

6:2

אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי: בְּכָל יוֹם וַיּוֹם בֵּית קוֹל יוֹצֵאת מִהָר
 חוֹרֵב וּמִכְרֶזֶת וְאוֹמֶרֶת: אוֹי לָהֶם לְבָרִיּוֹת מֵעֲלֻבּוֹנָה שֶׁל
 תּוֹרָה – שֶׁכָּל מִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ עוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה הֵרִי זֶה
 בְּזוּף, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: בָּזָם זָהָב בְּאַף חֲזִיר, אֲשֶׁה יָפָה וְסָרַת טַעַם
 (משלי יא:כב). וְאוֹמֶר: וְהִלַּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הַמָּה, וְהַמְכַתֵּב
 מְכַתֵּב אֱלֹהִים הוּא, חָרוּת עַל־הַלַּחַת (שמות לב:טז). אֵל תִּקְרִי
 חָרוּת אֶלָּא חָרוּת, שֶׁאֵין לָךְ בֶּן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי שֶׁעוֹסֵק
 בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה. וְכָל הַעוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה הֵרִי זֶה
 מִתְעַלָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וּמִמַּתָּנָה בַּחֲלִיאֵל וּמִבְּחִיאֵל בְּמוֹת
 (במדבר כא:ט).

Rabbi Y'hoshua ben Levi said: Every single day a heavenly voice emanates from Mount Horeb, proclaiming and saying, "Woe to them, to the people, because of [their] insult to the Torah!" For whoever does not occupy themselves with the Torah is called, "Rebuked," as it is said: "Like a golden ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman who turns away from good judgment" (Proverbs 11:22). And it says: "The tablets are God's handiwork and the script was God's script *charut* [engraved] on the tablets (Exodus 32:16). Do not read *charut* [engraved] but *cheirut* [freedom], for you can have no freer person than one who engages in the study of the Torah. And anyone who engages in the study of the Torah becomes elevated, as it is said: "From Mattanah to Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel to Bamot" (Numbers 21:19).

REVELATION IS THE CENTRAL, powerful moment in the Judaic religious narrative. Scores of thinkers and theologians have wrestled with the manifold dimensions of revelation and its role in Jewish destiny. Yet the splendor of revelation is nearly impossible for twenty-first-century minds to grasp. We should nonetheless strive to access the experience

of our ancestors. In the Talmud, there is vigorous debate on how the Israelites responded to the revelation at Mount Sinai:

And Rabbi Y'hoshua ben Levi said: With every single statement that emanated from the mouth of the Holy One of Blessing, the souls of the Jewish people departed [from their bodies], as it is stated: "My soul departed as God spoke" (Song of Songs 5:6). Now, since their souls departed after the first statement, how could they have received the second statement? [God] brought down the dew with which God will resurrect the dead in the future and resurrected them. (BT *Shabbat* 88b)

In this mishnah, Rabbi Y'hoshua ben Levi teaches something quite radical: "Every single day a heavenly voice emanates from Mount Horeb." Revelation continues. Indeed, revelation was never intended to be a single moment in history. Instead, it was the start of a living, reciprocal relationship, an ongoing communication. We are charged with listening to the past while concentrating on the present. When they seem to clash, listen more closely. When we listen to past and present, inward and outward, we attain our freedom. It is a liberty built upon responsibility and commitment to the noblest truths, which will set us free from our base instincts, desires, and the most fleeting ideologies of our time. Former American Jewish World Service president Ruth Messinger remarked, "Listening is a prerequisite for action. Listening is a principle for living Jewishly in a globalized world."⁴³⁸ As the world is evolving fast, we must listen more and more deeply and responsively.

But there is discord:

And Rabbi Y'hoshua ben Levi said: With every single statement that emanated from the mouth of the Holy One of Blessing, the Jewish people retreated twelve miles, and the ministering angels helped them to totter back. (BT *Shabbat* 88b)

There is a distinct paradox in this account of the Israelites approaching the Divine. The first narrative tells of love—a return to God—but the second shows fear and backing away with awe. The first is about the limits to human understanding of the truth of revelation, and the latter is about the limits to human courage.

By definition, revelation means that we learn something powerful or startling that we did not know before. With religious revelation, we do not merely walk away with new knowledge, but also with a strengthened spiritual relationship. Further, revelation is effective only if it leads to holistic transformation. We cannot live the same way after attaining this new knowledge and after this relationship has been strengthened. Our minds, hearts, and relationship to the Revealer are transformed. We are called upon to imitate the Divine and thus create our own relationships that include intimate revelation; indeed, revelation should not be limited to intellectual and religious learning.

We share concern for those we love, and we assert justice for strangers. So too, must we embrace learning with strangers and revelation with those we love. In this sacred space, we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable and embrace shared experience that will change us. Some commentators suggest that God revealed only the nearly silent *alef* of *anochi*—the first word of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2).^{438a} This suggests that spiritual presence is just as important as the actual content. Sometimes just an *alef* (א), spoken with all one's being, can be deeply revelatory.

When participating in religious life, we should take profoundly inspirational and transformative moments from text and tradition and assimilate them into daily life. Sinaitic revelation should become a part of daily prayer and living. The wedding canopy, the chuppah, should be carried into daily love and responsibilities. On a regular basis, celebrating the Sabbath is a consistent reminder of the sanctity and preciousness of time.

When we pray, we seek to connect to the Above. But that leads to another question about revelation: Does God pray as well?

In one Talmudic story, the Rabbis teach that God does indeed pray:

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra: "How do we know that God prays? Because it says: 'I will bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer [literally: house of My prayer]' (Isaiah 56:7). It does not say 'house of *their* prayer,' but 'house of *My* prayer.' This teaches that God prays. What does God pray? 'May it be My will before Me that

My mercy will suppress My anger, and that My compassion will prevail over My [other] attributes, and that I will deal with My children with compassion, and that I may treat them beyond the strict interpretation of law.” (BT *B'rachot* 7a)

Imagine for a moment the radical nature of this discussion. Alongside their erudition, the Rabbis show their ability to make God an immediate and perceptible presence. Their depiction of God isn't that of a divine being who fades into the background to let humanity do all of the inner work that it takes for prayer. God is an active participant in the rituals, rather than simply a distant observer of them.

Relatedly, another passage goes so far as to suggest that God even “wears” *t'fillin* during prayer (BT *B'rachot* 6a). Of course, some commentators don't take these teachings literally. After all, to whom would God pray? Further, God doesn't have to inhabit a body—as we are to understand the idea of a body—in order to don *t'fillin*. This teaching is still valuable. We learn that prayer is a sign not of weakness but of strength. It takes courage and humility to pause and reflect upon ourselves and existence. God prays and thus praises Creation and reflects upon existence. We learn that God intentionally made the world imperfect, so that humans could be partners in Creation:

A certain philosopher asked Rabbi Hoshaya and said to him: If circumcision is so beloved [by God], why wasn't the first man created circumcised? . . . [He replied:] Everything created during the six days of Creation requires further work. For example, mustard seeds must be sweetened, legumes must be sweetened, wheat must be ground, and man must be improved.⁴³⁹

The first humans were the last of Creation, in order to show that they had no part in the initial stages:

Our Rabbis taught: Adam was created [last of all beings] on the eve of Sabbath. And why? Lest the heretics say: The Holy One of Blessing had a partner [Adam] in God's work of Creation. Another answer is: In order that, if our minds become [too] proud, we may be reminded that the gnats preceded us in the order of Creation. Another answer is: That [Adam] might immediately enter upon the fulfillment of a commandment, the observance of the Sabbath.

Another answer is: That he might straightway go in to the banquet. The matter may be compared to a king of flesh and blood who built palaces and furnished them, prepared a banquet, and thereafter brought in the guests. So too, Adam was created in a world that was already prepared. (BT *Sanhedrin* 38a)

Humans played no part in the initial creation of the world, but we have a huge part in the future of the world. And for millennia, humans have turned to prayer for our own needs, as well as for the needs of others. Recent research indicates that Jews may be less likely than many others to pray. The Pew Research Survey released in 2013 showed that 55 percent of all Jews viewed religion as very or somewhat important in their lives, versus 44 percent who viewed it as not too or not at all important.⁴⁴⁰ Compare this with 79 percent of all Americans who viewed religion as very or somewhat important. According to the Pew Research Center's earlier 2007 U.S. Landscape Survey, 58 percent of Americans prayed daily, ranging from 80 percent among Black Protestants, 71 percent among Muslims, 58 percent among Catholics, 53 percent among mainline Protestants, and (last among major religions) 26 percent among Jews.⁴⁴¹

The efficacy of prayer has been put to scientific trial, with mixed results. A Mississippi study of patients concluded that direct person-to-person prayer sessions improved depression and anxiety scores, but did not affect cortisol levels.⁴⁴² Another study of Christian prayers for strangers undergoing heart surgery found that there was no effect on the outcome, regardless of whether the patient knew about the praying, and that there was an increased rate of complications following surgery among those who had been prayed for.⁴⁴³ We don't consider prayer to be magic. Rather, prayer can improve the person who prays, by grounding us and filling us with inspiration, hope, and positive energy.

Dr. Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan writes:

Religion is not a movement stretching out to grasp something, external, tangible and good, and to possess it. It is a form of being, not having, a mode of life. Spiritual life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced. It is new birth into enlightenment.⁴⁴⁴

Religion pushes us to deeper experience. Rather than merely analyzing our existence, we must immerse ourselves in the deepest and highest form of living. Sometimes we can solve problems, but sometimes we are humbled before the challenges. President Barack Obama, channeling a Lincoln-esque oration, said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go."⁴⁴⁵

Today, we are surrounded by personal, local, national, and global challenges. There is much work to do. Even though we are capable of much, we must humble ourselves through prayer and introspection. God can create or destroy the world in a moment, yet God is found in God's own prayer immersed in truth, hope, and love. So, too, we can achieve much, but we must pause to consider the correct path. Revelation is not merely a historical phenomenon, but a way of life. We can open our eyes and hearts to the profundity of the soul's capacity for love, amazement at the infinitude of the universe, and the beauty of loving relationships. In sacred moments, God continues to speak with us. Embracing the holy everyday revelation is a recommitment to the Sinaitic experience. Even more so, embracing spontaneous sacred moments of divine and human revelation is essential to spiritual growth and renewal. That is where revelation is truly found.