

Geulas Yisrael #38

Yitro: The Voice

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Iconic experiences begin with important letters. Har Sinai began with the letter "א" as Hashem proclaimed אנכי and launched the aseret hadibrot. Or so we always thought. The midrash provides a differing account in which a different word launches Har Sinai. Before delivering the mitzvoth, Hashem announced שמע ישראל to which the Jews responded by ה' אלוקינו ה' אחד. Effectively, matan Torah was preceded by a joint recital of shema!

This peculiar lead-in to Sinai is best appreciated in light of a Har Sinai parable contained in a different midrash. A king marries a woman by handing her two rings. As she is likely to misplace the first ring, he cautions her to safeguard the second. Likewise at Har Sinai, we "married" Hashem with one ring of "na'aseh" and with a second ring of "nishmah". At Sinai we committed to mitzvoth but also, we heard the direct voice of Hashem. Realizing that we may abandon na'aseh or mitzvoth, Hashem urged us to hold fast to nishmah.

Har Sinai was a watershed moment in human history. For the first time in close to 2500 years a human community embraced the will of G-d and submitted to a life of commandments. However, human nature is fickle and no less than 40 days later their loyalty withered in the revel of idol worship. Additionally, Hashem knew that the hardships and struggles of Jewish history would severely challenge halachik commitment. Knowing all this- that humans aren't always disciplined and that Jewish history would be harsh – Hashem realized that na'aseh conviction would waver. Sadly, at different stages of Jewish history the na'aseh ring of mitzvah observance would be misplaced. What would happen to this marriage if the na'aseh ring went lost? Hashem hatched a plan to preserve Jewish identity even if religious commitment faltered.

Facing the specter of "religious stumble" Hashem layered a second component to Har Sinai. At Har Sinai, independent of the mitzvoth we received, we convened directly with Hashem, directly listening to the divine voice in unmediated fashion. The sound of this divine voice lodged in the Jewish subconscious and still reverberates in every Jewish

soul- even in Jews who abandoned "na'aseh" performance of mitzvot. That second ring still binds every Jew to Sinai.

Religious belief cannot be empirically proven and boils down to a leap of faith. Our faith is based on unverifiable truths delivered from generation to generation- from father to child and from Rebbe to talmid. We trust the previous generation to transmit traditions which cannot be scientifically proven. This begs the question: if all faith is based upon delivered traditions shouldn't we assign the same validity to other world religions? Aren't these religions also based upon trustworthy " facts " faithfully delivered throughout thousands of years? If all religion is a leap of faith, what differentiates Judaism from other major religions?

The answer lies not in the method of transmission, but in content of the transmission. In theory, Jesus may have walked on water or healed the ill – as Christian traditions convey. Those stories—even if true- do not form a religion but reflect a person who accessed the world of magic, performed "miracles", and whose students assumed was a god. Likewise, Muhammed probably dreamed of angelic visitation and he took those dreams to be divine revelation. Many people dreamt of divine apparitions; few convinced others of the authenticity of their private dreams. In each instance, these transmitted truths, which likely occurred, do not yield absolute truth or the foundation of faith.

By contrast, our delivered traditions speak of a once-in-history moment of mass revelation during which we directly heard the voice of Hashem. It is crucial that this conversation was heard by over three million people. Corroborating our personal experience with the public perception assured us that we were not hallucinating. No other religion has ever lodged this assertion, nor will any religion ever again avow this audacious claim. Sinai can't be empirically proven, but once we accept this delivered truth, mass revelation forms a cornerstone of absolute truth and a bedrock of faith.

It is this divine voice which is forever lodged within our collective soul. We often have misplaced na'aseh, but the sounds of Sinai reverberate within each Jewish heart. The echo of nishmah can still be heard. To emphasize this "voice, Har Sinai began with a joint recital of shema- literally urging us to LISTEN to Hashem before we recorded a lengthy

registry of commandments. The shema announcement alerted us to savor nishmah before dissecting na'aseh.

The first pasuk of shema, which launched Sinai, became the one pasuk which every Jew –regardless of religious affiliation- is familiar with. It became the pasuk which Jews recited on the way to a martyr's death while defending the presence of Hashem in our world. It became the pasuk recited to Jewish children who attempted to escape Hitler by sequestering in Christian monasteries. This pasuk and the memory of Sinai awakened in these children an inner voice even though they were completely ignorant of religion. This voice rescued them from oblivion.

We can never forget that voice. We still hold fast to the ring of nishmah!