

## Parshas Bamidbar 5772

### THE ULTIMATE AUDIO / VISUAL PRESENTATION

#### SEEING SOUNDS AT MOUNT SINAI

As the *Yom Tov* of Shavuos approaches, the focus fittingly shifts to the Revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah. One of the many wondrous aspects that accompanied this singular event concerns the *kolos* (sounds) that were manifest at that time. Regarding the transmission of the Torah to the people at Har Sinai, the verse states (*Shemos 20:15*): וְכָל הָעָם רָאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת, which — translated literally — means: “And all the people *saw* the sounds.” Rashi amplifies this notion by quoting Chazal, who declare that the attendees at Har Sinai were capable of a certain feat that has not been duplicated since: they beheld with their eyes that which is normally just heard.

What, precisely, did they see? The sound waves? The exact nature of this amazing phenomenon is the subject of discussion amongst the commentators. For example, the *Shelah* understands it to mean that — as the words of the Torah were being uttered — the Jewish people beheld these words simultaneously taking the form of actual letters. In any event, it is clear that this was truly a sight to behold.

What may not be so clear, however, is the purpose of this grand spectacle. True, it certainly was intriguing and “eye-catching,” so to speak, but we know that Hashem performs miracles for specific purposes, not

simply for effect. This point, as well, generates much fascinating discussion amongst our great sages, as we shall see.

#### DID YOU SEE WHAT I SAW?

An important principle emerges from a Talmudic discussion concerning *Rosh Chodesh* (the new month). As elaborated upon in *maseches* Rosh Hashanah, *Rosh Chodesh* was classically determined via *kiddush hachodesh* (sanctification of the new moon). This process centered around the delivery and acceptance of testimony regarding the sighting of the new moon, and was administered by the *beis din* (court). When the *beis din* determined that the testimony was indeed valid, they consecrated the day as *Rosh Chodesh* by exclaiming, “*Mekudash! Mekudash!* (It is properly sanctified! It is properly sanctified!)” The Mishnah (3:1) discusses a case where, instead of standard witnesses, it was *beis din* itself who sighted the new moon:

רְאוּהוּ בֵּית דִּין בְּלֵבָד, יַעֲמִדוּ שְׁנַיִם וְיַעֲיִדוּ בְּפְנֵיהֶם, וְיֹאמְרוּ מְקֻדָּשׁ מְקֻדָּשׁ.

“If *beis din* alone sights it (the procedure is as follows): Two of the members (of the *beis din*) stand before the rest and testify (that they saw the new moon). (The sitting judges) then declare, ‘*Mekudash! Mekudash!*’”

The Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah 25b*) questions this procedure. Why is it necessary for two members of the *beis din* to go through the formality of delivering testimony? It almost seems odd that the *beis din* needs

לזכר נשמת ציפא רבקה בת ברוך ע"ה

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of חיים בן יוסף הלוי, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

to base their determination in this instance upon what they hear from the witnesses. After all, didn't the *beis din* itself behold the sight of the new moon? *Hearing should not be considered greater than what their own eyes beheld*, the Gemara wonders.

And this principle stands — even in the Gemara's conclusion. Why was there a need here for testimony? The Gemara explains that the Mishnah was dealing with a unique case: *beis din* did view the new moon, but they saw it only during the nighttime — a time in which they don't normally convene. As such, they were prevented from declaring *Rosh Chodesh* right then and there. *Beis din* had to wait until morning to take up the case; at that point, it was necessary to rely upon witnesses to initiate the proceedings. Without this technicality, however, *beis din's* viewing would have been sufficient. Were they to see the new moon during daylight hours — the proper time for adjudicating such cases — they could declare the new month based on what they saw with their own eyes. In this respect, *seeing* is superior to *hearing*.

### **BEST OF BOTH WORLDS**

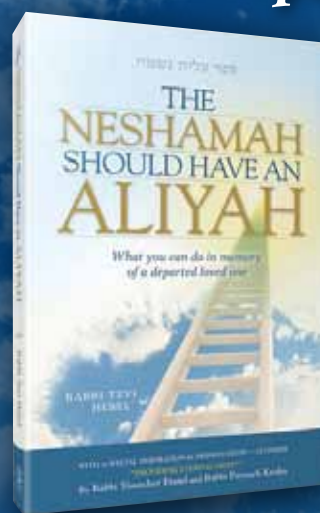
This notion seems quite sensible. As the Sefas Emes (*Shavuos*) explains, sight possesses an intrinsic advantage over hearing. Hearing, in effect, is a second-hand experience; that is, the listener does not hear the actual source of the sound, but his eardrums merely pick up the sound waves emanating from the source. But one who beholds a sight is viewing the very object upon which his eyes are focused.

On the other hand, there is a property by which hearing may have an edge over vision. A sight is beheld by the eyes — but the spectacle remains in its place, outside of and separate from the beholder. Regarding this aspect, hearing may actually be considered a more “intimate” experience: for the sound waves travel to within the

confines of the person (i.e., into his ears — literally).

The ability to “see the sounds” at Har Sinai, explains the Sefas Emes, thus served a crucial purpose. Hashem was transmitting the Torah to His people, who would continue the transmission throughout all generations. Obviously, this initial transference of the Torah's sacred words needs be executed in as complete a fashion as possible; the transmission must take place under optimal conditions. As noted, both seeing and hearing possess qualities that render them superior, in some way, to the other. Hashem solved this issue by utilizing the best of both words. He enabled B'nei Yisrael to both see and hear the Torah's teachings. In this way, they both beheld the actual words of Torah themselves — firsthand — and internalized these teachings — in the most literal sense of the word.

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