

An Alternative *Krias Hatorah* (Torah Reading)

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One of the Shavuot customs that communities observe throughout the world is to learn (and drink coffee) throughout the night and *daven* (pray) at sunrise. Although the custom has developed and evolved over the centuries, the Magen Avraham (494:1) believes that the reason behind the practice to remain awake learning is to rectify a mistake the Jews made the day they received the Torah on Sinai.

The midrash (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:57) records a fascinating story. The night before the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people did what most people would do before an important event—they turned in early for a good night’s sleep. This seemingly innocent decision, however, led to embarrassing consequences. The next morning, when it came time for the Torah to be given, the place was empty. The entire Jewish people had slept in. The Midrash even recounts that Moshe had to wake them—causing G-d to later lament with the prophet Isaiah’s (50:2) words, “Why have I come and no one is here to receive me?”

This would not be the last time God would invoke Isaiah’s challenge. The Talmud (Brachos 6b) relates “When the Holy One, Blessed be He, enters a synagogue and does not find ten people there, He immediately becomes angry, as it is stated: ‘Why have I come and there is no one? [Why] have I called and no one answers?’”

And yet this year, though we may try our best to rectify the mistake of our ancestors, to remain awake and study Torah in eager anticipation of the first rays of dawn, the Holy One Blessed be He will enter the synagogue and once again find it empty.

“Why have I come and there is no one?” He will ask. “Why have I called and no one answers?” He will lament.

But we will have an answer this time.

Instead of having to wake us up, Moshe, the indefatigable defender of our nation will cry out in heaven that there is no one to answer God’s call in shul, because we are faithfully fulfilling His call to us in the Torah (Deuteronomy 4:15) “*venishmartem meod lenafshoseichem*” – and you shall take great care of yourselves. The primacy of God-given life trumps God’s call in shul.

And when Hashem hears our response, He will not be angry. On the contrary, He will be filled with *simcha* at this display of our unwavering commitment to the Torah despite the painful sacrifices we must make.

But such *simcha* cannot fill the void of people in an empty synagogue. It cannot replace the *ameins* we would have answered. It cannot give voice to the Ten Commandments that we will not read Shavuot morning. And for us, it seems a paltry replacement for the indescribable

experience we share learning together throughout the night followed by a Shacharis when through sheer willpower we keep our eyes open, clutching the pews to stand and reenact the revelation at Sinai.

And that's just Shavuot night. We cannot fully capture the moving story of Ruth or the communal recitation of Yizkor on our own. And finally, on the one holiday on the Jewish calendar which every sage in the Talmud agreed must be celebrated with a joyous feast, we cannot share it with others in person.

When I was a child, one my teachers told me in the name of a chassidic rebbe that because every year there is a new *Kabbalas Hatorah* (Acceptance of the Torah), Hashem proclaims the *Aseres Hadibros* (Ten Commandments) Shavuot morning from Har Sinai for the world to hear. And though we may not be sufficiently spiritually sensitive to physically hear God's words, our souls are invigorated each year by this wondrous experience of the infinite communicating with the finite. So while we may not read the Ten Commandments from a Sefer Torah, our souls will still hear the silent words of God Shavuot morning.

However, this should not be seen as mere consolation. It seems strange how the Torah (Exodus 19:16) describes God's voice as a booming, thunderous roar, while in *Sefer Melachim* (1 Kings 19:12), Eliyahu Hanavi (Elijah the Prophet) is explicitly told that God's presence was heralded by the *kol demamah dakah*, a murmuring, almost silent, tone? The Zohar (3:33b) answers that the Torah's characterization refers to Hashem's "heard voice," the way He interfaces with the world. But the *kol demamah dakah*, the sound that cannot be heard, characterizes a more internal dimension of Hashem - His "inner voice."

Sometime referred to as "self-talk," the inner voice is a cognitive construct developed by the human mind, an internal monologue providing a running verbal monologue of a person's thoughts while they are conscious. Serving as the bridge between amorphous thoughts and feelings and external speech and actions, the inner voice is usually tied to a person's sense of self and is the source of the words, deeds, and values we share with world.

While certainly not meant literally, God, as it were, also has an inner voice. It is the source of the values and ideas He chooses to express with the thunderous external voice employed at Sinai. But that audible voice is inherently limiting. Much like the world would be overwhelmed if we communicated with others by narrating our internal monologue, God must circumscribe the infinite wisdom of His "inner voice" into the finite words of the Torah which can be heard by mortals.

But once in a while, we, like Eliyahu Hanavi, get a glimpse at Hashem's "inner voice." His *kol demamah dakah*. Not concrete words or commandments, but the thoughts and values behind them. Though we are not privileged this year to hear God's audible voice in the Torah Reading this year, that stark silence yields the space for us to listen to His inner voice. That *kol*

demamah dakah, the infinite source of values, munificence, and determinations which translate into the Torah we know, cherish, and follow.

Though we won't hear the audible *Aseres Hadibros*, we will merit to be privy to the "inner voice" of the *Aseres Hadibros*. The values behind the Ten Commandments. Values which dictate that the preservation of life is paramount.

While we must be proud and happy of our observance of the immutable obligation to guard our lives and the lives of others, we cannot deny (or forget) the inevitable sadness that we feel - unable to answer Hashem's call when He enters the shul. Nor can we deny the loneliness and pain of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) that His children are hurting and unable to join Him in His house on this special day; in the darkened vacuum of the synagogue, illuminated by the solitary flickering glow of the *ner tamid* (eternal flame), Hashem's silent call thunderously reverberates against the sanctuary walls.

There will be no roaring paeans of Hallel, nor brilliant glow of lights in the *beis medrish* (Torah study hall), but God's silent call, the intimate *kol demamah dakah* of the *Aseres Hadibros*, will always be there. As we say each Friday night in Lecha Dodi, "*sof ma'aseh bemachshava techilah*" – the actions we do reflect the inner voice that bore the decisions we made. When we adhere to the values, we join the profound silence of Hashem's inner voice and compliment it with the audible Torah, *tefillah*, and *chessed* that fill the homes in our community over the holiday and beyond.

This year's celebration of *Matan Torah* (Giving of the Torah) will no doubt be different for many of us. Against the backdrop of personal and communal sacrifice, loss, and loneliness, we are more attuned to the *kol demama dakah* than ever before. It is an intimate moment when we, in our individual homes, can embrace God, His "meta-halachic" values, and the Torah they produced. With this connection, we share not only ideas and ideals, but emotions as well. Hashem shares in our loneliness, our sadness, and our simcha. And we share in His. Indeed, the Talmud (Taanis 30b) compares *Matan Torah* to a wedding between Hashem and the Jews, and each year we affirm and celebrate this special bond we share. (Let's just not oversleep this time!)

Wishing you all a Chag Sameach and a happy, healthy, and meaningful *Zman Matan Toraseinu!!*