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Seeing is Believing?

Parshat Yitro 2018/5778 - Rabbi Adam Mintz

Seeing is a central theme during the giving of the Torah. We are told that the Jews at Mount Sinai “saw the thunder and lightning”. Chazal comments that miraculously they were able to see thunder, a natural phenomenon which is generally not visible.

Experiencing revelation revolved around the experience of sight. Yet, it also involved hearing the voice of God for the first two of the Ten Commandments. Once again, Chazal comments on this unique experience in which everyone achieves the ability to hear God and engage in the majesty of the moment. They explain that after God recited the first two Commandments, the Nation told Moses that they were afraid that they would die if they continued to hear God’s voice. Therefore, Moses relayed the remaining eight commandments himself. The experience of both seeing and hearing were combined to create this extraordinary moment in human history.

The experience of hearing is also mentioned in parshat Yitro. Yitro “hears” all the good that God performed for the Israelites. Seforno is struck by the term *וישמע* - to hear, and asks why the Torah uses the term to hear instead of the more common term *וירא* - to see. He explains that seeing is only used to describe an experience in real time while hearing is used for experiencing an event that has already transpired. Seforno, I believe, is not just teaching us the definition of these two words; he is commenting on the lasting nature of these two ways of experiencing events. Yitro arrives at the Israelite camp following the splitting of the sea and the battle with Amalek. Is that the reason he joins the Israelites? Chazal believe that hearing of these miracles brought Yitro to the Israelite camp and allowed for the reconciliation of Moses and his wife and sons.

Yitro is very helpful to Moses in setting up a judicial system. Yet, after this short episode, Yitro disappears until the beginning of the book of Bamidbar as the Jews are initially preparing to enter the Land of Israel (before they are forced to wander forty years in the desert as punishment for the sin of the *meraglim*). At that point, Moses tries to convince his father-in-law to join the Israelites as they prepare to enter the land. Yitro explains that he wants to return to his own land, but Moshe persists in his entreaty, telling Yitro that he should stay as he has served as “eyes for the people”. The story ends without a definitive conclusion; we are not told whether Yitro joined the Jewish Nation or returned to Midian. Rambam argues that Yitro joined the Jewish people as they entered the Land. Yet, this is the minority view among the commentators. Most *mefarshim* explain that the Torah does not clarify the outcome because Yitro decided to return to Midian.

Seforno explains that Yitro ultimately decided not to accompany the Jewish people into the Land because he experienced the miracles of the splitting of the sea and the victory against Amalek only through hearing and not seeing – in other words, he experienced these miracles as an outsider not as a participant. While this experience was enough to convince him to join the Jews in the desert, it was not sufficient to convince him to leave



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his homeland personally and join the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.

To become a member of the Jewish nation one must recreate the experience of revelation and combine the senses of sight and sound. One must envision the majesty and miraculous nature of the moment and also be able to listen to the sounds of Jewish experience. Yitro heard the sounds of Jewish victory, but he did not experience the moment with vision.

In 1971, Rabbi and Mrs. Lichtenstein decided to make aliyah. There was a farewell party for Rav Lichtenstein at Yeshiva University. During his remarks at the party, Rabbi Lichtenstein explained his reasons for leaving his alma mater and moving to Israel. He told the audience that he no longer wanted to be a spectator in the miracle of the State of Israel. He wanted to be a participant. He wanted to experience the State of Israel not only as one who listens to its stories from afar. Rather, he wanted to see and experience the miracles and the challenges firsthand. This was his reenactment of Mount Sinai.

May we all pursue our passions and our dreams not as spectators but as active participants.