



What Did We Hear at Sinai?

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What did we hear at Sinai? What does God want us to hear?

The Torah seems to tell us that God spoke the Ten Commandments directly to us:

שמות כ:א	Shemot 20:1
וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹקִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר:	God spoke all these words, saying...

An early *midrash* from the Mekhilta makes clear the miraculous nature of God's revelation to us, but in so doing, it raises a new question:

מכילתא מסכתא דשירה ח:ט-י	Mekhilta Massekhta de-Shirah 8:9-10
שְׁלֹא כַּמִּדַּת בֶּשֶׁר וְדָם מִדַּת הַקֹּדֶשׁ:	Humans are not like the Divine:
מִדַּת בֶּשֶׁר וְדָם, אֵינוֹ יָכֹל לִוְדוֹר שְׁנֵי דְבָרִים	Humans cannot hear two things at once, but the One Who
כְּאַחַת, אֲבָל מִי שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם אָמַר	spoke the world into being spoke the Ten
עֲשֵׂת הַדְּבָרוֹת בְּדַבּוּר אֶחָד, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וַיְדַבֵּר	Commandments in one utterance, as it is stated, "God
אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר."	spoke all these words, saying."



מִדַּת בָּשָׂר וָדָם, אֵינוֹ יָכֹל לִשְׁמָע מִשְׁנֵי בְנֵי אָדָם כְּשֶׁהֵן צוֹעֲקִין כְּאַחַת, אֲבָל מִי שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם אֵינוֹ כֵּן, אֱלֹא אָפְלוּ כָּל בָּאֵי עוֹלָם בְּאֵין וְצוֹעֲקִין לִפְנֵיו, הוּא שׁוֹמֵעַ צַעֲקוֹתֵם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: (תהלים סה,ג) "שִׁמְעֵ תַפְלָה, עֲדִיךָ כָּל בָּשָׂר יָבֹאוּ."	Humans cannot hear two people screaming at them at once, but the One Who spoke the world into being is not thus. Rather, even if all of Creation come and cry out before God, God hears their cries, as it is stated, "The One who hears prayers, all flesh will come before you" (Tehillim 65:3).
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The *midrash* understands the introductory verse to the Ten Commandments ("God spoke **all** these words") to mean not merely that God indeed uttered each of the words that we find in the remainder of the chapter, but that God did so in one instantaneous utterance, an act that no human could perform. God's miraculous speech is paralleled in this *midrash* by another incomparable trait, namely, God's ability to **hear** multiple things at once. Even though the entire world calls out to God in every moment, God is able, somehow, to hear each individual voice.

God has the power both to speak and to hear multiple voices at once; we, however, do not—that is precisely what makes God's hearing our prayers so miraculous. This principle even has halakhic consequences. Since the human ear cannot separate multiple aural strands one from the other, rituals that require hearing—for example, Torah reading or *shofar* blowing—must be performed by a single individual.¹ So the problem is this: if God spoke all of the Ten Commandments at once, countless voices layered one on top of the other in a single outpouring of sound, but we are mere mortals—what did we hear? How could we hear anything? If only God can hear multiple things at once, what is the point?

Perhaps we did not actually receive, in a way that we would comprehend, specific and

¹ Yerushalmi Berakhot 5:3, 9c; Bavli Rosh Hashanah 27a; see also Bavli Megillah 21b, where the principle of תרי קלי לא משתמעי is implied, though not explicitly mentioned.



particular commands such as “Do not kill” and “Do not steal.” What if, rather than a lecture delivered from on high, what we actually experienced at Sinai was rather an overwhelming experience of the senses, not the intellect—a glorious cacophony of an infinite number of voices, all speaking God’s truths to us in different registers and at different paces, such that we were swimming in rather than listening to God’s revelation? Indeed, when the Torah retells this moment in Sefer Devarim (4:12), we are told that “Hashem spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words (*kol devarim*).” The **sound** of words—but perhaps not the actual words themselves, with their accompanying rational meanings.

Of course, such an overwhelming blanket of divine sound is too much for humans to handle:

שמות כ:טז	Shemot 20:16
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֵתָּה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל יִדְבֹּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים כִּן נָמוּת:	“You speak to us,” they said to Moshe, “and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.”

The stereophonic experience of God’s revelation cannot be sustained. And so almost immediately after the revelation, we must begin to pull apart the strands. The Sinai moment was a peak experience that was felt but not understood; the process of understanding it necessarily follows. And so we take everything that goes in the hopper, and we learn it and clarify it until we can make rational meaning of it. That’s a necessary step in making Sinai meaningful and ongoing, rather than a blip in human history of no practical significance. The whole project of *talmud torah* (studying Torah) is in this sense a process of pulling apart the countless voices that we heard all at once at Sinai, transforming a nonrational sound into a comprehensible litany of laws and beliefs that can become all the codes of law and works of philosophy we now have.

The necessity of turning that tidal wave of sound into digestible bits of information, however,



might cause us to forget that what we actually received on Sinai was a gloriously overwhelming, incomprehensible-to-human-ears-and-minds experience. As a result, we lose something; if the only way we mark Shavuot is by learning Torah in a rational way, attending *shiur* after *shiur* in a marathon of nighttime learning, then we're marking only part of what God gave us. What would it take to try to engage also with the part of Torah that transcends our understanding, that is simply a flood of God's revelation and not a clearly defined message?

The Talmud tells us that there are some rituals, such as the reading of the *megillah*, where it is valid to hear it from multiple readers at once, because "since they are dear, people pay attention and hear."² Why would that be? The Gemara's general principle is that the human ear simply cannot make sense of multiple voices—does loving something make the impossible possible? Perhaps not, but when we love something, we can overcome the fact that we can't rationally comprehend it. To engage with the mystery of Torah, we have to be prepared to love it not despite, but precisely because of, its enigmatic nature. When we lean into the mystery of God's revelation to us, recognizing its dearness, we can hear and feel God's will—even when we can't comprehend it.

² Bavli Megillah 21b. This permission, it should be noted, applies only where all of the readers are reading from a kosher scroll.

