

SEASONS OF THE MOON

THE MONTH OF AV

Av 5759 / July 14, 1999 - August 12, 1999

Ears aren't just for hearing. The inner ear is also the center of balance. A series of fluid-filled canals oriented at right angles to each other tell the brain which way and how much you are turning. When you move your head, the relative motion of the fluid in these canals changes. Yet another part of the inner ear responds to the force of gravity and lets your brain know the static position of your head. Why should the mechanism of balance be located in the ear? What, after all, do hearing and balance have in common?

SEEING SOUND

Each of the twelve months of the Jewish year is associated with one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The month of Av is associated with the tribe of Shimon. The name Shimon comes from the same root in Hebrew as the word to hear — *shema* — as in “*Shema! Yisrael — Hear! O, Israel.*” The *shema* is the basic credo of the Jew, his first declaration of G-d's Unity, and the last words to leave his mouth when he passes from this world. Why is it that we say “*Hear! O, Israel!*” Why don't we say “*Look! O, Israel!*”

When the Jewish People stood at Sinai to receive the Torah, they underwent an experience which was literally out of this world. When G-d spoke, the Torah writes that the Jewish People “saw the voices.” There was a dislocation of the natural perception of the senses. Kinesthesia. Seeing sound. What does it mean to see sound?

Sight and sound are very different. Sight operates instantaneously. We see through medium of light and light is the fastest thing in the universe. It travels at 186,000 miles per second. Sound is relatively slow, moving at about 800 miles an hour.

The difference between the speeds of light and sound symbolizes

HEAR/SAY

a fundamental difference between the two. Sight perceives a complete whole instantaneously. When we look at something,

we perceive it at once as a complete entity. After this first sight, we may analyze what we are looking at in more detail, focusing on one element and then another, but the essence of vision is an instant whole.

Sound, however, is always perceived as montage, a collage of different elements. We order these separate pieces of information to give them substance and definition, so that we may understand what it is we are hearing. This process of assembly is not instant. Our brain takes time to balance and evaluate what we are hearing.

ASSEMBLING SOUND, ASSEMBLING REALITY

One of the most remarkable things about listening to a tape

recording of, say, a lecture, is how much distracting ambient noise there seems to be on the tape. When you listen to the lecturer in person, you aren't aware of the constant drone of the traffic in the background, the noise of the fans and the air-conditioner. However, when you listen to a tape, those extraneous sounds vie for your attention. The tape recorder is not the human ear. The tape recorder is an indiscriminate

“vacuum cleaner” of reality. The human ear, however, takes the elements of what is available and it “hears” — it discriminates and balances.

WORLD ASSEMBLY

This world is like an assembly line. The Hebrew word for “world” is *olam* which means “hidden.” You don't see G-d in this world. He is hidden behind the facade of the world. You can't see



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THE ULTIMATE MESSAGE *continued*

G-d in this world — *but you can hear Him*. If you tune your ears carefully, you can hear an unmistakable pattern in events. If you listen carefully to the un-historical history of the Jewish People, and weigh it in the balance of probability, you will hear G-d's Voice. If you listen to all the seemingly coincidental events in your life, you will hear Him. Everyone has experienced "co-incident." Really, co-incident is *Kah* (one of G-d's names) *inside-ence* — G-d shaping events to bring everything to the correct time and place of its fulfillment.

The reason we say "Hear! O Israel" is that, in this world, you cannot see G-d. You have to take the disparate, seemingly random elements of this world, and assemble them into a cogent whole. To sense the Oneness of G-d, a Jew declares twice a day: "Hear O Israel! Hashem our G-d, Hashem is One." You have to *hear* it. Because you cannot see it. Not in this world. In this world, you have to balance and assemble. You have to hear.

There was only one time in history that you didn't have to hear in order to perceive G-d; one moment when you could actually see G-d's Unity. At Mount Sinai. There the Jewish People "saw" the voices. They saw with an incontrovertible clarity those things that usually need to be "heard." Seeing is more than believing. When you see, you don't have to believe. It's in front of your eyes.

THE ART OF SOUND

One of music's exquisite pleasures is the great variety of feelings conveyed by the blending of the instruments. The sound of brass combined with strings is unique. It doesn't sound like either of them. Similarly, the exact emotion a chord conveys depends on the balance and inversion of its constituent notes. Music is the art of sound. Music depends on balance. Maybe this is the connection between the ear's double function as the organ of hearing and the center of balance. Accurate hearing itself depends on "balance," on being able to assemble, judge and formulate a world of sound.

Just as balance is the keystone of sound, similarly to hear G-d in the world we have to balance, to order and to evaluate all the information from our senses.

THE PRIDE OF THE LION

There are many human failings which cause imbalance and the inability to "hear" G-d's voice. One of the most lethal enemies of balance is pride. The month of Av is related to the element of Fire. Fire, like pride seeks to rule at all costs. Fire isn't interested in balance. It strives always to ascend. It doesn't mind what it consumes in its path, in its single-minded desire to ascend, to get to the top. That's the nature of pride. The visual symbol of the month of Av is the Lion. The Lion, the king of beasts, seeks to rule at all costs. We talk of a "pride" of lions.

The month of Av is a time of great tragedy for the Jewish People. It was on the ninth of Av that the first transports to the gas chambers of Treblinka started to roll. On the ninth of Av, the First World War broke out. And on August 2nd, 1492, the ninth of Av, the Jews were expelled from Spain. Spain was to be *Judenrein*. It was on the ninth of Av that both the Holy Temples were destroyed* and on the ninth of Av in the first year after the Exodus, the spies brought back a negative report about the Land of Israel. This was the root cause of all the tragedies that were to follow.

IN THE BALANCE

The sin of the spies, the seminal cause of thousands of years of tragedy, was rooted in pride. Pride which blinded the eyes of the spies to reality. However, the spies could never have caused such damage if the ears of the people were not open to

hear their slander. The Jewish People opened their ears to the lies of the spies and panicked. The first casualty of panic is usually balance. When we panic, we can no longer assemble reality correctly. All our actions become reactions to fear. We succumb to the cacophony and the confusion of the mob.

If we want to "hear" G-d's voice in the world, if we want to piece together the silent symphony of truth, our ears must be free of the poison of slander. This time of the year is propitious to correct the fault of listening to slander and corrupted speech. If we use our ears properly, we will hear the sounds of redemption calling. They are not far away.

THE SILENT SYMPHONY

When the Sounds of Silence
steal your ears once more
and a million memories
batter and leave you
on the floor —
Look up and see
the still small voice
playing still
The Silent Symphony.

* The first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the second by the Romans. This is alluded to in the name of the month itself: Av consists of *alef*, the first letter of the name *Edom*, the progenitor of Rome, and *bet*, for *Bavel* - Babylon.

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