

CHEVRAH TORAH 5778...Seeking ✨ Spirituality

Shabbat Yitro

Exodus 19:16-25...20:15-18

KEY KOSHI:

HOW IS THIS MOMENT OF MEETING AT THE MOUNTAIN A MODEL FOR OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES?
HOW DOES OUR 'STANDING AT SINAI' INFORM/EXPRESS OUR ✨ SPIRITUALITY?

P'SHAT—AWARENESS... The beginning of knowing about God is simply paying attention, being fully present where you are

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.
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

16 וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַהֲלִית הַבְּקָר וַיְהִי קִלְת וּבְרָקִים וַעֲנַן כָּבֵד עַל־הָהָר וְקֹל שֹׁפָר חֲזָק מְאֹד וַיַּחֲרֹד כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה: 17 וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְיַצְּבוּ בַתְּחִתִּית הָהָר: 18 וְהָר סִינַי עָשָׁן כָּלֹּ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה בָּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עֲשָׁנוּ כְּעֵשֶׁן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁן וַיַּחֲרֹד כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד: 19 וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֲזָק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יֹדֵר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְקוֹל: [שְׁשִׁי] 20 וַיֵּרַד יְהוָה עַל־הָר סִינַי אֶל־רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל־רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה: 21 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רֵד הָעֵד בְּעַם פֶּן־יַהֲרִסוּ אֶל־יְהוָה לְרֹאוֹת וַנִּפֹּל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב: 22 וְגַם הַכֹּהֲנִים הַנִּגְשִׁים אֶל־יְהוָה יִתְקַדְּשׁוּ פָרִיפְרָץ בָּהֶם יְהוָה: 23 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֹא־יוּכַל הָעָם לַעֲלֹת אֶל־הָר סִינַי כִּי־אַתָּה הִעַדְתָּה בְּנֹו לֵאמֹר הִגִּבַּל אֶת־הָהָר וְקִדְשְׁתּוֹ: 24 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹו יְהוָה לְדָוֵד וְעָלִית אֲתָה וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהָעָם אֶל־יְהוָה לַעֲלֹת אֶל־יְהוָה פָּרִיפְרָץ־בָּם: 25 וַיֵּרַד מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוֵּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'zivanu 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.

come back together with Aaron; but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them.” 25] And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

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.

15 וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת־
הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֶת־קוֹל הַשָּׁפָר וְאֶת־הַהָר עָשָׂן
וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ מֵרָחֵק׃
16 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר־אֵתָּה עִמָּנוּ
וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל־יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים פֶּן־
נָמוּת׃ 17 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם אֶל־
תִּירְאוּ כִּי לִבְעֹבוֹר נִסּוֹת אֶתְכֶם בָּא
הָאֱלֹהִים וּבְעֹבוֹר תִּהְיֶה יְרֵאתוֹ עַל־פְּנֵיכֶם
לְבַלְתִּי תַחֲטְאוּ׃ 18 וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם מֵרָחֵק
וּמֹשֶׁה נִגַּשׁ אֶל־הָעַרְפֶּל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם
הָאֱלֹהִים׃

REMEZ—UN-SELF-AWARENESS...

- 19:16-17 *On the third day as morning dawned there was thunder & lightning and a dense cloud on the mountain, and a very strong blast of the horn, and all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of camp towards God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.*
IBN EZRA...In my opinion, “*the becoming of morning*” refers to a time very close to sunrise. “*thunder*” literally means “*voices,*” but the translations are correct. “*a dense cloud on the mountain,*” and only on the mountain.
“*and a very loud blast of the horn,*” again using “*voice,*” this sound was miraculous, not a natural sound...
ABRAVANEL... “*thunder and lightning, etc...*” All of these phenomena—involving the four basic elements of air, earth, fire & water—were natural ones. Their miraculous nature lay in their being created for this occasion.
SARNA.... The picturesque imagery constitutes, so to speak, the overture that sets the emotional tone for the grand drama which is to follow...The vivid, majestic and terrifying depictions, which draw their ultimate inspiration from the storm and the earthquake, are meant to convey in human terms something of the awe-inspiring impact of the event on those who experienced it.
HaKTAV V’HaKABALLAH... “*all the people trembled*” This shudder or tremble is not the result of a natural phenomenon, as an earthquake, but a trembling which inspired fear for their very survival...As RASHI understood the term when Torah told of Isaac’s reaction to being deceived by Jacob [Gen 27:33] it reflects utter amazement, coming face to face with new realities which turn the beliefs one held upside down.
B’CHOR SHOR... “*Moses led the people out toward God*” ...For they were too frightened to go out of camp on their own.
RASHI... “*Likrat ha-Elohim—towards God*” ...As compared to “*likrat kallah*” ...This tells us that the Shechinah went towards them like a bridegroom who goes out to greet his bride.
MUNK... The word “*likrat—towards*” indicates a meeting of two beings approaching one another. Hence, RASHI’s explanation. The emotional bond between God and Israel in no way conflicted with the demands the Holy One placed upon them...for it was grounded in love.
ETZ HAYIM ... “*out of the camp towards God*” At times we must leave the familiar places and habits with which we have grown comfortable, as Abraham did at the beginning of Israelite history, to grow to be the people we are capable of becoming.
- 19:18 *Now Sinai was all in smoke, for Adonai had come down upon it in fire...and the whole mountain trembled...*
R’S.R.HIRSCH... “*VaYechedad—Ha’Am...Ha’Har*” Like the people trembled so did the mountain. Israel saw all of nature quiver at the approach of the Divine Majesty, yet they themselves stood firm...Creation is in an uproar, lightning leaps forth, mountains shake, the earth is filled with the horn’s blast, but Israel hears only God’s words
- 19:20 *Then Adonai came down upon the top of Mount Sinai, and called Moses to the top & he went up*
RASHI ...One might think that the Holy One actually descended upon the mountain, but to teach otherwise, Torah says, “*For from the heavens I spoke with you.*” [20:19] So how can Torah tell us in one verse God descended and in another: God was on High? It teaches that at the moment of Revelation the Holy One bent the upper and lower realms, and spread them like a cover over the mountaintop...God was on High and here on Sinai at one and the same time. [MECHILTA]
DA’AT SOFRIM...From this apparent contradiction we learn that at the moment of the Giving of Torah, everything reverted back to the primordial state of Creation, before the Holy One had made a separation... For at this hour the earth was joined with the heavens, the distance between them, removed.
- 19:21 *Then Adonai said to Moses, “Go down, warn the people not to break through to Adonai to see, lest many of them perish.*
BACHYA... Moses did not comprehend the full significance of God’s warning, “*lirot—lest they see*” He thought it was included in the prohibition against viewing the site of Revelation at close range, and so replied, ‘They have already been warned.’ But God was telling Moses that the prohibition against gazing was not physical, but meant in the spiritual sense. The people had to be warned not to exceed the limits of human thought, not to try and ascend and so penetrate the mystery...
- 20...V.15-16 *All the people saw the voices and the lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking, and when they saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. “You speak to us,” they said to Moses, “and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.”*
MECHILTA... “*The people saw...*” the words of fire shoot forth as they were etched on the tablets, and moved back in awe.
RASHI... “*VaYanu’u—they moved back and forth*” Shaking, or uncertain on their feet, no longer standing still.
“*VaYa’andu mei-Rachok—They drew back to stand*”...They retreated 12 miles, the length of their camp, until the ministering angels came and brought them back. [MECHILTA]

D'RASH—READING BETWEEN THE WORDS...

Rabbi DAVID KALB...

Before God gives the Torah to B'nai Yisrael, there are clouds, the Shofar, thunder, lightning, smoke, fire and the mountain shudders. Why? What is going on here?

...Why does God give this prelude to Matan Torah? Why would God feel that it is necessary to have these special effects before the giving of the Torah? Many people look at this section of the Torah and automatically assume that the reason is to make the people have Yirat Hashem (a fear of God). That would be the case, if the experience at Mount Sinai was purely for the purpose of giving of the Torah. However, the experience at Sinai was also for God to reveal God's self to the Jewish people, for the people to have a more direct spiritual interaction with God.

RASHI puts it in a very beautiful way when he describes the experience between the Jewish people and God at Mount Sinai by stating that "the Shechinah (the presence of God) went forth to meet them (the people) like a Chatan, (a groom), who goes forth to meet the Kalah, (the bride)." If the purpose of the experience at Mount Sinai was for the Jewish people to interact with God in this very direct way like a bride and groom, then why the Shofar, thunder, lightning, smoke, fire and the mountain shuddering?

This does not sound like the most intimate experience in the world. Yet this is the experience of Mt. Sinai. I would have thought that these types of sights and sounds would be a hindrance during the divine revelation. During this intimate moment between God and B'nai Yisrael, all of these additional elements could distract people from this spiritual experience.

...When people are in the midst of a thunder and lightning storm, they have to make a huge effort to hear and see what is going on. If you add the sound of the Shofar, clouds, smoke, fire and a shuddering mountain into the mix you need to struggle even harder to understand what is happening. It is my belief that this was precisely God's intention in having this atmosphere to accompany the experience of God revealing God's self at Sinai. God wanted to make the experience complex for B'nai Yisrael. It is and should be complex to understand God.

However, there is something else. With such distracting weather conditions and sounds it is possible that each person who was at Mt. Sinai saw the experience in a different way. This is not only true of the interaction with God at Sinai, but anytime we interact or try to gain a better understanding of God.

There was once a school for blind children that went on a class trip to a farm where they let children feed and play with the animals. There were three blind children who were accompanied by one teacher with sight. They all went over to the pen where they kept the goats. After the children played with the goats for a while, the teacher said, "What is a goat like?" The first child said "It's soft and furry." The second child said, "No it's hard and scratchy." The third child said, "No it's wet and slippery."...Each of the children gave a correct answer, but it was a partially correct answer. The same is true in the way we experience God. We as finite human beings can only have partial answers about God....Revelation is what we each can receive...

GOTTLIEB ZORNBERG... The striking paradox here is the fact that, after all the elaborate precautions against the practice of desire, the people, so far from rushing forwards, recoil in what might be called a reverse stampede, withdrawing from the mountain-base.

And, in an equivalent move of regression, surrender the immediacy of their prophetic mode to Moses. Mysteriously, the Torah relates “*they saw the voices...*” It is the effect of this moment of perception to make them fall back...In RAMBAN’s view, this regressive movement is precisely the right one: their enlightenment bringing them to recognize Moses as Prophet beyond compare.

But for RASHI, the situation is more ambiguous...In his description of the people’s recoil from Revelation, a powerful and unexpected dialectic is introduced. A shudder runs through the people at each of the Ten Commandments...the trauma inflicted by the experience of hearing God’s Voice makes them lose their footing: they yield the ground they so much desired. And then, the angels help bring them back....This is the hidden, kinetic dimension of what is traditionally known as “*standing at Sinai.*”...RASHI intimates, with this midrash, an ebb and tide in response to God’s Voice...A certain human standing, an existential posture is disrupted at the very moment that is called “*Ma’amad Har Sinai—Standing at Sinai.*”

This becomes stance as sacred oscillation, a motion that rocks them to the very roots of being. The terror—*yir’ah* which is registered in the spontaneous recoil of a nation which had recently been avid with desire, becomes part of a vital dialectic. Like the systolic and diastolic rhythm of the heart, the people oscillate...

It is the drawing out of human spiritual greatness that is God’s purpose in revealing Himself...What is enacted at Sinai, then, is the revelation of the *Human being*...a new consciousness is born. The Israelites endure an initiation that ensures them against the extremities of history. The implications are quite radical. God comes to Sinai, so that the human may come fully into its own.

[The Particulars of Rapture, pgs 259-266]

SOD—The SELF of the UNIVERSE... God's "I am" has the psycho-theological force not of dissolving individual selves but of reminding us that we were never individual selves in the first place...Our selfhood endures by virtue of its participation in some greater Self,

Rabbi EUGENE B. BOROWITZ.....

We cannot reclaim Sinai's power without reaffirming the most extraordinary miracle of the Bible—God personally communicating the Ten Utterances...For moderns and post-moderns alike, the Sinai experience must be brought into the common range of human experience. The relational theory of revelation enables us to do so unreductively. It "explains" by presence how God and people communicate, and it recognizes that this can happen to nations on special occasions. It also appreciates those uncommon moments when encounter occurs with such fullness that our lives can never be the same—and Sinai was just that for our people. No longer a miracle, it remains wondrous enough to draw the Jewish spirit to existence in Covenant.

I do not see it as a defect in this theory that identifying revelation with genuine relationship renders communication with God an ongoing, everyday occurrence. This is simply the reality behind common piety. Even we ordinary Jews know that now and again we stand in God's immediate presence and find ourselves specially obligated because of it. High on my list of things I wish for in Jewish life today is the existence of more Jews who regularly share such ordinary intimacy with God. The simplicity of these encounters will refresh the appreciation of the genius of the prophets, psalmists, and other biblical authors whose spirituality could not borrow, as ours does, from the prior experience of millennia. They broke new religious ground with such success that their words still inspire and instruct people the world over. Our little touch of revelation does not entitle us to hope that anything we discern will have the equivalent depth and staying power. Nonetheless, it will do what Jews have always known revelation to do: direct us to our duty as participants in the Covenant. [from Renewing The Covenant, EBB, pg 283, J.P.S., 1991]