

Parashat Yitro: Exodus 19:16-25; 20:1-3; 15-18

P'SHAT

Ex. 19:16 On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

Ex. 19:18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. ¹⁹ The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. ²⁰ The LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. ²¹ The LORD said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish. ²² The priests also, who come near the LORD, must stay pure, lest the LORD break out against them." ²³ But Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.'" ²⁴ So the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come back together with Aaron; but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest He break out against them." ²⁵ And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

Ex. 20:1 God spoke all these words, saying: ² I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: ³ You shall have no other gods besides Me...

Ex. 20:15 All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. ¹⁶ "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." ¹⁷ Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." ¹⁸ So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

¹⁶ וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּהֲרֹת הַבֹּקֶר וַיְהִי קוֹל וּבָרָקִים וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל־הַהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חָזֵק מְאֹד וַיִּתְרַד כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בְּמַחֲנֵה: ¹⁷ וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְנַצְּבוּ בְּמַחֲתֵית הַהָר: ¹⁸ וְהָר סִינַי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עָשָׂנוּ כַּעֲשׂוֹן הַכִּבְשָׁן וַיִּתְרַד כָּל־הַהָר מְאֹד: ¹⁹ וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר הוֹלֵךְ וַתִּזְקַן מְאֹד מִשְׁעָה יִדְבָר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל: ²⁰ וַיֵּרַד יְהוָה עַל־הָר סִינַי אֶל־רֹאשׁ הַהָר וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל־רֹאשׁ הַהָר וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה: ²¹ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רֵד הַעֵד בְּעַם פֶּן־יִהְרָסוּ אֶל־יְהוָה לְרֹאוֹת וּנְפֹל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב: ²² וְגַם הַכֹּהֲנִים הַנִּגְשִׂים אֶל־יְהוָה יִתְקַדְּשׁוּ פֶן־יִפְרֹץ בָּהֶם יְהוָה: ²³ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֹא־יוּכַל הָעָם לַעֲלֹת אֶל־הָר סִינַי כִּי־אָמַרְתָּ הַעֲדוֹתָהּ בְּנֹו לֵאמֹר הִגְבַּל אֶת־הַהָר וְקַדְּשָׁתּוּ: ²⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה לְדָוִד וְעַלִּית אִתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהָעָם אֶל־יְהִרָסוּ לַעֲלֹת אֶל־יְהוָה פֶּן־יִפְרֹץ־בָּם: ²⁵ וַיֵּרַד מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: ׀

20:1 וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לֵאמֹר: ׀ אֲנִכִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּתַר מִיָּת עֲבָדַי יִם: ³ לֹא יִהְיֶה־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פְּנֵי

¹⁵ וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת־הַלְפִידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר וְאֶת־הַהָר עָשָׂן וַיִּרְא הָעָם וַיִּגְעֻוּ וַיַּעֲמָדוּ מֵרָחֹק: ¹⁶ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר־אַתָּה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאֶל־יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים פֶּן־נָמוּת: ¹⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם אֶל־תִּירְאוּ כִּי לִבְעֹבוֹר נִסּוֹת אֶתְכֶם בְּאֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וּבַעֲבוּר תִּהְיֶה יְרֹאתוֹ עַל־פְּנֵיכֶם לְבַלְתִּי תִחַטְּאוּ: ¹⁸ וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם מֵרָחֹק וּמֹשֶׁה נָגַשׁ אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים: ׀

KEY KOSHI: What exactly is revealed at Sinai? How does that event inform how we understand and occupy our 'place' in the world?

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתַי וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה.
 Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'czivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.
 Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

REMEZ by RASHI

19:16 - לקר את האלהים lit., WHEN IT WAS BEING MORNING — This phrase tells us that God was there before them at the place of the Divine Revelation, something which it is not customary for human beings to do — that the teacher should await the arrival of his disciple. But it is God's way.

19:17 - לקראת האלהים [AND MOSES BROUGHT FORTH THE PEOPLE ...] TO MEET GOD — This (the word לקראת, "to meet," which is used when two persons are approaching one another) tells us that the Shechina was going forth to meet them, as a bridegroom who goes forth to meet his bride.

ההר בתחתית ההר AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN — This is the straightforward sense. But a midrashic explanation is that people actually stood beneath the mountain. It was plucked up from its place and turned upside down over them like a huge vessel or reservoir. God said: "If Israel will accept the Torah, fine. If not, I am returning the world to unformed chaos" (B. Shabbat 88).

19:19 - הולך וחזק מאד WAXED LOUDER AND LOUDER — The manner of an ordinary person is that the longer he continues to blow a trumpet the sound he produces becomes weaker and fainter; but in this instance it went on getting stronger. And why was it thus (i. e. not so loud) at first? To make their ears receptive to as much as they were able to hear (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:19:1).

משה ידבר AS MOSES SPOKE — Moses would speak and proclaim the Commandments to Israel, for they heard from the Almighty's mouth only the Commandments ולא יהיה לך and אנכי, while the others were promulgated by Moses. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, assisted him by giving him strength so that his voice might be powerful and so become audible (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:19:2).

19:20 - וירד ה' על הר סיני AND THE LORD CAME DOWN UPON MOUNT SINAI — One might think, then, that God actually came down upon it! Therefore it states, (Exodus 20:19) "You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven." These two texts together teach us that God bent down the upper and lower heavens and spread them out over the top of the mountain like a bed-spread over a bed and the Throne of Glory descended upon it (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:20).

19:21 - פן יהרסו — The term הִרְסוּ, "breaking down," always denotes the separation of the collection of parts that constitute the edifice. *Bekhor Shor adds:* "Do not dismantle" the single file line in which they stood around the boundary.

20:1 - את כל הדברים האלה ALL THESE WORDS — This statement (that God spoke all these words) tells us that the Holy One, blessed be He, said all these words in one utterance, something that is impossible to a human being to do — to speak in this manner. Now if this be so, why does Scripture again say the first two Commandments, אנכי and לא יהיה לך? But the explanation is that God repeated and expressly uttered each of these two commandments by itself (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 20:1:1). *Hizkuni adds:* The people grew frightened, and Moses uttered the rest of the commandments himself.

DRASH by ALAN MORINIS in WITH HEART IN MIND

Chapter 25: Knowing One's Place – Makir et Mekomo

This notion shows up in our personal lives in regard to the inner trait of humility, which I have defined as “occupying your rightful place.” You are meant to play a unique role in life, and that role has dimensionality that is yours to occupy. A key aspect of wisdom is to know who you are and where you fit into greater schemes. Occupying too much space (call that arrogance) and occupying too little of the dimension that is yours (call that self-deprecation) are equally major barriers to growing into wholeness.

According to the Maharal, knowing your place refers to self-knowledge. You must have an honest assessment of yourself in order to acquire Torah. Otherwise, the basis for learning and transformation will be false and the results skewed. At the same time, knowing where you are at this moment creates the possibility of experiencing the awesome profundity that is accessible everywhere and always, if you open to it. In the wilderness and with only a stone for a pillow, Jacob proclaimed, “How awesome is this place.” As is this place.

To acquire Torah, you must know that place that is yours in this moment and occupy it fully. That is not a one-time process, however, because our relationship to the world around us is constantly in motion. That shifting relationship only comes to an end when we are laid to rest in our final place.

SOD by Arthur Green in *Radical Judaism* [89-92]

The ten commandments. They were spoken by God and heard by all Israel. Surely *this* the text tells us plainly enough: “The Lord spoke all these words, saying” (Ex.20:1). But a well-known Talmudic source tells it differently. All that God got to speak were the first two commandments, “I am the Lord your God” and “You shall have no other gods besides Me and make no graven image.” Then Israel, stricken with terror, cried out to Moses and said: “You speak with us and we will listen, but let God not speak with us, lest we die.” The rest of the commandments were spoken by Moses, and thus are presumably fraught with the possibility of human fallibility. Nevertheless, these first two, it is claimed, contain the entire Torah. “I am” bears within it all 248 positive commandments, and “No other gods...no graven image” is the basis of all the 365 prohibitions. All we need to accept, one might say, is God’s “I am” and the notion that this alone is to shape and limit our behavior. All the rest will follow.

Franz Rosenzweig, at least in one of his formulations, went farther still, though possibly with similar intent. In admitting “ ‘He came down [i.e., “Y-H-W-H descended upon Mount Sinai” (Ex. 19:2)]’ already concludes the revelation; ‘He spoke’ is the beginning of interpretation, and certainly ‘I am,’” Rosenzweig is saying that the *fact* of divine self-disclosure, before there is any speech at all, surpasses any content the words could possibly have, that the reality of God, hence the basis for all religion, is present in (and, indeed, precedes) the divine speech act itself.

Another version of this idea that God’s revelation is without or beyond specific content is found in a Hasidic source quoted in the name of Rabbi Mendel of Rymanow. Perhaps it can be seen as the final step in this progressive narrowing of revelation’s funnel. Only the first letter of the commandments, the *aleph of anokhi*, “I am,” was spoken by the divine voice alone, Rabbi Mendel claims. All the rest was revealed through Moses. Aleph signifies the number 1, referring to the unity of all in Y-H-W-H. That sufficed for the message. The *bet*, or number 2, of *bereshit*, the birth of duality in Creation (since “creature” appears to be other than its “Creator”), is now replaced by the all-embracing aleph. All the rest is humanly transmitted commentary...

“All of Torah contained within the letter *aleph*” means that all the many words that will come to exist, both within the Torah text and in the onflowing stream of conversation about it in all generations, constituting the Oral Torah, are present in the divine silence that precedes and underlies them. In that silence there is not yet any division between words and letters, between schools of thought or points of view on any question that will ever emerge within Torah. I would expand this to claim that the divine silence also reaches beyond the divide between religions, taking us back to that inner place that precedes and underlies them all. It is important to recall that *aleph*, as the first letter of the alphabet, also represents the number 1 in the Hebrew counting system. Here Torah, as the divine word that is one with its Source, takes us back to that which we were seeking: a Jewish language for expressing the oneness of all that is. God is the underlying One behind and within all existence. Torah is the underlying One behind and within all language. The oneness underlying “Creation” and the oneness underlying “revelation” are the same One.