

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Nothing is Enough

Dr. Alisa Braun, Academic Director, Community Engagement, JTS

sitting amid your litter, feet buried
by accumulated jars of buttons,
glasses lost beneath a decade of bank statements
and funny poems.

— Alicia Ostriker, “Mother,” *The Volcano Sequence* (2002)

The obligation to honor your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12) is never simple, but it’s especially complicated when relations between parent and child are strained. In her moving poem “Mother,” Alicia Ostriker gives voice to the ethical challenge of caring for her mother when the conflicts of the past loom large.

Addressing her mother directly, the poet acknowledges that she has put an “ocean” of distance between herself and her mother, a separation necessitated by her mother’s own attachment issues. Typical of the hoarder, her mother has held onto things that are not meant to be meaningful and as a result, lost a significant human relationship. The poet juxtaposes her mother’s obsession with saving items to her own inability to save her mother from inevitable decline and becoming “blind and helpless.”

Ostriker sees her mother in a way her mother was never able to see her. She is “tortured” by her inability to rescue her from this “madness,” to “love you enough” as an exemplary self-sacrificing daughter might. Yet the poem concludes with the stark recognition that in the face of death’s inevitability, “nothing is enough.”

Parashat Yitro 5776

פרשת יתרו תשע"ו



Whose Revelation Is It, Anyway?

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Parashat Yitro is a Torah reading of monumental ideas, foundational concepts, and widely-recognized importance. By all measures, this week’s portion must be considered a highlight of the entire Torah, since it includes no less (and a lot more!) than the Ten Commandments. This seems to be the right place to explore questions such as these: what did the actual revelation (Exodus 20) include? What *were* God’s commandments? Why were *these* statements singled out, especially given the amount of law scattered throughout the Torah? What gives *these* brief pronouncements their distinctive importance? There are so many crucial questions we could ponder with great benefit about the Commandments, their form, their content, and their meaning. However, since so much has been written about the Decalogue, and we have much to learn from other parts of the *parashah* that are not included within the Decalogue itself, let’s move our focus instead to the preceding chapter, Exodus 19.

If you can look over the chapter, this would be a time to read through it to see what of interest jumps out at you; below I will suggest verses that particularly grabbed my attention. I think you will see at least one very powerful and theologically rich theme “hidden” in two verses we might be tempted to neglect, or at least minimize, in our rush to get to the “Big Ten.” (Coincidentally, the Big Ten Conference in athletics, which has had as few as 9 member institutions, now has 14. So, too, commentators have suggested that the Ten Commandments might not originally have been 10, some suggesting fewer and others finding more).

The Torah sets the scene: only a few months after the Children of Israel had been delivered out of Egypt, they reached a mountain in the wilderness of Sinai. God told Moses to remind the Israelites of God’s role in their redemption and to promise them, as well, that Israel’s acceptance of the commandments-yet-to-be-

given would assure the people a special place as God's treasured possession, a life of service as "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." The chapter describes ways in which the entire community (or, problematically, at least those who had the standing of full membership in the community) were to ready themselves for the impending event. Israel is told how to prepare for the theophany, God's appearance, and for the divine revelation. An experience of this magnitude would be magnificent, but also overwhelming. It would be glorious, but potentially fatal. It could have an incalculable effect on every participant and would forever change the community.

Amid thunder and lightning, a thick cloud and strong shofar blast, the people tremble. The scene is set; the people are around the base of Mount Sinai; prepared. Moses is up on the mountain. The cloud and the smoke of God's fire grows thicker; the sound gets louder; the mountain itself, mirroring the people, trembles. Then—and now—we are ready for God to speak, to proclaim, to command. With unimaginable excitement, we anticipate the "Ten Commandments". But, wait! Several verses still precede the revelation itself and even precede some technical instructions with reminders that God gives Moses for the people. While the order of events in this chapter is notoriously difficult to discern, the sense of excitement and trepidation is palpable. We focus on two verses, Exodus 19:19-20. Read them carefully and slowly, asking yourself, who does what, where, and when?

The sound of the shofar was getting stronger. Moses was speaking and God was answering him thunderously. The Lord came down onto Mt. Sinai, onto the top of the mountain, and the Lord called to Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר הוֹלֵךְ
וְחִזְק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יִדְבֵר
וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְקוֹל:
וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל-הַר סִינַי אֶל-
רֹאשׁ הַהָר וַיִּקְרָא ה'
לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר
וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה.

Before God reveals, Moses speaks and God answers. Moses first and then God? So it seems (in Exodus 19:19), but perhaps the two events were simultaneous. Then God descends to the Mountain, to the very top of the Mountain, from wherever God had been—perhaps riding in the highest heavens or riding on the clouds (cf. Ps. 68:5, 34)—and *now* God is ready to expound. No, still not yet. God realized how far away Moses was, recognizing the gap between them. Revelation, despite its grandeur, needs to be intimate. God wants, needs Moses to be close and, so, calls Moses to the top of the

mountain where God was at the time. We are confident that *now* we will hear God's special pronouncements. No, again; not yet! At this point, what can possibly be missing?

There will be no divine revelation; there *can* be no divine revelation, until Moses ascends to the top of the mountain. Without "the mortal Moses" (Ex. 32:1, 22), there will be no divine revelation. It will not exist. If God speaks words which fall in the woods, and no human being is nearby to hear them—to receive them and to interpret them—they simply do not exist. An ancient rabbinic commentary (Sifrei Devarim, Section 346) makes the same point, interpreting the biblical verse Isaiah 43:12. The relevant part of the verse, "You are My witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God" is explained this way in the commentary: "*When* you are My witnesses, I am God; and if you are not My witnesses, I am not God, as it were."

Divinity depends upon human beings. In other words, religion depends upon human beings. Without people, there is no religion. The ways each religion and every denomination within each religion acts is dependent upon its adherents. We cannot merely "blame religion" for what goes on in the world, not even what goes on in the world in the name of religion. We must each use our religious selves to help bring the divine and the human together, as Moses and God were united on the Mountain, so that the enduring messages of the Ten Commandments can be heard above the clash of religious intolerance.

Think back to the two verses we considered. Moses spoke and God responded. We mortal beings need to start the process of enacting our highest values and not wait for God's actions. If God wants to follow along, fine, but we can no longer wait for God. Remember the other phrase, too, that before revelation "Moses ascended." We must each ascend. Just as there is no religion without us, there is no voice of God without us. We must each fulfill our role in determining if God's voice can be heard any longer. If it can, we determine, too, how God's voice may sound today and what effect it can have in a world that greatly needs each of us to show God the way.

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