

Shavuot 2022

You might think there is little left original to write about the Festival of Shavuot that we are about to celebrate. We know its Biblical, agricultural origins, the importance of nature without its subservience to it, and the celebration of the seasons. We know of its umbilical 49-day connection to Pesach, from the barley harvest to wheat. The story of that wonderful woman Ruth who came to choose to live a Jewish life of kindness and loyalty. We also know how the rabbis worked out that this was the anniversary of Sinai.

What happened at Sinai is often called revelation. But that is a theological word that is not found in the Bible at all. We rather use the phrase *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, standing at Sinai together where we heard the words. The words of the *Aseret Hadibrot*, the Ten Words or statements that God spoke to Moses. Words can be so magnificent, so essential, and yet so much abused and misused.

I don't want to go into the technical literal details of how or what happened so long ago. What the method of communication was. The Torah itself gives three different versions of the events. But the fact is that these words and how we have understood them, are the foundation texts of Judaism as it has been practiced for thousands of years even as the religion built around them has evolved, changed, and added as every organism, culture, and tradition changes over time.

Language should be valued and respected. Not just what we say when we recite our prayers, read the Torah, or study. The Bible has God communicating to humans in words, whether in dream states or as in the case of Moses, awake and conscious. WE have no idea in what way or in what language. But in our tradition, God speaks. And man speaks. The Zohar described humans as the creatures who speak, long before some evolutionists described him as 'the talking animal'. But the Torah is very much concerned with how and when we speak to each other and how we use words as tools of destruction.

The Torah is full of warnings against using speech negatively, gossiping, insulting, humiliating, and deceiving. The expression *Nivul Peh*, an ugly mouth, describes the way some use language destructively, crudely, and offensively. The world we live in is one that devalues words. We are surrounded by swear words, profanities, and dirt in every area of society. Our most intimate selves are displayed everywhere for anyone to see, and our private thoughts are sold to the highest bidder as if this were good or healthy. There is no constraint. And linguistically we live in a world of abbreviations, crude dog language, and a sense that none of these matters, so long as you do not, heaven forbid, correct anyone or give them the impression that they are not perfect or entitled to do as they please.

Our society lets too many people get away with corrupt behavior. I am ashamed of the way rabbis who should know better use foul, abusive language to attack those they disagree with. This past week we have heard one so-called rabbi in Israel call a Jewish politician a Nazi. Several rather primitive so-called

rabbis with lots of followers who ought to know better, call other rabbis they disagree with heretics, sinners, and worse. Some use words to seduce and betray countless naïve women into having sex with them. All this is a complete betrayal of religious values. We must 'out' them and those who empower them. They make me ashamed to be identified with them. But just as important is to find ways of comforting and healing. This is the other side of language. We should listen to the beauty, majesty, and knowledge that words can do to elevate us instead of using them to drag us down into the dirt.

Another side of this religious bullying is the pressure exerted on people not to dissent or speak their minds for fear of being ostracized or worse. There is a violent side to religious life that I find horrifying. More troubling because it is in the name of religion. Yet one sees it all the time in the Knesset, at demonstrations, and in protests. Rival religious sects indulge in verbal and physical abuse. However bad it is, thank goodness it is still not as pervasive and murderous as it is in some other societies I could mention. But that's cold comfort to be compared to the very worst of humanity.

I grew up in a hypocritical English society where one did not say what one thought. Certain subjects were not to be brought up in polite conversation. One did not disagree with one's superiors or betters. One knew one's place. One did not rock boats or express private feelings or wash dirty laundry in public. Thank goodness my father rebelled against these constraints and taught me to follow him. But I would rather that kind of society where at least outwardly there is civility and dignity is preserved to the primitive violence of yahoos with beards and kipot hats.

The most significant feature of the Book of Ruth we read on Shavuot is the language, the themes of kindness, comfort, and support are all expressed in words. Ruth stands by a bereft Naomi and supports her emotionally. Boaz recognizes what a wonderful woman this foreign woman is and how she is working so hard to support her mother-in-law and how he comforts her and makes her feel welcomed. Look at how everyone uses language kindly and generously. Boaz interacts with his workers and they with him respectfully. He negotiates with dignity and civility. The community is supportive and concerned. This explains why this book is read at the time we commemorate receiving the Law. The Law is crucial. No society can exist without laws. But neither can a just society exist without love, support, kindness, and spirit that goes well beyond the letter of the law.

Keeping a tradition alive and healthy requires more than just obedience. Like liberty, it requires eternal vigilance. Otherwise, one looks around too late and it is gone. It requires free expression and free thought, the essential ingredients for a healthy human mind and soul. As we look around us wherever we are, we see such antagonism, an absence of civility, and an ability to communicate reasonably with each other.

Shavuot and Sinai celebrate language. Like all tools, it can liberate us from paganism and the randomness of irrationality or it can enslave us. Creation and Torah, begin with words. Let there be. Let us be. Let us be kind to each

other even when we disagree.

Chag Sameach, Happy Shavuot.