

Dvar Torah – Yitro – Feb 11th 2023

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Parashat Yitro is an important portion of the Torah as it describes the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments, also known as the "Aseret HaDibrot" in Hebrew, are a set of principles that serve as a foundation for the Israelite community's moral and ethical code.

So far, this was a dvar torah written by ChatGPT on parshat Yitro, which Leon created for me after we talked about a recent JC article on the subject. It's not very good, and Leon agreed that for the moment at least, we will do better to continue asking members of the community to write something the traditional way.

But ChatGPT is right - Yitro is an important portion. Torah min hashamayim is the principle that Torah has come directly from heaven, from God, to the Jews. This revelation wasn't one single event, but the revelation starts in this week's sedrah, with the Children of Israel hearing God speak the 10 commandments from the top of Mount Sinai while they stood, quivering with fear, at the foot of the mountain. After this event, the rest of the 5 books of Moses was dictated to Moses by God while he was at the top of Mt Sinai for 40 days and nights. The tradition is that he received the whole of the torah. The written law, and also the complete oral law, because all of the oral law, later written down as the Mishnah, could be derived from the words of the 5 books, the written Torah.

But whether it is the law as written in the torah or the oral law as derived from the torah, - how one understands this principle is one of the defining differences between orthodox and masorti theology. And the way in which just a tiny part of that Torah was transmitted to Moses, and to the Jewish People, is at the heart of today's portion. Revelation. What God chose to reveal directly to each and every one of the people standing at Sinai.

In Chapter 19 v7 God tells Moses to say to the children of Israel that there will be a new covenant

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians

וְעַתָּה אִם-שָׁמַעְתָּ תִשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי ו

and if you listen to my voice

and keep my covenant

you will be my treasure....

you will be to me a kingdom of priests.

Note bekoli – listen to my voice, which so far the children of Israel haven't heard for themselves, but only indirectly through Moses. The children of Israel tell Moses – all that the Lord has spoken they will do. And again, Moses is the transmitter, this time

of their words back to God. This is the start of the sina'itic revelation - the children of Israel will hear, for the first time, the actual voice of god.

After ramping up the expectation by three days of preparation followed by thick clouds, thunder and lightning, the sound of the shofar, God chooses not to start with their history from Abraham.

He starts with 10 statements, which we call the Decalogue, the 10 words, the Aseret Hadibrot, Aseret Hadvarim, or commonly the 10 commandments.

The first of these isn't even a commandment but an introduction, a profile. It is the God who brought them out of the land of Egypt who is establishing this new covenant. We have this introduction, and then a set of 9 assorted laws.

What seems so special about the 10 commandments isn't necessarily the importance of the 10 laws, but the fact that these, rather than the 603 other laws in the torah, were spoken directly to the children of Israel.

But do they ever hear it? Do they hear the actual voice of God? And if so, which commandments do they hear God speaking?

The Peshat, the straightforward understanding is they heard all 10 of the commandments.

In Exodus 20:1 it says "God spoke all these words", implying the entire decalogue.

Also in Deuteronomy, when Moses recounts this momentous day to a new generation of Israelites, he says (Deut 4:12-13) "you heard the sound of words that God spoke to you, just a voice, the aseret hadvarim."

After hearing the 10 commandments, the children of Israel clearly had had enough. In Shevii we read how after the thunder, lightning, the blast of the shofar and the mountain smoking, they were trembling and in Ex 20:16 they say "You, Moses speak with us and we will hear, but let not God speak with us lest we die." Moses accepts their request, and from then on, the laws are given to Moses alone, who relays them to the people orally and writes them down on the stone tablets.

Is the conversation in Ex 20:16 the people asking Moses to intercede **before** God first spoke to them? From the location of this conversation in the narrative it seems to indicate that they asked for Moses to intercede only after the 10 commandments had been given, - this was certainly the view of the writer of the midrash in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, who wrote –

"This means they did not have the strength to receive more than the decalogue".

But in Deuteronomy 5:4 the wording is less clear – "The Lord spoke with you face to face; I (Moses) stood between the Lord and you *at that time* to declare unto you the word of the Lord, for you were afraid of the fire and *did not go up to the mountain*" The first clause ("face to face") might relate to the decalogue, the second clause ("I stood between you and the Lord") to all the following laws that Moses related. But

it's possible to read this as if they never directly heard the voice of God themselves, as if they never actually went up the mountain to hear Gods voice

But some traditional commentators also think that Moses may have been interceding for some of the decalogue as well! Nachmanides in the 13th century gives the traditional view:

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra said that this [occurrence that *I Moses stood between the Eternal and you,*] happened only *after* the Revelation at Mount Sinai, meaning: “He spoke with you *face to face* [at the giving of the Ten Commandments], and from that day on I stood between G-d and you.”

And then Nachmanides says: **But it is not correct. It appears to me that the correct interpretation is that Israel understood from the mouth of the Almighty only the commandments *I am the Eternal thy G-d etc. and Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.* As for the rest of the commandments, it was Moses who declared to them what G-d said.**

So Nachmanides says they only heard 2.

Why does Nachmanides deviate from the straight forward interpretation of Rashi, Ibn Ezra and others? Well, the Talmud said this already. In Makkot 23b, Rav Hamnuna gives a drash on Deut 33:4 which says:

“Moses commanded the Torah to us
תּוֹרָה צִוָּה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה

The gematria for Torah is 611. So Moses commanded 611 of the 613 laws of the Torah, but two laws were commanded directly by God, and which are they? They are the first 2 of the 10 commandments. And what might be the reason for thinking this? These two are in the 1st person – ‘I am the Lord your God’, and ‘do not have other Gods beside me’. But in the next 3, God is described in the 3rd person, as if Moses is retelling God’s words to the Children of Israel. And this drash is quoted elsewhere in the Talmud as fact.

As if that isn’t novel enough, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov 1745–1815 suggested that the Israelites heard only the unvocalized gluttal stop “aleph” which is the first letter in the Decalogue. The idea is found in the work of his student Rabbi Naftali Zvi Horowitz of Ropshitz which the latter presents as a mystical interpretation of a verse in Psalm 62

אַתָּה וְדָבַר אֱלֹהִים שְׁתִּימְנוּ שְׁמַעְתִּי כִּי עָזָּ לְאֱלֹהִים:
One thing God has spoken;
two things have I heard:
that might belongs to God,

His idea was that the one thing that God may have spoken was just that first Aleph from the 1st word of the 1st commandment Anochi. Which of course meant they heard nothing, as an Aleph is silent. Yet from that silence the Jews intuited all of the 10 commandments, or all of the Torah.

So what does this say?. On the one hand we all accept that the Torah can be self-contradictory because of the way we believe it was compiled. We don't believe in traditional meaning of Torah min hashamayim. So far, nothing new. And we haven't even discussed what it means to HEAR Gods words when God is a non-corporeal being.

But even despite that, we should try to understand the traditional view of Torah min Hashamayim, because that is the mythic basis on which Judaism has developed over three millenia. And if we do this, we see the traditional commentators look at the Sinai revelation and disagree over what the children of Israel actually heard directly from God. Nothing (they were too scared). Just a silent Aleph. Just the first two commandments. Or All 10 commandments. But they do agree that everything else was transmitted indirectly via Moses. What did he hear, and was his version of God's words filtered through his own mind to introduce a subjective element to the Torah?

What does it matter? Well, we think we can rely on the evidence of our own eyes and ears. If we didn't see or hear it ourselves, we know that secondary accounts of an incident are less reliable. Our ability to work out what was real, what actually happened, what was really said, gets more challenging the more there are others mediating between us and the reality. The 10 commandments should be the most definitive 10 laws in the Torah because we thought the people actually heard all of them directly. But maybe they didn't hear them at all – after all, the 2 versions are somewhat different. Maybe both versions are inaccurate because the children of Israel didn't hear either of them directly from God, only via an intermediary.

I started off with an AI-written intro to a dvar torah on Yitro. In a few years much of what we read in some contexts could be AI-generated texts and we will have to decide both as individuals and as society if we want to concede to an algorithm many of the important ways in which we understand our world. And as AI is already progressing to generating voices and video, this will soon be challenging our notion that we can rely on the evidence of our own eyes and ears. AI will be another intermediary between us and reality, but one over which we may have no control, no insight into the how and why it might be distorting our view of reality. We know that what some people accept as direct revelation from God to man has taken us centuries to really understand. Even then, we aren't sure who heard what at Sinai. We of all people should be very aware of the risks of stumbling into another world where we cannot be sure of what we see and read with our own eyes.?

Shabbat Shalom