

Two Versions of Sinai

Last week we read about the revelation that gave us the Torah on Sinai. This week we go into the specific religious and civil laws that expanded the initial ten principles that were inscribed on the two tablets of stone. And then the Torah returns to a recapitulation of the Sinai revelation with interesting differences.

In the first version in Exodus 19 Moses reads out the conditions of the covenant in which God will extend His laws and protection if the Israelites will agree to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Everybody replies that will do whatever God says. Na'aseh. We will do. Moses returns to God who says and God then says that He wants everyone to hear Him talking to Moses so that they will believe in him forever. Then Moses I instructed to sanctify, purify the people to be ready for the third day. And they must all stay away from the mountain itself.

On the third day there is thunder and lightning and the people are trembling. Moses takes the people out to meet God. And they are standing under (at the bottom of) the mountain. The mountain is smoking and God comes down through the fire. The people re trembling. Moses speaks and God replies. Then God comes down on Sinai and calls to Moses and Moses goes up.

On the third day God calls to Moses to go up. But then He tells him to go down to ensure the people do not break through to the mountain. And there's a warning to the priests too. And then Moses goes down and spoke the words of the revelation to them.

Then in Chapter 24 we have another version. This time Moses is commanded to bring Aaron, Nadav and Avihu up (but/ and) the seventy elders are told to stand at a distance. Only Moses comes closer. Then Moses comes and tells the people all the laws. And they say they will obey. And Moses promptly writes down all the words of God.

Then he sends the young men to sacrifice burnt offerings and bulls. Moses then takes The Book of the Covenant and reads it out to everyone and then they respond Na'aseh VeNishma. We will do and listen. Moses then scatters blood from the sacrifices and declares it to be the Blood of the Covenant.

Then Moses, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu and the seventy elders come closer and go up the mountain. Where they had a vision of God. They then have a banquet one assumes of the sacrifice and then finally Moses goes up the mountain alone. For six days the mountain is covered in clouds and on the seventh God calls to him and he goes up into the cloud for forty days and forty nights. What is the significance of these differences?

Academic thinkers tend to see this as an example of inconsistency, lack of chronology and system or different versions remembered. But the Torah is a complex document, more concerned with the religious message than a work of history or science.

It seems to me that this unusual sequence is intended to convey several very important principles in Judaism. The laws are essential. The constitution and human behavior is what preserves society and a particular way of life. But just important is what we call spirituality, the feeling of being close to that energy and power that is greater than human capacities.

That is why the civil laws are sandwiched between the revelation to the people and the revelation to individuals. We are part of a great nation. But each of us needs to find one's own relationship with the Divine. There are three core principles that define us as Jews. A people, a constitution and the spiritual connection with God.

But just as important is the impression not of confusion but that this was such a huge experience that different aspects of it struck different sections of the people in different ways. It was a multi-faceted, multi experienced phenomenon unlike anything else in the Torah. The whole of revelation was an out of this world, exceptional, non-rational unique event.