Bringing the Revelation to the World: Thoughts on Parashat Yitro, February 11, 2012

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The people of Israel witnessed the singular Revelation of God at Mount Sinai, an experience that was to change the course of history. No other people before or since has had such a direct public communication from God.

A Midrash teaches that the words of the Revelation actually split into 70 languages, indicating that the Torah contains a message for the 70 nations of the world i.e. humanity as a whole. The Israelites were chosen to be God's messengers, to deliver the teachings of Torah to the world. The nations were to see the Israelites as sources of divine truth so that they would say: "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (Devarim 4:6) The Talmud reports the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer that the Jews were exiled from their land in order to gather converts in the lands of their dispersion (Pesahim 87b).

Jews are expected to be great communicators, to bring important ideas to the nations of the world. To fulfill our responsibilities, we must recognize that we are part of the human family, that we must understand the languages and ideas of the nations, and that we must be able to enter into meaningful discussion with others. The Torah presents us with a vast agenda. This agenda can be met only through engagement and involvement with humanity. It would be incredible to think that God's expectation at Mount Sinai was that the Jewish people would live in isolation from the civilizations of the world, that we would be confined to physical and mental ghettos.

Yet, engagement with the civilizations of the world entails risks. If we learn the languages and cultures of other nations, we might assimilate into their patterns. Instead of bringing them closer to the ideals of Torah, we might ourselves be drawn away from the Torah way of life. The "outside world" presents dangers to our spiritual lives. Nonetheless, we are called upon to be a light unto the nations. In spite of the risks involved, we must have confidence that the Torah can successfully confront every civilization, that we can heroically maintain our own way of life while at the same time sharing in the life of humanity as a whole. We

are to be a “wise and understanding people” actively participating in human civilization; we are not to be a reclusive, narrow people, afraid of the world, afraid of our own weaknesses.

Modern civilization surely poses spiritual dangers to the Jewish people. Some argue that it is best for Jews to give up on the world and simply worry about ourselves. Let us insulate ourselves from the “outside world” to the extent possible. Let us wall ourselves into spiritual ghettos.

It was recently reported that some rabbis, including the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, signed a letter forbidding the use of the Internet. They warned about the “spiritual dangers” and the availability of immoral content on the Internet. These rabbis claim that it is a Torah obligation to avoid using the Internet. If one’s livelihood depends on it, one must be sure that the best possible filtering software is used to sift out all the sinful content on the Internet. Rabbi Moshe Shafir, editor of Yom Leyom, the newspaper of the Shas party, has described the Intenet as “a bad devil” subjecting its users to the worst religious sins a Jew could ever commit. He calls upon readers to “throw away this device of impurity and abomination, and obey the outstanding rabbis of the generation [who forbid using the Internet].”

Surely, the Internet has content that undermines religious values and ideals. Surely, every effort must be made to filter out the objectionable material. But is it realistic or religiously mandatory to avoid using the Internet?

The rabbis who forbid the Internet and think of it as a “bad devil” are essentially asking Jews to disconnect themselves from the major means of communication among the people of the world. They seem to overlook the vast amount of positive material on the Internet, including a tremendous number of Torah websites that have given religious knowledge and strength to so many thousands of people.

These rabbis want to march us back into the pre-modern era, thinking that if we only close our eyes and plug our ears, all the evils of the modern world will somehow vanish. Is their ruling going to make the Jews appear to be “a wise and understanding people” in the eyes of the nations? Or will it simply consign us to occupy the backwaters of human civilization, living as an isolated sect with no message to and no engagement with humanity?

It is proper to be concerned about the dangers of the Internet and other modern technological advances, and it is proper to provide filters and safeguards that

protect us from improper material. But it is absurd to call on us to “throw away this device of impurity” when it is a powerful link between us and the rest of the world, when so much good can be accomplished through it. The Internet, as other modern technologies, is “neutral”—and can be used for good and for ill. The correct strategy is not to outlaw the Internet, but to instruct people on how to take advantage of its immense powers and how to avoid its negative elements.

At the Revelation at Mount Sinai, the Almighty surely expected something great from the people of Israel. He surely expected us to be His messengers in bringing the ideas and ideals of Torah to the nations of the world. He surely expected us to be viewed as “a wise and understanding people” who maintain exemplary righteousness.He expected us to have the spiritual strength and stamina to hold fast to our values while interacting constructively with the nations of the world.

Angel for Shabbat