

Distance and Intimacy at Mount Sinai

By Dr. Erica Brown

In Exodus 19, the children of Israel prepared for three days for the giving of the *Aseret Hadibrot*. During this time, they were commanded to create and maintain a heightened sense of purity. Moshe told them to set up boundaries around Mount Sinai to prevent them from approaching it until they heard the sound of the *shofar*, entitling them to ascend the mount. Thus, the Children of Israel both prepared for the holiness that was within their reach and set limitations for that which was beyond them.

In his article, “Loving the Torah More than God,”¹ the French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, makes several observations about the distance generated in this chapter between God and humankind. According to Levinas, “The adult’s God is revealed precisely through the void of the children’s heaven.” The fear in the chapter, he believes, confirms a larger theological message:

Man’s real humanity and gentle nature enter into the world with the harsh words of an exacting God. Spirituality is offered us not through a tangible substance, but through absence. God is real and concrete not through incarnation but through Law, and His greatness is not inspired by His sacred mystery. His greatness does not provoke fear and trembling but fills us with high thoughts. To hide one’s face so as to demand the superhuman of man...that is a truly divine mark of greatness! This is a long way from a warm and almost tangible communion with the Divine and from the desperate pride of the atheist. It is a complete and austere humanism, linked to a *difficult adoration*.

The “difficult adoration” of which Levinas speaks was created not only by laws that prohibited intimacy with God at *Har Sinai*. It was also stimulated by the introduction of stormy weather: thunder, lightning, and dense clouds on the mount. The impact was predictable: the children of Israel were afraid: “*All the people who were in the camp trembled*” (Exodus 19:16). The demands of personal preparation, the boundaries around the mount—cemented by the punishment of death for anyone who failed to respect them—and the threatening weather created an atmosphere of awe and distance. In Levinas’s understanding, a warm, nurturing God would minimize the impact of God’s own words, which must stand on their own merit. Yet, in re-creating this religious moment every Shavuot with the reading and celebrating of the *Aseret Hadibrot*, is it this distance that we are aiming to experience anew?

We can expand this question by considering the beginning of Exodus 19, in which a very different relationship between God and humankind was cultivated. God told Moshe to communicate to the Israelites a very specific message:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19: 4-6).

Rashi understood from the framing of this verse—namely that God told Moshe twice, once before and once after the speech, to speak these exact words—that Moshe was not to paraphrase God’s words, as he might have done in other communications. Instead, he must utter God’s exact words. Before the thunder and lightning, before the physical preparations, came this mental preparation for revelation.

Here, at the beginning of the chapter, the message is very different. God appears nurturing and close. He spoke the language of covenant, of partnership. He embraced His children as

an eagle bears hers and regarded them as one would a fine treasure. Lastly, God told them that they could be a priestly people, despite the fact that priests in Jewish tradition are hereditary positions assigned to those from a particular family. God sought to convince the members of this former slave nation that they had the capacity for both holiness and leadership. They were capable of moving from positions of subordination to those of autonomy and authority. Before God told them to purify themselves for the actual moment of revelation, He told them that, in essence, they had the capacity for greatness.

It is difficult to imagine that people engaged in manual labor, in the work of slaves, could ever believe themselves capable of leadership or of being nurtured and treasured by the one who rules over them. God wanted these specific words heard so that the Children of Israel would understand what to aspire to ultimately, not only in terms of the Ten Commandments, but with all else that was to follow. In this part of the chapter, there was no lightning bearing down; there were eagles flying up. Here, in place of a fence around the mount, there was a sense of great expansiveness.

We return to our question. What impression was a participant to have at Mount Sinai that we want to re-create today? Is it the awe, reverence, and distance of the last half of Exodus 19, or is it the nurturing, protective and confidence-building relationship with God described in the first half of that chapter?

As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites were, no doubt, used to receiving orders, given in a curt and authoritative manner. These orders did not place intellectual or spiritual demands on them; instead, they concerned specific actions. Much of this tempo appears in the content and style of the commandments: they are short, definitive demands requiring action or stating prohibitions. Had the *Aseret Hadibrot* not been preceded by the earlier poetic speech of Exodus 19:4, the communication between God and humans would have been similar in many ways to that between slave and master. By giving a brief preparatory speech beforehand, God changed the whole tenor of the encounter. Naturally, awe, reverence, and distance must be part of the *mysterium tremendum* of revelation, but before making demands, God created expectations. The children of Israel *can* be holy, *can* be leaders, *can* be partners in a covenant. God gave them responsibilities only after imbuing them with the confidence that these responsibilities would be transformative.

One of the most powerful lessons we learn from this dialectic experience of revelation—of distance and closeness—is how to dispense orders and responsibilities when *we* are in a position of authority. Whether as an employer or a parent, in our professional or personal lives, we often make demands of others and assign them tasks. At those times we must ask ourselves if we have created unbalanced relationships of hierarchy and subordination or if we have achieved more balanced relationships by instilling confidence, giving praise and creating opportunities for partnership. Often people are under the misapprehension that the only way to motivate obedience is through criticism or demand; they do not realize that long-term partnerships benefit from believing in the capacity of others to achieve their potential. Before creating geographic limitations, God offered us a limitless belief in ourselves. We, in turn, need to inspire others to feel treasured and nurtured as they fulfill their responsibilities. We celebrate this dual legacy every Shavuot.

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1 Emmanuel Levinas, “Loving the Torah More than God,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).