

Monet and Matan Torah – Pre-Shavuoth 5777

When I was a junior in high school I visited Giverny, France, former home of impressionist painter Claude Monet. I spent hours walking across the dainty footbridges and winding garden paths that are the subject of Monet's many masterpieces, drinking in the sweet smell of Wisteria and reveling in the colors of the French countryside. Of my entire three weeks abroad, Giverny was the absolute highlight of my travels. But along with being the favorite part of my time away, Monet's gardens were also the most difficult piece of the trip to convey to others. Words like "colorful" or "bucolic" seemed totally inadequate to describe the power of what I had experienced; even superlative phrases could not convey the sheer beauty of what I had seen. Almost as useless as these verbal descriptions were the photographs that I had taken of the gardens and the Monet prints that I had purchased in the estate gift shop. For while these visual aids gave my friends and family the false impression that they could appreciate what I had witnessed, I knew that these second-hand representations did not even come close. Nothing could quite capture the true essence of Giverny!

This coming week we will observe the holiday of Shavuot, a festival which commemorates our receiving of the Ten Commandments so many years ago and celebrates the centrality of these laws in our lives still today. Shavuot is a holiday of all-night learning and rich dairy desserts, of chanting the book of Ruth and remembering the first fruits offered up to God during Temple times. It is also, for many of us, an opportunity to reflect on our relationship to Torah. Shavuot is not the only holiday devoted to the honoring of Scripture, of course, for Simchat Torah in the fall bears this theme as well. But while Simchat Torah emphasizes the *liturgical* aspect of Torah – the fact that we have completed our yearly lectionary cycle and will soon begin again anew –

Shavuot emphasizes the *historical* dimension of Torah, the fact that this beloved book was transmitted to our people on Mount Sinai this day so many thousands of years ago. It celebrates our sacred legacy throughout the generations.

For many of us, the story of God's revelation at Sinai inspires feelings of pride and attachment while also raising deep and important questions. While there may be many aspects of Revelation that we find meaningful – the communal nature of the covenant made at Sinai, for example, or the connection to the past that we feel when reciting ancient words transmitted through the generations – some of us also wonder about the nature of Torah and its origins. Is Scripture an unadulterated product of the Divine or did humanity play a role in its authorship? If Torah was written entirely by God, what do we make of the profoundly difficult passages that it contains – laws that prohibit individuals with disabilities from serving as priests, for example, or condemn homosexual behavior, or legislate the death penalty for what we would consider but minor crimes? And if Torah was rather written by humans, from where does it derive its ultimate authority and sanctity in our lives? How is it different from any other ancient and beautiful work of great literary merit? It is some of these questions that I'd like to explore together this morning.

My own personal understanding of Revelation has been very much influenced by the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Franz Rosenzweig, and Martin Buber – three philosophers who all, while having slightly different ideas about the transmission of Torah, see Revelation in metaphorical rather than literal terms. Something happened at Mount Sinai. That something was so powerful and extraordinary that *B'nai Yisrael* (the Children of Israel) knew it could only have been orchestrated by God. For once, this unbelieving, skeptical people, this nation of

whiners and complainers, insubordinates and rebels, shared a collective moment of awe as they experienced the glory of their God. For once, this unapproachable, distant God, this deity accustomed to conversing only with the chosen elite, intimately revealed the Divine Presence before all of Israel, communicating God's will to the many rather than the few. Perhaps Revelation was the transmission of a particular sacred text but surely it was the tender breakdown of a normally wary relationship, the moment when two parties let down their guard and make themselves vulnerable one to another. Revelation was connection. Revelation was commitment. Revelation was covenant.

And then came the difficult part, the problem of how to capture "covenant" on a piece of parchment. Torah represents humankind's best efforts at solving this intractable problem. Narrative, law, poetry, song, and metaphor are all used as tools to try and express what occurred at Mount Sinai – the particular content that was revealed there along with the overwhelming aesthetic and emotional and religious experience of witnessing the Divine Presence firsthand. The finished product, our Torah, is humanly imperfect. For as Heschel writes, "The nature of revelation, being an event in the realm of the ineffable, is something that words cannot spell, which human language will never be able to portray (God In Search of Man, 184)." Influenced by the same limitations that hindered my own experience of trying to describe Giverny, Scripture reflects inconsistencies and differences in viewpoint, ambiguous items and passages that don't quite make sense, redundancies, ellipses, questions left unanswered, and – we can only imagine – descriptions of events that but pale in comparison to the original events themselves. At the same time, Torah has left us with a pretty good record of how our ancestors understood the foundational stories of our past and the laws that have

always shaped and structured Jewish community. It is our job to continue unearthing their meaning and applying them to the times in which we live.

All of this – Heschel and Buber and Rosenzweig and the rest - represent a quite radical departure from traditional notions about the authorship of Torah, the classical idea that it was none other than Moses who wrote down the words of the Five Books, hearing them firsthand from the Divine who dictated them word by word. The only question for the early sages of the Talmud was whether or not Moses had written the final chapter of the Torah, the one which recounts his very own death. Some of the rabbis imagined Moses writing even this, etching out the letters with tears rolling down his cheeks. Others imagined that these last lines alone were written by Joshua, Moses' successor.

Imagining that there was perhaps a human element in the authorship of Torah helps to alleviate some of the questions that exist when Scripture does not necessarily embody our highest ideals of justice or right; we can now see its words as a product of its time, one quite different from our own, and as the product of fallible human beings, trying their best to understand God's will but not always getting it just perfect. Yet once we start to think of Torah as a man-made creation, a great work of literature but a work of literature nonetheless, we have the potential to diminish Torah's importance, authority, and holiness. If the Torah was written by humans, what makes it different from Plato or Shakespeare or the Declaration of Independence – iconic, society-altering pieces of writing, to be sure, but not those that we tend to venerate or allow to dictate behavior in nearly the same way that we do the Torah? From where does Torah's holiness derive if it comes not directly from God?

For me, there are three elements as to what continues to make Torah sacred and commanding, even if it was, in fact, written by human hands. First, yet of least importance, there is its age – the fact that it is one of a very few documents that have remained in continuous use, that have remained relevant to the life of a community, since time immemorial. Older, by itself, does not necessarily mean better but the fact that Torah was able to introduce such radical concepts into the world as monotheism or the idea that laws should be followed out of an ultimate sense of “right” and “wrong” rather than in order simply to avoid consequence adds to its eminence; it was progressive in its day and has been lovingly interpreted in order to remain so still in ours. Its timelessness combined with its longevity grants it a particular sort of status.

Next, and of greatest importance, there is the idea that God may not have written Torah but God certainly inspired it; its very essence is an attempt to capture an experience of the Divine. Torah’s content is nothing less than the existential question of how to be in this world, what our purpose is as human beings living in relationship with the Almighty. Torah may contain law and philosophy and poetic passages that stir the soul but it is higher than any one of these things alone – it is a meditation on what God wants from us and it grows out of our direct encounter with none other than the Divine Godself. Even if it is mediated through human transmission, still Torah bears a Divine imprint.

Finally, there is the idea that Torah is sacred to us, as Jews, because it’s “ours” – the story our people have told throughout the generations, the text lovingly transmitted from parent to child, the rules that have shaped our community and our faith for millennia. Just as an old family heirloom carries worth not by dint of its value but rather because of the role it has played in one’s own personal history, the Torah is holy because it has always occupied a place of holiness

in the life of our nation; it has been holy to us since we first became a holy people. The Torah may have been written by human hands but its age and its content, the touch of Divine inspiration it contains, and its centrality to us, the Jewish people, make it utterly unlike any other human-made work. The Torah is holy because it has always been used as a vehicle for holiness.

And so we gather this Shavuot, preparing to receive Torah once more. As we enter into the holiday we imagine what it might have felt like to stand at Sinai, witnessing God's revelation, and how hard it would subsequently have been to try and convey that experience to others. This record of Divine encounter, our Torah, may be humanly imperfect – the humble attempts of mankind to capture that which cannot ever fully be captured. But that should perhaps come as no surprise: we don't even have a color photograph or one of Monet's prints to help us out!

An early *Chag Sameach* – a very happy holiday to all!

Shabbat Shalom.