

# Sermon

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***“It is not what you look at that matters. It’s what you see.”***

**- Henry David Thoreau**

In his book Musicophilia, Oliver Sacks writes about the way in which the human mind processes music. He describes the various pathologies of the brain that inhibit a person’s ability to appreciate music’s full impact. The brain employs many different areas of function in order to “hear” music. When just one of these areas falter, the music can be lost to the listener.

While those conditions are biological, Sacks records cases in which people, either through personal choice or as a result of psychological conditions, lose their appreciation for music. He indicated points in his life when he had, while experiencing depression, lost his own ability to enjoy music.

Similarly, at the beginning of Va’era, Moshe speaks to the Children of Israel of freedom, love, future and hope. We are told, however, that they could not “hear” him. Because of their workload, stresses and the pressures of slavery, they could not appreciate the great realities which were the music of Moses’ words.

Their inability to hear him was not because they intentionally disregarded him. On the contrary, it was due to “truncated spirits and difficult work”. They had lost their inner capacity to respond to the promises of love and hope.

It is important to recognise that so much of the quality of our life depends on our own inner ability to “appreciate the music”. Often we believe that our perception of a situation is the reality. However, we all have a lens through which we interpret what happens to us. That lens is the mind – the great “ear”

through which we hear the music of life – our most precious possession and the key to our freedom.

At some point in our lives, most of us will experience a level of anxiety, depression or other forms of inner darkness. It is important not to refrain from speaking about the challenges of our inner life, and from seeking help in dealing with them.

We must focus on this critical line in the parshah that tells us why the Israelites did not listen to Moses.

The Israelites’ mental health had been compromised and weakened as a result of relentless and meaningless labour, persecution and trauma. It was not that they did not care. It was that they did not at the time have the ability to take in the music. Their oppression and suffering was not only physical, but also mental and Moses had to liberate them from both.

Often, the story of the Exodus is as much about lifting the spirit as it is about liberation from physical confines. This teaches us that without the mind’s delicate and unfathomably complex ability to receive, the Israelites could not hear the call of hope and redemption that Moses was singing to them. Likewise, without well-nourished and cared-for minds, we will not grasp the music of our own lives that G-d is playing all around us. Paying attention to the maintenance of the mind - our “mental health” – is one of our most critical tasks, for every dimension of our lives.

This Shabbat we focus on our mental wellbeing and what we can do as a community to provide the resources and support necessary for those who struggle, and to heal the “stigma” attached to mental health. This Shabbat we are encouraged to pause and hear the Torah’s outcry to us to foreground mental wellbeing in our communal consciousness and dialogue.