



Parashat Yitro: God's Touch Screen

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

This week we will delve into the issue of intimacy and human boundaries. It is a rather long drasha, bear with me, I think it will be worth it.

47 days after the Exodus, Bnei Yisrael arrive at the foot of Mount Sinai and encamp there. They are exhausted, beaten, confused, and insecure. The preparations for the giving of the Torah last three days, and include mostly doing laundry and abstaining from sexual relations. The strongest motif, however – both in the preparations for this very intimate event and at the event itself – is distance!

In the quote below, you will notice how both God and the People ensured that the distance is observed. Only Moshe remains close, running back and forth like a mountain goat, straining to maintain the connection between the frightened People and awesome appearance of God.

"And the LORD said to Moses... "You shall set boundaries for the people, saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death...'. 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... The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.

"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. The LORD said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish... " (Sh'mot 19: 10-23).

"...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. "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you... So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was." (Sh'mot 20: 15-18)

Why are the People standing at a distance?

Why don't they come near?

What are they afraid of?

It is not God's warnings that are scaring the people away - since when do we listen to God's warnings? It is fear and terror that makes them keep their distance. Intense sights and sounds envelop the event – pillars of smoke, burning torches, lightning, and the sound of the shofars – the sounds of silence are disturbed, and the People flee.

But one does not need blasting noise to keep a distance. Most of the time we humans maintain a safe distance. It is life itself - it seems to me - that we keep at a distance. We live our lives with great caution and trepidation.

If you are not convinced, perhaps it is because fear, distance, and caution are so imprinted in our DNA that we are not even aware of their existence! We are so accustomed to living our lives in this way - day after day - that it does not occur to us that we are actually distancing ourselves from life.

Still not convinced? Well, here are a few expressions of the distance we create. None of them are meant to be criticism, they are merely an observation:

- We are the only creatures who cover their bodies with clothes, unrelated to weather.
- We do not simply wear clothes; we also make sure – some of us more than others – to conform to someone else's dress codes (culture, fashion, etc.).
- We rarely say what's in our hearts and minds. We censor both the negative and the positive. We don't want to distance people by expressing our critical opinions and we refrain from compliments which might create "extra" closeness.
- If we do speak, we try to make sure what we say is clever and logical. Furthermore, even the voices that emanate from deep within us we learn to restrain at a very young age.
- As children we learn many unimportant, boring and totally irrelevant things at school, further distancing ourselves from ourselves
- No wonder, as adults, we need an alarm clock to wake us up, ignoring our need for more sleep. And then we go to work, even if our "insides" are craving for something else.
- Most of us work for others and do what they ask and expect us to do.
- We conduct ourselves with accepted etiquette, having long ago forgotten what our inner desires are.
- We try to live our lives in keeping with the laws of the state and of the society in which we live.

All of these things - which we consider normal behaviour, as well as healthy acts of socialization - are all expressions of distance. They all serve as protection, each and every one of them.

But protection from what?

From what others will say?

Perhaps.

From being rebuffed?

Certainly.

Lest we be strange and not fit in?

Absolutely.

Yet, there is something else...

Distancing is an expression of a great fear of truly living, lest we feel the full power of life; lest we die of too much... LIFE:

- Being able to feel absolute happiness requires feeling absolute pain.
- To fully live the moment requires acknowledging the danger of annihilation.
- Jumping into the stormy waters of life requires that we agree to possibly drown.
- Leaping into the flames of love means agreeing to melt away into the void.

This is why we abstain!

We prefer dulling our happiness, escaping the moment, gazing from the other side of the river, avoiding the fire of love, and making do with the shadows that the fire casts on the walls of our caves.

And then we complain about our loneliness, our sense of alienation, our confusion, and the distance in our lives; today more than ever.

This, I would argue, is the tragedy of being human. It is a tragedy because the truth is that Bnei Yisrael (we) really want to touch the Mountain! They (we) so much want to rush forward and embrace God! They (we) yearn to dance around the Mountain in a state of total and complete satiety of the senses, to the point of losing consciousness. The closest they will ever get to this will happen in a number of weeks, when Bnei Yisrael will dance around the Golden Calf, heeding Aharon's call to "a festival for God". But the Golden Calf was a cold, lifeless statue, a god of masks (covering).

Like Bnei Yisrael, we too are afraid and we cower from the bare truth, from the essence of life, and find solace in falseness. This is how we replace the God of Life with cheap imitations.

It is possible that there is no choice in the matter. It is possible that the Torah is teaching us a cruel lesson at this momentous time: that a distance must always remain; that a protective layer must always separate us; that the reality is that we can never really fully embrace God or even dance a wild Hora around Him.

It appears that all love requires a boundary; otherwise we will blend in and become one "dough". If we unite entirely we will disappear; we will melt into the object of our love, **"For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God."** (D'varim 4:24)

But there is another possibility. Moshe is familiar with it, but the People are not, and neither are we. Moshe makes a very curious statement: **"Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you."**

The distancing is merely a test, Moshe says, knowing that is the key to the closeness we desire: When humans try to come close, they do so towards what is outside of themselves. We mistakenly think that the object of our longing is "out there". As a baby, it was the breast (that is why God is called "El Shadai"- which can be translated as "God of my breasts"- in Bereishit) and the protective embrace of our parents. As adults we strive to replace the nourishing breast and the warmth and unqualified parental love with our partners, our professions, with the protective walls of our homes, and with God and with religion.

But just as a mother's love is not located in the breast, God is not located on Mount Sinai (nor is He in synagogue!). Just as longing for love is not located in our partner, it is also not to be found on Mount Sinai. Just as the desire for self-fulfillment is not to be found in higher education or in professional training, so, too, the answers are not located on Mount Sinai.

**God distances us from the Mountain because what we are seeking is not on it!
God warns us: I am not there!
I am within you,
Only within you.**

Be careful, says God. Whoever seeks the Divine truth and the answers to all questions on Mount Sinai will die! He will die inside, because life is not to be found

on the Mountain, but inside; only inside. The outside is merely a reflection of our inner world.

Mount Sinai is simply the screen upon which the drama of our lives is projected. Life happens within us. Inside. And because access to "there" is limited and complex, the internal is projected on a "plasma screen" which we tragically mistake for life itself.

Therefore, a moment before commanding distance from the Mountain, God says to Moshe: "**for on the third day the LORD will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai.**" He does not come down to the Mountain; He comes down **in the sight** of all of the people on Mount Sinai. They **see** him descend on the mountain, but the mountain is just a screen. God actually appears within them.

Only Moshe Rabbeinu, old and wise, knows that it is all a huge test to see if we know how to find God within us.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha