



## Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

### To See or Not to See...That Is the Question!

Leonie Jacob

In the lead-up to Matan Torah, Hashem prepares Moshe as follows: “Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud so that the nation will **hear** when I speak with you” (Shemot 19:9). The emphasis is on sound, on listening. The thick cloud serves to de-emphasize the visual experience, so that the aural becomes the focus.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in his writing on Parshat Re’eh (5768, rabbisacks.org), explains that the people of Israel are called upon to reject images in favor of words, to discard appearances and follow, instead, the commanding voice. To meet G-d, he says, is to listen to G-d. It makes sense, then, that the Torah’s own account of this event emphasizes that which is **heard**. Thunder, voices, *shofarot* being blown – while visibility is diminished by thick clouds and smoke (Shemot 19:16). The culmination of this encounter with the Divine takes place through the *Aseret HaDibrot* – literally, ten **sayings**.

It becomes all the more noticeable, therefore, when immediately after the completion of this set of laws, the Torah suddenly shifts gears in its description of the experience:

“And all the nation **saw** the voices, and the torches, and the sound of the Shofar and the smoking mountain” (Shemot 20:15).

After all this emphasis on listening and sound and reducing visibility – the Torah begins to emphasize the visual nature of this encounter. Were the people of Israel meant to see....or not to see?

What does it mean to have a **visual** encounter with that which is **heard**, to see sounds?!

One approach to understanding this verse can be found in the Ibn Ezra Hakatzar. He explains that there is a connection between the ability to see and the ability to hear, along with the ability to perceive any of the other senses.

At first glance this Ibn Ezra doesn’t seem consistent with our current understanding of anatomy or physiology. Our senses are processed completely differently, in different parts of the brain! Each one is experienced independently of the other – not connected to one another.

Unless, that is, a person has an obscure neurological condition called synesthesia. *Synesthesia* is a word derived from the Greek words “syn,” which means union, and “aesthesia,” sensation. The term describes a remarkable experience of cross-sensory perception – an interconnectedness between senses.

This condition was described anecdotally for over 300 years, but it was only in the 1980s that Dr. Richard Cytowic (a neurologist, currently a professor at George Washington University) revived scientific interest in this area, thanks to a man he met named Michael Watson.

Michael Watson tasted shapes. Chicken that was not adequately

seasoned was described as “not having enough points.” The flavor of mint consistently resulted in a simultaneous experience of feeling smooth, glass cylindrical columns.

As Dr. Cytowic began to research this condition further, he discovered that the most common form of synesthesia is a visual response to an auditory stimulus; in other words, seeing sounds.

Perhaps the Ibn Ezra’s statement is not meant to be taken metaphorically, but suggests that for at least that moment, the whole of Klal Yisrael had a synesthetic experience – a physiological cross-sensory perception, such that sounds were actually experienced visually.

If that is true, what, if anything, could that add to our understanding of the Har Sinai experience?

In a standard, typical sensory experience, the limbic system (the home of our emotional make-up) absorbs an experience as a whole and then apportions significance and importance to various aspects of that experience. It then sends that information to the cortex of the brain for further analysis. The relative importance and value we attribute to anything in our intellectual analysis has its roots in our limbic system. This is why every single person will react to any given event differently and remember it differently, depending on how their individual, subjective limbic system evaluates the situation.

Dr. Cytowic is a proponent of the theory that synesthesia occurs from within the limbic system. Only when the cortex is relatively switched off is the limbic system then activated to the degree that it becomes possible for people to experience senses simultaneously.

By stripping away the intellectual, cognitive part of the experience, the Jewish people at Har Sinai would have been placed into a state where their acceptance of the Torah was taking place on the most essential, integral emotional part of their being – that part which determines the value of any other information we receive.

The receiving of Torah was not and is not meant to be purely an intellectual exercise. By allowing it to imbue our being that deeply, even if just for that moment at Har Sinai, Hashem taught us that it is an experience that can inform our values, our attitudes, our reactions – and become incorporated into the very essence of our being – if we allow it.

A story is told of a student who approached his Rebbe, the famous Kotzker Rebbe, excitedly informing him that he had just finished going through the entire Shas for the third time. To which the Kotzker Rebbe’s immediate response was “Yes, but how many times has it gone through you?”

Our encounter with Torah has the potential to refine the very essence of our being, to help us grow and develop into people who can transform the world into a more G-dly place.

### Primer: Israel’s Six Day War

William Evans

As wars go, the famous Six Day War was small in scale. In significance, however, it must rank as one of the most important - not only for the state of Israel, but for the world. This meticulously planned and nearly flawlessly conducted campaign is studied in war college and has been

cited as a major influence on world events in the latter half of the 20th century. That it occurred towards the end of Iyar and the beginning of Sivan makes its study especially appropriate at this time of year. What follows is a brief outline of events that led up to the war, how it was

conducted, and the aftermath.

From the time of the Israeli army's Sinai Peninsula campaign in 1956, there had been a steady increase in tensions. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when tensions made war inevitable, but by March of 1967, a boiling point had been reached and war was almost assured.

In May, Israel's enemies had circulated untruthful reports that Israel was gathering forces on the Syrian border. This led Egypt and Syria to mobilize their own armies. They announced "combat readiness" on May 17th, King Hussein of Jordan followed suit, and on May 19<sup>th</sup>, Radio Cairo called for a "Holy War" to destroy the Jewish nation. A large force of Egyptians, Syrians and Jordanians began to form on the Zionist nation's borders.

What brought things to a head was Egypt's closing of the Straits of Tiran, which effectively cut off the port of Eilat, Israel's only outlet to the Red Sea. Israel considered this a "Causus Belie" (act of war) and it was decided at the highest levels that a preemptive strike, although less politically advisable than waiting to be attacked, was called for. The plan was directed by the likes of Yitzchak Rabin and Moshe Dayan, recently appointed Minister of Defense.

Although each part of the war must be described separately, most of the events actually occurred simultaneously. The coordination and planning was incredible indeed. They fought against five nations on three fronts and not only won but nearly obliterated their opponents.

The air campaign had been conceived four years earlier and called for an almost entirely offensive strike (only 12 aircraft remained in Israel for defense) at the heart of the Egyptian Air Force (EAF). This "extraordinarily well coordinated" (reference #2, page 5) attack was carried out in three waves. First, forty planes struck ten Egyptian airfields. By the time the first wave had finished their destructive runs, the second wave was on the way towards more Egyptian airfields, and the third was on the runway ready for deployment. The destruction of the Egyptian Air Force and its Russian-made bombers (the most immediate threat to Israeli civilians) was completed in two days.

The Israeli Air Force then turned their attention on the Jordanian, Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi air arms. The Arab nations lost 415 planes to Israel's 26 destroyed, as sanguine a victory as one could hope for.

The ground campaigns were just as effective. In the Sinai Peninsula, a three-pronged strategy destroyed the entire Egyptian army in the Sinai. Racing towards the Suez Canal, they cut off the flower of the Egyptian army. The Egyptians had the choice of destruction or surrender. Many chose to capitulate. In all, 31,500 Egyptian soldiers were killed or wounded and 6,000 became prisoners. In order to find a comparable surrender and complete and utter destruction of an army, one may look back to the siege of Vicksburg during the American Civil War, ranked as one of the most successful campaigns in history, when Grant effectively put over 30,000 soldiers out of commission.

The other two theaters of action were no less impressive. The Jordanians had concentrated 45,000 men on the west bank of the Jordan, initially for defensive purposes. On June 5th, after information about Israel's Egyptian air strike was confirmed, General Riadh, an Egyptian commander placed in Jordan by the allied Arab nations, ordered an offensive against Israel to relieve pressure on the hard-pressed Egyptian army in the Sinai. The Israelis had maintained a defensive posture and intent on the Jordanian border, until firing broke out and they shifted to a pre-planned offensive. Here, as in the Sinai, the Jewish State's operations went almost entirely according to plan. In Jerusalem, after two days of hard fighting, Jews were once again in possession of Jerusalem! "Har Habayit Beyadeinu" ("the Temple Mount is in our hands!") became a national catchphrase and cause for much celebration throughout the Jewish nation, religiously affiliated or not.

The last action took place on the shared border with Syria. The Syrians had converted the Golan Heights, a plateau overlooking Northern Israel, into a fortified camp. 265 Syrian guns were aimed at the Jewish State, capable of throwing 10 tons of shells per minute into heavily populated civilian areas. On June 9<sup>th</sup>, Israel began its offensive to eliminate this threat. General Elazar conducted a skillfully handled campaign, which caused the utter discomfiture of the Syrian army. In hopes of triggering Soviet intervention, the Syrians made a false announcement over Radio Damascus that the Israeli troops had captured Quneitra. They retreated, leaving the entire southwestern portion of Syria and the Golan Heights in Israel's hands. A U.N. ceasefire halted fighting, and the Six Day War came to an end.

The Six Day War, in all its strategic and tactical genius, led to a state of euphoria and confidence in Israel. Many soldiers and civilians saw Hashem's hand working through the people on every level. The leadership of the country, however, chalked up their easy victory to superb planning, leadership, and fighting capabilities. (See, for instance, Moshe Dayan's remarks cited in reference #5.) They neglected the real reason the Arabs were so quickly defeated. In retrospect, the fact that everything fell so easily into place should have been attributed to a power higher than their own military might. This false confidence was at least partially responsible for a lack of vigilance which in turn led to the initial disastrous setbacks and unnecessary loss of precious life during the Yom Kippur War six years and four months later.

The Jewish Nation has only one true Protector.

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5. <https://www.jewishhistory.org/the-yom-kippur-war/>

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**הירש צבי בן ניסן**

**Lesley and Jeff Schwersenski**

**Rabbi Moshe Berger**

*Scholar in Residence*

(216) 533-5233

moshe@mberger.com

**Leslie Seiger**

*Facilitator*

(216) 392-8966

leslie.seiger@sbcglobal.net

**Sarah Rudolph**

*Editor*

(216) 291-8918

scdrudolph@gmail.com

**Ronnie Shulman**

*Sponsorships*

(614) 507-3855

rsulman1@gmail.com

**YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREATER CLEVELAND**

Rabbi Naphtali Burnstein, *Rabbi*

Rabbi Aharon Lebovics, *Associate Rabbi (Hebrew Academy)*

Jeffrey Soclof, *President*

**Beachwood Branch**

2463 S. Green Road  
Beachwood, Ohio 44122

(216)-382-5740

office@yigc.org



**Hebrew Academy Branch**

1860 S. Taylor Road  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
44118