizing. There is a message here as we approach Rosh Hashana.

Suppose that two people were walking by a synagogue on Rosh Hashana just at the time when the shofar was being sounded. The synagogue windows were open so that both people outside heard the shofar. The first one thought: I wish to be included among those who are fulfilling the mitzvah of hearing the shofar. The second one simply kept walking, having heard the shofar but without paying any particular attention to the sounds. Did either, or both, or neither of them fulfill the mitzvah of shofar?

In fact, both of them heard the exact same sounds of the shofar. The only difference was in their intention. But the intention is exactly what determines that

the first person fulfilled the mitzvah, while the second one did not. Both of them "heard" the shofar; but only one "listened" to the shofar.

This halakhic ruling underscores the role of proper intention in fulfilling the mitzvah. It is not enough just to hear the shofar as random sounds; rather, one must recognize--at least on some minimal level--that he/she is listening to the sounds of the shofar and thereby fulfilling the mitzvah.

Maimonides points out that the shofar is intended to awaken us from our spiritual slumber, to generate within us thoughts of repentance and personal renewal. For this message to reach us, we must be "listening". If people hear the shofar but do not tune in to its significance and its message, then they have missed the essential feature of this mitzvah.

There are those who attend synagogue services on Rosh Hashana and "hear" the shofar--but somehow the prayers and shofar and sermons don't stir up much spiritual energy for them. They are pretty much the same people after Rosh Hashana as they were before Rosh Hashana. There are others who are transformed by Rosh Hashana, who "listen" to the prayers, and the shofar and the sermons--and are genuinely moved. All these people may be sitting in the same synagogue, and yet the results are radically different. Some only "hear" the services; others actually "listen".

Whether or not we are spiritually energized by the High Holy Day season depends largely on ourselves. The more receptive we are to its powerful messages and the more we cultivate our own spirituality, the more we will experience religious meaning and spiritual transformation. Let us focus very carefully on our prayers, on the Torah readings, on the sounds of the shofar, on the sermons. Let us "listen" with great attentiveness. If we will "listen" and not simply "hear", we will not only find a key for greater fulfillment of the holidays but for greater fulfillment in our lives. Shana Tova, Tizku leShanim Rabbot.