

Thoughts for V'etchanan

Educating Faith

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Har Sinai is everything!! For the first time in history G-d descended into the human realm and revealed Himself to an entire population of three million strong. This epic revelation hasn't repeated itself in over 3400 years. Every religion asserts formative events in the evolution of their religious system. However, no religion has ever staked the audacious claim which we have held dearly for centuries: an entire population spoke directly with G-d in a verifiable and non-hallucinatory fashion; three million were on hand to corroborate the authenticity of this event. Nothing short of a second Har Sinai can undermine the certainty of that moment. Miracles, omens, modern discoveries, changes in human experience all pale in comparison to the directly revealed word of G-d. That moment, frozen in time, remains inalienable.

It wasn't just the content of Sinai which positioned the cornerstones of Jewish belief. The "experience" itself highlighted fundamental tenets of Jewish belief. No images or visuals were displayed that day, reinforcing the non-physicality and unknowability of G-d. This was a day of voices and of auditory experiences but not one of pictures. Throughout the ages, we have staunchly defended pure monotheism- the notion that no image, nor any human term can capture the Divine essence.

Additionally, the emotions we sensed on that day framed our continuing emotional interface with G-d. Astoundingly, we are mandated to both love and fear G-d, to both understand His will while simultaneously surrendering to the mystery of His wisdom. Somehow, both of these "conflicting emotions" intermingled on that day. The Torah's description of the encounter highlights the billowing smoke and the infernal fire which terrified the attendees. Yet, in Shir Hashirim, Shlomo Hamelech depicts Sinai as a marriage consummation between G-d and His chosen bride atop this mountain canopy. Our relationship with G-d is too complex to be reduced to a single emotion- as powerful or potent as that

emotion may be. Instead, it is the unlikely blend of fear and love which animates our relationship with G-d. This astounding combination was also hatched at Har Sinai.

However, as immutable as Har Sinai felt, Torah isn't static. As seminal as the events of Sinai may have been, the transmission of Torah is dynamic- interpreted by great human imaginations decoding the Divine code. Two great human traditions were launched at Sinai- prophecy and Torah sheba'al peh. While the general population was terrified by the billowing smoke, Moshe Rabeinu freely entered the infernal fire without harm or injury. We heard him relay the Divine voice which we couldn't fully comprehend. We learned that as distant as G-d sometimes seems, he speaks directly communicates with individuals of surpassing virtue, erudition and prophetic capacity. We also recognized that as eternal as Torah may be, it can and would be, interpreted by the human heart and the human imagination. So many elements of Jewish belief were showcased by both the content and the experiences of Har Sinai.

For this reason we are commanded to transmit the story of this mountain. In fact, many cataloguers of the 613 mitzvot list a separate mitzvah to retell the Sinai story. Beyond instructing mitzvah observance or Torah knowledge we are instructed to take our children back to the mountain and reinforce the Faith which was delivered atop its summit.

It is fair to ask ourselves whether our modern educational experience has veered from this educational mandate. To a large degree, the Jewish Orthodox world has succeeded in both inculcating halachik fidelity and promoting Torah scholarship but has swerved away from the instruction of Faith. In part, this veering was prompted by two seismic events which tossed the Jewish world in the 20th century. The Holocaust poses very serious questions about G-d and the presence of evil in our world. The magnitude of this tragedy defies human imagination and encouraged a general avoidance of discussions of Faith; the stakes of this discussion were too great and, to many, the deck seemed "stacked". By contrast, but just as significantly, the return to Israel has provided a theological "vacuum cleaner" which sweeps up all questions of Faith. Any conversation about Faith and the struggle for Faith can be "easily" resolved by the Messianic presumptions underlying our return to Israel. If, indeed, history is about to conclude, and we are

cycling toward utopia, all questions will ultimately be resolved. Other minor factors have decentralized the exploration of Faith in our communities; ultimately many deeply religious Jews haven't pondered even the basic questions pertaining to Faith.

Even if we don't invest significant educational resources toward the study of Faith, it is crucial to discuss it openly within our families and communities. The average Orthodox Shabbat table is adorned by a range of divrei Torah which address the centrality of Torah, the sanctity of a Jew, Israel as the epicenter of Judaism or the pursuit of moral conscience. How often do these Shabbat Torah discussions address issues of Faith which lie at the core of our belief?

It is likely that serious discussions of Faith are neglected, in part, because parents and teachers themselves are deficient in Faith-based education. Once a tradition is 'lost' it is very difficult to recover that information. For centuries, Tanach study was relatively decentralized and many great scholars, possessing vast Torah knowledge were, none the less, unable to fully transmit a Tanach mesorah which they themselves hadn't been exposed to. It appears as if our generation is facing a similar deficit in our familiarity with the question surrounding Faith.

This has created a potentially dangerous situation. As a community, we have excelled in the augmentation of halachik observance, Torah study and our identification with Israel. Yet, we remain vulnerable to serious challenges to our Faith. At some point it seems as if that "debt" will be paid and the consequences of that 'payment' may be dire. Parshat Yitro is a critical opportunity to restore the conversation about Faith. It is an opportunity to celebrate our illustrious tradition- delivered from father to child- about that desert event which continues to brace Jewish Faith.