

PARSHAS YISRO - MEET YOU AT SINAI - FROM A DISTANCE

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Meet You At Sinai - From a Distance¹

Hashem said to Moshe, "I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever." Moshe related the words of the people to Hashem. Hashem said to Moshe, "Go to the people and sanctify them...let them be prepared for the third day...You shall set boundaries for the people...Whoever touches the mountain shall surely die."

Look carefully, and you will see that this dialogue does more than exchange information between two parties. It is more like a courtship, with one side proposing drawing closer - and the other side drawing back with reticence. In the imbalance of it all, we find the difference between Judaism and other religions.

One pasuk earlier, Moshe had already brought back to Hashem the enthusiastic response of the people to the offering of the Torah. The Bnei Yisrael enthusiastically accepted responsibility for all that Hashem would command them. Why, then, does Moshe once again relate the words of the people to Hashem?

Hashem had told him that Revelation would be an utterly overwhelming experience. The Presence of G-d would be so intense and immediate, that it would have to be shrouded in the thickness of a cloud. Scaling down its intensity was not an option. Hashem wanted this moment in time to be like no other, so that a pillar of faith would stand tall and firm. The people would know, then and for all time, that G-d can speak with Man, and did speak with him at Sinai.

Moshe does not add anything to what he has already conveyed to Hashem when he conveyed the acceptance of the people. In effect, what he says is, "Do we really need such an experience, and all the consequences and precautions? The people do not need to be convinced. They have arrived at the spiritual plane that You wanted of them. They look forward with alacrity to fulfilling Your Torah. Let us shelve the sounds and the lights, and get on with the work of receiving the Torah!"

Hashem's response was to draw back. He had to bring home the message that ready as they were to accept the Torah, that readiness was not the pinnacle of spiritual accomplishment for His people. The purpose of giving them a Torah was to take them to unimanaginally higher places. Such elevation would be theirs only as a result of living by the Torah. The gap between the spiritual plane they occupied at that moment, and what the Torah would bring them after centuries and millennia of study and practice, was huge. Closely bound up with this message was a second one. By pulling

back, by creating a distance between the Giver and receivers of the Law, Hashem wished to emphasize that the Word of G-d came to mankind from a place outside of them. G-d did not speak in the people, or through the people. He spoke to them from a distance.

This crucial detail makes Judaism unique among the major religions. All other faiths sprang up from the people, who found in the ideals of those faiths spiritual meaning and significance. They sensed that there was a Higher Power, and then dictated their own terms about how to react to it. The Torah alone was not the product of Man's search for G-d, but G-d's message to Man. It alone can claim to be a completely objective system, divorced from the subconscious needs of its practitioners. Because it is objective - because it comes from a Voice of G-d heard externally to Man's inner needs - the Torah can serve as the touchstone against which all societal change and progress are measured. Because it comes from an external Source, it is not changed in the course of Man's using it; it can lay logical claim to being immutable and eternal.

By contrast, all other religions must change with time. Those religions were authored by men who lived under specific conditions, who had specific needs and whose vision and understanding was limited by the constraints of their cultural times. As those factors change, the religion based upon them must change as well. Torah, on the other hand, was not the product of a set of historical realities. It came to us from a transcendent Deity, Who is not tied to any set of human circumstances. Its truths are bound to His reality, not to our perceived realities.

The narrative with which we are presented describes a Torah that had to enter into the hearts of Man, rather than flow from them. The process was not without difficulty. They were not easy to convince. The pattern of their behavior showed them to unmistakably to be a "stiff-necked" people, resistant to giving in to authority. Picking such a people to receive the Torah was the first indication that the Word of G-d came to Man, but not from Man. Torah had to overcome their initial objections. It was not something they found within themselves and felt compelled to record for the rest of the world.

Several details that followed are consistent with a Torah that had to be brought to the people from afar. The Torah underscores that it was given by Hashem on His terms, rather than theirs. Arriving at the appointed place, the people must wait three days before anything happens. During that time, they are asked to further prepare themselves. They need to sanctify their inner selves and even the garments they wear. Immersing in a mikvah was a symbolic rebirth, as if to say that their old beings - however willing and able - could not possibly accept the Torah without resolving to begin life anew.

Even the positioning of the people at the base of the mountain heightened awareness of the Torah coming to them from afar, rather than rising up from within. Har Sinai was cordoned off. It was treated as off-limits, not to be touched by human or animal, but in a rather extreme way. It was to be regarded as so utterly other-worldly, that approaching it, touching it meant death.

The upshot of all these details was to create an interface between two different universes, so that

Torah could flow across the divide, crossing from its source, from a point beyond ordinary human reach, were it not for the chesed of Hashem.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 19: 9-13
