



Love and Hiddenness

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The revelation at Sinai is a high point in the Jewish story. It is the moment when God gives us the *mitzvot*—and we accept them. However, the Talmud tells us that Sinai is only the first time we accept the *mitzvot*. In Massekhet Shabbat (88a), we are told that the commandments were actually accepted twice: once at Sinai, and again in Persia, during the time of Ahashverosh. Amidst a long discussion of what really happened at Sinai, the Talmud offers us a parallel moment near the end Megillat Esther. Exploring these two moments in tandem allows us to see how personal empowerment can lead us to approach God with love.

At Sinai there is thunder and lighting and the Jews accept the Torah from a place of fear and trepidation. R. Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa suggests that rather than standing at the foot of the mountain, the Jewish people were actually **underneath** it. God holds the mountain over their heads like a basin, threatening to drop if they give the wrong answer. They do accept the Torah by saying “*na’aseh ve-nishma* - we will do and we will hear”—but maybe not entirely willingly.¹ When Rav Aha bar Ya’akov expresses concern that perhaps the Jews have accepted

¹ This phrase becomes a sign for full and unquestioning acceptance of the *mitzvot*: we said we will do them before we even heard what they were. R. Avdimi’s *midrash* adds an undertone of fear to this declaration.



Torah under duress, Rava assuages this concern by asserting that the Jews voluntarily accepted the yoke of heaven a second time, years later, after the battle of Shushan:

תלמוד בבלי שבת פח.

אמר רבא: אף על פי כן הדור קבלוה בימי אחשׁוֹרוֹשׁ, דְּכָתִיב: "קִיְמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים" — קִיְמוּ מֵה שֶׁקִּבְּלוּ
קָבַר.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88a

Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it in the time of Ahashverosh, as it is written:

“ordained, and took upon them” (Esther 9:27)—ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.

This discussion sets up a parallel between the story of Sinai and the story of the Megillah, connecting them as the two primary occasions when the Jewish people officially sign up for the covenant with God. Through this parallel, we come to see that Moses and Esther, the heroes of these stories, have much in common. Although years and lands apart, both Moses and Esther are the lone Jews in the palace of the king. Neither of them chose this status of closeness to royalty, each having been pushed to the palace by a family member; and yet, their position affords each of them opportunities to speak directly to the crown and make the case for their people. Despite their special status, Moses and Esther each express fear that they are not the right person to speak on behalf of their people. They are hesitant leaders, who actively doubt their role and need to be encouraged to take the mantle.

What makes their parallels so surprising is the key difference: God is not present in the story of the Megillah. Moses is called to leadership directly by God through a miraculous burning bush. When he doubts, God is the one who reassures him. When the enemy needs to be fought, God sends plagues to do the dirty work. Esther, by contrast, inhabits a story with no direct divine communication. It is her uncle Mordekhai who suggests she step into a role of



hero. It is he who gives her a needed pep-talk. She herself chooses to fast for three days in preparation for confronting the king, figuring out her own way forward. In the end of Esther's story, no God arrives to diminish the enemy by murdering first-born sons; there are no grand displays of divine power. Instead the Jewish people do their own massacring of the enemy. The blood is on their own hands. Unlike Moses, Esther is not a prophet, and she never speaks directly with God.

And yet, both stories end with acceptance of divine commandments. Rava tells us that the Jews of Shushan accept the laws all over again. This second moment is at least as powerful—and maybe even more important—than the first utterance of *na'aseh ve-nishma* at the foot of the mountain in the desert. While the first acceptance may have been under duress, the second is pure and binding. Rashi adds an additional layer, telling us that while the first acceptance came from a place of fear, this second acceptance comes from love:

רש"י שבת פח. ד"ה בימי אחשורוש
מאהבת הנס שנעשה להם.

Rashi Shabbat 88a

[They accepted the torah] out of love for the miracle that was done for them.

The Israelites in the desert have just experienced God's wonders through plagues, a splitting sea, and manna that falls from the sky. The Jews who left Egypt have been saved from hundreds of years of slavery by God's outstretched arm. And yet it is the Jews of Persia—who fought their own war and never heard directly from God—whose relationship to *mitzvot* is characterized not by fear but by love and gratitude. The Jews of the Megillah experience their safety as a miracle and are moved to reach back towards God by accepting the commandments a second time, reaffirming the vows of a divine covenant.



Perhaps counterintuitively, the hidden God of the Megillah allows for a kind of love that wasn't possible with the very hands-on God of the redemption from Egypt. The God who may appear at first to be absent turns out to be the God of intimacy and love. Rashi, through his comment on Rava's statement, teaches a lesson that has become a central idea in the theology of R. Yitz Greenberg, that God's hiddenness can be an opportunity to actually experience God more closely:

I believe that in our era... God becomes totally "hidden." In our times, God is closer and more totally present even than in Shekhinah² form. There are more miracles than ever but they, like God, are more difficult to discern because they are hidden in the natural process.³

When God is present in the fire at the top of the mountain, the people at the bottom feel distant. But when the people experience the miraculousness of having gallows that had been built for them used instead to hang their enemy, they understand that these are God's miracles. They are grateful and filled with love.

Our lives are more like the Megillah. God doesn't call on us directly to step up. Like Esther, we have the responsibility—and also the opportunity—to call on ourselves and to call on each other. Like Mordekhai, we can look for leadership in our family and friends and encourage them to be brave and strive to make change. We are left to fight our own battles, navigating how and when to raise arms. The responsibility is great and can feel overwhelming. But perhaps the distance and autonomy can lead to perspective, gratitude, and love.

² God's immanent presence in the world.

³ R. Yitz Greenberg's essay for Seventh Day Pesah, "The Once and Future Exodus," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/once-and-future-exodus>

