

Chapter 32 is Moshe's final charge to the Israelite people, reminding them of the many blessings they have received from Hashem, and warning them of the disaster that will fall when they inevitably become complacent and arrogant and forget their dependence on God.

Unlike many speeches throughout Deuteronomy with similar messages, this time, the charge is delivered as a song. When we read the Torah tomorrow, those who are physically present will see that the column of this Torah portion is laid out differently, in two separate subcolumns with poetic breaks separating them – a pattern as arresting as the wave pattern of Shirat Hayam.

The visual of the poem on the parchment is to demand that we stop and pay attention. So too are the words with which Moshe opens his song:

הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֲדַבְרָה } וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי-פִי:

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!

Moshe instructs not only the Israelites to listen, but all of nature.

Midrash Tanchuma comments on this instruction: “Listen, heavens, and I will speak. Impressive is the human being who can say thus to the works of heaven. It is like a king who says to his servants, “Listen and hearken to my words!” So too [Moshe] said to the heaven and earth, “Be quiet until all of my words are done!”

As Rabbi Dena Weiss, notes, the midrash hints at something important about the nature of true listening: “When Moshe commands the heavens and earth to listen to him it is “until all of my words are done!” The speaker not only determines that we need to stop what we are doing and give our undivided attention, but also claims that attention for an indefinite amount of time. Sometimes, even important conversations can wrap up neatly in a few minutes, but sometimes it takes a lot of time for people to express themselves fully and feel heard—and the listener may not interrupt. Not only should they not interrupt in order to disagree, they even need to hold back on offering insight or affirmation until the listening is done. A response may be appropriate or necessary, but responding is not listening. The listening is an end in and of itself.”

Moshe's demand for attention is in the language of hearing, but the lesson here transcends our use of one particular sense. And as we close the book of Torah, the final demand for attention, articulated as a song, is a reminder that there is a difference between surface attention and truly taking something.

Often, when we attend to someone else's words, it is for the sake of the response. We pay attention so that we can produce a counter argument. We pay attention so that we hit on the right way to respond.

But Dena Weiss's commentary reminds us that to truly attend to another's words is to do so with an openness that seems deceptively simple – to take in the words fully, not only without verbal interruption, but without being distracted by our own thoughts.

Yesterday was Yom Kippur – a day when we spoke a great deal. We confessed. We pled for forgiveness.

Ha'azinu comes this Shabbat and reminds us that verbalizing is only half of the relationship.

Now, we prepare for Sukkot, a holiday when we take in the response – the vastness of the universe, as we sit under the stars. We let ourselves venture outside of the protection of our physical walls, and, too, ha'azinu reminds us, we set aside the words we usually tell ourselves and others and prepare to be fully receptive.

There's a reason that Moshe does this as a song, I think. I don't know about the rest of you, but I am more receptive to letting turning off the thinking, judging, defensive part of my brain when what I am taking in is music.

Sing song?