Are We Still Listening? Thoughts for Bemidbar and Shavuoth

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When the Israelites gathered around Mount Sinai to experience the awesome Revelation of God, each of them heard the same words—but in different ways! The Midrash teaches (Shemot Rabba 29:1) that God spoke “bekoho shel kol ehad ve-ehad,” according to the individual abilities of each listener. The universal message of Torah was made direct and personal. The miracle at Mount Sinai was not only the Revelation of God to the nation of Israel, but the individualized Revelation to each and every Israelite man, woman and child.

I think the message of this rabbinic teaching goes further. It does not merely refer to the receptivity and ability of Israelites at the moment of Revelation at Mount Sinai. It also recognizes that each individual’s koah—strength of understanding—is not stagnant. As we grow, deepen our knowledge, expand our sensitivities and open our minds and hearts—our koah evolves. In a sense, we receive the Revelation anew at each stage in life—actually, every day and every moment of life.

This is the wonder and glory of Torah: it speaks to us directly and personally throughout our lives. The great Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, taught: “There are those who hear the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah and keep hearing that Shofar throughout the year. There are others, on a higher level, who heard the Shofar at Mount Sinai and keep hearing it every day of their lives.”

Religiosity is not confined within a neatly sealed package. Faith is not something that can be totally attained and put on auto-pilot. Religiosity and faith are dynamic, fluid, developing. There are ups and downs, high moments and low moments. Sometimes we hear the Shofar of Sinai loud and clear, and sometimes we strain with all our might and we still can’t hear it. The Revelation at Sinai was not merely a gift—but a challenge. We are called upon to draw on our koah, our inner strength and courage, in order to maintain the teachings of Torah.

Throughout the generations, Jews have exhibited incredible loyalty to the Torah’s commandments and ideals, sacrificing so much in order to stay true to the

challenge received at Sinai. It has not been—and is not—easy to stand up for truth, compassion, justice. It is so much easier to sit quietly on the sidelines or go along with the crowd.

People frequently complain about corrupt or self-serving leaders—in politics, communal life, religious institutions. Yet, these very leaders have been chosen or maintained in power by the very people who are complaining! Why indeed is society afflicted with so many leaders who are autocratic, conniving, bullying? Why are leaders of nations and institutions able to endanger their own constituents and undermine their wellbeing? The answer basically is: the public lets them get away with their corruption and ruthlessness. People are either cowed, or passive, or feel themselves too weak to stand up in protest.

Nations, societies and institutions ultimately have the leadership they deserve. If they do not demand more, they have little right to complain. If they do not draw on their individual koah to combat governmental, religious and social evils, then they are accomplices to the evil.

The Revelation at Sinai reminds us that we each have koah, we each can find our voice and our courage to stand up for what is right. This is a persistent plea to us that began at Sinai and continues every day of our lives. Edmund Burke pointed out: “All that the forces of evil need to succeed is for enough good men to do nothing.” Those who “do nothing” have no right to expect anything. Those who “do something” are those who validate their own lives and bring blessing to the world. The Revelation at Sinai continues to prod us to a life of koah. Are we still listening?

Angel for Shabbat