Thoughts for Shavuoth

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By
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On Shavuoth, we commemorate the awesome Revelation at Mount Sinai, when the Almighty presented the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel. All of the Israelite men, women and children experienced that solemn moment, marking an everlasting covenant between God and the Israelite nation.

Let us imagine that God would invite us to a second Revelation at Sinai, asking all the Jews of the world to attend.

The Hareidim would say: we cannot be in the same domain as the non-religious or less religious Jews. We are pure, we will not have contact with those of lesser purity.

The Secularists would say: we cannot attend because we do not want to be bound by any commandments. We are citizens of the world and don't want the particular responsibilities of being Jewish.

The non-Orthodox would say: we can't attend unless the event is egalitarian; and unless there is no expectation that we accept any commandments. We are open to suggestions, but not to commandments.

The modern Orthodox would insist that the Revelation also include Divine words relating to science, philosophy and the modern world.

Hassidim would demand that they be placed near their own Rebbes, and not anywhere else.

Each Sephardic and Ashkenazic ethnic group would insist on having its own hazan, its own minhag, its own pronunciation of Hebrew.

Unaffiliated Jews would turn up out of curiosity; the Kabbalah Center would set up booths on the outskirts selling books and red strings.

Alienated and ignorant Jews would complain: this event is boring, we need a rock band or other entertainment to make it attractive.

The hypothetical second Revelation might not be such a happy and congenial event, after all. And yet, it should be a tremendous unifying experience for the Jewish people.

The Talmud (Eruvin 21b) teaches that King Solomon instituted two practices, and a heavenly voice approved of both. One practice is the washing of hands before meals; the other is the setting up of eruvin (boundary enclosures). Washing hands relates to personal purification. After we wash, we remain silent until reciting the blessing over bread. During that period of time, we are in a uniquely private domain, involving only us and the Almighty. Interpersonal relationships are excluded. The eruv, though, provides a method of including others in our domain. It is a symbolic way of turning a public area into a private area by considering all of us as one extended family and community.

For us to be a whole, united Jewish people, we need to draw on both of these wise practices established by King Solomon. We need to concentrate on personal purity, on fostering a direct and powerful relationship with God. We need the humility to accept God's commandments, and to delight in them. At the same time, we need the "eruv" philosophy that attempts to include as many as possible within our domain. It is a philosophy of inclusion, not exclusion; it is a way of extending boundaries and demonstrating concern for our neighbors—even those with whom we may disagree.

Shavuoth is the festival on which we recall the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. It is also a good time to plan for a hypothetical second gathering of Israelites at Sinai—and to think carefully how we can envision such an event as an opportunity to bring all of us together.

For the Jewish people to find its spiritual balance, we will need to work on personal spiritual development and purity; and also on strategies that are grand enough to allow all of us to stand together in the presence of God. Moadim leSimha.

Angel for Shabbat