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**SPECIAL SHAVUOT 5777 SHIUR**

**"AND ALL THE PEOPLE SAW THE SOUNDS"**

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At Sinai, the entire Jewish People took part in a wondrous and unprecedented assembly. The *Midrash* explains the momentous nature of this gathering:

"And Moshe brought the people out of the camp to meet with God" (*Shemot* 19:17). Rabbi Yose said: Yehuda would expound: "And he said, The Lord came *from* Sinai" (*Devarim* 33:2). Do not read thus, but rather: "The Lord came *to* Sinai" – to give the Torah to Israel. Or perhaps you should not say this, but rather: "The Lord came *from* Sinai" – to receive Israel, like a bridegroom who goes out to meet his bride. (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el, massekhet ba-chodesh, Yitro, parasha 3*)

The question whether to read the words as "to Sinai" or "from Sinai" is profound and of deep significance. When we say "to Sinai," argues R. Yose in the name of Yehuda, we refer to God's descent from His place in Heaven to the mountain in order to give the Torah to the Jewish people. On the other hand, when we say "from Sinai," we mean that God went out from Sinai in order to receive Israel.

Attention should be paid to the fact that the second description ignores the giving of the Torah. The purpose of God's descent, according to the first possibility, was to give the Torah to the Jewish people. To this end, God descended from His dwelling place on high to Mount Sinai. According to the second possibility, however, God goes out to Israel in order to receive them. The meaning of this reception is immediately explained: "Like a bridegroom who goes out to meet his bride."

According to the second possibility, the focus is not on the giving of the Torah. From this perspective, the Torah may be likened to the wedding band that the bridegroom gives his bride. The ring, as it were, is of no importance to anyone; the main thing is the act of betrothal. So too, according to the second possibility, the main thing is the act of betrothal – the joining of God and Israel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following passage seems to sharpen this point: "R. Berakhya said: The tablets [of the Law] were six handbreadths in length, two handbreadths, as it were, in the hand of He who

When we come to examine the assembly at Mount Sinai from this perspective, we must focus not on the Ten Commandments and their contents, but rather on the form and nature of that assembly, and the manner in which the people of Israel experienced it. The introductory verses to that great event describe a dynamic and multi-faceted experience:

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there was thunders and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mountain and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud; so that all the people in the camp trembled. (*Shemot* 19:16)

Following the giving of the Ten Commandments, Scripture tells us how Israel experienced the event:

And all the people saw the sounds, and the lightning, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood afar off. (*Shemot* 20:15)

Most of the biblical commentators tried to clarify the meaning of the complex expression: "They saw the sounds." Rashi writes as follows:

"They saw the sounds" – they saw that which should be heard – something which is impossible to see. (Rashi, ad loc.)

Rashi, then, invests this event with a miraculous nature – Israel seeing sounds.<sup>2</sup>

Let us look at this issue from a chassidic perspective.

### **"WE SHALL DO AND WE SHALL HEAR"**

In order to understand the profundity of the matter, we must first clarify the concepts of hearing and seeing. This is what the *Sefat Emet* does in the following passage:

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through His word brought the world into being, two handbreadths in the hand of Moshe, and two handbreadths separated between the one hand and the other" (*Shemot Rabba* 28, 1).

This *midrash* tries to perpetuate the moment that the *luchot* were given, just as a photographer tries to capture the moment that groom places the ring on the bride's finger. The moment during which Moshe held on to two handbreadths of the *luchot*, and God, as it were, held on to two handbreadths, was the most sanctified moment, because it reflected the essence of the entire event, the revelation and contact created between God and His people (see Maharal, *Tiferet Yisra'el* 48).

<sup>2</sup> Other commentators, each in his own way, try to resolve the problem in a simpler fashion:

Ibn Ezra: "And all the people saw the sounds" – I have already explained the meaning of "seeing the sounds," because all the senses are connected to one place.

Rashbam: "Saw the sounds" – The hail and stones, as it is written: "Mighty thunderings and hail" (*Shemot* 9:28).

Ibn Ezra tries to change the sense of "seeing" so that it should fit "sounds," whereas the Rashbam tries to change the sense of "sounds" so that it should fit "seeing."

"And all the people saw the sounds." Rashi, z"l, explains that they saw that which should be heard, something which is impossible for man to see, etc." We must understand why this miracle was necessary. Could they not have heard the sounds without a miracle? It may be suggested that hearing and seeing are two different things, the one unlike the other. Each one has a certain advantage and a certain disadvantage. For one who sees, perceives the seen object in perfect manner as it is without any change. But one who hears – the sound changes as it enters his ears and is no longer as it had been sounded. This is the advantage of seeing. Hearing has an advantage in that it brings that which is heard inside the person himself by way of the ear, while seeing is from the outside. Scripture, therefore, informs us that the children of Israel had both advantages: they received the commandments by way of seeing what is heard, for while the sounds, quite literally, entered into them, nevertheless they saw the sounds without any changes, as stated above. They merited this because "We shall do" came before "We shall hear," as stated above. (*Sefat Emet, Shavu'ot, 5635*)

R. Yehuda Arye Leib of Gur draws an essential distinction between hearing and seeing. When a person sees something, proposes the *Sefat Emet*, he perceives the object as it is without any alterations or interpretations. The picture that registers in the person is absolutely identical to the seen object itself, there being no difference between them. On the other hand, when a person hears something, the sound that reaches him and is absorbed is not identical to the original sound. In the very process of reception, it undergoes a change that corresponds to the hearer's ability to receive.

Seeing, then, confronts a person with the seen object as it is; the perspective is objective. Hearing, however, does not allow a person to confront the object without imposing the hearer's subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

This is the advantage of seeing over hearing – greater objectivity – but corresponding to this advantage, there is a certain disadvantage. Seeing, argues the *Sefat Emet*, is external, or as he puts it, "from the outside." When the Torah wishes to describe seeing, it writes: "And he lifted up his eyes, and he saw." The eyes are lifted up outwards. The eyes which cast their look meet the object located in its own place. Hearing, on the other hand, is not external, but internal. The sound reaches a person's ears, is received by them, and then is assimilated within him.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The question may be raised whether, scientifically speaking, the *Sefat Emet* is correct. His thesis seems to be contradicted by many phenomena that suggest that vision is also subjective. For example: color-blindness, two dimensional vision, and even poor eyesight that necessitates glasses.

<sup>4</sup> Once again, we must note that it is possible that science will refute this distinction as well, for vision also involves reception of light waves that originate on the outside, are assimilated on the inside, and undergo a subjective process in the brain. In my opinion, comments of this sort do not in any way detract from the idea, for the *Sefat Emet* wishes to fashion two psychological states, two manners of reception, two forms of contact with the outside world. From this perspective, his teaching is valid, even if the application to vision and hearing is scientifically inaccurate. Chassidic thinkers often try to arrive at abstract ideas through contemplation of the human body, in the manner of "From my body I would see God" (*Jyyov*

In great measure, the advantage and disadvantage of each of these prisms – seeing and hearing – stems from the very same point. Leaving an object on the outside without attempting to assimilate it on the inside allows it to remain objective. Its objectivity is not diminished by the imposition of a subjective perspective. The objectivity is pure and eternal, but it is also external, and therefore not relevant to the observer on the existential level. This is the case of seeing.

On the other hand, the attempt to turn something, an image or an idea, into a part of me, requires its assimilation that comes at the cost of clothing it in my subjectivity. Just as I am not eternal, so too it loses its eternity. It casts off its absolute standards that are unaffected by any factor, in its readiness to become a part of me, affected by me, and it may be added, limited by my limitations.

The attempt on the part of a teacher, a parent, a friend, or a student to remain "objective" in his encounter with another person or an object of study requires a certain alienation. One must not judge, express an opinion, or decide; one must remain "on the outside." All this, according to the *Sefat Emet*, is to see things, but not to hear them. On the other hand, when one of these people waives "objectivity," he at once engages in an unmediated encounter with the idea, which in a moment becomes part of him, so that it is no longer possible to separate between them.

The *Sefat Emet*, so it would appear, does not show preference to the one over the other, asserting rather that there is room for each. When, however, a person chooses one particular psychological stance, he must understand that he may enjoy its advantages, he must also pay its price. There are times and ideas for which eternal objectivity is appropriate, and for them he must pay the price of alienation. On the other hand, there are situations in which a person is asked to bring himself, to dedicate his entire being to the truth of an idea or experience. He must understand then that at that moment he has lost the dimension of objectivity, and perhaps also the dimension of eternity.

The uniqueness of the Sinai experience, asserts the *Sefat Emet*, lies in the inability to give up on either of these perspectives. The Torah, reflecting eternity, and the encounter with it cannot be a subjective encounter.

This idea is clarified through another distinction that the *Sefat Emet* proposes on this matter:

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19:26) (R. Nachman of Breslov does this in many of his teachings). There are two things that may be learned through such contemplation, even if they don't always match the findings of modern science. First of all, the idea itself, the psychological state, and the spiritual position that they are talking about exist and are relevant in any case. Second, the very attitude of "From my body I would see God" and looking at the human body out of a desire to connect our physical state to our psychological state is a grand idea that sweeps our entire being to the spiritual processes to which the Chassidic thinkers are leading us.

"And all the people saw the sounds." These are things that cannot be uttered by the mouth, but only perceived by the eye of the mind. For whatever can be uttered by the mouth is included in the Oral Law. And the Written Law is what the mouth is unable to contain, as it is written: "And were our mouths full of song, etc." (*Sefat Emet, Pesach, 5639*)

The distinction made in this teaching is between the "sounds" that cannot be uttered by the mouth, but only perceived by the eye of the mind by way of seeing, this being the Written Law, and that which can be uttered by the mouth, this being the Oral Law.

If we combine the two teachings, we must say that the "sound" associated with the Written Law cannot be uttered or heard, but only seen. This is a deeply profound idea. The *Sefat Emet* establishes here that any statement made about the Written Law turns into the Oral Law. This is not merely because it passes from written to oral form, but because it passes from the seen to the heard, that is, from objectivity to subjectivity. Every statement, asserts the *Sefat Emet*, involves interpretation, and every interpretation is subjective.

It seems, however, that he goes even further! According to the *Sefat Emet*, hearing is subjective, because it involves interpretation and an attempt to absorb the sounds as they are heard by me, with my own capacities, and not as they are in their external and objective dimension. According to this, it turns out that the moment that the Torah was given and told to Israel, it turned from a Written Law to an Oral Law, because Israel's hearing of it involved subjective assimilation.

Now, however, explains the *Sefat Emet*, we can understand the significance of the great miracle implied by the expression, "And all the people saw the sounds." Each and every generation that studies the Torah and receives it from its teachers belongs to the world of the Oral Law, because its reception of the Torah reflects the subjective standards of that generation. This is not true of the generation that stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. That generation merited the miracle that the initial reception of the Torah bore the impossible and illogical combination of internal reception and assimilation, on the one hand, and preservation of the eternal, objective dimension, on the other.

The Written Torah that we still read today is the same Torah that was given to the generation of the wilderness. It is essentially different, however, from the Mishna, the Talmud, the teachings of the *Rishonim*, and everything acquired by Israel across the generations, in that, as opposed to all the rest, it does not reflect the perspective of that generation. This is not merely because it was given by God, but because Israel merited to hear and receive it by way of seeing: "For while the sounds, quite literally, entered into them, nevertheless they saw the sounds without any changes," as the *Sefat Emet* puts it. This is what made the Written Torah an eternal Torah, one that it is objective and uninfluenced by any human prism.

This idea is reminiscent of the distinction proposed by Rav Kook between the sage and the prophet.<sup>5</sup> Prophecy, contends Rav Kook, is unmediated; the prophet who delivers it raises it from within him out of full identification, to the point that he can speak in the first person in the name of God. The prophet himself speaks the word of God out of total identification and complete emotional involvement.

Wisdom, on the other hand, is external, objective truth that is available for anyone to come and take. The Torah, which is the foundation of wisdom, passes from generation to generation, bearing eternal ideas that every generation submits to and tries to understand. We are dealing here with reflecting backwards to the source and attempting to study it, understand it, and draw it to us.

Prophecy, as it were, is more internal, more emotional and more experiential, but also more subjective. Every prophet prophesies in his own language and according to his own formulation. Every prophet prophesies about his people and his generation. Every prophecy, even if it is a vision about the End of Days, is first and foremost relevant to the generation in which it is delivered. The Torah and its sages, as opposed to prophecy and its prophets, is objective, and does not reflect the impressions and experiences of a specific sage or generation. The Torah is solid and eternal truth, and, to a certain degree, is liable to be less internal. The sage touches objective eternity, but, to a certain degree, lacks the prophetic spirit that gives expression to an inner, unmediated encounter. He does not bring himself into the encounter; he tries to efface himself in the wisdom and Torah that he wishes to bring to the world. The prophet is overtaken by the experience of the encounter and the presence of the *Shekhina*, and through them he brings himself, interprets, feels, and dresses his prophecy in his own garments. The price that he pays is the price of eternity and objectivity.

This is true, asserts Rav Kook, regarding every sage and every prophet, with the exception of Moshe Rabbenu who was both sage and prophet. Moshe Rabbenu was, first and foremost, a prophet, but through his prophecy he brought Torah/wisdom to Israel. Only Moshe merited prophecy that is absolutely devoid of his character, feelings and emotions. Moshe merited "objective prophecy," in which there was a meeting of inside and outside, object and subject, seeing and hearing. Moshe, it may be said following the *Sefat Emet*, saw the sounds. Moshe spoke as a prophet, but his voice was the voice of God – "Moshe speaks, and God answers him by a voice" (*Shemot* 19:19).

The quality that grants Moshe this ability, according to Rav Kook, is humility, the ability to experience, but remain objective, to feel, but continue to nullify oneself in the idea and truth that is being revealed. This was the quality of the most modest of men.

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<sup>5</sup> Owing to their great length, we will not cite the words of Rav Kook themselves. Anyone who wishes to examine the matter further should see: *Orot ha-Kodesh*, I, pp. 272, 275, 276, and 278; *Orot, Zir'onim 2: Chakham Adif mi-Navi*, p. 120.

So too the people of Israel, says the *Sefat Emet*, merited this miracle, because they said "We shall do" before "We shall hear." These words reflect the total self-effacement of Israel before the Divine revelation and before the truth that God wished to bring them. Had Israel first asked to check and examine, and then to decide, they would not have merited to "see the sounds." The total self-nullification of Israel, like the total self-nullification of Moshe, is what allowed them to hear the Torah, but not lose the advantages of seeing it; to receive the Torah, but leave it in its eternal state; to be prophets, but still remain in the world of wisdom.

## **A DEAF PERSON AND A HEARING PERSON – HEARING AND SEEING**

R. Ephraim of Sudylkow also touches upon the issue of seeing and hearing at Mount Sinai. As usual, he cites his grandfather, the Besht:

"And all the people saw the sounds, etc." This should be understood in accordance with a parable that I heard from my grandfather. There was once a person who played a musical instrument very beautifully, with great sweetness and pleasantness. Those who heard him [play] were unable to control themselves because of the great sweetness and delight, to the point that they would dance almost to the ceiling because of the great delight, pleasantness, and sweetness. Whoever was closer and could draw himself nearer to hear the instrument would have even greater delight and would dance even more.

In the meantime, a deaf person came, who was totally unable to hear the pleasant sounds of the pleasant musical instrument. He only saw the people dancing, and they appeared in his eyes as if they were crazed. He asked himself what is the joy here. In truth, were he wise and had he understood that it is because of the great delight and pleasantness of the sound of the musical instrument, he too would have danced.

The moral is obvious. This explains the verse, "And all the people saw the sounds." That is, God, blessed be He, appeared to all of them at once with His Divine light, which they all perceived when they saw the great joy, the angels of hosts dancing (*Shabbat* 88b). They understood that it was because of the sweetness and pleasantness of the light of the holy Torah, and they pressed themselves to hear the sound of the Torah. Even though they had previously been a little deaf, for they had not heard the sounds, they all began to hear. And they had sharp eyes, for they saw the great joy and happiness and they understood that it was certainly the sounds, that is, the pleasant sound of the Torah. Even though they did not apprehend the pleasantness of the Torah, they understood by way of the joy that surely it was because of the great pleasantness of the Torah. And therefore they pushed themselves to hear the sound itself, for perhaps they would apprehend and understand the pleasantness of the light of the Torah. And the wise one will understand. (*Degel Machane Ephraim, Yitro*)

R. Ephraim of Sudylkow, borrowing this amazing parable from the teachings of the Besht, draws a different distinction between hearing and seeing. Hearing involves experiencing something in an unmediated fashion –

encountering it directly. Seeing, on the hand, comes in the absence of hearing. It allows one who has not experienced the thing itself to get a taste of it by recognizing the impression that it left on its surroundings. In the parable, the "hearing" dancers dance because they hear the musical instrument itself. The closer they come to it, the more they cleave to it. In contrast, the deaf person does not hear, but his contemplation of the dancing of all the others teaches him about the great sweetness of the music and allows him also to dance, even though he does not hear.

Rav Kook makes a similar distinction in a different context:

No person can possibly know the nature of the self, not even his own, and all the more so that of another person, not that of an individual, and all the more so that of a nation. We circle the heart of knowledge, occupy ourselves with speculations and conjectures, in order to draw inferences based on manifest actions, which for the most part are also concealed, and especially their complicated causes. On the basis of such testimony, we speak about individual nature and a separate soul. We are forced to the conclusion that our knowledge of the matter hangs on nothing, and judgment belongs to God. (*Orot ha-Kodesh*, III, p. 119)

Rav Kook writes that while we try to know ourselves, we fail to touch "the point itself," the essence. The Hebrew word for essence, "*mahut*," contains within it the word *ma*, "what" – the search for essence leaves us without an answer. All of our self-contemplation rests on the actions of that essence, the manners in which it manifests and reveals itself, they too being concealed and complex, and through them we speculate and conjecture and try to understand the essence.<sup>6</sup>

Touching the essence is compared, in the words of the *Degel Machane Ephraim*, to "hearing" and attentiveness, whereas the speculations and conjectures belong to the world of "seeing." According to R. Kook, we can only "see" ourselves, but not "hear." We can walk around in a circle, but we will never be able to cross the encompassing light to reach the inner light found in its center.

"And all the people saw the sounds," according to the *Degel Machane Ephraim*, comes to reduce the intensity of the encounter at Mount Sinai. The people were unable to hear the sounds of God, the sound of Torah, for such apprehension, according to the *Degel Machane Ephraim*, was given only to the angels. All we can do is contemplate the light that is visible from those sounds and see them through it.

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<sup>6</sup> The idea that we do not meet the essence itself (noumenon) but only its external expression (phenomenon) is a philosophical idea from the school of Immanuel Kant. It is not uncommon for Rav Kook to refer to one of Kant's ideas and confront it. In this case, Rav Kook cites the idea and expresses no reservations about it. It may be noted that this is one of the few passages in Rav Kook's thought which ends on a note that is not consoling, and the difficulty and distress expressed therein find no alleviation.



We never encounter the Torah, but only the impression and glory which radiate from its incomprehensible essence. "Perhaps they will apprehend and understand the pleasantness of the light of the Torah" – but to hear it, to encounter it, to be nurtured directly from it, this they will never be able to do.

For *Chazal*, the opposite of a deaf person is a *pik'ach*, which denotes not only hearing, but also cleverness. In a world without a printing press, where writing was expensive and uncommon, verbal communication was the primary and almost sole instrument for education and acquiring knowledge, and so a deaf person could not be clever. However, the *Degel Machane Ephraim* sees *pikchut* as circumventing deafness in the most abstract sense. *Pikchut* follows from seeing, which is an expression of abstract understanding and apprehension. This can circumvent deafness, which expresses the absence of unmediated encounter: "They all began to hear. And they had sharp eyes, for they saw the great joy and happiness and they understood that it was certainly the sounds." To understand the sounds, according to R. Ephraim, means to see them, and not to hear them.

Seeing permits us to take in that which the ears do not succeed in hearing. This is true regarding a person's character, according to Rav Kook, and regarding the Torah and its sounds, according to the *Degel Machane Ephraim*. This is the meaning of: "And all the people saw the sounds."

## AUDITORY LOGIC

Let us delve more deeply into this understanding according to kabbalistic teachings. According to kabbala, the *sefira* of *keter* gives expression to that which is concealed and incomprehensible. "The tip of a *yod*" expresses that geometric point, having no dimensions, devoid of space, and incomprehensible, which we will never be able to see with our eyes. This is *keter*, the inner essence, before it receives any expression or visible quality. This is the *ayin*, the infinite nothingness, before it is dressed in the garb of the *yesh*, finite existence. Thus writes R. Yosef Gikatilla, author of *Sha'arei Ora*, about this *sefira* at the end of his book:

After we have given you the general rules, we must inform you of something that will seal the book. We have already told you in several places that no creature can contemplate the supreme *keter* ("crown"), other than by way of the hearing of the ear. Say not only the supreme *keter*, but also the *sefira* of *chokhma* ("wisdom") that is the first to emanate from it – no one who can understand it. As it says: "Whence then does wisdom come... We have heard a rumor of it with our ears; God understands its way, and He knows its place" (*Iyyov* 28:20-22), as we explained in *sha'ar* 9. If so, understand that *keter* does not have a particular letter in the Tetragrammaton, but only the tip of the *yod*, which serves as an allusion that we do not have the power to comprehend it. (*Sha'arei Ora*, *sha'ar* 10)

R. Yosef Gikatilla is saying two very important things here. First, he declares that one cannot contemplate the *sefira* of *keter*, just as one cannot contemplate "the nature of the self," according to Rav Kook, this being the inner essence, the root of the soul. Since apprehension and understanding require limits, definitions, and understanding, all of which belong to the world of *yesh*, the limited world of definitions and boundaries. Thus, one cannot use the instrument of *yesh* in order to understand the *ayin*, for it is impossible to contemplate infinity from the perspective of *tzimtzum* (contraction). Since this is our only perspective, we cannot contemplate and understand the *sefira* of *keter*, just as we cannot define and set limits to the tip of a *yod*.<sup>7</sup> The moment that abstract sound is impressed with light, and a person's essence is given expression, and *keter* is dressed in the garment of wisdom, they can already be apprehended by way of seeing, that is, through understanding, for they have a point to grab onto in the world of *yesh*. In their primal state, however, when they are still only in potential, before they reach a state of revelation and appearance, one cannot touch them, but only circle around them. The *keter*, argues R. Yosef Gikatilla, cannot be seen.

Second, R. Yosef Gikatilla asserts that while it is true that one cannot see the *sefira* of *keter*, one can listen to it and hear it. He does not, however, expand on the meaning of that hearing.

Two explanations of that hearing may be suggested. First, hearing refers to the very knowledge of its existence without any ability to comprehend anything. Seeing is understanding: "I see what you say," whereas hearing is merely knowledge of existence, taking in information without any understanding. A person can sit in on a scholarly lecture, hear every word, but not understand anything. About him it may be said, according to this interpretation, that he "hears" but does not see.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> R. Yosef Gikatilla adds that the *sefira* of *chokhma* is also not apprehended, but we shall not discuss that here. He too focuses here solely on the *sefira* of *keter*.

<sup>8</sup> According to this, seeing is higher than hearing, for seeing involves knowledge and understanding of the thing itself, whereas hearing only involves knowledge of the thing's existence. This also follows from the following passage by R. Shelomo ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Radomsk (1803-1866), a disciple of R. Meir of Aptá (who was the disciple of R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk) and of R. David of Lelov (who was the disciple of the Seer of Lublin), in his *Tiferet Shelomo, Yitro*:

"[The day that you stood before the Lord your God in Chorev] (*Devarim* 9:10); "Lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen" (*Devarim* 9:9). This seems to be alluding that a person must remind himself of the great level reached by the children of Israel at that time when they received the Torah, they seeing with their eyes, as it is written (*Shemot* 20:15): "And all the people saw the sounds." This seeing is a great level. This may be compared to an exceedingly wealthy man who in his old age lost some of his money, even though he still had a little wealth, though not as at first. He will always remind himself that his early days were better than these. The same is true regarding the memory of receiving the Torah. From that time until the coming of the Redeemer we will not be able to achieve this great and wonderful level again, the aspect of seeing. This is the meaning of the verse: "Remember the day that you stood..." "Lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen" (*Devarim* 4:9). That is, then you were in the aspect of seeing, as it is stated: "And all the people saw." For after the incident involving the [golden] calf, they fell from their level.

Israel's great level was that they merited to see; after their fall in the wake of the sin of the golden calf, they returned to the level of hearing alone.

According to a second interpretation, we may assign deeper meaning to the concept of hearing. For this purpose, we shall make use of a similar distinction proposed by R. David Ha-Kohen, the Nazir, who was a prominent disciple of Rav Kook:

The main thing is that in addition to the visible and observable ideal light, there is universal Divine vitality, from the source of life, which is internal, invisible, but audible, above the visible light. (*Kol ha-Nevu'a*, p. 129)

The Nazir distinguishes between visible light and audible vitality. Elsewhere he calls the second quality *higayon shim'i*, auditory logic. Hearing, according to the Nazir, is not mere absorption of information, but inner listening that does not pass through definitions and concepts, but rather is heard through other means, that are not taken from the world of the *yesh*. Auditory logic allows penetration to the root of existence and an inner encounter with the vitality itself that comes from the supreme source, the *ayin*, the *keter*.

It is precisely the absence of understanding, explains the Nazir, that permits a deeper and more internal understanding of reality, and perhaps it can also touch in an abstract, spiritual and attentive way the *keter*, the *ayin*, and everything that in the world of seeing is incomprehensible.

## CONCLUSION

The amazing expression, "And all the people saw the sounds," has taught us two, non-contradictory principles.

The *Sefat Emet* teaches us a great truth, one that is relevant to any situation in which tension exists between "seeing" and "hearing," between objective truth that we wish to leave in its place and the desire to experience and assimilate that truth within us, through our personal and narrow perspectives. Total humility, self-nullification, and the readiness to put "We shall do" before "We shall hear," allow a person the opportunity to see the sounds and hear the sights.

The danger that lies in wait for someone who wishes to existentially experience the Torah that he is learning and the situation in which he is found, is that he will lose the eternal dimension of the encounter. And perhaps even more, the subjective dimension is liable to restrict the Divine and the Torah, not only in the eternal and objective sense, but even with respect to the limitations of the senses and the emotions, through which the person wishes to encounter the Torah and God.<sup>9</sup> These dangers are greatly diminished when

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<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Rav Kook discusses this danger in connection with Christianity. See *Orot, Yisra'el ve-Umot ha-Olam*, p. 153. The desire to draw close to God by way of the senses and by way of religious experience is liable to give rise to idolatry, for besides being subjective, they are material, and therefore they lose the perspective of eternity, supremacy and immateriality. Only the revelation of God through Moshe, the most modest of men, which, on

a person puts "We shall do" before "We shall hear," and is willing to devote and nullify himself with his entire being. Any desire for a spiritual experience, any aspiration for a spiritual-Torah encounter by way of the world of the senses and by way of one's personal emotional strength, necessitates putting "We shall do" before "We shall hear," accepting the yoke, and possessing great humility.

Another great truth is taught to us by the Nazir: sometimes in order to reach deep inner worlds that border on infinity, we must abandon our organs of reason, vision, and take hold of the quality of listening. It is our constant wish to understand by way of the intellect, to see things and assimilate them through our reason. However, we pay thereby the price of the barrier that we set up between us and the *Ein Sof*, between us and our essences, and between us and God. Auditory logic, which waives intellectual understanding, and aspires to internal, spiritual listening, opens a window to infinity, to the supreme *keter*, where we meet in an unmediated, undefined, and inexplicable fashion that which is beyond the limitations of our minds and senses.

Great humility on the one hand and inner attentiveness on the other bring about a meeting of the worlds of seeing and hearing, the external and the internal, the intellect and the senses. Then we may see the sounds, according to the *Sefat Emet*, and hear the sights, according to the Nazir. Absolute eternity puts on the garment of the here-and-now, but at the same time remains clean of any stain or dross, and the Torah is given every day anew in that amazing and incomprehensible assembly, where "all the people see the sounds."

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the one hand, involves an unmediated encounter, while, on the other hand, fully recognizes that "man will not see me and live," allows us to know God and at the same time recognize our inability to know Him fully.