

Listening to the Voice of God

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael February 12, 2011

I recently taught on the *mitzvot* that were compiled by Maimonides centuries ago, where he stated and put in approximate order of subject, 613 commandments of God he believed were contained within the *Torah*. He separated them into 248 positive commandments – i.e. those saying that we must do something, and 365 negative commandments – i.e. those saying we must not do something. I'll give you an example of how they are written by reading the first two positive ones from a book titled "The Commandments":¹

1. Believing in God

By this injunction we are commanded to believe in God; that is, to believe that there is a Supreme Cause who is the Creator of everything in existence. It is contained in His words (exalted be He): *I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, etc.* (Exodus 20:2).

2. Unity of God

By this injunction we are commanded to believe in the Unity of God; that is to say, to believe that the Creator of all things in existence and their First Cause is One. This injunction is contained in His words (exalted be He): *Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One* (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The *mitzvot* that follow are "Loving God," "Fearing God," "Worshiping God," "Cleaving to God," and so on. You see, a *mitzvah* written by Maimonides did not simply quote what God said – it interpreted and then restated what God said into "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" forms. Well, since Maimonides wrote *mitzvot*, I don't see why we can't, so let's compose a few from what we know of *Torah* Scripture. "Thou shalt love God," "Thou shalt fear God." "Thou shalt worship God." "Thou shalt cleave to God." Give me some more!

.... receive suggested *mitzvot* from congregants

Did you say "Thou shalt obey God?" Where did you get that in Scripture?

.... wait for answer

Would it surprise you to know that obeying God was not one of the commandments on Maimonides' list? Yet Scripture commands it so many times. Here! Let me read you some:

¹ Charles B. Chavel, editor & translator, "The Commandments," (New York: The Soncino Press, 1967).

Numbers 15:38-40

“Speak to the people of Isra'el, instructing them to make, through all their generations, tzitziyot on the corners of their garments, and to put with the tzitzit on each corner a blue thread. It is to be a tzitzit for you to look at and thereby remember all of ADONAI's mitzvot and obey them, so that you won't go around wherever your own heart and eyes lead you to prostitute yourselves; but it will help you remember and obey all my mitzvot and be holy for your God.”

Deuteronomy 11:22-23, 32

“For if you will take care to obey all these mitzvot I am giving you, to do them, to love ADONAI your God, to follow all his ways and to cling to him, then ADONAI will expel all these nations ahead of you; and you will dispossess nations bigger and stronger than you are. ... And you are to take care to follow all the laws and rulings I am setting before you today.”

Deuteronomy 30:15-16

“Look! I am presenting you today with, on the one hand, life and good; and on the other, death and evil - in that I am ordering you today to love ADONAI your God, to follow his ways, and to obey his mitzvot, regulations and rulings ; for if you do, you will live and increase your numbers; and ADONAI your God will bless you in the land you are entering in order to take possession of it.”

So what's going on? Is it that the very existence of commandments makes the need to obey them self-evident and that is why Maimonides chose to not include such *mitzvot* in his compilation? Then why did God Himself command obedience and repeat it so many times? I don't know the answer, and I've inquired of several scholars who have studied Maimonides and they also don't know why. And here's another interesting thing I observed. There are numerous instances where *Torah* Scriptures command listening to God's "voice" in addition to obeying His commandments, and Maimonides doesn't mention any "listening" *mitzvot* either. Here are some of them:

Exodus 15:26

“He said, ‘If you will listen intently to the voice of ADONAI your God, do what he considers right, pay attention to his mitzvot and observe his laws, I will not afflict you with any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians; because I am ADONAI your healer.’”

Deuteronomy 13:5

“You are to follow ADONAI your God, fear him, obey his mitzvot, listen to what he says, serve him and cling to him;”

Deuteronomy 27:10

“Therefore you are to listen to what ADONAI your God says and obey his mitzvot and laws, which I am giving you today.”

Deuteronomy 28:1

“If you listen closely to what ADONAI your God says, observing and obeying all his mitzvot which I am giving you today, ADONAI your God will raise you high above all the nations on earth;”

So what should we think about this? Is God’s voice – that is, what He says – simply what is written in Scripture, or is there more to it? The rabbis say that there is more, and they call it the Oral *Torah* which, supposedly, was given along with the *Torah* that was written down by Moses at Mt. Sinai. We in Messianic Judaism do not ascribe to an oral law because there is no biblical evidence of it and, besides, what God communicated orally to Moses, even if some of it survived, is now just as un-adjustable as anything that Moses wrote down. On the other hand, we do ascribe to a non-literal aspect of the *Torah* that has flexibility to accommodate situations, and that is the *Torah* written in our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit – a gift of the New Covenant that was prophesied in Jeremiah 31:32-33:

“For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra’el after those days,” says ADONAI: “I will put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will any of them teach his fellow community member or his brother, ‘Know ADONAI’; for all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest; because I will forgive their wickednesses and remember their sins no more.”

“Okay,” I ask myself: “What has the *Torah* written on our hearts to do with listening to God’s voice?” As I usually do when I talk to myself, I also answer myself. It has EVERYTHING to do with listening to God’s voice, because, while we cannot hear words written on parchment speak, we CAN hear persons. The words that are written in the *Torah* – they never change. They do not adjust to accommodate for individual situations, for the loss of the Temple, for the sacrifice of Yeshua, for most of Israel living in the Diaspora, or for the multitude of other changes that have occurred over the last several thousand years.

Ahh, but you argue... The *Torah*’s words DO accommodate for situations. You say that you yourself have experienced how the Word of God is so incredibly adaptable that it applies this way now, and then tomorrow it applies to that! Today *Torah*’s words clearly set your path in one direction, and you expect that if tomorrow’s day requires it, it will be lead you in another way tomorrow. “It’s supernatural how the words seem to change,” you say!

Well, in reality, the words *don’t* change, and as wise and well-crafted as they are, they are not, by themselves, supernatural! What is supernatural is the Word-Giver, the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us and guides us in how the words of *Torah* apply to each and every situation we encounter! So there is a person speaking! There is a voice to hear! It is the voice of God spoken by the Holy Spirit who instructs us on the application of God’s *Torah*, moment-by-moment, if we have ears to hear! It is the essence of the New Covenant, and why Romans 8:14 can say:

“All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons.”

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In my conversations with people, some long-time committed believers tell me that they are not sure that they have ever heard the voice of God. Now part of the problem comes from words “hear,” “listen,” and “voice,” because we normally associate those words with audible sounds, and even those of us who know we hear God – most of us have never heard Him audibly. No, that is not what the words mean, nor do they mean receiving communication from God in a human language and, yet, we occasionally do. More commonly, what we hear is what is described in 1 Kings 19:12:

“After the earthquake, fire broke out; but ADONAI was not in the fire. And after the fire came a quiet, subdued voice.”

Other translations call it a “still small voice,” but it amounts to the same thing in that God’s voice is normally not overwhelming and compelling because He wants our actions to be governed by our decision to obey him – not by his ability to force Himself on us.

Our listening to God, in an equally quiet way, is the most important part of our intimacy with Him, and the only way to guarantee hearing. It is true that if we are walking in unrepentant sin that His voice to us will be heard only weakly, but that is not the subject of discussion today. Today I am saying something a lot more obvious, which is that when several people speak simultaneously, it is difficult to hear any one of them. And so it is with God’s “quiet subdued voice” if our own voice is blasting. Our self-will – our desire to have things our way – our striving to be in control – all of these generate a barrage of continuous and loud chatter that literally drowns God out. If we are to be led by God we must hear Him, so we have to be willing to relinquish control and listen.

Now I want to emphasize that the Scriptures telling us to listen to God’s voice that I read earlier are commandments, not mere exhortations, and warn us that we cannot obey His commandments without also obeying His voice. And lest anyone think that this is just Mosaic stuff, consider the words of Matthew 7:24-27:

“So, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on bedrock. The rain fell, the rivers flooded, the winds blew and beat against that house, but it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a stupid man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the rivers flooded, the wind blew and beat against that house, and it collapsed - and its collapse was horrendous!”

Also John 10: 27-28a:

“My sheep listen to my voice, I recognize them, they follow me, and I give them eternal life..”

And also James 1:22-24:

“Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says, but do it! For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”

A word to the wise then is to be quiet and listen.

Psalms 46:11 says:

“Desist (NKJ: “Be still”), and learn that I am God, supreme over the nations, supreme over the earth.”

Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 says:

“Don't speak impulsively - don't be in a hurry to give voice to your words before God. For God is in heaven, and you are on earth; so let your words be few. For nightmares come from worrying too much; and a fool, when he speaks, chatters too much.”

And finally:

Luke 11:27-28 says:

“As Yeshua was saying these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice to call out, “How blessed is the mother that gave birth to you and nursed you from her breast!” But he said, ‘Far more blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it!’”

So let's summarize. It is not sufficient to learn the commandments of God and attempt to keep them because, without listening to God's voice simultaneously, we will not consistently succeed. Second, we should not expect (but neither should we be amazed) to hear God's voice audibly and loud. Rather, we should expect hear it as a quiet subdued voice, and we should arrange our listening environment to be equally quiet so as to enhance our hearing. That means we must truly listen and not talk so much; or, put another way, we must not dwell on our personal desires and self-interests to the extent that they diminish our ability to hear God. If we truly want to hear God, we must put “self” aside, be quiet, and listen.

My prayer for us today is that God's spirit of quiet *shalom* will permeate our inward parts and that we will all listen for God's voice and, when we hear what He has to say, we will obey.