

## Chapter Seven

# A Mentor's Communication Skills

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*Happy is the generation in which the greater give ear to the lesser.*

—ROSH HASHANAH

### **Listening to Our Voices . . . and Learning to Hear Them**

If we wish to act as mentors and nurture others on the path to wholeness and holiness, we must discipline ourselves to listen well. To do so, we must recognize that “some speak with their eyes, some with their hands, some with the shaking of their head, some with the movement of their body, and some with their feet.”<sup>1</sup> To show a speaker that he or she is the sole focus of our attention, we must demonstrate the skill of active listening, through eye contact, posture, verbal acknowledgment, and facial expressions. Without active listening, we preclude communication. And without communication, there can be no learning, no growth, and no relationship.

As we have done before, we can look to Moses as an exemplar—this time one of mindfulness and active listening. When God summons Moses to ascend Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, God commands him to “ascend to the mountain *and be there*.”<sup>2</sup> Don't we already know that if Moses climbs the mountain, he will “be there”? Why does God add that phrase? What is the Torah telling us?

One early Ḥasidic master understood the phrase “be there” to teach that “it is possible for Moses to stand on the mountain but for his head to be somewhere else. It is not the physical ascent that is essential; rather what matters is being actively present.”<sup>3</sup> Moses is able to receive the Torah because he is able to listen actively, to attend fully to the moment.

In a conversation with his fellow Israelite, Moses demonstrates that important attribute of being present and attentive: being a true leader means taking the time to reflect rather than merely lurching into action thoughtlessly. In the words of the Mishnah, being a leader means “learning from every person.”<sup>4</sup> When his father-in-law, Jethro, suggests a better way to govern the Jewish people, Moses adopts it. Thus it is taught that “no one should treat lightly the speech of another. We find that Moses listened attentively to the words of Jethro.”<sup>5</sup> When Korah (a priest who resents God’s choosing Moses as leader) rebels against the authority of Moses, Korah publicly challenges Moses’s right to speak on God’s behalf. Confronted before the people, Moses—having spent years performing miracles and having accomplished the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage—must feel outrage at Korah’s sheer arrogance. When Korah finishes speaking, we might expect Moses to reject the rebel’s charges. But Moses doesn’t blurt out his anger; instead, he pauses, prays, and listens: “When Moses heard this, *he fell on his face*.”<sup>6</sup> What is he doing while lying flat on the ground? According to several medieval interpreters, he is listening for God’s answer.<sup>7</sup> Only after this silent, attentive gesture does Moses “then speak to Korah and all his company.”<sup>8</sup> Moses pauses long enough to listen and understand. During that moment, he gains the levelheadedness and courage necessary to respond effectively.

Both listener and speaker benefit from hearing what the other is trying to say. If we hope to be able to touch another human heart, we must be willing to listen to the outpourings of that heart. When we give the gift of our attention, we open our self to another human being. We grant permission to that other person to be, to grow, and to

give in return. In listening, we communicate more than we could ever hope to through speech. Our active listening conveys commitment, closeness, and conviction. We let the recipient—the speaker—know that he or she has found a listening ear, someone willing to take in the pain, joy, doubts, and struggles that meaningful growth requires.

And the listener—what does the attentive listener gain? The *Zohar* teaches that “the heart is the Holy of Holies.”<sup>9</sup> There is no Holy Temple today. Its innermost shrine, the Holy of Holies, was the place that witnessed the zenith of holiness in Jewish life. There, in that most sacred of sanctuaries, the most sacred person (the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest) would speak the most sacred word (God’s name) on the most sacred day (Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement). With the destruction of the Temple, we have lost that confluence of sacred place, person, word, and time. But we do have a portal to that fusion of holiness. When we learn to listen to another human soul, we gain access to the place where heaven and earth touch each other: the human heart. Today’s Holy of Holies is present wherever two people connect. And connection can happen only if someone is listening.