

Can We Hear the Voice of God?

A D'var Torah on *Parashat T'rumah*¹ (Ex. 25:1 – 27:19)

By Brendan Howard

“Dabeir el-B'nei Yisrael v'yik'chu li t'rumah....”
“Tell the Children of Israel to bring Me gifts....”

“Va-y'dabeir Adonai el-Moshe leimor....” In Exodus, God talks to people — a lot.

Tending a flock and wandering in the wilderness outside his father-in-law's lands in Midian, Moses hears God call to him from a burning bush, with an angel appearing before him.² God tells Moses he is to lead his people out of Egypt. Back in Midian, Moses begins a decades-long, two-way conversation with God.³ God even speaks to Moses' brother, Aaron,⁴ who will become Moses' mouthpiece, as Moses is unsure of his speaking ability because of a speech impediment.

How wonderful, right? To hear the voice of God and carry on conversations with God, the Creator of the universe, the molder of man, animal and worlds — a blessing! In our liturgy, we thank God, we praise God, we sing to God, and we promise to follow God's laws that He relayed through Moses and others. We talk to God, yes, but we don't hear a voice in return, do we?

The Israelites certainly got to see fantastic manifestations of God's might, things that echo in our imagination thousands of years after they were spoken of and then written down: the plagues in Egypt, the walls of water at the Sea of Reeds held at their sides as the bedraggled ex-slaves walked the soggy bottom to the far shore. In the desert, there was a cloud by day and a fire by night that God used to lead the Israelites from place to place, and there was manna that God made to drop from the sky for them to eat in their travels, and water that He brought bubbling to the surface when they grew thirsty.

Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the 70 elders of Israel even come to the foot of Mt. Sinai, “and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.”⁵

¹ All English Torah selections are from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*; Jewish Publication Society; 1999.

² Exodus 3:2.

³ Exodus 4:19.

⁴ Exodus 4:27.

⁵ Exodus 24:10.

The Israelites see God's might, and a few select people see parts of God, perhaps, but to talk to Him? Almost no one.

When the Israelite people get a chance to hear God speak, when Moses is relating the first set of commandments in Exodus 20, the Israelites are terrified of the prospect: "You speak to us,' they said to Moses, 'and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.'"⁶ Moses reassures them that God is only testing them by appearing in a massive cloud they can all see, and he says that God will not show a face or sound a voice to them.

A special place for God's voice among the Israelites is finally shared in Exodus 25 in *Parashat T'rumah*. God starts Moses' 40-day seminar on the commandments and detailed instructions for building a sacred place for God among the Israelites, "a sanctuary that I may dwell among them."⁷ Among those instructions is a description of the place where Moses will hear God's voice in the sanctuary:

"You shall make a cover of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide. Mark two cherubim⁸ of gold — make them of hammered work — at the two ends of the cover. Make one cherub at one end and the other cherub at the other end; of one piece with the cover shall you make the cherubim at its two ends. The cherubim shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings. They shall confront each other, the faces of the cherubim being turned toward the cover. Place the cover on top of the Ark, after depositing inside the Ark the Pact that I will give you. There I will meet with you [Moses], and I will impart to you — from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact — all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people."⁹

This place to hear God was just for Moses.

When we speak of talking to God today, very seldom do we mean we hear a voice — and those who do hear God's voice are usually called insane ... or, sometimes, prophets who themselves become birthing mothers of new religions. We usually talk of seeing and hearing God in nature, in the

⁶ Exodus 20:16.

⁷ Exodus 25:8.

⁸ These are not the chubby-cheeked baby angels of modern folklore. "In reality, the Israelite Cherubim were modeled on the hybrid gods of [the Israelites'] neighbors: the Egyptian sphinx, the winged man-lion god of Phoenicia, the winged bulls of Assyria and Babylonia. ... Centuries later, when the Jerusalem Temple replaced the Mishkan, the motif of the Cherubim was repeated on its inner and outer walls, on its doors, and on the huge brass bowl called the 'Molten Sea.' Today we can find faint traces of the ancient Cherubim in the rampant lions adorning many synagogue arks." — *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*, by Ellen Frankel; Grosset Putnam, 1996; p. 131.

⁹ Exodus 25:17-22.

melled voices of a Shabbat service, in the divine inspiration of the writers of the Torah, or in the still, small voice inside us. When we speak of God's commandments, we talk of the Torah's demands, the tradition's demands, the rabbis' demands or the demands of our own conscience.

But imagine being so close to God's consciousness that you could hear God's voice. It's no walk in the park, of course. When Moses first hears God's voice calling him to be a prophet, he balks: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?"

Imagine it. We seek guidance in our darkest hours or in the throes of momentous decisions. We look to our loved ones, our conscience, and sometimes we turn to God ... but to hear what?

Seeking God's literal voice flies in the face of the development of rabbinic Judaism through the millennia, which has argued that God has said what God needs to say, and now it's up to us to interpret, to wrestle with, to love and to obey God's living law, the Torah.

What does the Torah teach us in the Five Books of Moses about how people react when God speaks directly to them? They rebel anyway. They turn from the clearly spoken commandments of God, as Moses sought to do when God first called him, as the Israelites did again and again in the trek through the desert, lengthened from a couple of years to 40 years so that a generation of rebellious older Jews could all die away and leave a younger generation to enter the Promised Land.

Maybe the slow burn of lifetimes of Jews studying Torah, observing mitzvot and seeking God's guidance in prayer is a better recipe than the sudden, intense fire of God's voice commanding us, in no uncertain terms, to leave our homes in a familiar land and wander into the desert.

Those of us today, who have no Ark or Tabernacle, commune with God when we pray fervently and seek God's presence, when we wrestle with the existence of God in a difficult world, when we do good according to our conscience, and when we feel moved to fulfill a mitzvah. We know that inner voice, that soul, that inclination to do good, the *yetzer ha-tov*.

If we listen in the ways available to us today, maybe we become a link to God for the world and ourselves, just as Moses was a link to God for the Israelites. Maybe when we seek answers from God's written commandments, from the rabbis' teachings through the centuries, from the wise among us, and from our inner desire to do the right thing, then we walk in Moses' footsteps into that traveling Tabernacle alone, we face the cover of the Ark, and from between those two cherubim, we have our own heart-to-heart chats with God.