

“In A Voice”

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*Par'shat Yitro*, February 5, 2021

What would it mean to hear the voice of God? I mean *actually* hear the divine voice?

Our parashah raises this very question. Moses is shuttling back and forth from the top of Mount Sinai to the bottom, then to the top, then half way down, then finally to the top again. Both he and we are being prepared to hear the essence of Revelation, the quintessence of the Torah, the so-called *Aseret Had'varim* (“the ten speakings”). Naturally, we are expecting to hear words. Meaningful, comprehensible words.

An awful lot of noise emanates from the mountaintop. One would think the Superbowl teams are about to be introduced. Thunder, shofar blasts, God-knows what else.

*Vay'hi kol hashofar holekh v'chazek m'od*

“And so it was that the voice of the shofar got stronger and stronger.”

Our Rabbis imagine that with such a racket going on, neither Moses nor the people could have heard a darn thing.

Nonetheless, *Moshe y'daber v'ha'elohim ya'aneinu v'kol*

Moses would speak, and God would respond to him in a voice.

Note, not “in God’s voice,” but “in a voice.” *B'kol*.

Our Rabbis know that the Torah is being coy. They – and we – want to know what God sounds like. Or to put it more philosophically, they want to know if God has a sound at all, and if so, whether it can be deciphered to receive specific messages. To “know God’s will,” as it were.

But the Torah won’t tell us. *B’kol* is all we get.

A famous midrash in the Talmud (in tractate B’rachot) asks *mai b’kol?* “What is the meaning of ‘in a voice?’” *B’kolo shel Moshe*. “In the voice of Moses.”

This answer avoids the issue. Or does it? If the issue is “what does God sound like?” then this quip answers indirectly, “it sounds like Moses.” Well then, we might ask, does the Torah intend for us to think of Moses as one and the same as God? And do the Rabbis think the Torah wants the Israelites to think that Moses is God?

I think the Rabbis are saying something else entirely. First of all, ‘no’ to both of the above questions. No one thinks Moses is God, and no one wants to leave that impression on our ancient ancestors or on us.

I think that the Rabbis, by being as coy as the Torah, are telling us that we’re asking the wrong question. Do we really think God has a voice? Do we really need to hear it in order to understand the essence of the Torah? Do we really want Moses to entertain us with pyrotechnics and special audio effects in addition to telling us, in his own familiar voice and his own reasonable words, what he believes God expects us to know and do?

The Rabbis are telling us that there are plenty of versions of “God’s voice” out there if we would only pay attention to them.

One is Moses's voice. Or rather, the calling out of anyone in our midst who speaks of righteousness and justice.

One is the voice of all those around us who are in agony. Who are in pain. Who are neglected, worried, anxious, lonely. Who call out *b'kol* directly to our hearts, bypassing our ears altogether.

One is the voice of those who feel great joy, and who want to share it with us, even if we do not have the capacity to feel our own joy at this moment.

The seventh blessing of the wedding ceremony imagines a messianic time. How will we know that that time has come? Because we will hear the *kol sasson v'kol simcha, kol chatan v'kol kallah*. "The sound of rejoicing; the voice of grooms and brides running forth from their chuppahs, and of youngsters frolicking at wedding feasts." In other words, the voice of people trying against all odds to find joy in making their lives work, in giving themselves a future, in investing in life-long relationships.

All of those voices are contained in whatever it is that we hear when we read those tablets, in whatever voices we employ to convey the message. That, say the Rabbis, is the voice we can hear perfectly well, despite the noise. Of course we can. It is the voice that has been speaking from inside ourselves since time and space began.