



In the Beginning There was Prophecy

◦ RABBI SHAY NAVE

The festival of Shavuot is also known as *The Festival of the Giving of the Torah*, but this title can be misleading and confusing. We tend to understand the word Torah to refer to something specific and defined: books, learning, intellect, the *bet midrash*, and so on. But is that the Torah we received at Shavuot?

A far more accurate name for this day, in my opinion, would be *The Day of the Revelation at Sinai*, rather than *The Day of the Giving of the Torah*. The *peshat*, straightforward meaning, of the texts discloses a very different picture from our usual definition of Torah.

In Shemot chapters 19-20, the Torah describes the preparations for the Revelation at Sinai and the Revelation itself. These verses convey a sense of awe on the part of the people, exaltedness and holiness – in a word, **prophecy**. At Sinai, each and every Jew was granted an intimate and direct encounter with the Divine presence.

The Sages of the Talmud, basing themselves on the *peshat*, deduce that *I am the Lord your God* and *You shall have no other god before Me* were both heard directly from God (Makkot 24a). That is to say, the first two commandments were heard by every Jew from the Almighty Himself. Hence, in the first two commandments, God addresses the people in first person, saying, *I am* the Lord ... and *You shall have no other gods before Me ...*, whereas the remainder



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of the commandments refer to God in the third person, for example: For in six days *the Lord* made the heavens and the earth ... and not *I* made the heaven etc.

During the Exodus from Egypt, all of Israel witnessed the miracles, the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea, and the manna. Did the people, though, know and recognize the Being who was behind all of this? Possibly, rumors abounded – speculation and traditions may have come into play; yet, other than Moshe and Aharon, and perhaps Miriam, the exact identity of their redeemer remained unknown. We might compare this to a person who leaves gifts anonymously for another. Does the recipient know and recognize the benefactor? This only becomes possible once they have actually met. Thus too, it is only in the first commandment, when God comes to the people and tells them, *I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt*, that they finally know and understand who and what this Redeemer is.

Rambam writes in *Moreh Nevuchim* (Part II, end of chapter 32; chapter 33):

At the Sinaitic Revelation, all witnessed the great fire and heard the dreadful thunderings that caused such an extraordinary terror; but only those who were able were prophetically inspired – and even then, each one only according to his capacity ...

... What emerges from the verses and from the words of the sages is that at this Revelation, the Jews only heard one single sound, from which Moshe and all of Israel inferred [the first two commandments]: I am the Lord and You shall have no other, after Moshe transformed the sound into intelligible words for them.

According to Rambam, the words recorded in the Torah in the Ten Commandments are Moshe's words. The division into letters and words was carried out by the master of all prophets; nonetheless, each and every Jew personally experienced the encounter with God. What is the theme of the first two commandments? Faith and the unity of God's name. Each and every Jew perceived the unique, infinite Divine presence; but the exact, detailed wording was only grasped by a few, in Rambam's view.

At Sinai, God sought to elevate the entire people to the level of prophecy, but the nation was not ready for such a lofty Revelation, and appealed to Moshe:

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood far away. And they said to Moses, Speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die. (Shemot 20, 15-16)

The people drew back from the Divine, wishing to appoint Moshe as their mediator. They felt threatened by this intimacy with God; and the consequence of their withdrawal was the sin of the golden calf, the need for a second set of tablets, and so on—with its concomitant advantages and disadvantages.

In Summation:

Shavuot is the festival of the giving of the Torah, but the meaning of the word, 'Torah' differs from our everyday usage. Shavuot returns us to a primal point, to the beginning of prophecy, to an intimacy from which we distanced ourselves, and it distanced itself from us. Shavuot reminds us of the magnitude of God's love and appreciation for us, and how great is the challenge of cleaving to the Divine. On Shavuot, too, we experience to a limited degree the loss of the great, intimate, stirring prophetic experience that has passed from the world.

The Torah study in which we engage is a substitute for direct encounter. We brought upon ourselves the *hastarat panim*, the hiding of God's face, and now what is left is for us to scrutinize time and again the ancient letter that our Beloved left for us; and thus we turn the Torah this way and that, delve into it, inhale its scent – and recall, and long for, that forgotten point of beginning.