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Parshat Yitro: On Closeness without Convergence

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Parshat Yitro famously introduces the Ten Commandments, together with the fanfare that accompanies the grand revelation. These divine utterances, arguably the very foundations of our ethical and legal traditions, have been revered throughout our history, studied, recited, and artistically represented in a myriad of ways. To many, this initial encounter at Sinai, between God and the Jewish people, stands as that which affirms and cements this unique relationship for eternity. God commanded. The Jewish people assented. And the covenant endures.

Yet, central as the Ten Commandments no doubt are to our understanding of divine expectations, I would suggest that it is the drama that *surrounds* the event of revelation that actually ought to shape our understanding of the divine relationship. The way that God set the stage for the encounter; the conditions that would govern it; the rules laid down before delivering the Rules—all of these beg for investigation. For the revelation of how human beings might come to know divinity began before the Revelation. It began in the preparations for Revelation, preparations that, ironically, demanded a commitment to distance before one could come to know closeness. So let us turn there.

On the brink of the encounter at Sinai, God said the following to Moshe:

10 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure [or to be sanctified] today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes. 11 Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. 12 You shall set boundaries for the people around about, saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death: 13 no hand shall touch him, but he shall be either stoned or shot; beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain." 14 Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes. 15 And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day: do not go near a woman." (Exodus 19:10-15)

י וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל-הָעָם וְקַדְּשֵׁם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וּכְבֹּסוּ שְׂמַלְתְּם: יא וְהָיוּ נְכֹנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי י בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד ה' לְעֵינֵי כָל-הָעָם עַל-הַר סִינַי: יב וְהִגַּבְלֹתָ אֶת-הָעָם סָבִיב לְאָמַר הַשְּׁמָרוּ לְכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וּנְגַע בְּקִצְחוֹ כָּל-הַנֹּגֵעַ בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת: יג לֹא-תִגַּע בּוֹ יָד כִּי-סָקוּל יִסְקַל אוֹ-יָרֵה יִרְהוּ אִם-בְּהֵמָה אִם-אִישׁ לֹא יִחִיָּהּ בַּמִּשְׁךְ הַיֵּבֶל הַמָּה יַעֲלוּ בְּהָר: יד וַיֵּרֵד מֹשֶׁה מִן-הָהָר אֶל-הָעָם וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֶת-הָעָם וַיְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמַלְתָּם: טו וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָעָם הָיוּ נְכֹנִים לְשִׁלְשֵׁת יָמִים אֶל-תִּגְּשׁוּ אֶל-אִשָּׁה: (שמות יט:י-טו)

What must the people know before they experience the ultimate intimacy? What message must be communicated not once, but thrice, before they come close to the divine? Do not come too close. Remember to stand back. God will appear on the mountain, but you must, at the cost of death, restrain from even approaching its perimeter. "You shall set boundaries," says God to Moshe. The key to encountering God, it seems, is to get clear on your inability to truly encounter God.

Perhaps Moshe internalized this idea so much that he translated it into human terms. When he came to deliver this paradoxical message to the people, he substituted human relations for divine ones. To best

prepare for intimacy, resist intimacy, he says. It is not only mountains that beckon us to touch and to transgress boundaries. People do too, so stay far away, he suggests.

This dance between distance and closeness, or this pre-condition for abstinence in the pursuit of intimacy, echoes Moshe's own introduction to God back at the burning bush. If the collective revelation to the Jewish people is characterized by this paradox implicitly, the personal revelation to Moshe is even more explicit. In Exodus 3:4-5, God calls to Moshe for the first time: "Moshe, Moshe!" To which he answers, "*Hineni*. Here I am." And God's very next words, following this invitation to relationship, are: "*Al tikrav halom*. Do not come any closer." Approach, but not too much. Establish a relationship, but observe its boundaries. What a delicate balance to strike.

Here at Sinai, this message is now amplified for the entirety of the Jewish people. It is not clear whether the people so thirst for unbounded relationships that they require such repeated warning to keep them in check, or whether the repeated warnings are God's proactive way of educating them into balance, but note that the message is reiterated one last time before the revelation of the Ten Commandments ensues.

20 The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. 21 The Lord said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze, lest many of them perish. 22 The priests also, who come near the Lord, must stay pure, lest the Lord break out against them." 23 But Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, 'Set boundaries about the mountain and sanctify it.'" 24 So the Lord said to him, "Go down, and come back together with Aaron; but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them." 25 And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them. (Exodus 19: 20-25)

כ וַיֵּרָד ה' עַל-הַר סִינַי אֶל-רֹאשׁ הַהָר וַיִּקְרָא
ה' לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל-רֹאשׁ הַהָר וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה: כֹּא
וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה רֵד הַעֵד בְּעַם פְּנֵי-הָרָסוּ
אֱלֹהֵי לְרֹאוֹת וְנָפְל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב: כִּב וְגַם
הַכֹּהֲנִים הַנִּגְשִׁים אֱלֹהֵי יִתְקַדְּשׁוּ פְּנֵי-פִרְיָ
בָּהֶם ה': כִּג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֱלֹהֵי לֹא-יִוָּכַל
הָעָם לָעֲלֹת אֶל-הָר סִינַי כִּי-אַתָּה הַעֵדְתָּה בְּנוֹ
לְאֹמֶר הַגִּבְלֵת אֶת-הָהָר וְקִדְּשָׁתוּ: כד וַיֹּאמֶר
אֱלֹהֵי ה' לְרָרְד וְעֲלִית אִתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ
וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהָעָם אֲלֵי-הָרָסוּ לָעֲלֹת אֶל-הָ
פְּנֵי-פִרְיָ-בָּם: כה וַיֵּרָד מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲלֵהֶם: (שמות יט: כ-כה)

There is a near-obsession with transgression here, a palpable fear of "breaking through." The people's yearning for God might cause them to "break through" the prescribed boundaries. God's anger might potentially "break out" as a result. So just before the moment of Revelation, Moshe is sent down one very last time to ensure that all parties maintain their distinctive lines. God will not enter the scene until people have satisfactorily exited from it.

Why? Why such an insistence on distance? Why the need for such repetition and reiteration? Why condition the divine revelation on human retreat? I submit that this was the beginning of the revelation—not in rules about human conduct, but in rules about human relationships. In circumscribing the mountain in this way, ensuring that the Jewish people would gain intimacy with God without transgressing God's boundaries, God was setting in place an enduring lesson regarding relationships of consequence. They always require room to breathe. They always demand enough separation to maintain a sense of distinction. Though we often yearn to merge with another or an Other, we do so at great cost. We flatten ourselves. We trample those we love. We suffer the confusions of convergence and the suffocations of possession. The great irony, and delicacy, of intimacy, we learn, is that it is born of just the

right amount of distance; just the right amount of respect for the other party's otherness and our own. This balance can be so very hard to maintain and so we must be reminded over and over again. To responsibly come together, we must stay a bit apart. "Ve'higbalta. You shall set boundaries" (Ex. 19:12). This was the great revelation before the Revelation.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslav reminds us, though, that there is a distance that nourishes closeness and a distance that houses fear. Right after the Ten Commandments were uttered, the Jewish people embraced the latter.

15 All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. 16 "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let God not speak to us, lest we die." 17 Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only to test you, and in order that fear of Him may ever be with you, so that you do not go astray." 18 So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

טו וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת־הַלְפִידִם וְאֶת־קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת־הַהָר עֹשֵׂן וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֹק: טז וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר־אֵתָה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאֶל־יְדִבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים פֶּן־נָמוּת: יז וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם אֶל־תִּירְאוּ כִּי לִבְעֹבֹר נִסוּת אֶתְכֶם בָּא אֱלֹהִים וּבְעֹבֹר תִּהְיֶה יְרֵאתוֹ עַל־פְּנֵיכֶם לְבַלְתִּי תַחֲטְאוּ: יח וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם מֵרָחֹק וּמֹשֶׁה נִגַּשׁ אֶל־הָעֶרְפֶּל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים: (שמות כ:טו-יח)

On this Rebbe Nachman writes:

This is the meaning of the verse, "So the people remained at a distance." When people see fog, or obstacles [that prevent their approach to God], they stand back. But Moshe, who represents the wisdom of Israel, "approached the thick cloud, where God was." That is, he walked toward the obstacle, for therein hides God. (*Likutei MoHaRaN* 115)

זְזָה פְרוּשׁ הַפֶּסוּק, 'וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם מֵרָחֹק' - כִּי כְשֶׁרוֹאִין הָעֶרְפֶּל, הַיְנוּ הַמְּנִיעָה כְּנִ"ל, עוֹמְדִין מֵרָחֹק. וּמֹשֶׁה, שְׁהוּא בְּחִינַת דַּעַת כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, נִגַּשׁ אֶל הָעֶרְפֶּל, אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים. הַיְנוּ אֶל הַמְּנִיעָה, שְׂבָה בְּעֲצָמָה נִסְתָּר הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ: (ליקוטי מוהר"ן קטו)

Though people sometimes bristle at the gaps that keep them from fully merging with another, or turn away when overcome by fear of that which remains unknown, Moshe walked toward it, toward the "obstacles," the gaps, the in-between places, the *arafel*. For there is where the hidden God resides. That is where relationships of consequence, relationships that promote intimacy without convergence, actually begin. May we be so blessed to come close, but not too close.



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