

# A Message from the Rabbi

## Rabbi Mark Fasman

A couple of months ago my father told me that he had come across a novel in a bookstore entitled *Deaf Sentence*. Because he has increasing difficulty with his own hearing, he picked up the book and found that the author described his own hearing challenges. It sounded interesting so I ordered the book and read it myself.

I recall hearing a hearing expert explain that there is, as yet, virtually nothing that can be done to reverse hearing loss. And because we are living longer, we find that our world is increasingly affected by deafness – there are more of us and we have a longer time for our hearing to gradually fail.

Hearing aids help, but they do not solve the problem. What problem? Loss of hearing compromises our ability to interact with others. Conversations become strained or impossible. Life becomes a kind of Wheel of Fortune, in which there is a lot of filling-in-the-blanks and guessing as to what the other person has likely said.

The results can be comical. Or embarrassing. Or even dangerous.

Why does Genesis, in speaking about the first solitary human, tell us *lo tov heiyot ha-adam levado* – “It is not good for the human being to be alone?” I think that it is because one of the essential ways in which the human being is like God is that we can use symbolic language. And thus it is not good to be human unless we have an “other” with whom to converse. As Helen Keller commented, she believed her deafness to be worse than her blindness because her inability to hear isolated her from people.

Because of that novel, I understand better the frustrations of the hearing-impaired. I have increased *rachmones* for them and try to be more patient (though the frustration continues on both ends of the conversation).

Torah teaches: *lo tekalleil cheireish, v'lifnei iveir lo titein mikhshol* – “You shall not curse/insult the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind” [Lev. 19:14]. On its surface these commandments seem obvious and even silly. Rashi explains that, since we are commanded not to curse anyone [Ex. 22:27], specifying the deaf is a way of saying that we should not curse any living being. The deaf are to be considered among the living; Rashi’s comment suggests that the deaf cannot interact normally, so we might treat them as though they are dead to us.

In this verse, the Rabbis understand “blind” as “unsuspecting” or “uninformed” (what kind of person trips blind people?). Similarly, I understand “deaf” not to mean unable to hear, but rather “unwilling to hear” – to close one’s ears to the words of others or to the words of God, as understood by Jewish tradition (after all, of what possible benefit would it be to utter curses or insults to one who cannot hear

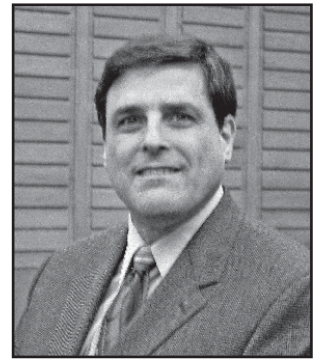
them?).

For me, there are two applications of this commandment not to curse the deaf. First, one is not permitted to defame a third person (living or dead), particularly when that person is unable to defend him- or herself. And second, we must not rebuke (or exhort or even try to teach) someone who is unwilling to hear our words.

Just as speaking louder does not necessarily help the hard-of-hearing to understand our words, simply increasing the intensity of our rebuke will have no effect on those who will not even listen to us (think of interactions with our adolescent children). Our greater challenge is to find a way to get the hearing-resistant to pay attention. Yelling louder (whether in personal interactions or public speaking or political discourse) will only increase the resistance of those who are resistant to begin with. Witness the difficulty of peace talks. Or family disputes. Those who feel disrespected are unwilling to listen, even to reasonable rebuke or disagreement or suggestions.

The flip side of this commandment is that we need to listen to – and really hear – the words of others. The Book of Deuteronomy contains three final discourses by Moses to the Children of Israel. Moses is filled with dread and certainty that, once he is gone, the Israelites will turn away from God’s commandments. Thus, 89 times we find a form of the verb *li’shmo’a* (*shin-mem-ayin* .ש.מ.ע.) – “to hear.”

“Hear” – this is Moshe’s charge, it is the charge of the prophets, and it is the charge of the Rabbis. If we want to learn what God wants of us, if we want to improve ourselves, if we want to deepen our relationships, then we must “hear.” But first, we must listen.



## Save the Date

“Hamentashen Express”

*It’s a Mishpacha event!*

**Sunday, March 1, 3:30-5:00 pm**

Make hamentashen and fill *mishloach manot* (gift bags) for family and friends in preparation for Purim!