

Choosing Revelation

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Everybody loves Dayenu. It's an opportunity to experience some joyous song in the middle of the, occasionally heavy, conversation of the Magid section of the Seder. It's an opportunity for people who don't read Hebrew to join in and sing along with a one word refrain that is easy to pronounce. But it's also a beautiful and powerful poem and a significant exercise in gratitude. Dayenu invites us to appreciate our redemption on a more atomic scale, declaring that each and every step of our emancipation from Egypt constituted its own blessing from God and was a distinct accomplishment for us in our growth as a people. Every single step in the process of redemption is a redemption all its own.

However, there is one moment in Dayenu that always gives me pause. It highlights a step in our journey to the promised Land which does not really seem significant on its own, and yet is isolated and emphasized as if it were:

אלו קרַבְנוּ לִפְנֵי הָרֹשֶׁת, וְלֹא
נָתַן לָנוּ אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה. דֵּינָנוּ.

If [God] had brought us before Mount Sinai, but did not give us the Torah—that would be sufficient [reason to be grateful].

According to the author of Dayenu, just standing before Mount Sinai is a critical experience independent of redemption and independent of revelation. And the question I have been asking myself for years is: Why? What is Mount Sinai if not the place where the Torah was given and received? If God were not going to give us the Torah, approaching the mountain would have certainly been a completely meaningless and unnoticeable event!

Looking at the redemption from Egypt purely from our human vantage point, perhaps it would have been a non-event... for us. However, for God, bringing us to the mountain was indeed a

significant choice made and an event of consequence for Him. From God's perspective, bringing us to Mount Sinai would have been worthy of notice even if the Torah had not actually been given. Because the moment of bringing us to the mountain was the moment when God decided that He would give us the Torah, when He decided to reveal Himself to us in an incredibly fundamental way. That decision was momentous to God even if we were oblivious to it.

According to the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:8), giving us the Torah is the day of God's wedding to us, יוֹם הַחֲתוּנָה. Therefore God's bringing us to Mount Sinai is the point when He decided to ask us to marry Him. To give a somewhat pedestrian, but midrashically-grounded analogy: Bringing *Benei Yisrael* to Mount Sinai is the equivalent of God's setting up a *huppah* or purchasing an engagement ring. From the perspective of the partner who receives it, the purchasing of a ring on its own is not a significant act.

The person proposed to would never say, “If you had bought a ring, but never gave it to me in a marriage proposal—*dayenu!*” However, from the perspective of the ring-purchaser, the ring represents the willingness to ask the question, to make the commitment; it is a decision-point for them. So even if something then happens to the ring or their partner declines the proposal, purchasing the ring has emotionally symbolic weight for the one who buys it. It represents or embodies the decision to make the leap and pop the question. Deciding to be vulnerable, deciding to commit is very difficult and very meaningful, independent of the outcome of the proposal itself.

The giving of the Torah, though the goal of bringing *Benei Yisrael* to the mountain, is merely the culmination of an earlier, fundamental decision that God made to reveal God’s self to us, to be in a committed, covenantal relationship. This moment of selection and this concretization of love is significant even absent the giving of the Torah itself. Revelation is daring and so is the resolution to disclose oneself. On what basis did God make this defining decision? Why *did* God give us the Torah?!

One way of answering this question can be found in a comment by R. Moshe Hayyim Ephraim of Sudilkov,¹ author of the *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, which provides a touching insight into

The mountain was the moment when God decided that He would give us the Torah.

why God made this decision and why He chose us to receive the Torah:

דגל מחנה אפרים, פרשת בהר
...כי ידוע מן איכות טבע העולם כי מי שהוא גר אין לו עם מי לדבק ולקרב עצמו ולספר לו כל מאורעותיו וכל לבו שאין לו חבר - לא ישראל ולא גוים - אך כשרואה חבירו הגר אזי מספר כ"א בפני חבירו כל מאורעותיו.

וידוע הקב"ה הוא כמו גר בעוה"ז שאין לו על מי להשרות שכינ' כבודו ית' כי זעירין אינן וכו' והוא שהתפל' דהע"ה גר אנכי בארץ היינו אני ג"כ איני רוצה להיות תושב בעוה"ז ואני רק כגר בעוה"ז - ולכך אל תסתר ממני מצותיך כמו גר אחד בפני חבירו שמספר לו כל לבו....

Degel Mahaneh Ephraim, Parashat Behar

...For it is known from the quality of the nature of the world that a person who is a *ger* doesn't have anyone to be attached to or to bring himself close to and tell everything that's happened [to him] and all of his heart, because he doesn't have a fellow—neither Jews nor non-Jews. But, when he sees his fellow *ger* then he tells everything that has happened [to him] to his fellow. And it is known that the Holy Blessed One is like a

1 The *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* does not make this comment in relation to the bringing of the people to Mount Sinai, though it is relevant nonetheless. Interestingly, he relates this idea in the name of “*hakham ehad*” an anonymous sage. He also teaches a similar idea in his comments to first verse of Parashat Vayeishev, but there he does not mention having received this insight from an outside source.

ger in this world, since He does not have anyone on whom to bestow His Blessed presence, because we are so insignificant. And this is what King David prayed, **I am a *ger* in the land**, that is “I also don’t want to be a resident of this world, and I am only like a *ger* in this world, therefore **don’t hide Your mitzvot from me** (Tehillim 119:19), like one *ger* tells his friend his whole heart. When the Degel Mahaneh Ephraim uses the term *ger* here, he is referring to *geirei toshav*, resident aliens who live in Israel and are integrated into Jewish society, but are not themselves Jewish.² The Degel Mahaneh Ephraim assumes that these *gerim*, no matter how integrated they are into Jewish community, always feel that they don’t belong and aren’t really understood. And though it is true that God is everywhere and the whole earth belongs to Him, in a fundamental way, God is also a *ger*. There is no one who understands what it is like to be God, to be the most Alone. So God chooses to give us the Torah,

to share with us His secrets and to disclose what matters most to Him, because we were *gerim* as well. It is not our greatness that makes God want to share His Torah with us, it’s our vulnerability.

No one understands what it’s like to be God.

This also explains why God gave us the Torah while we were in the Sinai desert, and not in the land of Canaan where the *mitzvot* were to be fulfilled. God wanted to share Himself to us as one *ger* to another, God wanted to share His self with us at the time that we were most suited to understand Him.

This notion is reflected by a statement of Rava:

תלמוד בבלי נדרים נה.
אמר ליה: אם אדם משים עצמו
כמדבר זה שהכל דשין בו - תורה
ניתנה לו במתנה...³

Talmud Bavli Nedarim 55a
[Rava] said to [Rav Yosef]:³
If a person makes himself
like this wilderness upon
which everyone treads, the
Torah will be given to him as
a gift...

According to this reading, God didn’t choose *Benei Yisrael* because of some merit—ancestral or otherwise—or because He saw some current or future greatness in us. God chose *Benei Yisrael* because He identified with us. God chose to give us the Torah because we were homeless and rootless, because we were a wilderness-people, because we were in-between. When God brings us to Mount Sinai and chooses to give us the Torah there, it is a reflection of what we have in common with God in that moment. God wanted to share His Torah with us because He saw Himself in us. He chose to be vulnerable with us because and while we were still vulnerable, humble, and open.

² As distinct from *geirei tzadek*, people who have converted to Judaism, Jews by choice who are fully Jewish and hopefully are and feel fully integrated into the Jewish community.

³ This statement is part of a larger exchange between Rava and Rav Yosef where Rav Yosef challenges Rava to explain the verse in Bemidbar 21:19, וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ נַחֲלִיאל וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמֹת, וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמֹת.

The Magid section opens with the statement that we were all once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but now we are free people. But Dayenu comes and stops us in the middle of that story. Dayenu catches us in the journey somewhere between captivity and freedom, when we were transitioning and did not know who we were and where we were going. Dayenu teaches us that our time in Egypt and our time in the desert is foundational to who we are. God

chose to reveal Himself to us not when we were secure land-holders, but when we were strangers and felt the way that God Himself feels.

And this interpretation reminds us that often, in order to deeply connect to people, we need to look for what we have in common.

What are our common struggles?

What are our common goals?

What are the universal human experiences that we can bond

over? Are we portraying ourselves as perfect or are we portraying ourselves as ordinary? Are we willing to acknowledge that we need other people? Are we willing to identify ourselves with them and to build genuine relationships with one another?

And this interpretation should inspire us. For, if God can see Himself in us, surely we can see ourselves in one another. ♦