

Parashat Yitro, 5770, 2010:

Rabbi David Etengoff

One Torah for All Time

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Parashat Yitro is the *parasha* wherein G-d revealed Himself to our ancestors at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai):

And the L-rd said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in the thickness of the cloud, in order that the people hear when I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever.”... It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunderclaps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered. Moses brought the people out toward G-d from the camp, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the L-rd had descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the smoke of the kiln, and the entire mountain quaked violently. The sound of the shofar grew increasingly stronger; Moses would speak and G-d would answer him with a voice. And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they stood from afar. (*Sefer Shemot* 19:9,16-19, 20:15, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The Rambam (1135-1204) formulates the physically apprehensible nature of Hashem’s revelation to us in the context of his analysis of the veracity of Moshe’s prophecy:

The Jews did not believe in Moses, our teacher, because of the wonders that he performed. Whenever anyone's belief is based on wonders, [the commitment of] his heart has shortcomings, because it is possible to perform a wonder through magic or sorcery... What is the source of our belief in him? The [Revelation] at Mount Sinai. Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's. There was fire, thunder, and lightning. He entered the thick clouds; the Voice spoke to him and we heard. “Moses, Moses, go tell them the following:....” Thus, [Deuteronomy 5:4] relates: “Face to face, G-d spoke to you,” and [Deuteronomy 5:3] states: “Not with our forefathers [alone] did the L-rd make this covenant, but with us, we, all of whom are here alive today.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah*, 8:1, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, underlining my own)

Given the above, our *parasha* provides us with a unique opportunity to pause and reflect upon our relationship to G-d, the Torah, and the mitzvot. On the most basic level, we know that there is a tripartite process that forms the background of each and every commandment of the Torah: Hashem as the *metzaveh* (the Commander), the *mitzvah* (the commandment), and man as the *metzuveh* (the commanded). Each time we are *mekayam* a mitzvah (fulfill a commandment), we demonstrate our loyalty to our Creator and prove to the world that the Voice emanating from *Har Sinai* continues to be heard in all of its power and majesty. In addition, we show the entire world that the relationship G-d forged with our forbears continues to flourish until our own historical moment. By keeping Hashem's Torah, we joyfully proclaim: "*Hashem Hu HaElokim.*" ("Hashem is our G-d and Master")

Part of believing in the absolute truth of the Torah entails the belief in its immutability and that the Revelation at *Har Sinai* was a never-to-be-repeated event. Thus, in the ninth of his Thirteen Principles of Faith, Maimonides states:

The Ninth Principle of Faith is that of nullification. This means that the Torah of Moshe will never be abolished or annulled. In addition, there will never be another Torah from Hashem besides this one. Moreover, nothing may be added to or subtracted from the Torah, neither in a written manner or by way of interpretation and explanation... (*Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Sanhedrin, Chapter 10, translation my own*)

The Rambam based his position, in part, on the following famous Talmudic passage that is concerned with a *machloket* (dispute) regarding ritual purity and impurity:

On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: "If the *halachah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!" Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. "No proof can be brought from a carob-tree," they retorted. Again he said to them: "If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!"

Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — “No proof can be brought from a stream of water,” they rejoined. Again he urged: “If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,” whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: “When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have you to interfere?” Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright position, in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: “If the *halachah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!” Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: “Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!” But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: “It is not in heaven.” (“*Lo bashamayim hi*,” *Sefer Devarim* 30:12) What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai (*Sefer Shemot* 23:2), “After the majority must one incline.” (*Talmud Bavli, Baba Metziah* 59b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

The above-cited Talmudic passage is amazing, to say the least. In one fell swoop, it repudiates any possibility of a post-Sinaitic Revelation. Therefore, by definition, both Christianity and Islam are fundamentally specious, since they rest upon a foundation of a supposed subsequent revelation. Moreover, it appears that human reason, in conjunction with the accepted principles of Torah exegesis and analysis, is the determinant in any halachic dispute – even when one of the disputants is “a Heavenly Voice” (“*bat kol*”)!

The concept of man, rather than G-d, as the final arbiter of all halachic arguments was given eloquent voice by Rabbi Yosef Bloch *zatzal* (1860-1930), the head of the Telz Yeshiva in Lithuania:

When the Torah was given to Israel, its laws were given over to the Torah Sages, whose thinking, provided that it is aimed at the Torah's reasons and secrets, establishes the reality of the Torah and the reality of the universe that is dependent upon it. Thus, it differs from the other branches of wisdom, for those who investigate them do not establish the reality of those branches of wisdom, but rather uncover it. For their thinking and decisions will never change reality. This is not the case regarding Torah, for the reality of ritual impurity and purity, forbidden and permitted things, obligation and exemption, are set in accordance with the decisions of the Torah Sages. (*Shi'urei Da'at*, I, p. 21, translation, Rabbi David Strauss, as found in Rabbi Chaim Navon's Article: “Torah Study – Creation or Revelation,” www.vbm-torah.org/archive/philhalak/14amhal.rtf)

Closer to our own time, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein *zatzal* (1895-1986) explicitly stated in the introduction to the first volume of his monumental collection of responsa, entitled “*Iggrot Moshe*,” that a decision rendered by *Chazal* (Our Sages of Blessed Memory) must be followed – even if it is not congruent with G-d’s intent!

When an argument arises they must act in accordance with the understanding of the majority of the Torah Sages – even if it is possible that they did not comprehend the absolute truth (*shelo nitkavnu l’haemet*) and this was the understanding of Hashem – may He be blessed. The Holy One Blessed be He gave the Torah to the Jewish people in order that they should follow it according to their understanding of the written word and that which was handed over to them orally at Mount Sinai – all according to their comprehension. Moreover, Hashem, may He be blessed, will neither explain nor make determinations in the laws of the Torah – since “it is not in Heaven.” Rather, Hashem has already agreed from the onset to [abide by] the understanding and explanation of the Torah Sages. From here we may conclude that the letters of the Torah are [like] angels that act in accordance to that which is evident in the Torah, in the view of the Sages of the Torah, – even if it is possible that this was never the understanding of Hashem, may He be blessed. (Translation and underlining my own)

Stated somewhat differently, while the Torah is absolute Truth, the decisions rendered by *Chazal* are not - since they are based upon the interpretations and explanations of finite human beings. Thus, only G-d has “the Truth,” whereas man can only have the truth as it appears to him. Hashem, however, chose to give man, and not the angels, His holy Torah (“*lo nitnah haTorah l’malachai hasharet*”). As such, He agreed from the very moment of the Revelation, if not from the first microsecond of the creation of the Universe, that man, rather than Himself, would be the ultimate decisor of Halacha. Truly, to quote two verses from *Dovid Hamelech* (King David): “Blessed are you to the L-rd, the Maker of heaven and earth. The heavens are heavens of the L-rd, but the earth He gave to the children of men.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 115: 15-16, underlining my own)

With the Almighty’s help, may we all fulfill the words of the second *bracha* of the blessings over Torah study that we recite each and every day:

“Please, Hashem, our G-d, sweeten the words of Your Torah in our mouth and in the mouth of Your people, the family of Israel. May we and our offspring and the offspring of Your people, the House of Israel – all of us – know your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake...” (Translation, *The Artscroll Siddur*) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

Do you have questions, comments, ideas, or thoughts about this drasha? Would you like to share them? My blog is located at: tefilahandtorah.blogspot.com.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.