The Humility of an Open Mind: Thoughts for Shavuoth

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When I was a senior at Franklin High School in Seattle, my teacher for Language Arts was Mr. James Britain. Even after these many years, I remember him and his class quite vividly.

I invariably got A grades on all my papers. But once, Mr. Britain marked my paper with a D. I think I learned more from that D than from all my A papers. What was the paper about and what did I learn?

Mr. Britain often presented the class with challenging assignments. Once, he asked us to walk around the outside of the school building and to observe all its architectural details. Another assignment was to study a painting and analyze it as carefully as possible—its colors, perspective, lighting etc. His goal was to teach us to “see”, to focus in on detail, to look for the usual and the unusual.

One day, he played a recording of atonal electronic music for the class and asked us to write our impressions. I was outraged by this “music” and wrote a scathing essay condemning it. This was not music at all! It was a cacophony of senseless screeching, painful to the ear. Mr. Britain gave me a D on this paper. He wrote me a one line comment: “In order to learn, you must open your mind to new ideas.”

When I spoke to him afterward about my “unfair” grade, he calmly explained that I had entirely missed the point of the assignment. He indicated that I should have listened carefully, with an open mind; I should have tried to understand the intentions of the composer; I should have put aside my preconceived notions so as to experience the music on its terms—not on mine. Only after I had processed the experience with an open mind was I entitled to offer my judgments about it. Think carefully, don’t rant.

That was one of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned—and one of the most difficult to apply.

We all have fixed ideas on a great many topics. It is often painful to hear opinions that conflict with our sure understanding of life. New ideas, unusual approaches, unconventional artistic expressions—these are difficult to absorb. It is tempting—and usual—to shut off ideas that challenge our own views and tastes. It is very common for those who have different views to talk at each other, or to talk against each other; it is far less common for people actually to listen to each other, to try sincerely to understand the ideas and approaches of others. To open our minds to new ideas demands tremendous self-control and humility.

And this brings us to some thoughts about Shavuoth.

The festival of Shavuoth commemorates the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Torah and its commandments were revealed by the Almighty to the people of Israel on this special mountain.

In the early 17th century, Rehuel Jessurun wrote Dialogo dos Montes, a drama based on the rabbinic tradition that various mountains competed for the privilege of having the Torah revealed on them. (The drama was presented on Shavuoth, 1624, in the Bet Yaacob synagogue of Amsterdam.) Each mountain offered its claim to be the most worthy of this honor. Mount Sinai, though, was humble. It was a low and unimpressive mountain, hardly worthy of being chosen by God for the Divine revelation of the Torah. Because of its very humility, God chose Mount Sinai upon which to give the Israelites the Torah.

Much of human life resembles the Dialogue of the Mountains. People seek to assert their pre-eminence, to highlight their virtues, to claim the highest honors. Yet, it is the Mount Sinais of the world who reflect the quiet humility worthy of Divine blessing.

As we celebrate the Shavuoth festival commemorating the Revelation at Mount Sinai, it would be appropriate for us to recall the symbolic virtues of Mount Sinai—humility, awareness of limitations, openness to new and unique revelation.

"In order to learn, you must open your mind to new ideas."

This does not mean that one must accept all new ideas, or that one should adopt every new opinion. Rather, it entails the ability to listen carefully, to analyze and process ideas, to think carefully and not to rant. Even ideas that we ultimately reject may contain kernels of truth that will sharpen and enhance our own

understanding.

To open our minds to new and differing ideas is not only the way for all of us to grow intellectually and spiritually; it is the foundation of a responsible civil society.

Moadim leSimha.

Angel for Shabbat