
Shlomo's Drash

תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך

"It is a matter of Torah and I need to learn" Ber 62a

Parshat Naso/Shavuot Special Edition 5765

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Tikkun L'eil - When Joe met Sol

This week the census continues with the census of the Levites. Afterwards, God tells Moses to isolate the lepers, then explains a sin offering. Following this, God explains the procedure for the bitter waters rite for women suspected of adultery. We then get the instruction for a nazirite, one who consecrate oneself for divine service for a period of time. Then the famous blessings of the priests to the congregation

The Lord bless you, and keep you;
The Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.(7:24-26)

Finally we get an accounting of the offerings by tribe to the Mishkan, ending with the line, (8:89)

And when Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking to him from the covering that was upon the ark of Testimony, from between the two kerubim; and he spoke to him.

Moses gets to speak to God by a voice coming from between the two cherubs. The Midrash notes that the voice came from a tube of fire that descended from heaven. But the Midrash also notes a problem with this verse, the phrase "to speak with him." They decide that "him" means exclusively Moses and not Aaron, the high priest. We see the division here between two different types in the biblical text, the priest and the prophet. The priest gets to do all the ritual, including giving the blessing to the people, but the prophet gets to hear and convey the voice of God.

Not long after reading Parshat Naso 5765, we get to Shavuot. While originally a harvest festival, today it is the celebration of the day that the entire assembly of Israel were prophets: the giving of the Ten Commandments. Sinai was the time that the entire assembly heard God speaking. God probably would have kept on going, but what keeps them at ten and not 613 is the people decide that prophecy is not for them "And they said to Moses, Speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." (Exodus 20:16)

Since that time there have been the mouthpieces of God, the prophets. These were people who heard the words of God and were then able to transmit them to the people. Prophecy, unlike the priesthood isn't a paying job, the Talmud notes that prophets had to be rich in order to support themselves. Some who weren't, Like Elijah, were left being cared for by God, though eating by what ravens bring you is not the most appetizing. But with the destruction of the temple, Prophecy ended. R. Abdimi from Haifa in Baba Basra 12a declares "Since the day when the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to the wise. "

Which means "a great man makes a statement and then it is found that the same rule was a halachah communicated to Moses at Mount Sinai." In short, through study we can derive all that was told to Moses at Sinai. Only Scholars, rabbis, can tell the word of God, and that is through study, not divine revelation.

But that 2nd century opinion didn't last. By the time of the Bablyonian academies, a bat kol, a divine voice, or Elijah would give instruction. By the 1500's Kabbalists believed in divine conversation again. This time, it was not between the cherubs, as in this portion but a special divine messenger called a maggid. The maggid would be a divine teacher teaching a very righteous person Torah directly from Heaven.

One such case of a maggid comes from one of the most remarkable people in this time period. His name was Joseph Caro. Born in Spain in 1488, his family moved to Turkey in 1492, due to the Spanish expulsion. Caro was an incredibly learned man, and most know of him from his two major legal works. The first was the Beit Yosef, which was a compendium of a massive amount of legal rulings. Compiling and compressing this work, he wrote the Shulchan Aruch, what he intended as a grade-school primer in law, but would become known as the primary codification of Jewish law. Where the Talmud was just debate, Shulchan Aruch gave definitive answers, and it is still the basis of Jewish law today. While a great legalist and intellectual, he was also quite the mystic. Caro apparently had a maggid that talked to him regularly. Eventually Caro even published the diary of his conversations with his maggid.

While living in Turkey, he met another rabbi, who was journeying towards Safed, Israel. Solomon Alkabetz ha Levi was a mystic, and about the most anti-intellectual person one could meet, often grounding Kabbalah into practices and traditions. Among the traditions he started is the visiting of the graves of great rabbis for a spiritual connection. He also started a tradition of going out into the fields on late Friday afternoon to welcome the Sabbath. Taking an Image from Shabbat 119a, which describes the Sabbath as a bride, he wrote a small poem to sing for the occasion. He is best known to most of us for that poem he wrote about Shabbat, L'cha Dodi.

The two of them got together on the evening of Shavuot in 1530 and started to study together. As they studied through the night, Caro's maggid appeared not just to Caro, but to Alkabetz as well, teaching them both. The two decided to therefore make a tradition of all night study on Shavuot. As they both eventually moved to Safed, some comment it may have been Alkabetz who convinced Caro to move there, they spread this tradition among their students and fellow Kabbalists. Their tradition, called Tikkun Leil, continues today, and is gaining in popularity.

Traditionally, one is to study the beginning and end of every major work of Jewish thought. Today, in most situations, Tikkun Leil is all night teaching sessions. While there is definitely a mystical tradition here, rationalists had to come up with another answer for performing this tradition. Based in part on the commentaries that the Israelites were asleep when God was ready to give the ten commandments, we stay up all night to make up for them, according to this view.

But to the mystic, it's the best time to get an earful from our maggid.

I remember my first Tikkun Leil, several years ago. It has a lot of meaning to me since it was the very first time I ever gave Torah commentary, it was the very first Shlomo's Drash, three years before there even was a Shlomo's drash. It was then a drash that was twenty years late. It was on

my bar mitzvah portion, Shelach Lecha, the journey of the spies, time travel, and the mitzvot of tzitzit. I would give it again a few weeks later as celebrated the anniversary of my bar mitzvah. I gave my teaching at some obscene hour of the morning, I think it was about 3:30. There may have been only a handful who hadn't winked off by then, but thinking back on it, it may have been that exact moment I met my maggid. The maggid must have given me a big whack on the back of the head. I woke up from my stupor and gave a flawless teaching. I even dug out the beginning:

Our story starts in the wilderness, on the edge of the land of Israel. Moses hears from God his permission to send a party of spies, one from each tribe into Israel to scout out the land and get strategic information. The spies leave and explore for forty days. When they return they talk of a land flowing with milk and honey, of grapes so large two people need to carry them (thus creating a logo for kosher wine we still see today) So I wondered - what if I sent a spy not through space but through time - from 1979 to 1999- what would they report?

I haven't stopped writing D'var Torah since. I have to think that there is a Maggid somewhere out there always giving me a good idea or two. All too often I have no idea what to write, just like this week, and then everything just falls into place. This time it was finding some minor footnote to something else that I found out about Alkabetz and Caro.

This Shavuot, I once again will attend a Tikkun Leil. Once again, I'm going to try to make it all the way to dawn. This time, I'm not teaching, at least not that I know of. Like Moses listening to the sound between the two cherubim, I hope to hear my maggid once again, to learn new teaching, and to tell him thank you for every thing, and that I hope I can continue to be a good student of this maggid. Prophecy may not come to prophets any more. However prophecy continues, not in a voice from between the cherubim, but in other ways. We all can be prophets if we only try and listen to our maggid. As Caro and Alkabetz found out, the time of the Tikkun Leil is the prime time for such things to happen, for us to hear a voice from heaven.