

SIGHTING THE SOUNDS¹

*All the people **saw the sounds** and the flames and the mountain smoking; the people saw and trembled, and stood afar* (Exodus 20:15 [18]).

Rabbi Ishmael says: They saw what is seen and heard what is heard.

*Rabbi Akiva says: **They saw what is heard and heard what is seen*** (Midrash Mechilta).

Thirty-three centuries ago, the entire Jewish nation witnessed the revelation of G-d at Mount Sinai. Centuries later, two Talmudic sages, Rabbi Akiva² and Rabbi Ishmael,³ offered somewhat differing accounts of the experience.

One difference between them concerns the manner in which the revelation at Sinai was perceived by our senses. After recounting the proclamation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, the Torah relates: "All the people **saw the sounds** and the flames and the mountain smoking; the people saw and trembled, and stood afar."

What does it mean that they "saw the sounds"? According to Rabbi Akiva, the manner in which we perceived the sights and sounds of Sinai was radically different from the way in which such stimuli are ordinarily assimilated. At Sinai, our senses of sight and hearing reversed their roles—**we "saw what is (ordinarily) heard and heard what is [ordinarily] seen."** Not so, says Rabbi Ishmael. At Sinai, we experienced the greatest divine revelation of all time in the same manner in which we ordinarily relate to reality: we "saw what is seen and heard what is heard." According to Rabbi Ishmael, the word "saw" in the verse refers to the "flames" and the "smoking mountain" mentioned later in the sentence.

But both interpretations of the verse raise as many questions as they answer. Regarding Rabbi Akiva's description of an extraordinary transmutation of our senses, we can ask: Amazing, but why? We know that, as a rule, the Creator is loath to suspend the natural order of things; miracles are rare and come only to achieve a specific end.⁽¹⁾ How would Rabbi Akiva explain the purpose for such a nature-trouncing feat?

As for Rabbi Ishmael's view, it raises the question as to what this verse is coming to tell us in the first place. The Torah has already described the thunder, the *shofar* blast, the lightning, the fire, and the smoke which

accompanied G-d's descent upon Sinai (Exo 19:16-19). Need we be told that the people of Israel saw these sights and heard these sounds?

"SEEING" VERSUS "HEARING"

As tools of perception, sight and hearing differ in two significant ways.

Sight is a very physical experience: we see the thing itself—its mass, its immanence, the brute fact of its being. Hearing, on the other hand, registers stimuli of a more metaphysical nature. We see a wall, but we hear music, emotional inflections, ideas. This even more so regarding the other meaning of "to hear" which is "to comprehend" (in Hebrew, the word *shemi'ah* means both "hearing" and "comprehension"). We hear and understand things that are too ethereal to be captured by the physical eye.

A second difference is the manner in which sight and hearing affect us—the extent to which they impress their findings upon our mind and heart. Sight is the most convincing of faculties: once we have seen something with "our own eyes," it is virtually impossible for other sensory evidence or rational proofs to refute what we now know. Hearing and comprehension, on the other hand, are far less vivid impressers of the information they convey. They will convince us of certain truths, but not as unequivocally as do our eyes. What we hear and understand are facts which have been "proven" to us; **what we see is reality.**

(This difference is also reflected in Torah law. The Talmud⁽³⁾ rules that a judge who has witnessed a crime cannot sit in judgment over the case. Why not? Is not the entire point of the trial that the judge should learn the truth? Here we have a judge who knows what happened, not through second-hand information received from witnesses, but by the testimony of his own eyes! Explains the Talmud: "Since he has seen the accused commit the crime, he is incapable of seeing him in the right." A judge must consider more than what the accused did or did not do; he must also examine issues such as intent and culpability. When the judge merely *hears* from witnesses that the accused committed a criminal act—even if he is convinced that they are telling the truth—he can still maintain the proper distance to objectively consider other factors which may absolve the accused from guilt. But when he himself *sees* what happened, the fact of the accused's criminal deed is not only known but also real to him, making it extremely difficult for him to override this unequivocal reality with logic considerations.)

These two differences between sight and hearing are interconnected. We are physical beings inhabiting a physical reality. The physical is real to us, while the conceptual and metaphysical are foreign and insubstantial. So **sight, which perceives physical objects, is definitive and absolute**, whereas the intangibles perceived via the ear and mind are, at most, "proven facts," always subject to reassessment and reconsideration.

¹ Yanki Tauber, *The Inside Story, Exodus*, (Meaningful Life Center), pp. 160-168.

² Akiva ben Joseph (c. 50–135 CE), also known as Rabbi Akiva, was a leading Jewish scholar and sage, a *tanna* of the latter part of the first century and the beginning of the second.

³ Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha Nachmani, often known as Rabbi Yishmael ... was a rabbi of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE.

SEEING G-DLINESS, HEARING THE WORLD

The story is told of the mystic who tells the philosopher: "Do you know the difference between you and me? You are constantly thinking about G-d, while I am forever thinking about myself."

The philosopher was very pleased with the compliment. But one day it dawned on him what the old sage had meant. The philosopher is convinced that he, the thinker, exists, and doesn't give it a second thought. So he ponders the existence of G-d: Does G-d exist? What is G-d? How does His existence affect us? To the mystic, however, G-d is the very essence of reality. But where does that leave us? What possible legitimacy can our finite and transitory existence have within the all-transcending, all-pervading reality of G-d? The divine truth a given, the mystic ponders his own subjective reality: Do I exist? What significance, if any, is there to my existence? Why do I exist?

This is what Rabbi Akiva means when he says that at Sinai we "saw what is heard, and heard what is seen." Ordinarily, it is our physical existence that is "seen" and real to us. Of course, we understand that all this has a Creator and a purpose. There is proof of it in the majesty and complexity of the universe; every throb of life bespeaks it, and every stirring of conscience in the soul of man. But this higher reality is merely "heard" in our world—deduced, sensed, even experienced—but never perceived with the unequivocal realness of sight. To us, reality is the physical; everything else is merely a concept.

But not at Sinai. At Sinai our eyes were opened, and we "saw the G-d of Israel" (Exo 24:10). **We saw what is heard**, what is ordinarily abstract and "spiritual." **And we heard what is seen**: our formidable world, so real and tangible, was suddenly a distant echo, a concept. For if G-d is Reality, if the essence of existence is the infinite and omnipresent divine truth, what is our world? Just an illusion? But no, there must be a world—otherwise, what is the significance of creation? Of the Torah and its commandments? All this tells us that our world does exist—it *proves* it to us. What is ordinarily a given is now a substantiated theory.

HOLDING OUR GROUND

Rabbi Ishmael disagrees. As he sees it, the revelation at Sinai did not come to turn our natural reality upside down. **The function of Torah is not to overwhelm and negate our world, but to enable us to deal with it, on its own terms, and uncover its potential to reflect the goodness and perfection of its Creator.**

This, maintains Rabbi Ishmael, is an even greater miracle than for the material reality to evaporate the moment G-d introduces Himself. That would be the most obvious and "natural" thing to happen. But at Sinai we achieved an even greater feat: we held our ground. Brought face-to-face

with the Divine, we refused to make this an otherworldly experience, a refutation of our finite and subjective existence. Instead, we insisted on applying the revelation to *our* reality. We saw and heard G-dliness, but on our terms, seeing what is seen and hearing what is heard. The physical remained real and the spiritual remained abstract, and both were permeated with the vision of their divine essence and purpose.

RESPONDING TO THE COMMANDMENTS

The Midrash relates a second difference of opinion between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael regarding the revelation at Sinai, pertaining to how we responded to G-d's proclamation of the Ten Commandments.

The Torah relates that "G-d spoke all these words, to say: 'I am G-d your Lord ... You shall have no other gods before Me ...'" (Exo 20:1-3). The Midrash is puzzled by the Torah's use of the word *leimor*, "to say." What does it mean that "G-d spoke all these words, to say"? Throughout the Torah, dozens of laws are preceded by the phrase, "G-d spoke to Moses, to say ..."; but in those instances, Moses is being instructed to convey those divine directives to the Jewish people. Obviously, *leimor* cannot be so interpreted in our case, as all of Israel were present at Sinai. Explains the Midrash: "to say" means that the people responded to each of the Ten Commandments, affirming their commitment to its observance.

What did they say?

They says "yes" to the yeses, and "no" to the nos. This is the opinion of Rabbi Ishmael.

Rabbi Akiva says: They said yes" to the yeses, and "yes" to the nos.⁽⁶⁾

The Ten Commandments include "positive commandments," such as, "Honor your father and your mother" and "Remember the day of Shabbat," as well as "negative commandments" or prohibitions, such as "Do not murder" and "Do not steal." According to Rabbi Ishmael, when we heard G-d proclaim the commandments, we responded, "Yes" to the positive commandments (i.e., "Yes, we will do so"), and "No" to the prohibitions (i.e., "No, we will not do so"). Rabbi Akiva disagrees. According to his understanding of the dialogue between G-d and us at Sinai, we said "Yes" to each of the positive commandments, and "Yes" (i.e., "Yes, we will obey") to the prohibitions.

But what is the point of their disagreement? In either case, our response was to declare our readiness to uphold both the positive and negative commandments of G-d. **What difference does it make if we said the word "yes" or the word "no," if the meaning of both these responses is the same?**

THE POSITIVE NO

There are two ways of relating to the divine commandments in the Torah. One approach is to view them through the lens of human experience: to appreciate the wisdom gained from Torah study, the spiritual elevation achieved by prayer, the tranquility experienced on Shabbat, the educational potential of a Passover *seder*, the social value of charity. On the "negative" side, we can appreciate the importance of the *mitzvot* that prohibit theft, gossip, promiscuity, food harmful to the body and psyche, and so on. Indeed, our sages have said that "The *mitzvot* were given in order to refine humanity."⁽⁷⁾ But is any of this truly relevant? After all, these are G-d's commandments. What greater achievement can there possibly be than to carry out G-d's will? From this perspective, all *mitzvot* are equal, for all else pales to insignificance before this one monumental fact. In the words of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, "had we been commanded to chop wood, " this would be no less a *mitzvah* than the most enlightening, fulfilling, and character-refining of G-d's commandments."⁽⁸⁾

This is why Rabbi Akiva maintains that we responded "Yes" to the positive commandments and "Yes" to the prohibitions. At Sinai, Rabbi Akiva is saying, there was no such thing as a "negative" *mitzvah*.

Indeed, one who views the *mitzvot* in terms of their beneficial effects on their personal life and on society, will distinguish between the positive commandments and the prohibitions. To give a million dollars to charity is to *do* something. But what is accomplished by refraining from eating nonkosher foods? To eat that cheeseburger would be detrimental to one's spiritual health; but to not eat it is to do-nothing. But at Sinai, says Rabbi Akiva, we were beyond all that. We saw what is heard and heard what is seen. The material world, with its "issues" and pretensions for significance, was but a figment of the imagination. Reality was G-d. From such a vantage point, who would think of G-d's expressed will in terms of moral and social utility?

To one who stands at Sinai, says Rabbi Akiva, the definition of *mitzvah* is an opportunity to fulfill G-d's will. Everything else is of secondary, "hearable" significance. When you give a million dollars to charity, you are doing something: you are fulfilling G-d's will. When you refrain from eating a forbidden food, you are doing something: you are fulfilling G-d's will. Every *mitzvah* is a positive act, the same positive act, the ultimate positive act—the implementation of a divine desire. Every *mitzvah* elicits the same positive response: "Yes, we will."

ON OUR TERMS

Rabbi Ishmael disagrees. Assembled at Sinai, we obviously knew that the ultimate significance of the *mitzvah* is that it is G-d's will. But we knew this as a sublime truth, as a concept that is "heard" and understood but remains beyond our tangible grasp. Our reality was the physical exist-

ence, and the point of revelation at Sinai was not to overturn our perspective but to perfect the one we had. What was real to us—what we "saw"—was the way in which the *mitzvot* sanctify our everyday lives and create a world that is at peace with itself and its Creator.

So there are differences between *mitzvot*—most significantly the difference between "do" and "don't," as befits dealing with a world polarized by good and evil. There are *mitzvot* with which we develop the positive in our world, and those which guide us in the rejection of the negative; *mitzvot* which cultivate the light, and *mitzvot* which combat the darkness.

At Sinai, says Rabbi Ishmael, we heard what is heard and saw what is seen. True, we understood that the essence of a *mitzvah* is beyond anything our finite physical selves can relate to. But our primary response to G-d's commandments was to embrace them as the foundation of our lives—lives defined by the yes and no of our reality.

(1) *Derashot HaRan* (Discourses of the Ran [Nissim of Gerona]), 8. See also Genesis 8:22; Talmud, *Shabbat* 53b.

(3) Talmud, *Rosh HaShanah* 26a.

(6) *Mechilta*, ad loc.

(7) Midrash Rabbah, Bereishith 44:1.

(8) *Likutei Torah* (Collected Talks on the Torah), *Shelach* 40a.

1. *Sight is the most convincing of faculties: once we have seen something with "our own eyes," it is virtually impossible for other sensory evidence or rational proofs to refute what we now know.*

a. Exodus 3:2-5

²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. **Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.** ³So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." ⁵"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

b. 2Kings 6:15-23

¹⁵When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?" the servant asked.

¹⁶"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. **"Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."** ¹⁷And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see." Then **the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.** ¹⁸As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike this army with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked.

¹⁹Elisha told them, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." And he led them to Samaria. ²⁰After they entered the city, Elisha said, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see." Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria. ²¹When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?" ²²"Do not kill them," he answered. "Would you kill those you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master." ²³So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.

c. Luke 24:28-32

²⁸As they approached the village to which they were going, Yeshua continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening ... " So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹Then **their eyes were opened and they recognized him**, and he disappeared from their sight. ³²They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

d. 2Corinthians 4:17-18

¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So **we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen**, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

e. "Truly, Don't Believe Your Lying Eyes" by Rebbetzin Miriam Gross⁴

In last week's article, I noted the harm in making hasty conclusions. Our senses are fallible and can easily mislead us. A human being, by definition, is apt to err and therefore should never rush to pass judgment.

Let me illustrate my point with (an) example ...

I was present at a *Sheva Brachos*⁵ at which a young man delivered a speech. Later, a woman sitting next to me asked me whether I knew who the *old* man who had given the *dvar Torah* was. I replied that the talk had been given by the young man seated next to

the older one she was pointing to. I knew it was him, **not only because I had seen him give the *dvar Torah*, but because I asked him later to clarify a point he had made—which he did.**

But she would not be dissuaded. She insisted the orator was none other than the old man. I didn't pursue it. After all, what difference did it make? But I savored the precious lesson that had fallen into my lap. **How often do we stubbornly hold on to mistaken impressions convinced we're right, our mind refusing to let go of our conclusions?**

2. *A judge must consider more than what the accused did or did not do; he must also examine issues such as intent and culpability. When the judge merely hears from witnesses that the accused committed a criminal act—even if he is convinced that they are telling the truth—he can still maintain the proper distance to objectively consider other factors which may absolve the accused from guilt. But when he himself sees what happened, the fact of the accused's criminal deed is not only known but also real to him, making it extremely difficult for him to override this unequivocal reality with logic considerations.)*

a. Matthew 26:47-68

⁴⁷While (Yeshua) was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people ... ⁵⁵In that hour Yeshua said to the crowd, **"Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?** Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled (Zec 13:7).

⁵⁷Those who had arrested Yeshua took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled ... ⁵⁹The chief priests and **the whole Sanhedrin** were looking for false evidence against Yeshua so that they could put him to death.

⁶⁰But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward ⁶¹and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"

⁶²Then the high priest stood up and said to Yeshua, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶³But Yeshua remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." ⁶⁴"You have said so," Yeshua replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, **"He has spoken blasphemy!** Why do we need any more witnesses?

⁴ <https://www.jewishpress.com/judaism/torah/truly-dont-believe-your-lying-eyes/2019/01/04/>

⁵ The *Sheva Brachot* are seven blessings recited over a glass of wine during a wedding ceremony.

Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. ⁶⁷Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"

3. *At Sinai our eyes were opened, and we "saw the G-d of Israel" (Exo 24:10).*

a. Exodus 24:9-11

⁹Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up ¹⁰**and saw the God of Israel**. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. ¹¹But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; **they saw God**, and they ate and drank.

b. Exodus 33:18-23

¹⁸Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." ¹⁹And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you ... ²⁰But," he said, **"you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."** ²¹Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. ²²When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. ²³Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but **my face must not be seen.**"

4. *The Ten Commandments include "positive commandments," such as, "Honor your father and your mother" and "Remember the day of Shabbat," as well as "negative commandments" or prohibitions, such as "Do not murder" and "Do not steal." According to Rabbi Ishmael, when we heard G-d proclaim the commandments, we responded, "Yes" to the positive commandments (i.e., "Yes, we will do so"), and "No" to the prohibitions (i.e., "No, we will not do so"). Rabbi Akiva disagrees. According to his understanding of the dialogue between G-d and us at Sinai, we said "Yes" to each of the positive commandments, and "Yes" (i.e., "Yes, we will obey") to the prohibitions.*

a. Matthew 5:33-37

³³"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made' (Num 30:2; Deu 23:21; Ecc 5:4) ³⁴But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷**All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No';** anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

CJB, KJV, NAB, NAS, NIRV, NKV, RSV, YLT—"But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'"

1) Mekhilta to Exodus 20:1

Rabbi Yismael commented, "The word 'saying' teaches us that they (the children of Israel) responded to each positive commandment (*mitzvah 'aseh'*) with the positive affirmation '*hen*' ('yes') and to each negative commandment (*mitzvah 'al ta'aseh'*) with the negative affirmation '*lav*' ('no')" ("Melamad she-hayu omrim al hen hen ve-al lav lav," lit., "this teaches that they were saying 'yes' 'yes' and 'no' 'no,' that is, they were responding to a "yes (commandment)," "yes," and to a "no (commandment)," "no."

2) James 5:12

¹²Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

3) Ruth Rabbah 7:6

R. Huna said in the name of R. Samuel b. Isaac: The yes of the righteous is yes, and their no, no ...