

Shavu'ot – Shabbat 5780

Shabbat Shalom, Chag Sameakh!!

I'd like to share some thoughts related to the Torah readings of Shavu'ot, both Friday morning (the first day of Shavu'ot) and Shabbat morning (the second day of Shavu'ot). First, I want to note that when a holiday coincides with Shabbat, the Torah reading skips the normal order of weekly portions and is something special for the holiday.

Shavu'ot is usually the most neglected of the three major holidays. The three major holidays are (in the order of the Jewish calendar): Passover, Shavu'ot, and Sukkot. They were the three pilgrimage holidays (when a male from each family was to go to the Temple in Jerusalem). They all have an agricultural component and a historical component. (By the way, even though in English we call Rosh Hashana a holiday, it's the New Year, Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, Chanukah is post-Biblical so it doesn't fall into the same category of holidays nor does Purim).

Shavu'ot came to be associated by the ancient rabbis, whom we call in Hebrew *khazal*, with the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. (*Khazal* is an acronym that stands for "our sages of blessed memory" *khakhamaynu zikhronam livrakha*) *Khazal* decreed that we should read the account of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai on the first day of Shavu'ot.

The giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai is definitely a peak moment in the sacred history of the Jewish people. Our tradition says that all Jewish souls were there including those who weren't born yet. One could respond to a statement like that and say – what a *bubbe mayseh*!! Or perhaps we could look at what is that statement trying to convey. One thing is that *matan torah* (the giving of the Torah) is the moment in which we become a people in many ways. In the days of the patriarchs and matriarchs we were essentially a clan. In Egypt we shared a fate as a people, but we didn't have the same sense of purpose, values, and meaning that we had after the Sinai experience. The exodus freed us from bondage, but it also was understood as having freed us not only **from** something, but **towards** something too. For *khazal* that meant it freed us to keep the Torah and to live a holy life.

What gives us cohesion as a people today? That's a seemingly simple question, but the answers to it are complex. I think it would be a fantasy to pretend that our ancestors, even in Biblical times, were totally united as a people. I'm sure there were many different beliefs that people had, different practices, different levels of commitment to our shared heritage, etc. That

certainly remains the case today. Maybe in earlier days when people were less exposed to other cultures, to other ways of thinking, when we were more insular whether by choice or lack thereof, Jews were more knowledgeable about Jewish thought, history, Torah, etc. However, I think there has always been a struggle for the soul of the Jewish people by influential Jewish thinkers. Back during the end of the Second Temple period there were various Jewish sects such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes who viewed elements of Judaism differently. We see divisions to this day. One question is how tolerant are we of those who differ from us in their orientation and understanding of our tradition. That makes a huge difference in the life of our people as a community.

Getting back to our earlier Midrash that all Jewish souls stood together at Sinai receiving the Torah, I hear the underlying thought that regardless of how we may interpret things differently, nevertheless ultimately we are all united – we all share this formative experience. Whatever happened at Sinai occurred approximately 3,300 years ago. Maybe we all were there, but our memory's a little foggy – granted it's been a while – (sometimes I have trouble remembering something I just read this morning). If we fast forward about 800 years, The second Temple in Jerusalem was built around 520 BCE and was destroyed in 70 CE. *Khazal* asked themselves what was the cause of the destruction? Their answer was *sinat khinam* (baseless hatred) between the Jews themselves. In other words, the people were so divided among themselves and hated each other for no real reason. Our sages saw the groundless anger that people felt for others with whom they disagreed as so corrosive of society that it made the society in general extremely vulnerable to destruction and collapse.

Sadly it's easy to see signs of *sinat khinam* (baseless hatred) both in Israel today and in the United States – and it's very frightening. In Israel you see the division between the ultra-orthodox and the secular and between the right wing and the left wing politically. Here we see a great deal of division between Republicans and Democrats. People have difficulty speaking to each other and listening to each other when they disagree so strongly. Now that degree of tension is beginning to express itself in people's responses to the current pandemic – those who want to be cautious about opening up again and those who think that the dangers are greatly exaggerated. I worry about how these early tensions will evolve over time. I also can't help but ask myself, who, if anyone, benefits from divisions like these and who, if anyone, exacerbates these divisions and why?

But back to Sinai and Shavu'ot. Sinai was a peak experience both literally and metaphorically. No one knows where Sinai was exactly, but when the Sinai peninsula was in Israeli hands I took a tour there with the Nature Society and we camped right at the base of what they called in Hebrew *har Moshe* (Moses' mountain) and in Arabic *jebel Musa* (which is Arabic for Moses' mountain). They didn't call it Mt. Sinai because no one truly knows where Mt. Sinai was, but this was a traditional belief of its location. One element that illustrated the antiquity of that belief was that there was a monastery there from the sixth century at the base of the mountain.

We all have peak experiences in our lives – those few and rare moments and experiences that change us forever. Some of those experiences occur over a period of time – such as a deeply important relationship, or it could be a momentary experience that deeply changes the way we look at and understand things.

In the last 30 years or so there has been a Jewish innovation, related in a way to Midrash, called Bibliodrama, in which people would try to imagine themselves in the roles of Biblical characters and try to understand what the experience must have been like. I think one way of understanding Midrash is as a version of Bibliodrama on the part of *khazal* who saw into the Biblical tales things that are not explicitly in the text. Trying to imagine what it must have been like to stand at Sinai with the mountain trembling and these people who had only seven weeks earlier escaped from Egypt after hundreds of years of slavery. Not knowing where they were going. Not really knowing where they were either. There is so much in the story that evokes a sense of awe. That sense of awe towards powers that are way beyond our understanding is a kind of religious feeling. I think that's why huge mountains, vast oceans, and the stars in the night sky in a truly dark place all give us a sense of perspective. We witness things that seem eternal and recognize our own smallness in comparison – yet at the same time we are capacity to recognize the awesomeness of certain things. That kind of perspective helps shed light on what really matters in our lives. I think that's also true of extreme experiences in general, including this pandemic. It gives us a perspective on what really matters.

My last comment. The Torah reading for the second day of Shavu'ot largely talks about social responsibility – mitzvot between people. The first day of Shavu'ot talks about our relationship with the Eternal One and the second day highlights our connection with our fellow humans. Both are a crucial part of our heritage and they feed each other. May we all merit clearer

and clearer visions of what really matters in our lives. Shabbat shalom and chag Sameakh!!

Rabbi Mark