



Parashat Yitro: All the People Saw the Sounds

Dear Friends,

This week we all stand at the foot of Mount Sinai, and we all see the sounds!
Never has there been such unity in Am Yisrael.

The phrase that repeats itself over and over is "the people", "Beit Yaakov", and even "all the people."

(Sh'mot 19:3) "...and Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel... .. ' All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And the LORD said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the entire people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." 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. Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.' (Sh'mot 20: 15) "And all the people saw the sounds and the torches..."

According to Jewish tradition, based on the revelation description in D'varim, every Jew - past, present, and future, whether born Jewish or converted - was present in one way or another at the formative moment at Mount Sinai.

For many "orthodox" Jews, this event, in which God revealed Himself to "all of the people" became eternal proof of the undeniable existence of God and the truth of the

Torah. Two million people cannot be wrong, are not imagining things, and are not hallucinating.

This is an apologetic understanding (apologetics, according to Wikipedia, is the way one defends a religious doctrine , through systematic argumentation and discourse). Our Sages had no use for such apologetics, but that all changed in the Middle Ages. Rabbis, such as Rambam, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, and the Ramban felt a strong need to substantiate Jewish faith with a system of proof.

With all due respect to these giants of Jewish spirit, and with great respect for my “orthodox” brothers and sisters, this is unnecessary!

It simply reflects a Western way of thinking, in which reality occurs outside of ourselves and is factual. We are mere witnesses to it, we respond, and - to a large extent - are its victims.

In my humble opinion - which I have no means of proving - the essence of the human experience is the exact opposite of this paradigm, as is the experience at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

We have absolutely no idea what really happens “out there”! We don’t even know for sure that there is an “outside.” We experience it with our senses - we see, hear, smell, taste, and feel - but it is not our eyes that see or our ears that hear. As far as we know, our senses “receive” information and transmit it to our brain, which then processes it, and provides us with a unified, continuous, logical, and coherent picture, which it then informs us is “reality.”

Our brain is indeed brilliant!!!

In order to maintain their sanity, people discuss their experiences and agree among themselves that what they heard, saw, and smelled is indeed an objective reality.

Even though we have no idea what is “really” going on outside or if there even is an “outside” at all, as our senses are not an objective measure of its existence, I don't know any person who lives his or her life as if it doesn't exist. This is how we create our world-view, every single moment.

I am not claiming that there is no “outside” and that reality is entirely a figment of our imagination, nor do I live my life as if it does not exist. I simply want to suggest that our personal redemption - our happiness, our mental health, even our physical health - will never come from the “outside”, nor will any proof that events actually took place ever really help us.

I want to suggest instead that the experience at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah are a wonderful and precise description of the deep, stirring, formative thing which we call Divine revelation, and that it is an internal experience, and not an external one. Moshe himself first experienced this a year before, in the exact same place, at the Burning Bush, when he was a shepherd. This experience was so significant that he returns there with Bnei Yisrael on the specific orders of the God who appeared before him so that they, too, could experience this revelation.

Ever since then, an entire nation is renewing the experience of revelation over and over again. Each time we have an “Aliyah to the Torah”, we are ascending Mount Sinai again hoping to experience that formative revelation again. Every serious Torah learner seeks the exact same thing: to experience deep within themselves the fresh Divine revelation of the secrets of the universe.

The willingness to accept the idea that the revelation at Mount Sinai by Moshe and Bnei Yisrael was first and foremost an internal one allows us to cease, once and for all, the search for superfluous proof of our beliefs outside of ourselves, and focus instead on finding our answers within. As I wrote last week, “inside” and “within ourselves” are not located in a particular part of the body, because then that organ would become yet another “there”, once again outside of our experience.

It is a very affirmative when someone else bears witness to what we ourselves have experienced. It is, above all, “proof” that we are not insane... But more than anything, it confirms that what we have experienced is “real.” There is tremendous loneliness in experiencing something significant - whether difficult or uplifting - on one’s own (like Holocaust survivors who live among people who did not experience that hell and will never truly understand, or soldiers who witnessed the death of their comrades in battle and return home to what seems like a parallel universe; or a person who experienced great physical pain that someone else cannot imagine, etc.) This loneliness is terrible, and can drive one to insanity. We say to each other “yes, I’ve experienced that too”, and suddenly we are not alone and the heavy burden is a little bit lighter!

We are social creatures, and it is wonderful to share our inner experiences, especially those that are truly formative!

The pain - the Holocaust, a terrible battle - or a wonderful experience, are all totally real! But comfort will never truly be found "outside" of ourselves.

At the end of the day, we really only have our own internal experience. Our thoughts, our beliefs, our opinions, the education we received - all of these help us mold we experience into a coherent and logical "reality."

There is no need to prove the existence of God or the truth of the event at Mount Sinai, or whether God wrote or dictated the Torah. There is no reason to argue at all.

Clearly God exists - if in our inner experience God lives, whispers and stirs with us, creating us anew each day. And clearly Mount Sinai happened - if in our inner experience we stood there and saw the sounds. And clearly the Torah is a Torah of truth - if in our internal experience it does not cease to reveal itself and echo the secrets of the universe within us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha