

## Jethro

How do we make sense of the spectacular event described in this week's Torah portion, Jethro? Israel encamps at Mt. Sinai and God comes down upon the mountain accompanied by thunder, lightening, tectonic shaking, and the sound of a Shofar blaring.

This event is known as the revelation at Sinai. In addition to the Ten Plagues and splitting of the Sea of Reeds, revelation is the most famous incident in the Book of Exodus.

Revelation presented few difficulties for our ancestors in a pre-scientific age. Since the advent of modern science, we are more skeptical of any event that appears to defy the normal course of nature.

Yet if we give up on revelation, we will have lost something that is essential to our self-understanding as Jews. Our tradition teaches that during the revelation at Sinai, God gave Moses the Torah in both its oral and written forms. This means that not only the written Torah but the oral Torah as recorded in the Mishna, the Talmud, and the Shulchan Aruch were all given to Moses. Indeed, our ancestors believed this, and some Jews in the ultra-orthodox world still believe it today.

Conservative Judaism teaches differently. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is credited with one of the greatest revisions of our understanding of revelation in modern times. For Heschel, what God reveals at Sinai is nothing more and nothing less than His very self.

Reflect on this for a moment, and you will see that Heschel retains the wonder and grandeur that are critical to our understanding of revelation. Breaking through the boundaries of time and space and the physical world, the Holy One Blessed Be He revealed Himself to our ancestors. Note, however, how Heschel's account differs from that of tradition. As a student who mastered the modern tools of historical research, Heschel was not able to assert that everything that is written in the Shulchan Aruch, the Talmud, and the Mishna was articulated by God to His servant Moses at Sinai.

These writings must have been composed by human beings. Indeed, that is Heschel's implicit conclusion, though he doesn't harp on it because he is not a scoffer. Rather, what Heschel claims is that what was written down as the Oral Torah was the human response to God's revealing God's self.

This is the move that I encourage all of us to consider and to follow. Heschel has not dispensed with revelation, but he has shifted its meaning to allow for the human role that we know is played in the composition of our holy texts. In an earlier time, this would be considered heresy. In our day, this is a view that is consistent with truth, arrived at through the use of critical modern tools.

Why is this important? We have to know what we believe. This is one of the biggest complaints by and about Conservative Jews. We don't know what we stand for. Here Heschel presents us with a view that we can believe in. As is often the case, Conservative Judaism finds a middle ground between a completely modern, secularized view and one that is thoroughly supernatural. Many modern people will scoff at the idea that God revealed Himself to the Jewish people at Sinai. Many ultra-Orthodox people will declare as heresy any assertion that not every jot and

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title recorded in our holy books was conveyed to Moses during the revelation. Heschel retains revelation as an event but circumscribes its content.

I cannot overstate how important at this time knowing what we believe is. I was a fellow traveler, you might say, for a number of years in the Orthodox world. While I didn't consider becoming ultra Orthodox, I had moments during which I was wont to concede that the ultra Orthodox were living according to the Torah in the fullest sense. After what we have witnessed, however, continuously during COVID with these out of control mass funerals in ultra orthodox neighborhoods, I have become extremely skeptical that we can say with any certainty that this group within the Jewish world understands and lives by the Torah. When members of that community can so blatantly violate the rules of the state and the findings of science, we have to start to look elsewhere for a group within the Jewish world that keeps the Torah God gave us at Sinai.

I think we are candidates to be that group, but we must increase our learning. We have to know more and live better. We can't wake up and read the New York Times and feel like we understand the world. We have to wake up, pray, and study our holy texts in order to become more knowledgeable not just about our heritage and who we are but about what values we are carrying forward into the future.

We may be overwhelmed thinking of ourselves as the vanguard group of the Jewish people. Looking to the ultra Orthodox as the leaders of our community is easier because then we can minimize our responsibility. But if the future of our people rides on our shoulders, then we have to be much more concerned with how we are living, particularly how we are living with respect to our tradition.

Even though God makes an eternal covenant with the Jewish people, we should be wary of thinking that our existence on earth is guaranteed. We live at a critical time during which we could assume in full the role that God has carved out for us, or we could abandon it and watch the demise of our people and our heritage.

I do not intend to stand idly by as our heritage sinks into the sands of history. The world is too imperfect and too much in need of repair and improvement for me to consider abdicating my role in bringing about the realization of humanity and the messianic time.

Today, we read about the revelation at Sinai. The echoes of revelation resound across the centuries. Our task is to teach ourselves how to listen so that we can live in accordance with the truths of monotheism. Our world desperately needs us to step up.