



Recreating Sinai

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Parashat VaYeilekh 5785

The generation that will enter the Land of Israel never heard God's voice at Sinai. They never experienced the earth shattering voice, the terror, the awe. In place of memory, all they have is a story.

Moshe's task in Devarim—his primary task, according to some—is to make that story matter. Explaining the words that explain Moshe's project in the book of Devarim, the Hizkuni¹ states:

חזקוני דברים א:ה

"הואיל משה באר" כל המצוות, גם עשרת הדברים ששמעו מפי הגבורה רצה הקב"ה שישמעו גם הנולדים במדבר מפי ציר נאמן.

Hizkuni to Devarim 1:5

"Moses undertook to expound this Torah"—he expounded all the commandments in the Torah, including the Ten Commandments that the people had heard from God directly. Hashem wished that the new generation which had been born after the revelation at Mount Sinai should hear the Ten Commandments at least from the mouth of Moses.

¹ R. Hizkiyah ben Manoaḥ (France, 13th c.).



Moshe's project, in Devarim, is to make that retelling as close to a lived experience as possible. Moshe is not God, but he will speak the words he once heard God speak. In recounting the Torah, and particularly God's words at Sinai, Moshe hopes to bring the people as close to revelation as people who did not experience it can be.

But Moshe also knows that while the generation about to enter the Land has the privilege to hear the story of Sinai from Moshe, if not from God himself, their descendants will not have that privilege. Moshe knows that their children—and their children's children in turn—will have had no such experience to ensure that they they keep the Torah and remain loyal to God. For them, Har Sinai and the time in the desert will be something that happened many many years ago to ancestors they never even knew.

Moshe, though, refuses to allow Sinai to become a distant memory. Instead, he offers what he does in Devarim as a template, a model of retelling. Moshe commands the Jewish people to gather together every seven years and reread the book of Devarim,² his story about the Jewish people's encounter with God and time in the desert

דברים לא:יג

¹⁰וַיֹּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אוֹתָם לֵאמֹר מִקֵּץ שִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים בְּמַעַד שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה בְּחַג הַסֻּכּוֹת: ¹¹בָּבוֹא כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל לִרְאוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר תִּקְרָא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת נֹגֵד כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַזְנֵיהֶם: ¹²הִקְהֵל אֶת הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנָּשִׁים וְהַטָּף וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְשָׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת: ¹³וּבְנִיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּ יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְדוּ לִירְאֶה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כָּל הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם חַיִּים עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

Devarim 31:10-13

¹⁰And Moshe instructed them as follows: Every seventh year, the *shemittah* year, at Sukkot,

¹¹when all Israel comes to appear before your God in the place that [God] will choose, you

² See Talmud Bavli Sotah 41a.



shall read this Torah aloud in the presence of all Israel. ¹²Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Torah. ¹³Their children, too, who have not had the experience, shall hear and learn to revere your God as long as they live in the Land that you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.

Every seven years at a ceremony known as the *hak'hel* (gathering), the entire nation must gather together and listen to the Torah being read aloud, recounting the sounds and sights of *ma'amad* Har Sinai (standing at Sinai), listening to the insistence that it was not their ancestors who experienced the smoke and sulfur, the fire and lightning, the booming voice of God, but they, themselves, gathered there that very day.

Through the power of the story, every seven years, the Jewish people will have a chance to transform Sinai from a memory into a real place, a place where they, as a nation, might encounter God. In this way, Moshe hopes, the Jewish people will learn to fear God, and out of that fear, obey His commandments. Through the power of words, Har Sinai will be given the chance to come to life.

But retelling the story is not enough on its own. Generations change. The story that brings one generation back to Sinai may push another generation further away. In order to matter, the storyteller must be prepared to interpret the story in different ways.

That may be why Rashi, commenting on the same words as the *Hizkuni*, explains the word “expound” differently, not as a simple retelling, but as a translation:

רש"י דברים א:ה

"באר את התורה." בְּשִׁבְעִים לְשׁוֹן פִּרְשָׁהּ לָהֶם.



Rashi to Devarim 1:5

Expounded this Torah: In seventy languages he explained it to them.

Rashi, likely, does not mean “seventy languages” literally. The Jews about to enter the Land have grown up in a homogenous community. It is difficult to imagine that Rashi thinks that Moshe spends his last days explaining the Torah in languages no one hearing him speaks.

Instead, the Birkat Asher³ explains, Rashi is not talking about literal languages, but about interpretations:

ברכת אשר דברים א:ה

אלא ודאי הכוונה לומר בשבעים אופנים, כלומר באר היטב, לא בשבעים שפות כי אם בשבעים לשונות הסבר.

Birkat Asher to Devarim 1:5

Rather, the intention is to say in seventy ways, as it says “expound it well”—not in seventy languages, but in seventy ways of explanation.

Moshe understands that for a story to endure we must be able to tell it in different ways. And so, in the last days of his life, Moshe begins that process, interpreting over and over, telling the story again and again, demonstrating that there is enough within it to survive the ages.

Thousands of years later, years past the building and destruction of the first temple, through the Babylonian Exile and *shivat tziyyon* (return to Zion), at a *hak'hel*-like ceremony, we see another such retelling.

³ R. Asher Wassertheil (1921-2008).



On Rosh Hashanah, Ezra, the head of the return to Israel, gathers together the small band of the few thousand Jews who followed him out of the Babylonian exile and back to the Land of Israel. After seventy years of Exile, the collective memory of the Torah and Har Sinai has nearly vanished. These Jews have little knowledge of the Torah. Ezra needs to figure out how to revive Sinai for them, how to renew the covenant between God and the Jewish people as he attempts to rebuild the Jewish commonwealth.

And so, on Rosh Hashanah, he gathers the Jewish people together and stands on a stage, surrounded on both sides by his closest allies, and begins to read from the Torah. The magic of the words works. As Moshe intended, the people feel experience awe and fear, so much so that they begin to cry. As Moshe intended, they are willing once again to commit themselves to the covenant out of this fear.

But while the words that Ezra uses to summon the memory of Har Sinai are the same, he makes a surprising and risky choice: he chooses to change the story. This experience, he explains to the people, should not be one of fear. Stop crying, he tells them. This is a holy day, a holy experience, and that holiness demands joy and celebration. Stop crying, he says, and go home and celebrate with your families. Eat beautiful meals, and send food to people who don't have any. The covenant with God has been renewed in joy. Your joy in God is your strength, he tells them.⁴

This time, the experience of Sinai is not one of obedience out of fear, but out of joy and love. The story, as Moshe intended nearly a millennium before, still has the power to create reality for the Jewish people. It still has the power to take Sinai on the map and make it into a real, tangible place. But this time, the story is ever so slightly different. Although the words are the same, the tone is different. And that difference changes everything.

⁴ See Nehemiah 8.



The Torah is a gift of words, but we forget too often is that it is not simply a gift of words received. Our words accompany the words of the Torah, shaping its interpretation and reception. Our words create the atmosphere in which it is received.

Our words become the breath we breathe into the text, creating the nature of the Torah in this world.

May the Torah we create be the Torah our people need.

