

# Hearing the Sounds of the Divine

## The struggle with Greece

*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* describes the Greek rule over the Jews during the Hasmonean period as “darkening the eyes of the Jewish people.”<sup>1</sup> It would seem that *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* is describing the Greek oppression as a general religious oppression as opposed to particular decrees of religious intolerance. It “darkened” the eyes of Jewish people from all the mitzvot of the Torah. Is this description of *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* in disagreement with the description in *Megillat Aniochus* ch. 31, that Greece was interested in nullifying three particular mitzvot: Shabbat, brit milah and Rosh Chodesh? The answer to this question perhaps lies in an important thesis by Rabbi Dovid Cohen, the Nazir of Yerushalayim.

## The Nazir's “Weltanschauung”

The Nazir, Rabbi Dovid Cohen, in his celebrated work *Kol Hanevuah*, outlines a basic difference between Jewish philosophy and Greek philosophy. Greek philosophy, the Nazir writes, is based on an analysis of theories that emerge from an examination of the world — via sight.

“Jewish philosophy is different. It is auditory. It does not look at the world to see G-d. Rather it hears the laws of the world and listens to commandments that cannot be seen but whose words are heard” (page 38). According to the Nazir, there is a deep tension between Greek philosophy, which emphasizes an analysis based on empirical study, versus Judaism,



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which emphasizes a message that is heard. The Nazir astutely points out that both Biblical and Rabbinic writings are replete with an inordinate emphasis on hearing and listening in the Jewish religious experiences. The ultimate expression of Jewish faith is

an auditory experience:

שמע ישראל ד' אלו קינו ד' אחד.

*Hear o Israel: Hashem is our G-d  
Hashem is one.*

Similarly, the Nazir writes:

### Personal reflection and historical background:

When our family made aliya in 2004, leaving behind our meaningful jobs at Y.U., there were many beautiful things that awaited us in Eretz Yisrael. Aside from toiling and teaching Torah next to the Kotel Hamaaravi, there were beautiful surprises that we had not anticipated. There are two particular things that immediately come to mind. First, the opportunity to learn daily from Mori V'rabbi Harav Nebentzal shlit”a. Second, the administration of Yeshivat Netiv Aryeh allowed me to sit in a special and unique room when preparing shiur and speaking with students — “The Nazir’s Room.” The Nazir, Harav Dovid Hakohen zt”l, was a prized student of Harav A.Y. Hakohen Kook zt”l. The Nazir’s depth in Torah, Kabbalah and philosophy was legendary. He was a practicing nazir and did not cut his hair or drink wine. His bookcases, tables, chairs and even his bed were relocated to the Haidra building overlooking the Kotel plaza after the Six Day War. I was told that the Nazir, who was in the Old City when it was captured by the Jordanians in 1948, was constantly expressing his longing for the Old City of Jerusalem. His return to the Kotel after the Six Day War is legendary. His furniture was also returned to what became known as the Nazir’s Room even after his death. Spending time in that unique room overlooking the Kotel is a very special experience. Since then I have felt an affinity to the Nazir. Despite the intellectual and spiritual gaps between me and the Nazir, I attempted to cull some ideas from his sefer *Kol Hanevuah*, and this article is a celebration of this unique *oved Hashem* (servant of G-d) and his powerful message about prophecy and *mesorah* (tradition). As I finish writing this article on Isru Chag Sukkot 5776, while Jews have been murdered at the entrance of the Old City on their way to visit the Kotel the memory of the Nazir, his messages, his passion for this city, and its redemption are as important as ever.

Wisdom is described in the Torah as 'the word of G-d' and Rabbinic wisdom is described as a 'saying' which was heard (*ma'amar*). This is because Torah wisdom is an internal experience of listening and is not achieved or understood through the human gaze. For that reason a teaching is emphasized as something that was heard, and not through form or substance.<sup>2</sup>

Kol Hanevuah pg. 25

The Nazir goes so far as to suggest that the word *hashkafah*, which is colloquially used today as an outlook, is an inappropriate term. Although people often refer to a "Torah *hashkafah*," the word *hashkafah* indicates a vision and our Torah view, argues the Nazir, does not come from man's vision but through listening to the words of our tradition even when it seems to be contradicted by empirical evidence.<sup>3</sup>

### The Negative Influence of Greece According to Rabbinic Tradition

Based on the Nazir's approach, the statement in *Megillat Antiochus* does not contradict the teaching of *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer*. Although the Greeks prohibited the Jews from three particular commandments, the approach that Greek philosophy would "darken and obscure all the commandments," as described by *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer*, can be understood based on the thesis of the Nazir. "The darkening of the eyes of the Jewish people" can be referring to the emphasis of the visual and empirical at the expense of the oral traditions that echo from Sinai. The expression is appropriate considering the meaning of darkness and light in Kabbalah in general, and particularly

in the teachings of the Nazir. The Nazir describes light as "G-d's glory." Darkening the commandments can refer to preventing the Jews of the period from accessing the inner light of the commandments, by emphasizing a philosophy that is antithetical to the "inner light of Torah." [It is beyond the scope of this article but it can be argued that particularly the three commandments that the Greeks chose to prohibit epitomize the above-mentioned tension between Greek and Jewish philosophy.]

### Challenges to the Nazir's Approach

Although the Nazir was deeply appreciated by fellow *gedolei Torah*, it was argued that this thesis failed to recognize other components of the G-dly experience involving the visual. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l raised his concerns regarding this topic.<sup>4</sup>

*There are some fantastic ideas that are expressed here about the significance of listening with "closed eyes," about the power of listening to an internal calling while ignoring external phenomena. I must say that I do not entirely identify with that position. I agree completely that we must listen carefully and pay attention to every sound, and we have become more sensitive to this, thanks to the author. However, I don't believe that we should advocate proceeding through life with closed eyes. In truth, we don't need to raise the banner of the importance of the phenomenon of listening at the expense of the power of vision. We need to learn how to balance these two tools and combine them and not have them oppose each other. ... I would like to conclude with the thread of my original point and that is the significance of this work even if there*

*are some points that require a deeper analysis. We all owe a debt of gratitude to the author who opened both old and new frontiers about a very important topic.<sup>5</sup>*

### Further Analysis of the Nazir's Thesis

Shabtai Daniel, a student of the Nazir, attempted to address some of the concerns raised regarding the Nazir's thesis.<sup>6</sup> He pointed out that Rav Yosef Albo, in the *Sefer Halkarim*, presents a similar idea. However, Rav Albo does not negate the significance of vision and sight but believes that there is something loftier about sound and listening. *Sefer Halkarim* notes that in Mishlei both the significance of vision and hearing are emphasized:

אֵזְרוּ שְׁמֵעֵת וְעֵין רְאָה ה' עָשָׂה גַם שְׁנִיָּהֶם.  
משלי כ"ב

*A hearing ear and a seeing eye, Hashem made both of them.*

#### Mishlei 20:12

However, Rav Albo points out, there is another passage in Mishlei that implies the value of hearing as greater than the value of vision:

אֵזְרוּ שְׁמֵעֵת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים בְּקִרְבֵּי חֲכָמִים תִּלְוֶין.  
משלי טו'ל"א

*The ear that hears life-giving reproof will abide in the midst of the wise.*

#### Mishlei 15:31

In this passage, hearing is mentioned and seeing is not. In fact, the Nazir himself (page 63) quotes this point from the *Sefer Halkarim* and concludes: "Both (vision and hearing) are beautiful, however, ... it is the sound that is the sweetest. 'Let me hear your voice for your voice is sweet' (Song of Songs 2:14)." This point is significant when responding

to Rav Lichtenstein's objection that the Nazir seems to ignore the value of the visual in the religious experience. Shabtai Daniel argues that the Nazir does not mean to reject the religious significance of the visual. He does, however, give greater spiritual significance to the auditory experience. It seems that the Nazir believes that "kol," a sound, is central to the spiritual experience because true wisdom is heard as the word of G-d. Although the visual form is a manifestation of G-d's presence, one cannot discern G-d's moral code and messages without auditory confirmation of G-d's "voice." Hence, the Nazir emphasizes that we can only know G-d's will from what we hear from our teachers or from prophecy. As Rav Lichtenstein argued, the visual experience is also part of prophecy. However, according to the Nazir, the manner in which we interpret the visual must be supported by the auditory.

If G-d's voice is not present when a human being envisions the world, then the visual experience and all of the inferences it represents can contradict Judaism. For the Nazir, this is the struggle between Greek philosophy and Judaism.

For the Nazir, Greek philosophy, due to the fact that it ignores the auditory experience of Jewish prophecy, introduces a philosophy that is opposed to Judaism. If G-d's voice is not present when a human being envisions the world, then the visual experience and all of the inferences it represents can contradict Judaism. It would seem that the Nazir wanted to emphasize this point so that the significance of the sound of Sinai, and prophecy in general, would be appreciated. Hence, the Nazir insists on contrasting the limited perspective of the visual and empirical when compared to the truth of the oral messages of Sinai and prophecy. For the Nazir, this is the struggle between Greek philosophy and Judaism.

### The Victory of Chanukah

According to the above approach, it could very well be that it's not a coincidence that Chanukah celebrates the miracle of the Menorah's lights. As mentioned, light is symbolic of G-d's glory, which is often hidden and obscured by the material world. During the period that the miracle of Chanukah occurred, the dominant Greek culture threatened to extinguish this light of Torah. The miraculous return of the flames of the Temple's Menorah is the physical expression of light, which represented the Jewish nation's rejection of those Greek influences that had attempted to "darken the eyes of the Jewish people."

### Practical Applications of the Nazir's Thesis<sup>7</sup>

The Nazir's thesis is important for so many areas of Jewish life. Generally, the above discussion would be placed in the theoretical arenas of Jewish

philosophy, *machshevet Yisrael*, and part of the important debate of how much exposure to secular philosophy is healthy and appropriate for a student of Torah. However, there are a few very practical lessons that can be applied when reflecting on the Nazir's thesis.

### The Power of Listening

The Nazir's thesis is not only about prophecy, philosophy or a Torah perspective of tradition. It also emphasizes the centrality of listening in the life of an *oved Hashem*, a servant of G-d. In an age in which everyone has a blog and an opinion, we learn from the Nazir that the power of listening is at the core of being connected to G-d. There are a few areas that I have noticed where we, the broader Jewish community both in Israel and the Diaspora, have begun to let go of this central component of *avodas Hashem*.

We, as a people, are blessed that over the last fifty years, *batei medrash* (study halls) are growing at rapid rates all over the world. There are more *chavrusos* learning together than there were fifty years ago, but how many are truly bending their ear to listen? The Talmud (*Chagigah* 3b) describes a student who "makes his ear like a 'grain receiver' to receive the teachings of his teachers so that he will have a heart to understand that which is pure and that which is not."<sup>8</sup> It seems that this ideal is slowly being lost. Students of the *beit medrash* are placing more emphasis on amassing their own knowledge and less emphasis on "listening" and receiving a proper *mesorah* from their rebbeim. This observation is not only relevant to semicha students but to all those who aspire for growth in Torah. As part

of the information age, individuals can easily fool themselves as being masters of a topic by simply amassing information with search engines such as Google or the Bar Ilan Responsa Project. Growth in Torah requires diligence as well as the dynamic dialectic of study by listening, questioning and assimilating the messages of a teacher who embodies and transmits the traditions of Sinai. As our thesis suggests, if the auditory experience of learning from a rebbe is lost, we may be inadvertently diminishing our connection to the *mesorah*. Without the ability to listen and learn from our teachers, we risk losing one of the central components of *avodas Hashem*.

## Listening as Central to Human Relationships

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Reich described to me the experience of watching Rav Nissan Alpert zt”l speaking with his wife on Simchas Torah. Rav Alpert zt”l was learning in the back of the beis medrash while the students were dancing. Right behind him was a bench that was placed as a divider between the men’s and women’s sections. When Rebbetzin Alpert z”l wanted to tell her husband something, Rav Alpert zt”l turned around to entirely face his wife and gave her his full attention.

Our thesis is not only about prophecy or *d’veikus* (connection) to G-d. What is true in the spiritual sphere

is reflected in the material sphere. If the most important component of man’s relationship to G-d is his ability to “hear” G-d’s messages, the same should apply to his human relationships. A person who truly listens to someone else can sincerely connect with him. One who does not, cannot. In an era in which we are distracted by so many forms of media, are we truly listening to those who are important to us? The Greeks left behind an appreciation for the aesthetic, but no means to create true relationships — neither with G-d nor with other human beings. The above-mentioned thesis reminds us that listening, which is central to all things that are spiritual, is also the key to meaningful human relationships.

## Notes

1. ותרדמה נפלה על אברם והנה אימה חשכה גדלה נפלה עליו“ (בראשית ט”ו, ב)
- אימה זו מלכות אדום שנאמר “דחילא ואימתנו” (דניאל ז, א). חשכה זו מלכות יון שהחשיכה את עיניהם של ישראל מכל מצוות שבתורה.
- “A deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold a dread, great darkness fell upon him.” (Bereishit 15:12)
- “Dread” that refers to the kingdom of Edom as Daniel (7;7) describes (Edom) as terrifying and a dread. “Darkness” refers to Greece who darkened the eyes of the Jewish people by obscuring all of the Torah’s commandments.” (*Pirkei D’Rebbe Eliezer* no. 27)
2. The Nazir expounds on this idea with a basic Kabbalistic principle which he continues to contrast with the Greek pursuit of knowledge, “The premise of Greek analysis is form. For the Greek thinkers, a theory is formulated based on how things appear and the material form (*tzurah*) is the base

perspective. However, in Judaism, form (*tzurah*) is not the basis of knowledge because the internal truth (*penimiyut HaTorah*) is hidden.” (page 39)

3. The Torah generally reserves the word “*hashkafah*” to G-d’s perspective not man’s. See for example “*hashkifah mim’on kodshecha*” (Devarim 26:1). There are some exceptions to this rule where the word is used to describe man’s gaze but it can be argued that the Torah is not being laudatory in those instances.
4. When the Nazir’s magnum opus, *Kol Hanevuah* was published, it included fascinating addresses delivered at President Zalman Shazar’s home by Israel’s political and rabbinic leaders celebrating the printing of the book. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l addressed the honorary gathering (in Hebrew) first praising the Nazir’s dynamic presentation of prophecy (which was not discussed in this article) and then concluded by addressing the Nazir’s above-mentioned primary thesis.
5. Addendum to *Kol Hanevuah*, page 44. This quote is a loose translation from its original Hebrew form. Please see the original for any clarification of the author’s intent.
6. At the above-mentioned gathering, see Addendum to *Kol Hanevuah*, page 34.
7. Originally, I thought about writing about how the Nazir’s thesis impacts the way in which an *oved Hashem* relates to the interface of Torah and science, but I quickly realized that an appropriate treatment of the topic requires a separate article. “*Lakol zman ve’et*,” Everything has its time and place (Kohélet 3:2).
8. The relationship between “hearing” and a “heart to understand” fits beautifully with the Nazir’s formulation of the significance of the expression *amarti b’libi*, “I said in my heart” (page 25).



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