

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

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Yitro – A Human Torah



This week we read about the powerful revelation at Mount Sinai when God’s descended upon the mountain (Ex. 19:18) and communicated the Ten Commandments to Israel. Following this moment of revelation, Moses ascends the mountain to receive the tablets of stone (Ex. 24:12). It is interesting to ponder this dual motion. Does God “descend” to humanity, or do humans need to ascend to God? (see Talmud Sukka 4b-5a for a riveting discussion of this question.)

This tension is at the core of a wonderful Talmudic passage (Shabbat 88b-99a) that relates the legend of what happened when Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Torah:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on high [to receive the Torah], the ministering angels spoke before God: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! What business has one born of woman amongst us?’ ‘He has come to receive the Torah,’ answered He God. They replied: ‘That secret treasure [- the Torah-] ... you wish to give ... to give to flesh and blood?

... God said to Moses: ‘Answer them!

‘Sovereign of the Universe’ replied Moses, ‘I fear lest they consume me with the fire of their breath!’

‘Hold on to the Throne of Glory,’ said God, ‘and answer them,’

... Moses said, ‘Master of the Universe, what is written in the Torah that you are giving me?

‘I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the Land of Egypt.’ - Moses said to the angels: ‘Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved by Pharaoh? Why then should the Torah be yours?

Again, what is written in it? *‘You shalt have no gods beside Me’* – ‘Do you live among people that engage in idol worship?

Again, what is written in it? *‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy’* – ‘Do you perform work, that you need to rest?

Again, what is written in it? *‘You shall not take God’s name in vain’* – *Do you have business dealings [that you need to take an oath?]*

Again, what is written in it? *‘Honour your father and thy mother’* – *Do you have fathers and mothers?*

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Again, what is written in it? ‘*You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.*’ Is there jealousy between you; is there an evil inclination amongst you that makes these laws relevant?

Straightway the angels conceded to the Holy One, blessed be He.

Please discuss this Talmudic story:

- Why do the angels think that the Torah is unsuitable for humans?
- Why does God insist that Moses respond rather than answering Himself?
- What is the argument that Moses uses in order to convince the angels?
- If the Torah is a Godly code, then why is it so “human”?

The angels perceive of the Torah as a holy code, not suited to those born of “flesh and blood, born of woman”; for them, Torah is heavenly, angelic, on High”. God encourages Moses to respond to the angels. Moses examines the law itself, the Ten Commandments, and discovers that the Torah is intensely human, predicated upon participation in the drama of human history, aimed at a life of work and toil, fatigue and temptation, and with “Honor your father and mother,” it is directed precisely to “one born of woman.” In short, the Torah, while its origins are with God, is designated for humankind and is deeply rooted in worldliness.

Why does God not respond to the angels? Why throw the task on Moses? Because it is mankind who must discover and unveil the significance and spiritual power of the Torah. The emphasis here is that the power of Torah lies in its impact upon humanity.

This is a deep question. Is holiness a concept which is rooted in higher spiritual worlds, or is true holiness to be found in this world?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik addresses this question in his work “Halakhic Man”. In that essay, he makes a contrast between “Halakhic Man” the personality steeped in Talmudic learning and halakhic living, and Homo Religiosus – the way that people classically conceive of the religious persona.

Halakhic man does not long for a transcendent world, for “supernal” levels of a pure, pristine existence, for was not the ideal world [of Halakhah] ... for the purpose of being actualized in our real world. It is this world which constitutes the stage for the Halakhah, the setting for halakhic man's life. It is here that the Halakhah can be implemented to a greater or lesser degree. It is here that it can pass from potentiality into actuality. It is here, in this world; that halakhic man acquires eternal life! “Better is one hour of Torah and mitzvot in this world than the whole life of the world to come,” stated the *tanna* in Avot [4:17], and this declaration is the watchword of the halakhist.

... Many religions view the phenomenon of death as a positive spectacle, inasmuch as it highlights and sensitizes the religious consciousness and sensibility. They, therefore, sanctify death and the grave because it is here that we find ourselves at the threshold of transcendence, at the portal of the world to come. Death is seen as a window filled with light, open to an exalted, supernal realm. Judaism, however, proclaims that coming into contact with the dead precipitates defilement. Judaism abhors death, organic decay, and dissolution. It bids one to choose life and sanctify it.

... The task of the religious individual is bound up with the performance of commandments, and this performance is confined to this world, to physical, concrete reality, to clamorous, tumultuous life, pulsating with exuberance and strength.

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The only difference between classic religious man - *homo religiosus* - and halakhic man is a change of courses—they travel in opposite directions. *Homo religiosus* starts out in this world and ends up in supernal realms; halakhic man starts out in supernal realms and ends up in this world. *Homo religiosus*, dissatisfied, disappointed, and unhappy, craves to rise up from the vale of tears, from concrete reality, and aspires to climb to the mountain of the Lord. He attempts to extricate himself from the narrow straits of empirical existence and emerge into the wide spaces of a pure and pristine transcendental existence. Halakhic man, on the contrary, longs to bring transcendence down into this valley of the shadow of death—i.e. into our world—and transform it into a land of the living... He wishes to purify this world, not to escape from it. ...His goal is not flight to another world that is wholly good, but rather bringing down that eternal world into the midst of our world.”

For Rav Soloveitchik, living a life of Halakha is a mode of bringing holiness into this world. Judaism doesn't seek to escape our reality, it seeks to sanctify it. At the moment of revelation, God descends to earth.

Shabbat Shalom!