



Reflections on Divine and Human Voices at Sinai

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Parashat Yitro 5777

Our *parashah* describes the climactic moment of the direct encounter between humanity and God, or more specifically, the people of Israel and their God:

שמות יט, י"ז; כ, א'

ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלוהים מן המחנה ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר [...] וידבר אלוהים.

Shemot 19:17, 20:1

^{19:17}Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain... ^{20:1}God spoke...

God's speech is directed towards the entire people, in a way that is unmediated. Instead of relaying His speech through the chain of Moshe who speaks to the elders who then speak to

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the people, or through Aharon as a mouthpiece, God speaks directly. This time God turns to the people and the direct encounter takes place after the people are asked to prepare, body and soul, for this interaction—they sanctify themselves, wash their clothes (Shemot 19:14), and prepare to respond to the divine invitation (v. 8).

It seems that through this direct speech act, God takes a step toward Israel—the tribe, group, and people that He has chosen. Until now the connection between God and the people was circuitous, going through various intermediaries—plagues, commandments, Moshe himself (ch. 12). This time it's different. This time they truly meet.

With this context in mind, reading Israel's reaction to God's invitation for a closer, more direct connection is heartbreaking. Israel reacts with what appears to be a rejection, a request for more distance, for indirectness, for mediation. The Israelites turn to Moshe and they say, “‘You speak to us,’ they said to Moses, ‘and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die’” (20:16). In my imagination I can see the moment where God is longing, trying, wanting to get close to the Israelites by “God coming down, in the sight of all the people” (19:11), and it is at that moment that the Israelites respond to the possibility of direct communication in the negative.

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There is a stream of exegesis that beckons us to understand that the response of the people is not as it seems. It doesn't express a desire for distance, rather it is a demand that reflects a desire to be more directly involved in the covenant. Meaning, Israel isn't asking to be farther from God, but wants to have a say in the way that God and humans communicate. They are trying to take part in defining the relationship that is created by the receipt of the ten commandments. What they are actually saying is that without their involvement, the covenant itself will be lacking.

A possible explanation is found in an exegetical dispute regarding what took place on Mount Sinai. The Sages discuss what Israel heard directly from God at Sinai, and possibly disagree about the chronological placement of this critical moment when Israel requests of Moshe, “You speak to us and we will hear”:

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שיר השירים רבה (וילנא) פרשה א; ב
רבי יהושע בן לוי ורבנין. רבי יהושע אומר: ב'
דברות שמעו ישראל מפי הקב"ה אנכי ולא יהיה
לך ... ורבנין אמרין כל הדברות שמעו ישראל
מפי הקב"ה

Shir HaShirim Rabbah (Vilna) 1:2

It is a dispute between R. Yehoshua ben
Levi and the other Rabbis. R. Yehoshua says: Israel heard [the first] two
commandments from God's mouth, "I am" and "You shall not have"... the Rabbis
say: Israel heard all of the commandments from the mouth of God.

R. Yehoshua ben Levi and the Rabbis are debating about what it is that Israel did actually hear directly from God's mouth. In other words, they are discussing what was heard directly at Sinai, how much of God's speech was unmediated. The *midrash* records two suggestions. According to the Rabbis, every single one of the commandments was spoken from God's own mouth. However, according to R. Yehoshua ben Levi only the first two were spoken by God. Immediately after the second commandment, the people interrupted God and asked Him to stop speaking with them in such a direct way.

There is a Hassidic description of the ten commandments that presents yet a third possibility. This is how it is presented by R. Naftali of Ropshitz (1760-1827, Galicia): "It's possible that all we heard from the Blessed One is the *aleph* of 'Anokhi,' 'I' ". We can understand these words in two ways: It's possible that he is further restricting the amount of communication that Israel heard directly. Not only did they not hear all of the commandments, they didn't even hear the first one or two in their entirety! All they heard was the first sound of the first word of the first commandment. All they heard was "ah." Additionally, we can also understand that R. Naftali of Ropshitz is making a metaphysical claim about what it means for the human ear to receive a divine communication. So R.

Naftali of Ropshitz is presenting a paradox—without a vowel, the sound that the *aleph* makes is silence. It is the absence of sound. So what they heard was nothing, the sound of nothing like the still small voice that Eliyahu heard.

Either way, these different descriptions construct a picture of gradation, either a gradual distancing of God, or a gradual distancing from Him, or a reflection of the immense challenge of the relationship between people and God. From the majority opinion that everything was heard by the people, to the opinion that the people only heard the first two commandments, to the opinion that not even the first word was heard, only the sound of the letter *aleph*.

However, looking at the verses again we see that Israel isn't looking for distance, but instead for some dimension of proximity. They do not ask to stop hearing God; what they are asking for is to be spoken to in a way that actually allows them to hear God better, "You speak to us and *we will hear*." It appears then, that there is something in the way that they have been spoken to until now that makes hearing difficult for them, there is a stumbling block in the form of communication employed thus far.

However, the Israelites do not ask to stop hearing God; what they are asking for is to be spoken to in a way that actually allows them to hear God better.

So we see that the different degrees of distancing described in the *midrash* and by R. Naftali of Ropshitz are also the basis for a type of involvement. For the more we constrict the direct Divine voice, the more we expand the human involvement in the creation of the Sinaitic covenant. The more the midrashic imagination shortens the duration of God's speech, the more the commandments are free to become a product of partnership between Man and God.

R. Moshe Alshich (1506/7-1600, Tzfat), when commenting on Israel's request to hear God speaking through Moshe, presents an aspect of cooperation that was necessary between God and those He created in order to proceed with the rest of the ten commandments. Specifically, he tries to explain how all of Israel were able to hear the commandments after this point: "And perhaps you'll say that it won't have enough power to be heard in a camp that was twelve *mil* by twelve *mil*, given that it is a human voice..." The Israelites number many hundreds of thousands of people and more, the Alshich presents a very logical logistical problem of amplification: How could Moshe's voice, a human voice, be heard by each person in this large camp? His answer is: "He who is Blessed will join His voice to yours. And that is what it means when it says "and we will hear."

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Meaning, the people's request that Moshe speak to them, didn't have the effect of replacing God's voice with Moshe's voice. Rather what they heard was a composite, God and Moshe speaking together. The people's request of "and we shall hear" reflects a longing for

combination. He continues to ask: "And maybe you'll say, and what have we gained from this? Either way you will be hearing God's voice?!" That is, if God's voice is still powering the communication, what have they gained and what have they been granted with their request? And he answers: "Behold, the combined voice with humanity is not like the unmediated voice of God." The "combined voice" is vastly different, according to Alshich, and this is what Israel was asking for. They seemingly knew the power of the composite voice, the voice that contains inputs from both God and people is not a dilution of God's voice but rather is the foundation for hearing it. It appears that according to this interpretation, Israel did in fact want to hear God and that is their request. They knew that the best way for them to do this required a different kind of divine voice, one that also incorporated the voice of humanity.

This raises the question, of course, of why? What was so difficult, so impossible for Israel in hearing the singular voice? And perhaps this is because one-sidedness of this voice makes it un-hearable. And this is not surprising, as we're talking about a covenant which is a pact between two entities, a story of two sides meeting. It is true that when coming together each side must know him or herself as a distinct individual or entity, but as long as in the formation of the covenant or relationship only one real actor is involved, of course it will be difficult for the other partner to feel whole in entering into the covenant and to really hear it and respond to it. Furthermore, a connection that is created in a way that is one-sided is unbearable, heartbreaking, incompatible with what it means to enter into a partnership. It is out of this heartbreak that Israel begs, "let us hear", and this is only possible through a joint voice.

If only we could have the wisdom to request the same—a joining together in order to hear, and to include all of our voices in order to have them heard as well.