



[Midrash] Sifrei Deuteronomy (Section 343)

When Adonai who is everywhere revealed Godself to give the Torah to Israel, God revealed Godself not only to Israel but to all the other nations as well. At first God went to the children of Esau. God asked them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They said right to God's face: "What is written in it?" God said: "Thou shalt not murder." They replied: "Master of the Universe, this goes against our grain. Our father, whose 'hands are the hands of Esau' (Genesis 27:22), led us to rely only on the sword, because his father told him, 'By thy sword shalt thou live' (Gen. 27:40). We cannot accept the Torah."

Then God went to the children of Ammon and Moab, and asked them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They said right to God's face: "What is written in it?" God said: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." They replied: "Master of the Universe, our very origin is in adultery, for Scripture says, 'Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father' (Gen. 19:36). We cannot accept the Torah."

Then God went to the children of Ishmael. God asked them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They said right to God's face: "What is written in it?" God said: "Thou shalt not steal." They replied: "Master of the Universe, it is our very nature to live off only what is stolen and what is got by assault. Of our forebear Ishmael, it is written, 'And he shall be a wild ass of a man: his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him' (Gen. 16:12). We cannot accept the Torah."

There was not a single nation among the nations to whom God did not go, speak, and, as it were, knock on its door, asking whether it would be willing to accept the Torah.

At long last God came to Israel. They said, "We will do and hearken" (Exodus 24:7). Of God's successive attempts to give the Torah, it is written, "Adonai came unto Sinai; after having [first] risen at Seir unto the people thereof, then having shined forth at Mount Paran, God finally came unto the myriads holy, at God's right hand a fiery law for them" (Deuteronomy 33:2).

Thought Questions:

1. What does this imply about being chosen?
2. Why might Israel not have been God's first choice?
3. Is the Torah a burden? Is it confining?
4. What do we get out of it?
5. Would you ever agree to a contract before reading it?
6. What does it mean to be in a Brit – A covenant with God?
7. What does this story tell us about the relationship between the nations in ancient times? If we were writing the story now, how would we characterize our differences from other tribes and religions?

[Midrash] Exodus Rabbah 5:9

At Sinai, when the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, God manifested marvels upon marvels for Israel with [God's] voice. How so? As the Holy One spoke, the voice reverberated throughout the world. At first Israel heard the voice coming to them from the south, so they ran to the south to meet the voice there. It shifted to the north, so they ran to the north. Then it shifted to the east, so they ran to the east, but from the east it shifted to the west, so they ran to the west. Next it shifted to heaven. But when they raised their eyes toward heaven, it seemed to rise out of the earth. Hence Israel asked one another, "But wisdom, where shall it be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12). "And all the people perceived the thunderings" (Exodus 20:15). Since there was only one voice, why "thunderings" in the plural? Because God's voice mutated into seven voices, and the seven voices into seventy languages, so that all the nations might hear it.

Thought Questions:

1. What are the implications for where God's teaching and wisdom can be found in the world?
2. What are the implications for whom the Torah is intended?
3. Are we still running around trying to find meaning?
4. Are we still running around trying to find God?

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