

Prophets

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Shavuot is the festival that commemorates not just the encounter between Moses and God on Mount Sinai but also the “revelation” of Torah. There are traditionally 70 ways of explaining (70 faces of) Torah. So how we understand what actually happened is, of course, subject to almost infinite variations, from fundamentalist literalism through academic reconstruction on to absolute denial. And I can respect different views even when I disagree with them.

But there is one possibility I can neither take seriously nor stop myself from laughing at, and that is one I have heard on the History Channel in the USA. Aliens landed on Mount Sinai; the fire and the smoke was obviously the exhaust of a space ship. Moses entered, was fed space rations for forty days, and then emerged with extraterrestrial instructions burnt into the tablets of high grade composite as to how his followers should behave if they wanted to survive successfully on earth. Then of course the ship took off and promptly disappeared. But not before some of those nobles, who standing halfway down the mountain, caught a glimpse of the afterburners (Exodus 24:11).

Some people just love conspiracy theories, and just as many are suckers for stories about how the only explanation we have for anything unusual on our planet is that it must have come from spacemen because humans could not have done it. Apparently 60% of Americans believe that aliens have landed on earth at some stage in our history. Of course I cannot prove they haven't, but neither can they prove they have.

The History Channel programs cover pyramids, ziggurats, Peruvian Nazca lines, Machu Picchu, Easter Island statues and Stonehenge, and underwater cities off the Bahamas and the Mediterranean. The latter that Plato (naturally) referred to in his fictional work on Atlantis. Now they have added Divine Revelation. The writers of the scripts follow a similar formula that you hear every time: “If this was the work of aliens from space, then...” And the narrator proceeds as if it were a proven fact. That all these phenomena can be explained perfectly naturally, though human agency is ignored, not even mentioned. Selective choice of “experts” ensures that anyone debunking the theory scientifically is not going to be heard. But who cares? It is television after all, and even serious newscasters tell lies, betray their prejudices, and tailor the facts to fit their predispositions.

The History Channel posits the idea that ancient prophets communicated with space. They were so advanced, so ahead of their time morally, that the only possible explanation could be (qualified of course by “if”) that they were contacted by aliens who bestowed them information and inspiration not otherwise available on earth.

But then it struck me. Isn't this what all religions teach? That an extraterrestrial force intervened in human affairs and inspired or instructed Moses or Jesus or Mohammad or Buddha how to teach humans the proper way to

behave? OK, except no one suggests spaceships. Other than Erich von Daniken in his 1968 book [*Chariots of the Gods*](#)^x, where he suggests that Ezekiel's vision of God in Chapter One is a description of a spaceship. And frankly, it does bear some resemblance if you remove the animal and human parts. But if we take spaceships and aliens out of it, isn't it the same thing? Isn't inspiration understood to come either from within or from without?

If academics suggest that Moses might have modeled his legal system on Hammurabi's and tweaked it a bit to remove some of the less savory parts because he was sensitive enough to recognize its limitations, the fundamentalist chorus will object most strenuously. The only way fundamentalists live with the fundamentalist approach is to appeal to the miraculous. In which case of course it's a miracle! But the miraculous cannot usually be explained physically. Though from the History Channel, too, it seems all the Biblical miracles can be explained naturally with only a weeny amount of imagination or rephrasing. So one solution is to put it down to some external intervention. And if some call it the work of God, why should not others call it the work of spacemen? Except that spacemen and spaceships are very physical and conform to physical laws. Therefore one would expect to find some independent physical evidence of their presence on earth, then or at some other date, rather than just a theory to explain structures that can otherwise be explained perfectly well.

But there is an important distinction. In the case of the Biblical prophets, at any rate, they did not build pyramids. They were men of ideas, social and spiritual. Their remit was not to create buildings or cities, but to teach people the difference between right and wrong, how to live a good life. They were not engineers but inspirers. It is true they claimed they talked to or dreamed of or were inspired by God, but the prophets who came after Moses were not given technical blueprints or indeed the power to make laws.

The greatest of prophets in Judaism was Moses. He had two titles and two roles. He was "Moses the Teacher" for disseminating his legal work and "Moses the Prophet" for his relationship with God. We usually only use the first. All prophets that followed him were exclusively of the second category. Hence the Talmud's principle that "prophets are not allowed to innovate laws". Their role was simply to reinforce what was there already.

Therefore, to suggest that prophets were inspired by physical objects like spacemen undermines their very purpose, which was to spread the word of a spiritual reality, not a physical one.

Now it's true that given the way that many religions deify their prophets, their holy men and their graves (when you can find them) it's little wonder that some Jews have tended to jump on the bandwagon. But that is why the Torah insisted that no one would know exactly where Moses was buried, to forestall such a tendency.

That is why on Shavuot we don't even mention Moses. It is all about studying the message, not worshipping the messenger.