

REFLECTIONS OF READERS

LISTENING TO HER VOICE

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Many of my male friends, when they were about to get married or had just gotten married, received the advice to listen to their wives. This advice echoes the verse from Genesis 21:12 where God tells Abraham *all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice*. This is good, practical advice that Abraham no doubt followed. However, if one were to look at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, to the story of the Garden of Eden, in verse 3:17, Adam was punished by God for listening to voice of his wife. How do we reconcile these two verses?

There is a midrash in the Yalkut Shimoni, mentioned in two places, Jeremiah 264 and Lamentations 600, which treats these two verses as well as two more. This midrash describes four types of listeners: one who listens and loses; one who listens and is rewarded by God; one who does not listen and is rewarded by God; and one who does not listen and loses. Two of these examples involve a husband listening to his wife. The one who listens and loses is Adam. He listened to his wife and lost the ability for humans to live forever. The one who listened to God and was rewarded is Abraham. He listened to Sarah, which is what God asked him to do, and had Hagar and her son removed from the house. Abraham's reward was that his son Isaac became his progeny.

Rabbi Haim ben Attar, known as the Or Ha-Haim, after his Torah commentary by the same name, may have had this midrash in mind when he commented on Genesis 3:17. In his commentary, he focuses on the seemingly superfluous words *because you have listened to the voice of your wife*. He writes that Adam's sin was not simply that he ate from the tree, but also that he listened to his wife. When Adam ate from the fruit, he had no idea that it was the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. What Adam failed to do was to ascertain the exact nature of the fruit that was handed to him by his wife. Adam should have engaged in conversation with her, which he did not. *Haim A. Gottschalk has an M.A. in Education from the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and taught Hebrew and Jewish Studies in a Jewish community high school in Phoenix, AZ. He is currently a graduate student at Indiana University.*

fact, the snake spoke more to Adam's wife than Adam did. The Or Ha-Haim, however, is silent on Genesis 21:12.

The Or Ha-Haim, perhaps, views listening as an active process. Adam was commanded not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. He accepted this responsibility. Therefore, to ensure that he was correctly following orders, according to the Or Ha-Haim, Adam had to engage in conversation with his wife to ascertain the nature of the fruit. Perhaps we can apply this idea to Abraham.

According to Rabbi Noah Weinberg, Founder and former Dean of Aish Ha-Torah, the word *Shema*, which God said to Abraham, implies a deep level of listening. To achieve this level of active listening, the listener must focus and pay attention, comprehend and verify what is being said by asking questions. Adam failed to do this.

Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, Rabbi of Congregation B'nai David of Los Angeles, California, taught about listening in marriage. Abraham was told by God that he would have progeny before Isaac was born (Gen. 15:4). Abraham listened to Sarah to take Hagar for wife, thinking that maybe Sarah would become a surrogate mother to Hagar's child. What Abraham did not do was engage in conversation with Sarah about this matter. Such a conversation, actively inquiring as to Sarah's feelings, could have prevented the anger that Sarah expressed later on (Gen. 16:5). When God tells Abraham *everything that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice* God did not say "you shall do," rather God said "listen." In other words, be an active listener and engage in conversation.

When my friends who were engaged received the advice of listening to their future wives, the person advising perhaps said it jokingly. But there is a lesson to be learned. When God tells Abraham to listen, He was saying to engage in conversation. By engaging in conversation, husband and wife learn to understand each other and ultimately will understand each others needs and perhaps be able to anticipate those needs. Conversation leads to harmony in the home and a successful and healthy marriage.