

A-163

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MAY 14, 1955

A-163

Sermon on Be'chukosai

(in Rosh Hana'ar, 1 entelechy,
"Warning to Listen")

1. The TOCHACHAH, that terrible portion of today's Sidra which predicts the horrible consequences attendant upon the rejection of G-d by Israel, and which has unfortunately been proven true to the last detail in our own life-times, is divided into two parts. And both begin with similar expressions: V'IM LO SISHM'U LI and V'IM B'ZOS LO SISHM'U LI. Both, therefore, are introduced with the pre-condition: these will happen IM LO SISHM'U, if you will not obey G-d.
2. But our Rabbis saw in these words more than a plain warning against disobedience. That is why they commented LO SISHM'U - LE'MIDRASH CHACHAMIM, that this disobedience refers particularly to rejection and neglect of the interpretations of the Sages. For the lack of practice is a result of the lack of study. Or, more generally and more clearly, the lack of OBEDIENCE is a result of the lack of proper LISTENING. The word SHAMO'A, in Hebrew, is a homonym: it means both "obey" and "listen". The core of the trouble, the primary cause of disobedience, is FAULTY LISTENING. That is what makes for a Tochachah.
3. Chassidim relate that a Chassid once came to the Yud Ha'kadosh and asked following question. Talmud: be'chol yom va'yom bas kol yotzeis me'har chorev u'machrezess, oy lahem le'briyos me'elbonah shel Torah...if reason for the Divine Voice is to inspire Teshuvah, encourage repentance, then every one should hear it. If no one can hear it, what is use of this daily Divine spot-announcement? Answered parable: Father, merchant, takes son on sales trip. Pass thru thick forest, boy spies beautiful black and red berries, very much wants pick them. Father: no time stop for that, must continue riding. Son: I'll get off and gather my berries, while you ride slowly on horse, I'll find you. Father: but you'll get lost. Son: Every now and then I'll call & you answer. When picked enough I'll be along with you. As son left wagon to go into the forest, father told him: remember son, IF YOU'LL HEAR VOICE FATHER AND FOLLOW IT, ALL WILL BE WELL, WON'T GET LOST. BUT IF NO LISTEN, NOT HEAR VOICE FATHER, THEN WILL GET LOST IN THIS GREAT FOREST....
4. We moderns have lost the capacity to listen. The Divine Voice calls out daily, we should be able to hear the voice Divine Father - but trouble is we're not listening. It is a dangerous injury. It is symptomatic of desensitized souls. Forebodes a terrible Tochachah.

The sociologist David Reisman ("The Lonely Crowd") speaks of our society as a wordy one, as one in which the flow of words from the mass-media of communication has become a veritable torrent. WE're so busy talking, we do not listen. One may hear, indeed; but that is purely automatic. Unless one listens, his hearing is of no value. Hearing a sermon or lecture is not the same as listening to it. Hearing the Torah reading is often automatic; listening to it is a creative act of the spirit. It involves deep study - it involves MIDRASH CHACHAMIM, a profound acquaintance with the interpretations of the Sages, a high sensitivity to their moral message.

5. A relative mine taking graduate work in Education, one of courses: Listening. Because education of children involves more than talking to children & teaching them to talk. Involves listening to them - their voices, their laughter, their tempers, their weeping, their very heartbeats - and teaching them the same. Real education requires listening with a spiritual stethoscope. It requires MIDRASH CHACHAMIM, true and profound Wisdom.
6. The technique of most of psychiatry - certainly analysis - is largely a matter of listening. And that means more than just hearing. Listening to a troubled man or woman is, as a Rabbi too has frequent occasion to do, is - or can be - a highly creative and skillful act. That kind of listening is itself a MIDRASH CHACHAMIM, an act of wisdom.

7. In a similar way, as in Education and Psychiatry, does Religion insist that every man LISTEN - for the voice of the Divine Father calls out every minute. It is up to us to listen, to rotate our antennae and set our receiving frequencies so that we can hear the Divine message that is broadcast daily from Mount Horeb. That is why the Torah decreed that a Man who willfully sells himself into ~~slavery~~ permanent slavery must have his ear bored - for that ear, the one that heard the Voice of G-d saying that Israel was slave to G-d not to Man, that ear that heard - did not listen.

8. What does it mean to listen? What can one hear when he is attuned, when he concentrates?

*** The man who has watched the ocean in the moonlight, he who has been sensitive to the passing moods of the ocean, its tranquillity alternating with unrequited passion and rage, its mysteriousness and its wisdom compounded by benevolence, that man, if he listens, hears a Voice. Through the ^{green}crash of the waves and the ^{white}tumult of the foam, KOL HA'SHEM AL HA'MAYIM, the Voice of the L-rd is upon the waters.

*** The man who has seen, personally or televised, the naked might, the brutal awe and raw splendor of an A-Bomb explosion, the release of all those overwhelming, primitive powers of Nature, the gigantic might that lies dormant in every atom in this universe, he hears a Voice too, a Voice more permanent and more meaningful than the explosion of the bomb or the blare of the announcers' descriptions, a Voice that cannot be measured in decibels: KOL HA'SHEM BA'KO'ACH, the Voice of the L-rd is in might.

*** The man who feels his heart flooded with warmth and joy and experiences esthetic delight as he opens a sensitive soul to the Message of Hope that lies in every blade of Grass, in every blossoming bud and growing leaf; the man whose heart swells with happiness as he sees the bare and prosaic streets of a wintery Forest Park turned into beauty-arched lanes bedecked with Nature's finery and adorned with the Poetry of Growth - such a man is listening. And as he listens he heard: KOL HA'SHEM BE'HADAR, the Voice of the L-rd is in Beauty.

When a man does all that, he is not merely exercising the purely automatic biological function of Hearing. When he is doing only what a Man can do: he is listening, he is indulging in MIDRASH CHACH AMIM, in the exercise of men of wisdom.

9. When men bend their ears and listen to KOL HA'SHEM, to the Voice of the L-rd, in its various manifestations, he will not be lost in the forest of life .

10. SHMA YISRAEL ECHAD. Hear O Israel - nay, Listen O Israel - the is One. Listen to His Voice, and you will not be lost in the forest of Tochahchah. ~~Recher~~ Father, VE'AHAVTA ES HA'SHEM ELOKECHA, That kind of listening leads to Love, to a closer, warmer, happier bond between G-d and a man.