

Shavuot: Corona Diary #30

Torah Lands on Earth, But Emerges from Heaven

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It all began on this day, atop a mountain of fire and smoke. For 2500 years, humanity failed to grasp a "One G-d" responsible for all reality. For too long, humanity was adrift in moral anarchy and societal dysfunction. On this epic day, G-d descended from Heaven and delivered His will and His Torah to a human audience which had been chosen to showcase religious life for the rest of humanity. This seminal day is the source of everything to a Jew.

Yet, for some strange reason, the actual date of this event is omitted. Based upon various other coordinates, we are able to puzzle together the timeline and "decipher" the day upon which Torah was delivered. However, the absence of an explicit date for the most important event in Jewish history is astonishing. Why doesn't the Torah announce this all-important date- in the same manner that it supplies dates for other important historical events?

In truth, Matan Torah doesn't actually possess a date because it isn't part of the human realm or the human calendar. Torah is cosmic and, as the Talmud describes, predates Time and the creation of our universe. On the 6th of Sivan the eternal wisdom of Torah was condensed and delivered to a human community, but Torah itself is more sweeping than this specific moment. Torah is otherworldly and transcends both human experience and the reality we inhabit. It exists outside of time and therefore isn't "chained" to a particular date.

There is a second and seemingly incongruous quality to Torah. Even though this Heavenly work is unrelated to human experience, it also deeply shapes and influences human experience. Torah provides a blueprint for moral behavior and for the construction of a utopian society. A religious life inspired by Torah constitutes an ideal lifestyle of meaning, mission and immortality. Additionally, Torah's wisdom and its values help us better understand our world and better respond to events which shape human history and affect our personal lives. Even though Torah stems from a place beyond time and beyond human

experience, it "lands" in the world of human beings and shapes our behavior and experience.

These two "modes" of Torah aren't contradictory. Ideally, by adhering to Torah, we partake of something "higher" and more Heavenly which advances our lives and refines our experiences. By thrusting ourselves into a different realm we also perfect and enrich our human lives. Torah lies "beyond" and enriches us, precisely because it allows us to stretch beyond ourselves and beyond the horizons of mortal experience. It is an ideal lifestyle precisely because it is otherworldly. It is our bridge to G-d.

However, not all "moments" in history allow us to reconcile these two modes of Torah. The past year, the Corona epidemic heightened the differences between "cosmic Torah" and practical "human Torah". The trying conditions of the pandemic and the strict health-guidelines forced us to flex our halachik observance. The preservation of life is a built-in halachik value, and almost every mitzvah is suspended for piku'ach nefesh. The doctrine of piku'ach nefesh is based upon viewing Torah as an agent for human prosperity. If Torah is meant to enable a better life and inspire that life with purpose, it certainly must preserve life when life is threatened. Torah braces and perfects life; when life is threatened, halachik regulations are temporarily set aside to preserve the life which Torah is meant to perfect. Our religious adjustments in the face of Covid-19 restrictions affirmed Torah as a "refiner" of human experience. Torah is relevant to the human condition, enhances human experience and is adjusted when human life is endangered.

There were some Jewish communities who adopted a more "cosmic view" of Torah as they navigated the epidemic very differently. They believed that if Torah study lies "beyond this world", it isn't subject to the natural order of this world. During various stages of the epidemic, they refused to suspend or alter Torah study for medical concerns. The gemara in Nedarim implies that if Torah study were to cease, the natural order would collapse. Without Torah the spiritual bedrock of our universe would become unsteady, and the world would "fold in" on itself. If there were ever a period which desperately demanded sustained Torah study, it is a global pandemic. For some communities the primacy and "otherworldliness" of Torah dictated that it not be suspended for health considerations.

It is not my intention in this article to judge this response to the epidemic. There are many additional layers responsible for this controversial communal response. It was not exclusively based upon the supernatural primacy of Torah study. I assume that most readers of this article, as myself, did not agree with these policies and did adapt their religious life to health concerns. However, policies aside, this overriding view of "cosmic Torah" is incumbent upon everyone – even those who did pivot for public health concerns: Torah lies beyond this world and, inherently, isn't subject to the rules and conditions of this world. By studying Torah, we draw G-d into this world. Human prosperity is advanced in a world in which G-d's presence is augmented. Preserving the otherworldliness of Torah retains its majesty; anchoring it too tightly to human concerns shrinks its enormity and sullies its grandeur.

Shavuot isn't just a time to celebrate a 'static' historical event, but also a moment to re-assess our attitudes toward Torah. Do we appreciate both the relevancy of Torah to life, as well as its transcendence? On the one hand each generation faces a renewed challenge of uncovering the relevancy of Torah. Each generation provides new technologies, new cultural voices and new human ventures. Torah addresses every evolution and every revolution- every shift in culture can be understood through the prism of Torah. The Torah encodes answers for whatever questions Man may pose and provides guidelines for whatever turns culture may take. Each generation searches for the wisdom to locate "cultural guidance" through Torah. We have all tried to navigate the crisis of 2020-21 through the hidden wisdoms of Torah.

But on Shavuot we also underscore the transcendence of Torah. Ironically, over the past 50 years, our widespread attempts to better anchor Torah to the human realm may have eroded the sense of otherworldliness of Torah. Has Torah become so human that its heavenly tone has been muted? The Rambam assiduously traced reasons for every mitzvah; he mapped every mitzvah to some human benefit. Part of the opposition to his program was the fear that he was humanizing a Torah which was meant to remain Heavenly. Have we all been guilty of this same humanization? By fastening Torah to human experience have we grounded it on Earth? By casting it as a preserver and enhancer of life have we emptied it of its cosmic meaning? By

demanding that Torah be relevant to every age and every stage have we ignored its timelessness?

The past year showcased two very polarized views of Torah. Most "subjected" Torah to the life-threatening conditions, while some endeavored to sustain the timelessness of Torah. Whatever your belief about the proper policy, Shavuot is an important time to reinforce these two enduring features of Torah. Long after the current crises fades, Torah will retain these dual features.