

The Confusion of Revelation

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We have now come to Parashat Yitro in our annual Torah reading cycle, arguably the most significant sedra in the Humash. While Parashat Bereishit has the mythic power of the creation stories and Parashat Beshallah includes the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt and the miraculous crossing of the Sea, it is in Yitro that we see the culmination of that crossing, for here in Parashat Yitro we read about our first connection to the Torah, the single most significant element of Judaism as it later evolved.

Because of that very significance it is a curious fact that the narrative that describes the revelation is anything but clear. Try, for example, to tell a child the story of what happened at Sinai and then compare your version to what we read in this week's parashah. Yes, Moses went up the mountain and came down with, well, what exactly did he come down with? And when does that actually happen in the narrative? In fact the Tablets, "written by the finger of God," are given to Moses a good deal later, in Parashat Ki Tissa (at the end of [Exodus 31](#)). In the meantime Moses has gone up and down the mountain a number of times, eventually staying there for the famous "forty days and forty nights" (found in [Exodus 24:18](#), at the end of next week's parashah, Mishpatim).

It is in our parashah that we read of the thunder and lightning, and the loud blast of the shofar, the last being a particularly confusing detail. We can understand that in the biblical imagination thunder and lightning are in the provenance of the Deity. But isn't the shofar a *human* "musical" instrument? Who is blowing that shofar? That very question may have been part of what made it a frightening experience for the Israelites—blasts from a mysterious horn, coupled with the smoke and the fire, while the whole mountain trembled violently ([Exod. 19:18](#)). This describes a full-on volcanic eruption. Meanwhile, adding to the

confusion, "the voice of the shofar grew louder and louder" (19:19). I have chosen to translate *kol hashofar* in this verse as "voice" rather than the conventional translation "sound of the shofar" because *voice* fits nicely with the second half of this same verse, which would read as a whole: "The voice of the shofar grew louder and louder; Moses would speak and God answered him with voice."

From both a literary and theological point of view this parashah is deeply concerned with "voice." Who speaks and what is spoken? How much is heard by the people? Early in the parashah God says to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and trust you ever after" (19:9).

Here it appears that the people will be *overhearing* the conversation between God and Moses in order to validate Moses's leadership. Almost immediately following this interchange, Moses leads the people out to the foot of the mountain to hear the Ten Commandments. Although "Ten Commandments" is a common phrase in English, it is not a term used in the Bible; the closest thing we get is the "*aseret hadevarim*" in [Exod. 34:28](#), meaning "The Ten Words" or "The Ten Utterances." (Scholars often use the term "Decalogue," based on the Greek formulation *deka logoi*—"ten words"—found in the ancient Jewish translation of the Bible into Greek.)

The Decalogue begins with a prefatory verse, "And God spoke all these words, saying" (20:1). And yet once again the structure of the narrative works against a linear retelling. After the Ten Utterances are completed, in the next verse we seem to switch back to a moment *before* the revelation—in verse 15 we read that the people were so frightened by the thunder, the lightning, and the shofar that they say to

Moses, “You speak to us and we will obey and don’t let God speak to us, lest we die.” So *did* God speak “all these words” to the people or only some of them? Or did God speak “these words” to Moses who passed them on to the people?

Moses enters (or approaches) “the thick cloud where God was” (20:18). At which point God begins to give a set of instructions to Moses and that is the last that we hear of Moses until the beginning of Chapter 24 when we see him ascending the mountain. Even here it is unclear where this part of the story fits in an imagined timeline of the revelation narrative.

Why is the Torah so confusing as it tells what is arguably the most important story it has to tell—the giving of the Torah to Israel? Some years ago, the great Bible scholar Moshe Greenberg wrote about the Decalogue: “The attempts to reconcile these accounts internally and with each other are not convincing. The accounts apparently combine different versions of the event: (a) God spoke with Moses, and the people overheard; (b) He spoke with Moses and then Moses transmitted His words to the people; (c) God spoke to the people directly” (“Decalogue,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*). Is this complexity due to issues in transforming the various strands of tradition that had been handed down throughout the ages into the final product that we know as *the* Torah? Have we caught those worthy editors who fashioned the Torah napping?

I think not. I would suggest three explanations that make sense to me. First, I would offer a technical, editorial explanation. It is reasonable to imagine that those editors (or perhaps *that* single editor—we do not know) believed that the sources they had at their disposal were legitimate representations of a sacred event beyond normal human comprehension. These reports or reports of reports were *all* in some way to be valued as profound and sacred. Hence trying to “harmonize” the various versions would do harm to all the versions by leaving things out or putting things in. Hence the editors essentially gave the later generations all of these reports and left it up to us to make sense of them and take them seriously.

Second, I would suggest a theological approach. Such a point of view is well represented by the German Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss. Strauss, in an essay about Genesis, makes the following general comment: “The mysterious God is the last theme and highest theme of the Bible The Bible reflects in its literary form the inscrutable mystery of the ways of God which it would be impious even to attempt to comprehend” (“On the Interpretation of Genesis,” *L’Homme* 21). The scholar Jonathan Cohen explains that for Strauss the contradictions found in the Bible “will be left in place and not reconciled by the editors, since these very contradictions bear witness to the impossibility of talking about God without contradictions” (“Is the Bible a Jewish Book?,” *The Journal of Religion* 87).

Finally, I would add a literary explanation, one that I learned from my former colleague at JTS, Dr. Edward Greenstein. He suggested that the contradictions and confusions we find in reading Parashat Yitro are the brilliant rhetorical efforts of the biblical editors to help us, in some very small measure, participate in the enormous and overwhelming experience of the revelation reported in the Torah. The confusions and contradictions are intentionally placed there to replicate for us the confusion of B’nai Yisrael at the foot of the mountain. In the same way that the Passover Haggadah tells us that all of us were part of the Exodus from Egypt, Parashat Yitro suggests that we were all at Sinai as well.

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