



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

# The Art of Listening

בראשית

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What exactly was the first sin? What was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? Is this kind of knowledge a bad thing, such that it had to be forbidden and was only acquired through sin? Isn't knowing the difference between good and evil essential to being human? Isn't it one

of the highest forms of knowledge? Surely God would want humans to have it? Why then did He forbid the fruit that produced it?

In any case, did not Adam and Eve already have this knowledge *before* eating the fruit, precisely in virtue of being “in the image and likeness of God”? Surely this was implied in the very fact that they were commanded by God: *Be fruitful and multiply. Have dominion over nature. Do not eat from the tree.* For someone to understand a command, they must know it is good to obey and bad to disobey. So they already had, at least potentially, the knowledge of Good and Evil. What then changed when they ate the fruit? These questions go so deep that they threaten to make the entire narrative incomprehensible.

Maimonides understood this. That is why he turned to this episode at almost the very beginning of *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Book 1, Chapter 2). His answer though, is perplexing. Before eating the fruit, he says, the

first humans knew the difference between truth and falsehood. What they acquired by eating the fruit was knowledge of “things generally accepted.” [1] But what does Maimonides mean by “things generally accepted”? It is generally accepted that murder is evil, and honesty good. Does Maimonides mean that morality is mere convention? Surely not. What he means is that after eating the fruit, the man and woman were embarrassed that they were naked, and that is a mere matter of social convention because not everyone is embarrassed by nudity. But how can we equate being embarrassed that you are naked with “knowledge of Good and Evil”? It does not seem to be that sort of thing at all. Conventions of dress have more to do with aesthetics than ethics. It is all very unclear, or at least it was to me until I came across one of the more fascinating moments in the history of the Second World War.

After the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, Americans knew they were about to enter a war against a nation, Japan, whose culture they did not understand. So they commissioned one of the great anthropologists of the twentieth century, Ruth Benedict, to explain the Japanese to them, which she did. After the war, she published her ideas in a book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.<sup>[2]</sup> One of her central insights was the difference between shame cultures and guilt cultures. In shame cultures the highest value is *honour*. In guilt cultures it is *righteousness*. Shame is feeling bad that we have failed to live up to the expectations others have of us. Guilt is what we feel when we fail to live up to what our own conscience demands of us. Shame is other-directed. Guilt is inner-directed.

Philosophers, among them Bernard Williams, have pointed out that shame cultures are usually visual. Shame itself has to do with how you

appear (or imagine you appear) in other peoples' eyes. The instinctive reaction to shame is to wish you were invisible, or somewhere else. Guilt, by contrast, is much more internal. You cannot escape it by becoming invisible or being elsewhere. Your conscience accompanies you wherever you go, regardless of whether you are seen by others. Guilt cultures are cultures of the ear, not the eye.

With this contrast in mind we can now understand the story of the first sin. *It is all about appearances, shame, vision, and the eye.* The serpent says to the woman: "God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing Good and Evil." That is, in fact, what happens: "*The eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised that they were naked.*" It was *appearance* of the tree that the Torah emphasises: "The woman *saw* that the tree was good to eat and *desirable to the eyes*, and that the tree was attractive as a means to gain

intelligence.” The key emotion in the story is shame. Before eating the fruit the couple were “naked, but unashamed.” After eating it they feel shame and seek to hide. Every element of the story – the fruit, the tree, the nakedness, the shame – has the visual element typical of a shame culture.

But in Judaism we believe that God is *heard* not *seen*. The first humans “*heard God’s Voice* moving about in the garden with the wind of the day.” Replying to God, the man says, “*I heard Your Voice* in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” Note the deliberate, even humorous, irony of what the couple did. They heard God’s Voice in the garden, and they “hid themselves from God among the trees of the garden.” But *you can’t hide from a voice*. Hiding means trying not to be seen. It is an immediate, intuitive response to shame. But the Torah is the supreme example of a culture of guilt, not shame, and you cannot

escape guilt by hiding. Guilt has nothing to do with appearances and everything to do with conscience, the voice of God in the human heart.

The sin of the first humans in the Garden of Eden was that they followed their eyes, not their ears. Their actions were determined by what they saw, the beauty of the tree, not by what they heard, namely the word of God commanding them not to eat from it. The result was that *they did indeed acquire a knowledge of Good and Evil, but it was the wrong kind.*

They acquired an ethic of shame, not guilt; of appearances not conscience. That, I believe, is what Maimonides meant by his distinction between true-and-false and “things generally accepted.” A guilt ethic is about the inner voice that tells you, “This is right, that is wrong”, as clearly as “This is true, that is false”. But a shame ethic is about social convention. It is a matter of meeting or not meeting the expectations others have of you.

Shame cultures are essentially codes of social conformity. They belong to groups where socialisation takes the form of internalising the values of the group such that you feel shame – an acute form of embarrassment – when you break them, knowing that if people discover what you have done you will lose honour and ‘face’.

Judaism is precisely not that kind of morality, because Jews do not conform to what everyone else does. Abraham was willing, say the Sages, to be on one side while all the rest of the world was on the other. Haman says about Jews, “Their customs are different from those of all other people” ([Esther 3:8](#)). Jews have often been iconoclasts, challenging the idols of the age, the received wisdom, the “spirit of the age”, the politically correct.

If Jews had followed the majority, they would have disappeared long ago. In the biblical age they were the only monotheists in a pagan world.



For most of the post-biblical age they lived in societies in which they and their faith were shared by only a tiny minority of the population. Judaism is a living protest against the herd instinct. Ours is the dissenting voice in the conversation of humankind. Hence the ethic of Judaism is not a matter of appearances, of honour and shame. It is a matter of hearing and heeding the voice of God in the depths of the soul.

The drama of Adam and Eve is not about apples or sex or original sin or “the Fall” – interpretations the non-Jewish West has given to it. It is about something deeper. It is about the kind of morality we are called on to live. Are we to be governed by what everyone else does, as if morality were like politics: the will of the majority? Will our emotional horizon be bounded by honour and shame, two profoundly social feelings? Is our key value appearance: how we seem to others? Or is it something else altogether, a willingness to heed the word and will of God? Adam and

Eve in Eden faced the archetypal human choice between what their eyes saw (the tree and its fruit) and what their ears heard (God's command). Because they chose the first, they felt shame, not guilt. That is one form of "knowledge of Good and Evil", but from a Jewish perspective, it is the wrong form.

Judaism is a religion of listening, not seeing. That is not to say there are no visual elements in Judaism. There are, but they are not primary. Listening is the sacred task. The most famous command in Judaism is *Shema Yisrael*, "Listen, Israel." What made Abraham, Moses, and the prophets different from their contemporaries was that they heard the voice that to others was inaudible. In one of the great dramatic scenes of the Bible, God teaches Elijah that He is not in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the "still, small voice."

It takes training, focus and the ability to create silence in the soul to learn how to listen, whether to God or to a fellow human being. Seeing shows us the beauty of the created world, but listening connects us to the soul of another, and sometimes to the soul of the Other, God as He speaks to us, calls to us, summoning us to our task in the world.

If I were asked how to find God, I would say, *Learn to listen*. Listen to the song of the universe in the call of birds, the rustle of trees, the crash and heave of the waves. Listen to the poetry of prayer, the music of the Psalms. Listen deeply to those you love and who love you. Listen to the words of God in the Torah and hear them speak to you. Listen to the debates of the Sages through the centuries as they tried to hear the texts' intimations and inflections.

Don't worry about how you or others look. The world of appearances is a false world of masks, disguises, and concealments. Listening is not easy.

I confess I find it formidably hard. But listening alone bridges the abyss between soul and soul, self and other, I and the Divine.

Jewish spirituality is the art of listening.[3]

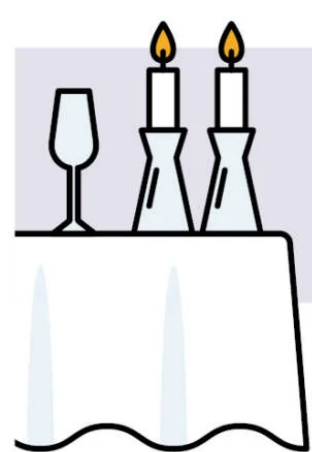
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[1] Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, I:2.

[2] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1946.

[3] We will continue our theme of listening in Judaism later in this series, particularly in the essays for Bamidbar and Eikev.

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# Around the Shabbat Table

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. Can you think of some examples of Jews in history who demonstrated how Judaism is a guilt culture, not a shame culture?
2. In what way is listening an important Jewish value?
3. What lessons can you learn for your life from the difference between shame and guilt?

These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For additional interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at [www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/bereishit/the-art-of-listening/](http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/bereishit/the-art-of-listening/)

