

## Parashat Yitro: Matan Torah Could Not Happen Over Zoom

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As the Super Bowl approaches this coming weekend, we may be reminded of a classic debate in sports: is the best place for a sports fan at the stadium/arena cheering from the stands, or at home watching the game on television? On the one hand, many have made the argument that watching the game from home is a far superior experience. Your couch is more comfortable than the stadium seats; the temperature is likely much better at home; the food, parking, and tickets are cheaper; and it is much more likely the TV crew is giving you a better view than you would have watching from the third deck. Yet, thousands of people show up every day at their home team's playing field to enjoy the game. Despite the mild discomfort (especially for football fans at December games) and high costs, it is deemed a worthwhile experience. Why is this the case? People get an experience of camaraderie with the other fans who are otherwise strangers - cheering together, hoping for victory together, and the excitement and the energy in the stadium is palpable. But the experience also feels authentic. You are simply there. You are having the full sensory experience. Especially when it comes to the Super Bowl or the World Series - just being there is part of the magic. Watching it on TV, you know what is happening and you see the plays. But you are just not present at the game. The experience of the game is more than just watching it take place.

The same can be said for other important events. I have witnessed a number of lifecycle events over Zoom over the course of the last year - a bris milah, weddings, and unfortunately, funerals and shivas. We are blessed that we are able to participate in other people's pivotal life moments through these electronic platforms. Although certainly meaningful, attending a wedding over Zoom or watching a livestream is not the same. I am not necessarily as dressed up; I am not sharing in the food that is integral to the celebration of the *simcha*; it feels strange to dance, and it feels insufficient to just watch the people there dance. When I watch a bris over Zoom, it feels strange not to walk into the seudah; once the ceremony is over, the streaming ends and we just move onto the next screen. On the opposite end, one might be able to hear a funeral over Zoom - I hear the hespedim and see the *aron*. But there is a physical and emotional barrier. By not being "there," I am not taking in the full experience, with the same level of empathy as I would if I was standing in the same *daled amos* as the *avel*. I do not think my reflection is unique. The experience of a lifecycle event is more than just seeing the event take place.

Imagine for a second if Matan Torah took place in the age of technology. A Jew decides that they would rather avoid the hassle of the big crowds at Matan Torah; it is really hot in the desert; and maybe you will see God better on the screen. So this Jew opens the livestream and watches the most momentous occasion of Jewish history online. Maybe they are listening to a reporter describe the goings-on of the event, and maybe the journalist has some insight to share that you would not hear if you were not watching it online. Would this suffice? Presumably, this Jew would be able to receive the same information from Hashem and Moshe through the livestream. Is this idea absurd? Indeed, it is absurd. But it is not because a rabbi gave a drasha saying that watching events over Zoom or livestream is bad and that technology is bad. It is because the definition of virtual is “almost or nearly as described, but not completely or according to strict definition.” Experiencing Torah and Judaism over Zoom or livestream is close to the real experience, but we need the real experience.

In fact, there are a few indications within the story of Har Sinai that make the case for the vitality of the full experience.

First, B’nei Yisrael understood even before the existence of technology that an experience filtered through a secondary channel is not the same as the live version. Hashem tells Moshe that He will appear in a thick cloud in order that the whole nation will hear Hashem speaking to Moshe; the pasuk continues, ויגד משה את דברי העם אל ה' (Shemot 19:9) - Moshe related the people’s answer to God. Rashi picks up that the Torah does not say what the people wanted Moshe to say. He understands from this that the people, in fact, wanted to hear Hashem speaking to Moshe. In Rashi’s words, תשובה על דבר זה שמעתי מהם שרצונם לשמוע ממך אינו דומה השומע מפי השליח לשומע מפי המלך, רצוננו תשובה על - their desire is to hear from You - hearing from an emissary is not the same as hearing from the king, and it is our desire to hear from the King! In other words, B’nei Yisrael want the full, unfiltered encounter. They do not just want the information, but they want the experience. They are thirsty for God’s voice to have a direct impact on their lives. Anything watered down will not have the same impact.

Second, the experience surrounding Har Sinai was central to receiving the Torah beyond the information itself. Matan Torah was a shocking, unforgettable moment, and the environment was created to that end:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהִיטְ הַבְּקָר, וַיְהִי קֹלֵת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כְּבֹד עַל-הַהָר, וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר, חֲזָק מְאֹד; וַיַּחֲרֹד כָּל-הָעָם, אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה.

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled ([Shemot 19:16](#)).

Why the pomp and circumstance? Matan Torah was not your average lecture where the speaker gets up to speak, the audience listens and goes home, remembering that an interesting talk was given and maybe remembering a thing or two about it by the end of the week. It was meant to *move* people. The sites and sounds caused people to tremble; Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael says they literally moved. The scene was constructed so that, according to R. David Tzvi Hoffman, even before everyone left their tents, they were awe-stricken, noting that something was irregular. We see this at the end of the *dibrot* as well:

וְכָל-הָעָם רָאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-הַלַּפִּידִם, וְאֶת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר, וְאֶת-הַהָרָה, עָשָׂן; וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ, וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֵק.  
All the people saw the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance ([Shemot 20:15](#)).

Rashi notes the strange sensation of seeing the voices; in fact, it is simply that what would normally not be possible to sense was possible at Matan Torah. What was the goal of all of this? To instill an awe and reverence for the Divine, to imprint in our hearts the majesty of the revelation of the Torah, and to create an experience of God that is moving. But if someone were to experience this event virtually or vicariously, they would have some knowledge of what happened, but the impression would be relatively small. Even in our experience of *kriat ha-Torah* today, Rav Soloveitchik explains that it is not about conveying the information in the Torah. Rather, “the purpose of reading the Torah aloud in the synagogue is... to arrange an encounter with God, as experienced by our ancestors at Mount Sinai” (Chumash *Mesoras HaRav*, 162). Thus, the custom of some to stand. We also experienced Torah in unity; when the Torah says *יחון שם ישראל* נגד ההר, Israel encamped by the mountain (in the singular), Rashi tells us it was *כאיש אחד* - like one person with one heart. We did not experience unity by people being in different locations hearing the same thing; we were truly there together. Our task is to feel Torah in its fullest, to hear it in its most real form.

Finally, if one asks what this means for me if just that one generation was there? Well, we were all really there, according to our tradition. Before the review of Aseret Ha-Dibrot in Sefer Devarim, Moshe says:

לֹא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ כָּרַת יְקֹנֶק אֶת הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת כִּי אֲתָנוּ אֲנַחְנוּ אֵלֶּה פֶּה הַיּוֹם כָּלְנוּ חַיִּים:  
It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today ([Devarim 5:3](#)).

Why does the Torah need to emphasize that Hashem did not just make the *brit* with those who originally stood at Har Sinai but also with “us”? If anything, Hashem *did* make the *brit* with them and not with us? The Alshich and Netziv both explain our souls were at Sinai; any future Jew was truly at Sinai. Perhaps the significance of this idea is that we could easily remove ourselves from the experience of Sinai by saying we were not there. Whatever impact it had was temporary; maybe we could experience Torah without it. Not so, says Moshe. We were all there. Our souls all experienced the thunder and fire and shofar; the fear and trembling. Part of the DNA of the Jewish people is that we have direct access to that experience of being at Matan Torah.

We are blessed to have the technology that we have nowadays. My wife shared with me that in 1937, during the polio epidemic, schools were closed and kids learned by radio. While that itself was a blessing of its time, listening to a class via radio for fifteen minutes is obviously not the same experience. Some students reported [distraction](#); others thought teachers [spoke too quickly](#) for them to take in information, and they could not provide feedback. Today, Zoom has enabled an interaction that closely resembles a real live experience. Yet, students and teachers alike realize that Zoom school is not nearly the same thing as the experience of learning in-person. The energy is much different, the atmosphere of being in school is different. It is especially difficult for a student at home to watch a live class take place, when they are essentially a fly on the wall. We are blessed that we have the technology to allow people to participate in important events in the lives of family and friends. This past year would have been far more gloomy than it already was without it.

What will our experience of Torah and mitzvot be post-pandemic? Is technology our entire future and our best path forward? Our brothers and sisters in the liberal denominations have even bigger questions to face, as many of those synagogues have Shabbat services livestreamed. In some cases, this was happening even before COVID-19. I am quite thankful, beyond the *halakhic* issues at play, that Orthodox Judaism does not have a way to permit this on Shabbat. At least one day a week, the experience has to be in the present moment and location. It is to be seen whether some people choose to daven and learn at home going forward and avoid the need to come to shul. Furthermore, as far as weekdays are concerned, I am in favor of shiurim being available online, whether through livestream or recordings, for people who cannot or will not end up coming to the live shiur. Technology knows fewer bounds than the permanent, stiff structure of the synagogue.

At the same time, I cannot fathom sitting at my dining room table watching Kol Nidrei take place elsewhere, as I was forced to this past year. I missed the sanctity of the synagogue; I missed the sanctity of the community; and I missed the sanctity of my physical connection with Am Yisrael. Very soon, I will share guidance with the shul about the *mitzvot* of Purim, including Megillah reading. In a *she'at dechak*, a pressing moment, one may fulfill their obligation to hear Megillah over Zoom. For many people this year, it may be a *she'at dechak*; some people should opt to hear Megillah online because that is the safest option. But the mitzvah of Megillah, in its most ideal form requires true, authentic “hearing” - the direct voice, not its echo or replication. It also entails matters such as *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle, and *b'rov am hadrat melekh* - glorifying the king in the multitudes. The unification of Am Yisrael sometimes requires us to be in the same room. The experience of the joy of Purim is ideally with others. Post-pandemic, we look forward to being together as Am Yisrael in shul. Likewise, in yet a short while, I will deliver my third major pre-holiday drasha over Zoom (Shabbat Ha-Gadol and Shabbat Shuva 5780 were the first two). It is doable over Zoom. But I cannot wait to give the next one with my beloved friends experiencing the learning with me.

When it comes to sports, there is legitimate debate whether it is more worthwhile to go to the live game or watch from home. There is value to broadcasting Torah and mitzvot online, too, where more people can participate. But there's an interesting secret when it comes to watching sporting events at home. For many fans who watch the games on TV, the experience is [diluted when there are no fans there](#); just watching the players play is apparently insufficient without the impact of the crowd and its energy. L'havdil, the same is all that much more true for Judaism. We learned a lot during COVID-19 about using technology to give a robust Jewish experience. But in the long run, as Matan Torah demonstrates, it will not be the same for us if we do not ourselves experience it live, and the truth is, it will not be viable for anyone if we all rely on the virtual experience. If Am Yisrael received the Torah via Zoom, I am not sure if we would even be here today. To build the next generation of Am Yisrael, we need to create fully involved Matan Torah-like experiences that keep us energized by the power of the present moment and space, in their fullest components, and the presence of each one of us is indispensable.