

Shavuot 5771/2011

The Torah that Each of Us Has to Teach

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Sometimes we, as LGBTQ Jews, as marginalized Jews, may feel as though the Torah is not ours to share. Too often hurt by others in its name, we may feel that we do not have an equal share in its blessings.

Yet the Torah was not given only to some Jews and not to others. It was given to the entirety of the people as a whole, together. “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel... ‘If you will hear My voice and you will keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession’ (Ex. 19:3-5).” The whole of Israel, not just a select few, were commanded by God to prepare for the encounter, and the whole of Israel, not just some, became partners to the covenant and treasured by God.

At Shavuot we commemorate the giving of Torah—the unique moment of the beginning of partnership between the people of Israel and our Creator. For fifty days we have been counting the *omer*, marking the sacred time leading up from Passover to this Shavuot. Just over seven weeks pass between our leaving Egypt as a rag-tag mixed-multitude of ex-slaves and our becoming a unified people in covenant with each other and with The Holy One.

As the anniversary of the encounter with the Divine at Mount Sinai, Shavuot is the birthday of our covenant between God and the Jewish people. But it doesn’t celebrate only the *giving* of Torah; for both the giving and the *accepting* of Torah were – and are – equally important. There is a spirit of collaboration in the cooperative and complementary acts of offering and accepting, of giving and receiving. The Torah issues from God, but its fulfillment lies with Israel. Inspiration comes from God, but aspiration is in our hands alone.

God has given us the gift of Torah, and by accepting it, we agree to live by it and fulfill it. We are now partners with the Holy One. In acceptance of this

covenant, this Torah, we say with one voice, “*na’aseh v’nishmah*, we will do and we will listen.” Yet ours is not a statement of docile obedience. Rather, we agree to become mutually dependent partners (with God, perhaps understandably, the senior partner, and we the juniors). We embark on a joint enterprise of ongoing, continuous creation. Creating and *perfecting* the world continues, and it is up to us as we work in partnership with the Holy One to do it.

The Torah belongs to each and every one of us. Our tradition teaches that the moment of revelation at Sinai was so important and so integral to the establishment of God’s relationship with the *whole* people, that all of us, including those who had not yet been born, were present at Sinai.

On Shavuot we read from the book of Ruth, which tells the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. After the death of Ruth’s husband, Naomi tells her to return to her people, but Ruth declares, “Where you will go, I will go. Your people shall be my people. Your God shall be my God.” Ruth, in essence, becomes the first Jew-by-Choice. Ruth’s status as “other” renders her Jewishness no less authentic than Naomi’s—and from Ruth’s descendants would come King David himself. By reading Ruth’s story on Shavuot, we see exactly what Sinai is about: the Torah belongs to each and every one of us. We, then, must be open to all kinds of Jewish people as we live by its teachings.

Not only is the Torah the inheritance of each and every Jew, but also, each and every Jew receives the Torah that they need. Our tradition also teaches that as the people of Israel stood at the foot of the mountain, “The word reached each one according to their ability to hear.” Each of us was there. And we each heard the words that we needed to hear at that moment.

During the Torah service, we carry the Torah around the congregation, a reminder that Torah was received by all of the people and is the possession of each and every one of us, regardless of education or social position. When we carry the Torah around and invite each person to kiss it: that is a little moment of Sinai. So too with the Passover story, in which we remember the Exodus as if we ourselves were slaves in Egypt and then became free. On Shavuot, as we stand to hear the Ten Commandments chanted from the scroll, we re-enact that moment in which God revealed Godself to each of us, as if we were again standing at Sinai.

Midrash teaches that when God was looking for a mountain upon which to give the Torah, there were a lot of high places which volunteered for the honor. All the mountains on earth wanted to be the one on which Israel would be given the Torah. The beautiful Mount Carmel believed that its lushness and greenery made it the most worthy. Mount Hermon, powerful and tall, thought its exalted snowy peaks made it the ideal spot for Torah. Mount Ararat, however, as the place upon which Noah's ark had rested after the flood, was confident that its importance would trump them all. The mountains were loud, vying for God's attention, causing rockslides and avalanches in an attempt to show themselves better than each other.

But God noticed that one mountain sat still and said nothing. "What about you, Mount Sinai?" "Me?" the mountain replied, "Oh, I'm not important enough. I'm just a little hill in the middle of a desert. I am so very ordinary." To which God replied, "Yet you are humble, and that is more important than beauty, fame, or strength."

And so it was that Torah was given to Israel on Mount Sinai, a humble, simple, unassuming little mountain. At Sinai, each of us was present, and each of us heard the Torah we needed to hear. We, too, need not be the most high and exalted to receive Torah; we need only be humble and willing to accept it. All that is required of us as we seek relationship with God and with Torah is that we be open to the encounter. We need not be beautiful, powerful, or strong. God accepts us where we are and how we are, right here, right now.

As we enter this moment of covenant with God, we are stepping forward over the bridge. We crossing from

being slaves at the hands of cruel taskmasters that steal our time, our work, our beauty, and our souls. We are becoming a nation, partners with God, in the ongoing process of creation and of fixing that which is broken in our world. "My hand is outstretched," says God, "You need only grab hold of it, and together we will walk the way, and bring wholeness to the broken parts of the world." Take hands. Take hands with God, and with each other. Let us stand together at Sinai—accepting each of us as we are, where we are.

Each of us, emerging from that moment of sacred encounter, is filled with light, with *chen*, with *chesed*, and with *rachamim*—with graciousness, loving-kindness, and compassion—a gift from God. For as *God* is filled with these, so too, are *we*, created in God's image. God has given us Torah. But not only that. God has also said, "I want to walk together with you. From here on out, we are partners. Let's spread that light."

Rachel Biale, in her essay, "Trance and Trans at Har Sinai," (in the anthology *Torah Queeries*) writes:

If, as the *midrash* says, all Jewish souls were present at the giving of the Torah in the first celebration of Shavuot at Sinai, it is incumbent on us to re-imagine and retell its story for Shavuot in our generation. We have, among many other challenges and opportunities, the momentous task of understanding the contours of a society and its individual members who transcend binary gender identities.... Regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity ... the Torah belongs to us all. It is up to us to teach it. It flows through us."

All of us, regardless of our identity, orientation, brokenness, fear, uncertainty, or needs, were present at Mount Sinai and encountered God at that moment. Each of us accepted and received the gift of Torah from that encounter, whatever state we were in. There was no discrimination. There was no exclusion. Each and every one of us, each created in the image of God, was touched by this holy encounter. At Sinai, we each heard the Torah we needed to hear, and each of us has the Torah that we now must teach. Each of us has our Torah, our holy wisdom, to teach and to share. Now go do it!