

TIMELESS TORAH

YITRO : CONTINUING THE CALL OF SINAI

Seeking the Transcendent Sound

After describing in detail the preparations that the Jewish people made to receive the Torah, the verses speak about the dramatic backdrop of Mount Sinai on the day itself. It is depicted as an awesome spectacle of light and sound, but in particular, verse 16:19 details three specific elements: ‘On the third day, there was thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud on top of the mountain, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly strong’. According to the Kli Yakar (Prague, d.1619), these two sounds – of thunder and of the shofar – represent two opposing forces. The heavy cloud illustrates the idea of being embedded and ensconced in a mundane life. Occasionally, there is a flash of inspiration, but like the claps of thunder and lightning described in the verse, they quickly fade. On the other hand, the shofar, which symbolises Yitzchak’s ram, is a sound that is connected to the notion of the *tzaddik*, a righteous individual who continuously grows stronger and more elevated.

In the carefully chosen sounds surrounding the Giving of the Torah are embedded the first challenge of the call of Sinai. From the depths of our own ‘clouds’, we hear many confusing noises, but our aspiration must be to discern the transcendent sound of the shofar amid the ongoing claps of thunder.

This message is reminiscent of the well-known story of the famous composer, Ludwig van Beethoven. Quite early in his career, Beethoven began to lose his hearing. As he became progressively deafer, he would furiously beat the keys of his piano, laying his head on its wooden frame so that he could feel the vibrations.

Remarkably, however, some of the greatest pieces we have today from Beethoven, including the Ninth Symphony and his late string quartets, were composed after he had completely lost his sense of hearing. It is possible that only after all the other interfering sounds around him had disappeared was he able to focus entirely on his own music.

In this vein, the Kli Yakar explains another verse, which speaks of a different cloud: ‘Behold, I will come towards you in a thick cloud in order that the people will hear me’ (19:9). In this monumental event of the Giving of the Torah, the visual experience was deliberately limited and enveloped in cloud so as not to distract from the crucial sense of hearing.

Never-ending Voice

In the next series of verses (19:16-19), the focus changes from the noise surrounding the mountain to the reaction of the people as they approached Mount Sinai. But in verse 19, we find again the ‘sound of the shofar becoming increasingly strong’. According to the Netziv (d.1893), this was not the same shofar mentioned in verse 16. While that shofar was hidden behind the confusion of the thunder, this was a shofar that pierced the silence, heralding the voice of Moshe to the people.

While Moshe himself needed no introduction, this was nevertheless a crucial introduction to the Giving of the Torah. Until now, Moshe had been the only channel through which the people could access the Word of Hashem, but at this point, they were about to experience a direct Revelation. Precisely now, the emphasis on Moshe speaking



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served to reinforce the message that the Written Law that would be revealed would forever be coupled with an Oral Law. The Written Law given at Mount Sinai must be understood and interpreted in the traditional Jewish way. This tradition is referred to as the Oral Law, which begins with the voice of Moshe in his generation and becomes 'increasingly strong' from generation to generation.

In the Netziv's interpretation, then, the second shofar represents the second call of Sinai: having filtered out the background noises in order to hear the sound of the shofar, the next challenge is to apply the appropriate attitudes towards understanding it, through the lens of the Oral Law.

Test of Sound

In the verses following the Ten Commandments, the Torah records the reaction of the people themselves to the experience. In these verses, as the Midrash and the commentaries explain, the people were overwhelmed by the formidable encounter, and Moshe reassured them that their awesome vision of Hashem was given in order to '*nasot etchem*' (20:17). The meaning of the word '*nasot*' is manifold, and there are numerous interpretations given. Rashi understands that it stems from the word *nes*, which means 'a banner'. The Jewish people were being told that the grandeur of the Giving of the Torah was in order to make the people great in the eyes of other nations. The Netziv, while concurring with the translation of the word, disagrees with its application. The nations of the world were not present at Mount Sinai and they would not have known what happened. Rather, he maintains, *nasot*, means 'uplifting', and

it is also linked to the word '*nisayon* – test'. What was occurring at Mount Sinai might be overwhelming, Moshe told the people, but the purpose of this test was to uplift them. Receiving the Torah was not easy, but it was purposely so because through learning how to cope with challenges in life they would always remain on a growth trajectory.

In this passage, which focuses on the struggles of the people rather than on the drama and awe surrounding the event, the notion of sound returns. This time, however, the verse does not say that the sound was heard but that the 'people **saw** the sounds' (20:15). The Kli Yakar, adopting a metaphysical perspective, explains that these sounds were indeed not only heard but seen; the words of the Ten Commandments took on a physical form as they were uttered by Hashem and they were actually seen by the people as 'letters floating in the air'. Rabbeinu Bachye (d.1340), in a more rational approach, explains that the seeing here is to be taken metaphorically. The people understood the words and attained intimate knowledge of them, as if they had obtained a physical form. Either way, though, the commentaries are underscoring the fact that at the Giving of the Torah, the Word of Hashem was seen as an absolute reality. This is the third and final challenge of the call of Sinai. We might be able to pick out the sound of the shofar and apply it in the correct way, but our ultimate aim is to make the Torah real, part of the very fabric of our lives.

Next Week - MISHPATIM: THE HEART OF
CIVILISATION