



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Yitro: Love. Fear. Awe.

Parshat Yitro describes God's revelation at Mount Sinai. The Israelites stand at the foot of the mountain and witness the thunder, sounds and lightning, and they hear God utter the Ten Commandments.

At times, this covenantal happening is depicted as a joyous union, a wedding in which "Moses led the people out of the camp toward God" (19:17) "as a bride goes to meet her groom" (*Mekhilta Bahodesh* #3), and the mountain is imagined suspended above them like a wedding canopy. In this view, Sinai is animated by feelings of love.

Alternatively, this foundational moment is presented as foreboding and fearful: "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" (19:16). In this portrayal, the mountain suspended above Israel is a threat: "If you accept the *Torah*, excellent, and if not, this will be your burial place" (*Talmud Shabbat* 88a). This version of Sinai is animated by feelings of fear and dread!

If the prime atmosphere at Sinai is one of love, we understand why the mountain had to be sectioned off by a barrier (19:12); God feared that the people would surge forward to gain greater contact and intimacy with the divine presence "to break through to the Lord to gaze" (19:21), as they did later (see Ex 24:1,7-12).

But that is not what happened. It would appear that emotions of fear eclipsed the atmosphere of love, and the people fled from the mountainside:

All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fled and stood at a distance. "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." So the people remained at a

distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was. (20:15-18).

Moses tried to persuade the nation to come closer, but they “remained at a distance.” They were frightened.

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, has a wonderful poem in which he wonders why God needed to create such a scary and daunting spectacle. Why was this formative event choreographed to be so frightening? Here is Amichai:

My father was God and did not know it. He gave me

The Ten Commandments

neither in thunder nor in fury; neither in fire nor in cloud,
But rather in gentleness and love. And he added caresses and kind words,
and he added “I beg You,” and “Please.” And he sang “keep” and “remember”

in a single melody. And he pleaded and cried quietly between one utterance and the next ,

“Do not take the name of God in vain,” do not take it, not in vain,

I beg you, “do not bear false witness against your neighbor.” And he hugged me tightly and whispered in my ear,

“Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder.” And he put the palms of his open hands,

On my head with the Yom Kippur blessing: “Honor, Love; That your days might be long

On the earth.” And my father’s voice was white like the hair on his head...

So here we begin our discussion

1. Why did the Revelation at Sinai have to be so scary?
 - When Israel fled from the foot of the mountain, did that make the Revelation at Sinai a success or a failure?
2. Yehuda Amichai prefers to learn his Ten Commandments from a loving, gentle, musical father, rather than an imposing, thunderous and furious God. He suggests that we do not need a God of revelation; just a good father. {BTW Amichai grew up religious and left religious observance.}
 - Do we, as human beings, as children, learn more by love or by fear? By threats or rewards?
 - Is fear of God a positive religious emotion? How so?

3. One curious verse here reads: “**Do not be afraid**; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the **fear of Him may be ever with you**, so that you do not go astray.”(20:20)

- Does God want Israel to fear or not to fear?

I posed this question to my students:

Some said that any big event is intimidating and overwhelming. And those events make a mark in our consciousness. Sinai is no exception.

Others said that this verse is mistranslated. God does not want Israel to “fear” but rather to experience “awe”. Indeed, the verb יר"א can be translated as awe and reverence rather than fear. For example, after Jacob’s dream, he awakes and says: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God.” He now has an awareness of God. He then proceeds to ask for God’s protection. He now appreciates God’s nature, God’s power. As Bible professor Meir Weiss puts it:

This verse teaches us that there is a contradiction between fear and “fear of God”. It informs us that “fear of God” is not frightening, distasteful or a reason to distance oneself, but rather a force which attracts one towards divine service. (Scriptures in their Own Light [Heb] pg.187)

If you were at Sinai, would the event induce love of God, fear or awe?

Shabbat Shalom!