The Ongoing Revelation

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By

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The Revelation at Mount Sinai was a national experience for all the people of Israel—but it also was very personal. Each Israelite 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.

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 foundational experience of the Revelation has an ongoing impact on how we confront life. Among the lessons is the importance of interiority, of being strong within ourselves.

The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Ladino biblical commentary (Turkey, 18th century), notes that the original Revelation on Mount Sinai was a highly dramatic episode. Moses ascended the mountain as the people of Israel gathered below with great anticipation. The scene was marked by thunder and lightning and the sound of the shofar. The voice of God was heard by all. Yet, shortly afterward, the Israelites were dancing around a golden calf! When Moses came down the mountain and witnessed this idolatrous behavior, he threw down and shattered the tablets of the law.

Later, Moses ascended the mountain again. This time, there was no public fanfare, no miraculous sounds and lights. God told Moses that he himself would

have to carve out the stone on which the Ten Commandments would be inscribed. The second set of the tablets of the law--received by Moses alone and through his own hard labor--was preserved.

The first tablets of the Ten Commandments, given with so much drama, were destroyed. The second tablets, given privately and quietly, survived and became the spiritual foundation of the people of Israel.

The Me'am Lo'ez points to the moral of this story: the really important and lasting things in life are often done by individuals in privacy, through their own exertions. Things done with much publicity may not be as permanent. We ought not judge the value of a person or an event based on external glitter and fame. Rather, we ought to realize that greatness and permanent value are often found in obscurity, in seemingly small and unnoticed acts of kindness or spiritual insight.

External fame, power, and popularity do not necessarily correlate to internal worth. What is truly important is what we do through the sweat of our own brow, quietly, without seeking publicity or glory. What is valuable and lasting in us are those things which are authentic, honest and good in the eyes of God, and which bring goodness and kindness to our fellow human beings.

Another lesson of the Revelation is that the Torah provides a grand and universal religious vision. A famous Midrash teaches that the Revelation at Sinai was split into 70 languages i.e. contained a message for the 70 nations of the world (understood to refer to all humanity). The Torah is not to be understood or limited as being a narrow message intended for a small sect. The Torah is not to be limited to a reclusive people living in self-contained ghettoes; rather, it is to provide spiritual insight to all humanity. The great 19th century Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh stressed Israel’s role as the most universal of religions, a religion that provides the moral framework for civilization a whole.

The Revelation accounts in the Torah also provide guidance on how to live as full, real people, with a healthy and wholesome sense of self. The Talmud reports (Berakhot 8b) that the holy ark in the Tabernacle contained the two sets of the Tablets of the law: the broken pieces of the first set, and the complete tablets of the second set. “Luhot veshivrei luhot munahot ba-aron.”

A lesson from this is: we each have “complete” and “broken” tablets within ourselves. We have our greatest strengths and achievements; and we also have our failures and shortcomings. If we only focus on the “complete” aspects of our lives, we may tend to become arrogant and egotistical. If we focus on the

“broken” aspects of our lives, we may become demoralized and crushed. To be whole and strong human beings, we need to value both sets of tablets within us. We need to draw on our strengths and learn from our failings. We need to balance self-confidence with honest awareness of our limitations and weaknesses.

The awesome Revelation at Mt. Sinai was a singular experience that took place thousands of years ago. The ongoing revelation continues within each of us, for all generations.

Angel for Shabbat