

Speaking in Thunder

Arthur Green

Among Jews in North America, Shavuot is surely one of the least-known and least-observed Jewish holidays. Another irony of Jewish history: the holiday of the book, forgotten by the people of the book. Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai, should by rights be the apex of the Jewish festival cycle. Passover, the time of liberation, leads up to it. We count the days from Exodus to Sinai, as though liberation itself were just a prelude. In order to be wedded to our God at the Mountain, we have to be free from bondage to all our inner and outer pharaohs. Sukkot, the third partner in the pilgrimage cycle, basks in the afterglow of Sinai. In it we celebrate our wandering through the wilderness and eternal preparation to enter the promised land. Neither of these makes any sense without the Main Event, the revelation of God at the Holy Mountain.

Sinai takes us to the heart of Jewish faith: it claims that God communicates to humans; that such communication took place between Y-H-W-H (the unutterable Hebrew name for "God," understood here as an impossible form of the verb "to be" best translated "Is-Was-Will Be") and Moses and Israel at the mountain in the wilderness; and that this revelation makes known the divine will. In one form or another, this set of claims pervades all of classical Judaism. I believe it is necessary both to deny and to affirm the claims of Sinai.

My denial of literal faith in Sinai will undoubtedly seem to some too distant from the simple notion of revelation they had in childhood. For many more contemporary Jews, my affirmation will doubtless sound too strong. My theological tone may sound to them too much like a "real" belief in revelation after all. I seek a mature and believable Jewish faith based on an ultimate commitment to a nondualistic vision of the universe, one that denies the radical separation of "God" and "self." Modern Judaism has conveniently buried the truth the Jewish mystics knew centuries ago: All God "reveals" at Sinai is God's own self, the self of the universe. The entire Torah is nought but this, God's own name. All the rest is commentary.

If the revelation and commandment at Sinai are the heart of Jewish faith, they are also the most difficult and "scandalous" claims made by the religious traditions of Israel. Taken at face value, they form the very essence of Jewish "supernaturalism" and seeming theological arbitrariness: Y-H-W-H, the Creator of the universe chooses at a particular moment to reveal "Himself" uniquely to the Jewish people, addressing them in words and pledging eternal loyalty in covenant with them if they will accept "His" specific will as manifest in the practice of Judaism. Both mind and conscience reel at such a thought! What does it mean to say that God speaks? Does God speak to Israel in a language that Israel understands, commanding a Torah made up of laws, ethics, rites, and traditions that seem remarkably related to those of the pagan nations in whose midst Israel lives? Can we

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imagine a God so arbitrary as to choose one nation, one place, and one moment in human history in which the eternal divine will was to be manifest for all time? How can we attribute to Y-H-W-H, who becomes “person” only through our encounter, this sort of arbitrary willfulness? For these reasons and others, thinking Jews in our time, including many who seek a serious approach to questions of the spirit, balk at accepting the “yoke” of Sinai.

But hear another voice from within the tradition. “Moses spoke and God responded in a voice” (Exod. 19:19). The rabbis comment: God responded “in the voice of Moses.” This seems to say that the only voice heard at Sinai was that of Moses, sometimes speaking on his own and sometimes possessed by the divine spirit, God responding from within Moses’ own voice. Rather than a “voice from heaven,” there was the voice of a prophet transformed by an inner encounter that can only be characterized as “heaven.” Jews over the centuries have debated how to refine the naive biblical depiction of Sinai and the experience of revelation. The phrase “Shekhina [divine presence] speaks from within his throat” was often applied to prophets.

The fact is that any sophisticated theory of revelation recognizes a moment in which the Divine and human minds flow together. Indeed, we speak of the “mind” of the Divine only by analogy with the human mind. If Y-H-W-H is the incorporeal essence of the universe, and mind or soul is the incorporeal essence of the person we *call* God the mind or soul of the universe. God as Y-H-W-H knows no distinction between “matter” and “spirit.” In seeking to comprehend revelation we may, however, speak of Y-H-W-H as a cosmic mind, present in the depths of each human mind, and impressing itself in a unique way upon consciousness. The universal One seeks to be known by the human, this manifestation of its own self that is also, paradoxically, its “other.” Its “seeking” or “calling out” to its “other” (the human) is not of language. It is only humans who can make the divine articulate in words, since words themselves are a human invention. In fact, the most recent translations of Exodus 19:19 render it, “Moses spoke and God responded in thunder.” Y-H-W-H speaks in thunderclaps; it takes a Moses to translate God’s thunder into words.

If the Jewish imagination regards the divine and human as separate, God living in “heaven” and humans on earth, revelation is the act that comes closest to bridging this separation. Moses goes up to the top of Sinai, according to the Torah, and God comes down upon the mountain (Exod. 19:3, 20). But at that moment the entire top of Sinai is covered by thick cloud—as though to say that the border between the “upper” and “lower” realms is lost. Later accounts of the revelation are more fanciful; they actually depict Moses as riding on the clouds, entering the heavenly realms, and holding on to God’s Throne of Glory. Moses returns from the revelation still human, but his face glows with the light of that encounter in which the upper limits on human spiritual attainment had been momentarily cast aside. He returns to the “world of separation” from an experience of transcendent unity, the Torah now “translated” within him. God’s thunder and Moses’ words are now one.

But the God who speaks in thunder is still the sky god, still the one who dwells in heaven and atop the highest peak. We are seeking a more fully internalized version of that foot-of-the-mountain experience. Remembering that our earliest ancestors were diggers of wells in the desert, suppose we allow ourselves to turn the high mountain into a deep well. Abraham observed Torah, say the rabbis, before it was given at the mountain. Let us try to imagine Torah as it was seen by that digger of wells. Instead of coming “down” from the top of the mountain, his wisdom or Torah flowed forth like water from deep within the earth. We thus try to understand revelation as the most profound of inner experiences. Seen this way, Moses’ experience has much in common with the creative act, the inner mental activity of the artist, the musical composer, the mathematician, and others along with the religious figure. The core experience of creativity reaches a depth that necessarily contains an element of mystery, something “other.”

We are talking here about an inner straining of the human mind to the breaking point—but

rather than a breakdown that leads to madness or confusion, we envision a breakthrough to new creative achievements. This may come in the form of a novel insight, a flash of intuition instantaneously translated into the medium in which the creator works: into music, into mathematical formulae, into words. The creative energy, like the divine light, is undifferentiated. Only the tools and mindset that lead one to that flash of intuition draw on that mysterious inner reserve and direct each to be creative in a specific way. (The rabbis say that at Sinai the very senses were confused, and Israel “saw the audible and heard the visible.” We can only imagine a state of creative elation from which Einstein would return with a symphony and Beethoven with a mathematical formula!) At this level of inner experience, lines between “creativity,” “discovery,” “inspiration,” and “revelation” are impossible to draw. The language we have for drawing such fine distinctions belongs to a level of consciousness other than that at which these inner events occur. The free flow of inner energies that characterizes such moments does not admit clear borders between “I” and “Thou” or between “mine” and “thine.”

When the soul (the human capacity to love and tremble in awe) as well as the mind (the human capacity to understand) participates in the creative, inspirational, or revelatory event, that event takes on a religious character. The human striving for revelation involves joining the emotional and the intellectual life fully. We Jews assert that Moshe Rabbenu—Moses our Teacher—had such an experience. The religion of ancient Israel, as embodied symbolically in that moment at Sinai, continues to represent for us the result of one of the great human encounters with Divinity. For us as Jews, it is, in existential terms, the greatest such encounter of all time. It is the only encounter we know. Others that may exist are not existentially open to us; they are not ours. True participation in a spiritual language requires the whole of the human heart. Each heart can speak only one such language. Our heart is given wholly to this one. While we recognize that there may be others, we cannot know them, cannot “set them upon our heart.”

The Jewish people throughout its history has accepted the task of forming a communal religious existence and creating a civilization that stands in response to the event at Sinai. This is what I mean by “accepting the Torah.” What we accept is the reality that Divinity is present in humans, manifest in human language and human institutions. We accept the challenge to create a society, with all its institutional trappings, that embodies this presence. We are no less charged with that task today than we were thousands of years ago. Part of our charge is to maintain and keep trust with the traditions of the past. We are here to be faithful bearers of our heritage. But every generation will have to create some new forms and reinterpret many old ones in order to keep the fire of Sinai alive, to keep it from becoming mere ash. Maintaining a sense of balance between these two, and not losing our awareness of Y-H-W-H while we are engaged in that balancing act, is no small task.

Generations of believers have invested boundless emotional and spiritual energy (*kavana*) in the forms of Jewish devotional life, including the words of prayer, the cycle of the calendar, its sacred music, and tales and commentaries. I believe that the power of this *kavana* is never lost. The intensity with which a form is used as a vessel of spiritual life grows and builds through each generation of devotion to it. The spiritual riches borne by the words of prayer or the form of offering increases in richness over time. A latter-day Jew, especially one coming from outside the tradition, who opens him or her self to that form may discover the tremendous riches of *kavana* that lie waiting within it. The Jewish people has both created and accepted these forms in love. That love is never lost or diminished, but is only hidden until we discover it again. The forms may not have been given by God from Sinai. But they are what we bring to the mountain; we invest them and forever associate them with the holiness we encounter there.

The relationship between the memory of Sinai and our ever-evolving religious lives as Jews is not a simple one. There is divinity to be discovered within the mitzvot (commandments), but this

is not the divinity of a commanding God who insists on their proper performance. Judaism is a way of reaching inward and outward toward the One, a way sanctified not by divine fiat but by generations of those who have walked along the path. The light that lies hidden within our Torah, made up of the countless points of love and devotion placed there by our ancestors, is also the hidden light of Y-H-W-H.

Is it then imperative that Jews seek out this light? Does the God who has dwelt within the hearts of so many generations, and who has been given expression through these forms, become an immanent *metsaveh*, a “commanding one,” who will stand behind the *mitzvot* as the indwelling embodiment of religious authority? I find myself to be rather close to this position, but I am not ready to assert it in any but the most personal and subjective ways.

In my own religious life, I have come to recognize the need for submission to Y-H-W-H (remember to say “Is-Was-Will Be,” and not just “God”!) as a part of religious devotion. I fought long and hard against this aspect of religious life, but I now, perhaps with long-delayed maturity, have come to accept it. I believe there is no room for God—however defined—in our lives until we can overcome our own willfulness. To thus submit, to “negate your will before the divine will,” is essential to accepting our covenant as I understand it, to be ready to serve as a channel for divine presence in the world.

In Judaism, this submission, usually described as *kabbalat 'ol malkhut shamayim* “accepting the yoke of divine rule,” is joined to *kabbalat 'ol mitzvot*, “accepting the yoke of commandments.” For myself, I recognize the necessity of this link, the sense that religious awareness only becomes constant in life through the regularity of religious discipline. But I also remain constantly aware of the pitfalls of submission as a religious value. It can lead to the cultivation of an overly submissive personality. Some expressions of submission, in our tradition as well as elsewhere, border on self-hatred. Most seriously, from a devotional point of view, the emphasis on submission may be at the expense of the true joy and exultation that are the heart of religious awareness. I turn to religious language to express the fullness of my heart. Let me be wary that religion itself not serve to diminish that fullness and joy.

Here the non-Orthodoxy of my theology is critical to my religious life. Because I know of the human role in the origin of the commandments, and because I know that all human creations are fallible, I never hand myself over entirely to the commandments. I know that they are but a means, and an often arbitrary one, to a greater end. Out of my love for our ancestors and the divine spirit who dwells within these traditions and who asks that Jews not abandon them, I choose to be faithful to the religious discipline they represent. I will do so wherever this discipline does not bring me into conflict with religious principles I hold even more deeply: I recognize all humans as embodying the divine image and I follow the seven Noahide commandments as I have chosen to understand them. (The rabbinic list of basic universal norms for human behavior, the Noahide commandments are Judaism’s closest parallel to “natural law.” They are prohibitions against murder, theft, idolatry, incest, and adultery, blasphemy or denial of god, dismemberment of living animals even for food, and an admonition to establish a society ruled by law.) I seek to affirm this commitment anew each day, to keep it an act of faith ever chosen in freedom. I need to cross the Sea each day, a reminder of my freedom, before I can renew the covenant. I am helped in this struggle with authority in religion by the very helplessness of God. The One who is present in these *mitzvot* is really no longer the frightening commander on the mountaintop. I thank the ever self-revealing Y-H-W-H for the gifts of biblical scholarship and historical study of religion, which have helped to break the excessive yoke of religious authority, making our generation a post- rather than a premodern one. The Presence that remains within the forms is the still, small voice of our people’s deepest inner self. The God I know is a Divinity that cannot act or be realized in the human world at all except through

human actions. Knowing full well that I live in an age of choice and freedom, one in which I can opt to leave the domain of this religion at any moment, I choose to remain “at home” with the life rhythms of the Jewish people. In doing so, I let myself hear that pleading voice of the One who has so long inhabited these traditions, and who asks not to be abandoned by yet another one of Israel’s children.

Such an “imperative” is, of course, an entirely personal one. I share it with the reader without advocacy. I have seen too much of the dark and dangerous side of religion to dare prescribe submission for anyone but myself. Though I take delight in others who join us on this path, I will not permit myself to become anyone else’s surrogate “commander.” You who seek to stand before that mountain, to hear the voice, to be commanded—you must get there by your own path. There is no better time to start than the night of Shavuot, a time when the heavens of your heart can open, and Torah can be given all over again. □

The Chosen People

David Curzon

The Hebrews in Egypt who chose not to leave—
 mostly those holding responsible positions—
 refused to be part of a stampeded populace
 led by a mad stuttering murderer
 who discoursed in the desert with burning bushes.
 These realistic skeptics expected the worst;
 they could predict worship of golden calves.
 It made sense to them to stay civilized slaves

and not be witness to the separating sea,
 the pillar of cloud as guide by day,
 the pillar of fire as guide by night,
 the struck rock that gushed water,
 the thunder and lightning as signs over Sinai,
 the countenance of Moses descending the mountain.

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