

## Frailty and Strength at Sinai

Friday night, February 9, 2007, Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara

We arrive this week at Mt. Sinai, the volcano in the wilderness which erupts and spews forth the word of God. This is our people's mythic narrative of revelation, of the hidden reality of God bursting forth into our world. The story speaks to us of the founding moment of our religion. Before Sinai, we were a tribe...the descendents of Abraham and Sarah...but only at Sinai do we receive a message, the teaching, a roadmap for living in this world.

The Torah describes a turbulent scene at Sinai, with the mountain trembling, and smoking, thunder and lightning, and the voice of a shofar from somewhere, growing louder and louder. Moses shuttles back and forth, up and down the mountain, back and forth between God and the people...who want God's teaching, but who are scared out of their wits. Finally, out of the storm, the 10 Commandments boom forth with stunning clarity, suddenly setting the chaotic world into order.

The Torah itself has virtually nothing to say about Moses' experience on top of the mountain, in particular, about what he *saw* there...the text says only that the top of the mountain was shrouded in cloud, and that Moses ascended into the cloud.

We Jews have been reading this story for 3,000 years, and telling stories about the story. *Imagining* what Moses saw, and felt and heard up there in the clouds. Those stories about the story are called *midrash* and they can be marvelous, outrageous, fantastic, beautiful, horrible... everything the human imagination is capable of: both exquisite visions, and terrifying nightmares. Let's take a journey this evening up Mount Sinai, into the cloud with Moses, into the realm of imagination.

Here's one midrash, from the Babylonian Talmud, composed sometime in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> centuries: When Moses ascended on high, the angels protested to God: Master of the universe! What is this one born of woman...this muggle...doing here among us??! God replied: He is here to receive the Torah. The angels argued: "The Torah?? This treasure, which you kept safe for 974 generations *before* the creation of the world, you are going to give to him...this muggle of flesh and blood?" Then God tells Moses to give them an answer. Moses says, "I'm terrified that they are going to burn me with the fire of their breath!" But God insists, saying, "Take hold of my throne, and give them a reply."

Then Moses turns to the angels and says to them: "Let's see what is written here. *Anochi adonai elohecha asher hotseticha me-eretz Mizrayim, mibeit avadim.* "I am the Eternal your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." But, did you go down to Egypt? Were you slaves to Pharaoh? And now what else? "You shall have no gods beside Me." But do you live among the nations who worship idols? What else? Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. But, do you have jealousy? Do you have sexual desires?" Eventually the angels calm down, and in this midrash they befriend Moses and give him gifts.

Where does such a story come from? What impulse produces this strange and delightful fantasy? It arises out of a question, which is never actually posed by the Torah itself, which is: What is the purpose of the Torah? The rabbis who wrote the Talmud were teachers, and so they knew they had to make it entertaining...but they had a point to make.

Their point is that we human beings are not evil, but we are not angels. We are not perfect, far from it, and the purpose of the Torah is to give us help, to make us morally and spiritually stronger. The angels, therefore, do not need the Torah...we do. This book, which we believe is fire from heaven, is specifically for us...to strengthen our moral fibre.

Have you ever noticed how often we talk about strength in connection with the Torah? When we reach the end of a book of the Torah, we call out together *chazak, chazak v'nitchazek*. Be strong, be strong and let us strengthen one another. And when our adult bnot mitzvah tomorrow morning finish their Torah chanting, we will shout to them the words *yashar koach!* Meaning “may your strength be straight!!” And in the sefardic tradition, when a person chants the blessing, or lifts the Torah, they are greeted by the words *chazak uvaruch!!* “Strong and blessed!!”

It seems that our relationship with the Torah is all about becoming strong.

And so the answer that Moses gives to the angels...about why he is there in heaven, on their turf, so out of place and laying claim to this treasure of theirs...is that we need it...not because we are so special and so wonderful, but because we are frail, and life asks so much of us...and we need strength.

The midrash makes it clear that there is an element of fear involved in claiming the Torah...our b'not and b'nai mitzvah will attest to that. Notice how in the midrash, God refuses to answer the angels for Moses...even though Moses admits that he is terrified. God says “hold onto me, and give them an answer.”

Something similar happens in this week's haftarah, the reading from the prophet Isaiah which follows the Torah reading. There, Isaiah finds himself in a mystical vision, in the throne room of God, with fiery angels flying around calling out *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh!!!* Holy Holy Holy!! And much like Mount Sinai in the Torah portion, the throne room is filled with smoke and the foundations of the building are trembling. Like Moses in the midrash, Isaiah is terrified and cries out “woe is me!” But then a seraph...a fiery angel...flies over to him holding a fiery coal and touches Isaiah's lips with the coal. Then God says “Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?” and Isaiah says “Hin'ni. Here I am. Send me.”

Like Moses, Isaiah is at first terrified and overwhelmed by his own inadequacy, but he stands his ground and touched by the divine fire, he feels himself become stronger and he hears himself accepting responsibility.

This is the point of all these texts, and it is the deep truth of Judaism. We are called to responsibility...the Hebrew word for which is *mitzvah*. A responsibility to care for the weak and the vulnerable. A responsibility to create a just society. A responsibility to care for the earth. A responsibility to transmit our heritage to the next generation. A responsibility to live up to our human, spiritual potential. And when we confront all of that responsibility, all of that undeniable obligation...we so easily feel overwhelmed. We feel keenly our own limitations. Our frailty.

The beauty of Judaism is that it speaks to us of our responsibility and it acknowledges our limitations.

*Kol adonai bakoach!* The voice of God in strength!! says the 29<sup>th</sup> psalm. And the midrash comments: The voice of God comes to each person according to their own strength. If the psalm had said *kol adonai b'kocho*, the voice of God in his strength...then the world would simply have disintegrated. No one and nothing can

withstand the full power of God's strength. But it simply says "The voice of God in strength...the voice of God came to the young according to their strength, to the old according to their strength, to the children according to their strength, to the babies according to their strength. Each heard the voice of God...and each experienced it in a way that *fit*, their own strengths and their own frailties.

Wonderfully, even God, in our tradition, has frailties. One midrash tells that when Moses went up there he found God busy drawing in the tiny crowns on the tops of the letters of the Torah text...and Moses stood there silently. Eventually God looks up and says "where you come from, don't they teach people to say hello?" Moses is taken aback and says "is it customary for a student to speak before his teacher?" And God says "you should have encouraged me." Immediately Moses says to God the verse from the book of Numbers "*yigdal na koach adonai*...may your strength become greater!" Even God needs a pep talk from time to time.

When my brother, sister and I were children, my mother had a few trademark expressions, which remain emblazoned on my memory. The three of us were all born within three years, so there were many moments when she was at her wits' end and in moments of utter desperation, our mother would cry out "Give me strength!!" Those outbursts always left us speechless, even after we reached teenage. In admitting her weakness before us, our mother suddenly grew large. With those three words, she stood praying before us, and drew down strength from God.

If you ever want to see strength embodied in this room, come on some Shabbat morning when Sylvia Glass comes up to the bimah to take an aliyah to the Torah...watch her climb this mini-mount Sinai, and grab hold of the Torah...and sing out the blessings thanking God for giving us the Torah. Then you will know the meaning of *yashar koach*. May your strength be straight!

Less than one year ago, Janet Laichas received a terrifying phone call from her doctor, and came out of her office shaken body and soul. We came in here, into this sanctuary, and took out the Torah scroll...which she held onto, sitting out there in the pews, for a long, long time.

All of us are frail. All of us are frightened. Even God. We all need encouragement and we all need strength. This is why we come here, and this is why, like Moses and like Isaiah, like Sylvia Glass and like Janet Laichas, we grab hold of the fiery coal of Torah, and set it in our mouths.

*Chazak chazak, v'nitchazek*. Be strong, be strong. And let us strengthen one another.