



What Happened at Sinai?: From Revelation to Entering the Covenant in Love

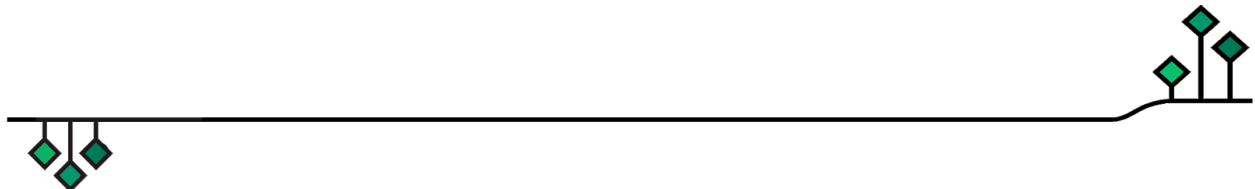
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Parashat Yitro 5781

In Parashat Yitro, the Israelites reached the desert of Sinai and camped at the bottom of the mountain (Exodus 19:1-2). Later tradition and Jewish thinkers have focused on the Sinai experience as an event of receiving Revelation. The Rabbis redefined Shavuot as *z'man matan torateinu*, the time of the giving of the Torah, at Sinai. But no less important, the mountain was also the site of Israel signing on to the covenant for all time.

The focus on Revelation (or Torah miSinai / Torah from Sinai) comes directly from our *parashah*. Yitro describes the three day preparation, the whole people assembled, the stunning mix of thunder, lightning, heavy cloud, and the ever stronger blast of a *shofar* which rocked the mountain, the mountain aflame and the Voice of God speaking the Ten Commandments (19:16-19). A central teaching of Rabbinic Judaism is that at Sinai, not only the Written Scriptures were revealed, but also the Oral Torah—the initially-not-written-down Torah of interpretation, expansion, and application of the Five Books of Moses.¹ “...And I

¹ In books too numerous to list, Jacob Neusner describes Rabbinic Judaism as the Judaism of the Dual Torah [=written and oral]. The Oral Torah interpretation may even override the plain meaning. Thus, the Torah's statement of *lex talionis* is “an eye for an eye” which seems to clearly mean “knocking out another person's eye is



shall give you [Moses] the stone tablets, the Torah, and the commandment which I [God] wrote to teach them [Israel]' (Exodus 24:12). “**Tablets**”—these are the Ten Commandments; “**Torah**”—this is the written Scriptures; “**and the commandment**”—this is the Mishnah;² “**which I wrote**”—these refer to the Prophetic books and the Writings;³ “**to teach them**”—this is the Talmud.⁴ This [verse] teaches us that all the above were given to Moses at Sinai” (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 5a).⁵

There is an inherent difficulty in taking a fundamentalist reading that all the later books were revealed at Sinai. Literally, this would mean that all future prophets and teachers were not adding to and renewing the Torah, they were only robots repeating words said long ago. The Talmud picks up on this anomaly and tells an ironic narrative of Moses visiting the school of Rabbi Akiva expounding the Torah (Babylonian Talmud Menahot 29b). Moses finds that he hardly understands a word of what is going on and feels faint. This is the Talmud’s acknowledgement that there is much innovation in later tradition. Then a student asks R. Akiva, “Where did this law come from?” Akiva explains: “This is a law [oral tradition] received from Moses at Sinai.” Moses brightens up. He gets the deeper point that is being made. The Rabbis are carrying on and applying Moses’ Torah and tradition in later times. The later

punished by knocking out the criminal’s eye.” The Oral Law interprets Exodus 21:24 that “an eye for an eye means money/payment,” an eye’s worth of money, and not a literal physical retaliation for harming anyone. See Mishnah Bava Kamma 8:1 and Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 84a. For Rabbinic Jews, the interpretation is the authoritative understanding at the words, and not the plain meaning.

² The core document of the Talmud which gives the Rabbinic exposition/statement of the Torah’s laws and views.
³ The Bible (Tanakh) consists of Torah (five Books of Moses), Nevi’im (Prophetic books), and Ketuvim (Writings such as Psalms, etc.).

⁴ The later Rabbinic interpretation, analysis, application, and expansion of the Mishnah.

⁵ In other places, the Talmud adds the aggadah (non-legal parts of the Talmud), rabbinic *midrashim* etc. to the list of those revealed at Sinai. For a discussion of the variable curriculum lists of Rabbinic study, see Martin Jaffee’s *Torah in the Mouth*.



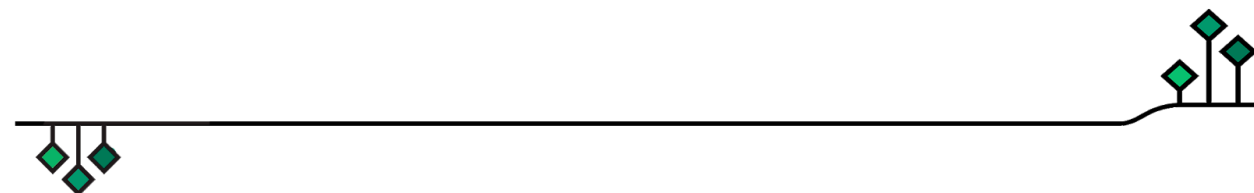
articulated parts of Torah deserve similar authority and respect in our eyes as those which were written down in Scriptures.

The Rabbis insist that the process of Revelation at Sinai never stops. The ultimate statement of ongoing Sinaitic revelation is the Jerusalem Talmud's comment: "**Everything** that a veteran student [of Torah] **will express** in the presence of his Rebbe (teacher) was already told to Moses at Sinai" (Peah 2:6, 17a).

Yet an exclusive focus on Revelation may miss the broader significance of what happened at Sinai. At this place, the Israelites as a people entered into the covenant of *tikkun olam*, to repair the world and fill it with life. This commitment set the character of Judaism for the ages. At Sinai, the mission of Jewry that has made it a special, chosen people in the world was defined. The birth of the national covenant is what makes Sinai so central in our tradition.

Our *parashah* signals what is to happen at the mountain in the runup to the Sinai epiphany. God says: "You saw what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to me. Now if you will hear My voice **and observe My covenant**, you will **become My treasured people** among the nations" (Exodus 19:5). What is the mission of this special covenanted people? "You shall be to Me **a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation**" (Exodus 19:6).

Among the people of Israel, the Priests connect the people to God. They teach the people a Torah of truth which enables them to distinguish between the impure and the pure, between the profane and the holy—and how to convert the realm of the profane (where the Divine is



hidden or obscured because it is in the presence of death) to the realm of the holy (where the Divine is present and manifest, and this is the realm where life is dominant).⁶ The priests, in their dedication of their whole lives to divine service—which includes having (ethically) clean hands and pure hearts⁷— aim to create an ideal mini-world which prefigures the future repaired earth. Similarly, in their personal physical perfection, they model and guide the people to building the universal ideal planet where sickness and handicaps are overcome.⁸ The Israelites becoming a kingdom of priests means that the entire nation will play the above roles for all of humanity. “A holy nation” means that as a society, the whole people will embody and model the realm of the holy where life and justice are dominant. Again, the goal is that the whole world will learn and build the model in the world at large.

Next week’s Torah portion, Mishpatim, confirms that the main activity during the rest of the time spent at Sinai was to enter into the covenant and study and plan the application of covenantal guidelines to all of life.⁹ Moses reads the Book of the Covenant¹⁰ to the entire people. In effect, Moses outlines the behaviors and way of life which the Israelites undertake if they enter into the *berit*. The Book of the Covenant makes clear that the Israelites were being asked to commit their entire life, not just to do an act or two. This was the moment of truth. The people answered as one, “That the Lord has said, **we will do** and **we will listen**.” (Exodus 25:16). They said “we will do” first. They offered open-ended acceptance, even

⁶ Torah of truth—see Malachi 2:6. Distinguishing between pure and impure—see Leviticus 11:47.

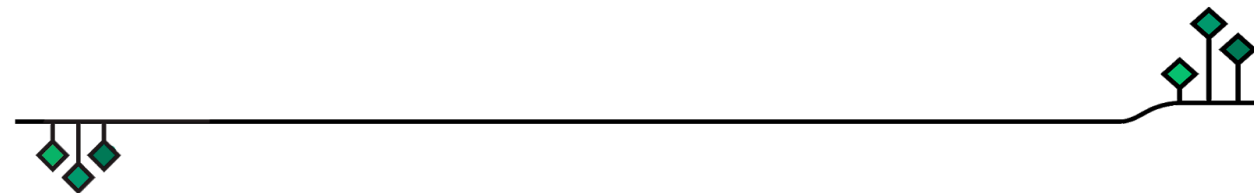
⁷ See Psalm 24:4.

⁸ For expansion on most of the points above, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (Anchor Bible) pp. 52-58, 42-51, 616-617, and throughout the volume. Also see Shai Held’s essay on Parashat Pekudei, “Building a Home for God,” printed in *The Heart of Torah* and available here:

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/building-home-god>.

⁹ See Exodus chapters 21-24, 25.

¹⁰ Tradition interprets this Book as the laws of the Torah outlined in chapters 21-24 (and elsewhere) which cover all aspects of life. They were all given at Sinai. I will review the covenantal way of life in next week’s dvar Torah.



before knowing all the details. The Talmud is electrified by this response.¹¹ Total acceptance represents profound trust. This is nothing less than a response of unconditional love. No matter what difficulties or problematic details may follow, it does not matter. We commit to the covenant. We will cope with whatever follows.

How could people pledge their very lives to accept the burdens of a partnership without even knowing the details? The Talmud puts this legitimate skepticism into the mouth of a heretic (Shabbat 88b). How could the Israelites commit before hearing out everything and assessing, were they up to the levels of performance and obligation in the covenant? Speaking from the perspective of living after the Holocaust, the real question is: Why did they not check out whether Jews—or anyone—could bear the isolation, the persecution, the hatred and violence, which this world has inflicted on them for being carriers of the covenant over the centuries? Should they not have asked first what were the risks and costs of taking on this partnership with God?

The answer clearly is: The Israelites committed out of recklessness, the limitless passion of unconditional love. Never mind the failures, the regressions, the small-mindedness they showed in the desert.¹² At that moment, at Sinai, they were madly in love and heedless of future risks. This unlimited acceptance has gone a long way with their Divine Partner in overcoming failures along the historical journey. Jeremiah referred to this total commitment when he reassured the Israelites that, notwithstanding God's revulsion at their abuse, and notwithstanding allowing the destruction of the Temple, God would never abandon Israel or

¹¹ See Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88a-b.

¹² See my essay on Parashat BeShallah, “Do Not Rely on a Miracle,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/do-not-rely-miracle>.



the covenant: “I remember for you the covenantal love of your youth, your love as a bride, when you followed Me in the desert, in a trackless land, not sown” (Jeremiah 2:2).

Sinai then is both the great moment of revelation and the beginning of the covenant of love. Actually, these are two sides of the same coin. Once we understand Sinai as the moment of setting out on a covenantal journey to realize *tikkun olam*, then the continuous revelation that speaks from Sinai has new meaning and realistic considerations. Applying the ethics or guiding principles along the way, adding ritual and reenactments of ancient and new events, seeing a new meaning in traditional sources, or a better way of living by inherited models—all these literally represent the revelation at Sinai occurring again and guiding the realization of the covenant. The new development may appear to be an innovation or change, but it is actually keeping the Sinai covenant alive and carrying it out. This is the profound, paradoxical truth in the rabbinic statement that “everything that a future veteran student **innovates** was told [meaning, implicitly revealed] to Moses at Sinai.”¹³

¹³ See Hiddushei HaRan on Eruvin 16b.

