

## How Do We Meet at Sinai?

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The human experience of Divine Revelation is marked with boundaries: boundaries built and boundaries breached, boundaries in time and boundaries in space. Psychological boundaries are eroded by the force of Divine presence and spiritual boundaries are thrown hastily up to make space for a brand new relationship with God.

At the moment God initiates a new covenant with the People of Israel, they must learn to demarcate the spaces of their new relationship. Some of these boundaries are lines drawn by God. Others are fences maintained by human beings. How can humanity and the Divine exist in the same space and time? And what can we learn about how humans can exist in relationship with each other from that encounter?

Parashat Yitro contains within it an impulse of rushing the mountain, of yearning to be in relationship with God, to experience the unlimited. This is the impulse that requires God to warn Moshe *three times in thirteen verses* not to allow the people up onto the mountain (Exod. 19:12, 21, 24). The Israelites are eager and ready for an encounter with God. While verse 12 instructs them to not only not to ascend the mountain but to not even touch the outskirts of it, verse 24 is ready for the people to attempt to break through to God Godself, ignoring all boundaries.

Rashi describes the people here as having a longing for God that will drive them to cross those boundaries, which may sound like a beautiful thing. But the word chosen is *תאוה*, *toevah*, whose meaning implies not only longing but an intense, often destructive, bodily craving. The Israelites here are a people who hunger for God with such an appetite that they are willing to ignore God's own instructions in order to catch a glimpse of the Divine Presence.

It is a romantic vision. The people want to be close to God, to merge themselves with the Divine. But like in any other relationship, the urge to breach one's own boundaries and subsume oneself in the other is ultimately destructive, as is the urge to breach the boundaries of another and subsume the other into oneself.

Yet Parashat Yitro also contains within it a very cautious attitude toward Divinity, in which the people themselves are afraid of drawing too near or perhaps are physically incapable of that nearness. As Moshe responds to God in 19:21, the people not only won't but *can't* invade God's mountain because they had successfully erected boundaries around it. These are the people who both quake and remain still: *וינעו ויעמדו מרחק* (Exod. 20:15). They staggered back and stood still from afar, responding to the moment of Revelation both in movement and in shock but, and this is key, by putting distance between them and God.

This is the impulse that drives the people to beg Moshe to stand between them and God as interpreter, to hear God's words from Moshe's human lips. Already they have felt their consciousness pushed and pulled, twisted and wrung out. Already they have undergone a synesthetic trial, *seeing* the thundering sounds and voices of revelation. "You speak to us!" they demand, because God's speech will break the boundaries of their minds the way humanity can break the boundaries of the sacred mountain (20:16).

The people are at risk of refusing God entirely, of holding themselves at so far a remove that they would not be in a relationship at all. It can feel safer to retreat behind psychological (and literal) walls than to risk the integration that comes with welcoming in someone else. Easier to buy into the myth of self-sufficiency than to open one's life to

others, to build something new upon a shared dream. With relationships come disappointments.

These warring push-forward-pull-back instincts at the moment of Divine encounter underpin the parallelism of 19:24:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי ה' לְרֹדְדֵי וְעֲלִית אִתָּהּ וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהָעָם  
: אֲלֵי-יְהוָה לְעֹלֹת אֵל-יְהוָה פְּנִי-יִפְרָץ-בָּם

And Adonai said to [Moshe], descend and ascend, you and Aharon with you, so that the priests and **the people will not break through to ascend to God, lest God burst forth against them.**

This verse paints a picture of a people and a God desperate to encounter one another but also in dire need of boundaries between them. A people and a God cognizant of some danger they might pose to each other. The people might break through destructively, יהרסו, break down the boundaries that have been built. God might burst forth as from an enclosure, יפרץ, breaching all limitations as only Divinity can.

It brings to mind the Kabbalistic understanding of Divine contraction, of God who makes Godself small in order to leave room for the rest of the world to exist. Here we have a God who has existed in smallness, perhaps even near isolation, and who is now ready to rejoin creation. Maybe only for the moment of revelation. Perhaps for eternity via a relationship with the Jewish people.

This is a dangerous time. The Talmud in Avoda Zara (3a) teaches that God only created all of creation conditionally—if the people of Israel accept the Torah at the foot of Mount of Sinai, creation will continue to exist. If they refuse, all of creation will be voided, the universe returning to a state of *tohu vavohu*, of formless mass, unbound, indistinct. So now creation is poised at the edge of destruction, all of time is ready to be unmade, and the people of Israel must make a choice not unlike anyone might make when faced with a new relationship. Unsure if it's safe, unsure if it will be worth it. Or, on the contrary, already so entranced, already so full

of love and hope that it is difficult to think clearly. A choice with high stakes.

On the one hand, we can distance ourselves so far from Sinai that we never hear the Torah from the voice of God or the mouth of Moshe and in doing so nullify all of creation. On the other hand we can throw ourselves at God and climb the mountain and in doing so nullify ourselves.

Or we can step between the extremes and accept a relationship with God wherein the boundaries of God and humanity are respected. Even if it means staying at the foot of the mountain. Even if it means seeing sounds and suffering terror. Even if it means risking that some of the Divine might be mistranslated through human error throughout the generations so that we're always left questioning what it is that God demands from and for us so that our relationship might continue.

Standing at the foot of a new relationship can be frightening. But, Moshe says in response to that fear, “don't be afraid,” even as he follows it up with, “the fear of God will always be with you” (20:17). In other words, muster the courage to reach out, especially when someone (or Someone) else is already holding out a hand. And live in relationship with the understanding that boundaries must be honored, and awe of the other always found.

As long as we neither run away from the mountain nor seek to ascend it—neither shy away from the boundaries nor attempt to breach them—we may just find ourselves in the middle of something new and sacred. And that is revelatory.