

Shavuot Yizkor Sermon
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The Teachers of Israel

I have a hard time connecting to the idea of revelation. I understand, conceptually, that when we read about *ma'amad har Sinai*, the standing at Mount Sinai, we are supposed to conceive of that particular moment as the time when we were transformed from a band of freed slaves into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. It was through the Divine gift of Torah that we were to make such a remarkable transformation. This is precisely what we celebrate on these days of Shavuot—the giving of the Torah at Sinai, our moment of divine revelation. The Torah goes to great lengths to capture that moment for us, “On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.”¹ You can imagine yourself in that situation. It is early morning, the sun is barely over the horizon, and suddenly the sky is illuminated not by the sun but by lightning, with clapping thunder that you not only hear, but you *feel*. It is awe-inspiring, perhaps even terrifying. It was in that atmosphere that the Torah was given to us at Sinai.

That sounds like a powerful experience, but I am not sure that I have a real way of connecting to that moment. I can imagine all of the pieces, but I cannot necessarily relate to it once they are all put together. This is the challenge of the Torah’s version of revelation, of standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah from God. That sort of powerful, revelatory

¹ Exodus 19:16.

experience is something that can be depicted in a movie and described in a text, but I am not sure if I have ever had the opportunity to experience something quite like it. But what I can understand much better, what resonates with me, is the way that our Sages somewhat surreptitiously recast what it means to receive Torah from God.

There are early morning blessings and prayers recorded in the siddur that are to be said even *before* the morning service begins. The assumption is that you do these on your own, at home or once you arrive in synagogue. One section is about Torah study. We acknowledge God as the one who *commanded* us to study Torah, תּוֹרָה בְּדִבְרֵי יְצִיּוֹנוֹ לַעֲסֹק. Then we acknowledge God as not only the Commander, but also the Teacher: “Adonai our God, make the words of your Torah sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people Israel. And may we and all of our descendants and the descendants of Your people the House of Israel, all know Your Name and be students of Your Torah for its own sake. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַמְלִמֵּד תּוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל, Blessed are You, Adonai Who teaches Torah to Your People, Israel.” Here we pray that learning Torah should be sweet, and that it should be something that we pass down to our descendants. But at a deeper level, the prayer also reimagines revelation. God is not only the Commander, but God is also *the* Teacher, הַמְלִמֵּד תּוֹרָה. I find this to be a powerful way of connecting with God and reimagining the revelation at Sinai. The Torah’s depiction of standing at Sinai is of God as Giver of the Torah, reading out a list of obligations and responsibilities that we are now dutybound to fulfill. But in the *siddur*, in this prayer that we are supposed to recite each morning before we begin the formal service, there we reimagine God as a teacher, one who instructs and educates and mentors, who cares deeply for their students.

We often like to speak of the idea that we all stood at Sinai, that our *neshamot* were there alongside Moses, Aaron, and Miriam when God uttered the words of the Ten Commandments. But I like to imagine that whenever I open a *sefer*, a Jewish book, that too is a potential moment of Divine Revelation. When we study Torah, and I mean that in the broadest possible sense—whenever we are engaged in Jewish learning—then we are continuing this process of revelation, and God is our Teacher. Jewish learning is not *just* learning, for if God is our Teacher, if God is **יְשׁוּעָה לְעַמּוֹ**, then learning *is* also revelation. On Shavuot, we celebrate this ongoing process of revelation, and we celebrate God as Teacher.

I imagine that the vast majority of us can more easily relate to the idea of a teacher than a commander. Everyone has gone to school of some kind; we have all had those exemplary teachers that not only transmitted to us knowledge and understanding, but also something much greater which is hard to articulate. There are teachers who made us love learning, who inspired us to take a particular path in our lives, who offered us much more than a lecture or a grade on an assignment. Those are the teachers that I invite you to imagine in this moment. Our tradition values teachers so deeply that the Talmud says, “Anyone who teaches another person’s child Torah, the Torah ascribes them credit as if they were their parent.”² In other words, our teachers are like additional parents. Since they have the responsibility of training us, teaching us, and mentoring us, they are looked upon as if they too were responsible for bringing us into this world and helping us to navigate it.

For many of us, the opposite is also true. Parents are not *just* parents, but many have also served as our very first teachers. (I recognize that not everyone has always had the best

² Bavli Sanhedrin 19a.

relationship with a parent, if they had one at all. And therefore we can safely say that sometimes we learn from them what we should do, and at other times we learn what *not* to do.) When I meet with our b’nai mitzvah students, we talk about their training and preparations to become b’nai mitzvah. Inevitably our conversation goes to asking about their mentors and teachers. When I ask about their very first teachers, many of them try to recall the names of preschool and nursery school teachers. It sometimes takes a bit of hinting that their very first teachers are usually sitting just beside them—their parents! It is from our parents, or from anyone who raised us, that we learn so much often without even recognizing that we are learning. We learn from parents and grandparents, from aunts and uncles, from siblings and friends, and even from our children. On Shavuot, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah at Sinai, we also recognize God as our Teacher, and thus we elevate what it means to teach to a level of holiness and sanctity. Our loved ones who have taught us were engaged in a divine act.

In a few moments we will rise to recite the Yizkor memorial prayers to remember those who departed from our midst. As we do so, I invite you to remember your loved ones as your teachers, to think of the manifold ways in which their lives enriched your own, and to consider how their advice helped shape the person you are today. None of us goes through life entirely alone; there are always people there—family, friends, and loved ones—to guide us along the way. In so doing, those people become our teachers. Just as we continuously learn from our sacred tradition, from Torah, and from God, so too may our memories of our loved ones be instructive to us. May those memories be endless sources of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Shabbat shalom and *chag sameach*.