

Shabbat 01 25 19 Sermon

That's the way my two-and-a-half-year-old talks to me. Sometimes, and I, just forgive me, it's like, you know, my kids one day will certainly know that I described their entire life from my pulpit. But one of the things about that's so adorable about my two-and-a-half-year-old is that he's in the middle of speaking to me, and then he just goes off into this whisper thing. He just kind of starts whispering to me, and like, this will date me for sure, like E.F. Hutton. Half of the room doesn't know that, but you know who you know by that, right? E.F. Hutton, when E.F. Hutton talks, people listen. Then I know that the volume, and the volume itself inclines me to listen to him. There's something about that that's really profound, because judging by the way that people speak in the world, sometimes you think that the more important it is, the more likely it is for someone to scream it at you, right? That the more assured somebody is of their truth, the more they feel the need to let you know in absolutely uncertain terms that they have it.

I had someone sit with me in my office recently, who tried to convince me that he had received a revelation from God. Now, I'm all for believing someone who says that they have a communication from the divine. You know, I'm in that business. That works for me. But when someone, you know, comes in with the sense of certainty and authority, and begins to raise their voice at me, I become skeptical. I don't know, maybe some of you feel that way. So if somebody walks in with that capital T truth, it makes me suspicious. But what I'm certain of is the power of revelation is a kind of revolution. The revelation, like revolutions, upend and destabilize us. They give us new information. We're in the business, when we are open to revelation, to hearing something new. Something will be told, something will tell us something that we didn't know before that, and somehow that is important to know.

And so when often we think about revelation in a religious context, revelation often is focused, when we think about it, on the what of revelation, the content of revelation, what is being revealed. It's so important to know what the Torah says, or the Koran, or the Bhagavad Gita, or you name it, whatever is the revealed text, someone has the big reveal, and they're going to make it known. And so often we focus on the what of it, and really, what I'm interested in tonight, and what I'm interested in general, is not the what of revelation, but the how of revelation. Not the content, but the framing of it, the way revelation happens, what we imagine happens in revelation, in a revelatory experience. Because in my opinion, and at least according to our tradition, there's as much Torah, as much holiness, and as much wisdom in how revelation happens as there is in what is being revealed. It's super important.

So let's look at the how of revelation, because tomorrow morning in the Torah, the Torah will tell us about how revelation happens, and the way that the Torah tells us is vital. So hold on your seats here for a minute, because we're going to come in for a landing in a little bit, but this is my first time using the shtender, and it's kind of more of the focus, so I'm just going to like, you know what, let's just take this and like, put it right there.

First thing to notice is that tomorrow morning in Torah, and the reason why this is important, let me just back up for a second, the reason why this is important, and why you should be sitting at the edge of your seats, is this. Because the Torah doesn't have a bigger

scene than the scene at Sinai. There's no bigger moment in Torah, which is the Jewish religious tradition, there's no bigger moment than when the great revelation happened at Sinai, and so it becomes, and it is, and should be for all of us, a template for me and you in our lives today, tomorrow, not just in terms of what is being given, because I could give that sermon, but that's not me, that's another rabbi.

What revelation is, I want to talk about how it is, because I think it really impacts us in our day-to-day living. Tomorrow morning, the Torah decides, and the rabbis are geniuses when it comes to this, the Torah decides to place the revelation at Sinai, which takes place in chapter 19 of the book of Exodus. They decide to put that revelation, chapter 19, is prefaced by chapter 18. And chapter 18, which is what we begin reading, is called Yitro. Just to pause for a moment and take that profound teaching in. The first teaching about revelation is that it comes not only from within the tradition, but from people outside of the tradition. The holiest revelation of our Torah comes from the father-in-law of Moses, who himself was not an Israelite, he was an other. Every year, when we read it over and over again, we read our sacred law within the context of someone who came from the outside. And not only does this person come from the outside, he's not from the outside, he's family.

The how of revelation begins in chapter 18, not with thou shalt or thou shalt not, but with a relationship between a father-in-law and a son-in-law, and specifically between someone who never had really a father and his adopted father. No fewer than 13 times in the beginning of chapter 18 will the Torah name Jethro as the father-in-law. 13 times in six verses. That's a lot. The Torah wants us to know that revelation begins with intimacy, with familiarity, with someone who knows you, who loves you, who sees you. And then the Torah does something really remarkable, everybody. You might miss this. The Torah tells us that the how of revelation happens by Moses receiving advice from his dad-in-law. Not firing brimstone, not Charlton Heston, not all the light show of the Ten Commandments, not seeing what is heard and hearing what is seen, a simple conversation between two people who love each other.

Father-in-law concerned that Moses is going to work himself to the bone and like a good coach, Marshall Goldsmith here, comes in and says, you must delegate. And that's the first Torah in the Torah. It's not from God, but from Jethro. Not Jewish, not a slave in Egypt, just a concerned family member whom Moses could trust. And that becomes codified for all eternity. We read it every single year over and over again. The Torah of Jethro. The second how of revelation. Not the revelation that comes between, of course, intimacy, but as the preface to that, intimacy, familiarity, the second piece.

The Torah tells us that when Moses brought the people to the foot of the mountain, Moses brought them there and God spoke and there was a shofar and it was loud and it was crazy, it was chaotic, it was scary. And the Torah tells us that Moses took them to the foot of the mountain just to give you a little refresher here. Get ready, Moses says to the people. Here comes God. And Moses brings the people out in exodus of sorts to the Elohim, to God, and they stand there at the foot of the mountain and here's where it gets really scary. And the mountain of Sinai is full of smoke and there's a loud shofar in verse 19. There is a loud, strong shofar and it's really, really strong and Moses spoke and God would answer him with a voice. This is Revelation, everybody. This is not the Decalogue, this is not the Ten

Commandments, but this is the moment where God and Moses are in a dialogue, Moses speaks and then God y'anenu b'kol, Moses speaks and God answers him b'kol.

What does that mean? God answers him with a voice and why does it matter? There are many interpretations of what it means that God spoke in a voice. God spoke in a very loud voice. God spoke in order to scare the people. God spoke in many different voices. But in order to understand the voice of God in exodus and to give us some advice for our lives, we have to understand that there was a second revelation at Sinai. It doesn't happen in the book of Exodus, it happens in the book of Kings. And in the book of Kings, the prophet Elijah comes to the same mountain in which Moses is bringing the people in which there's a light show and it's loud. And the Torah tells us, the Bible tells us in the book of Kings that Elijah runs out to the desert and he stands in the mountain area where Torah was revealed, where Moses stood. And then this, Go stand at the mountain God says to him and God passed before Elijah the prophet and God was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire but the Lord, but God was not in the fire and after the fire there was a voice of subtle silence. Three words.

Three, three words that interpret Moses. Elijah stood and there was thunder and earthquake and there was fire. It was a voice of subtle silence. The earthquake was dramatic and after it all had passed what was left was a call, a sound, a voice. A thin, subtle voice. A voice of speaking silence. A voice of whisper. Revelation sounds like a whisper. Way back in Exodus there are interpreters who say that when it says God spoke, Moses spoke and God answered the call and God spoke in a voice it didn't mean that God spoke in a loud voice. God understood that a traumatized, scared people would be terrified by hearing a thunderous divine voice. And so God spoke in a whisper. Jethro is intimacy and trust and revelation is it's so remarkable to think of revelation as a whisper and dependent on trust. Not revelation as I'm going to tell it to you whether you like it or not. I'm going to beat it into you. I'm going to yell it at you. I'm going to scream it at you. But something that we have to lean into. Something that requires silence.

My colleague Mike Cummins who spends a ton of his time out in the desert says when he thinks of this phrase he thinks of fragility. He says, I believe that Elijah heard a voice without sound. His reading is the voice of fragile silence. A voice of fragile silence. When I think in therapeutic terms I think to myself about Buck Brannaman who was the most respected cowboy in the country and became the inspiration for Robert Redford's 1998 horse whisperer. He's a man who experienced tremendous abuse as a child. He lived in a house where his father would tell him if he didn't ride well that he would be beaten by the same whips that were being used on the horses. Here was a child who grew up in a home that when he was finally put into foster care his father would write him letters and say I can see you through the eye of my shotgun. And he grew up to become the horse whisperer.

Those who never saw the movie, here it is. The character is someone and Buck was someone who knew how to take horses that could not be tamed, that would not listen, that would not comply, that would not be ridden and he could make them calm down. He could soothe them because revelation sounds like a whisper. He understood them. He would lean in and say, I just want to climb on you. And then he would know that in a posture that was the way a lion would have killed a horse and he would say to the horse, I'm not going to hurt

you. He'd whisper. He would track the horse. He would track the feeling, the emotional quality. He would follow where the horse was. And then without raising his voice he would whisper what needed to be heard. Sounds like a whisper.

There's even, as many of you know, in self-help trends, the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, ASMR, a term that was coined in 2010 to describe sounds that feel good. You know what the most, the best feeling sound for those who have insomnia and who have a hard time sleeping is? The sound of whispering. I don't understand some of the other ones here, frankly. Pen on paper, rhythmic monotone speech, tapping fingernails, don't get that. But whispering, I get. After the thunder, after the fire, the whisper. After the march, after the speeches, the whisper. After all is said and done, every revelation, every revolution sounds like a whisper. Because in the end of the day, in the end of the day, whips, accusations, ad hominem attacks, threats, all of those things don't work with horses, they don't work with children, they don't work with adults, they don't work. It might work for a moment. Here I come to give you a big revelation, it's with a shofar, a big sounding horn, and you're scared. That'll work for five minutes. Revelation sounds like a whisper means that to whisper means to invite somebody in to a deeper conversation. To whisper means to listen and to create a context, a silence in which another voice may speak. To whisper means that you trust that the other wants to hear, wants to connect, wants to listen, wants to know. Revelation sounds like a whisper.

In my experience in the last 30 years of my life, I can't tell you how many times I've tried all the wrong methods in which to convince someone that I'm right. I can't tell you how many times my persuasiveness was not available to me. I can't tell you how many times I tried to cajole my body or my children by raising the volume of my voice, even my community now and then. What would the world look like? What would this community, what would New York, what would this country look like if people spoke in softer tones? If instead of barking at one another, we left room for the silence between us to be heard? What if we stood at the foot of each other's mountains and said, after all of the fireworks? Revelation sounds like a whisper. So let me ask you, where are you raising the volume of your voice instead of the depth of your listening? Where are you shouting instead of tracking, finding yourself, finding the other, trying to heal?

Finally, the tables are starting to turn. Because we're talking about a revolution. But it doesn't sound like a tweet or a Facebook post or an angry screed. It's a whisper. Don't you know it's a revelation? Don't you know we're talking about a revolution? Revelation sounds like a whisper. Don't you know it's time to run, run, run? The tables are starting to turn. We're talking about a revolution. Finally, the tables are starting to turn. We're talking about a revolution. Finally, the tables are starting to turn. We're talking about a revolution. Finally, the tables are starting to turn. It sounds like a revelation. Don't you know we're talking about a revolution? It sounds like a whisper. Don't you know we're talking about a revolution? It sounds like a whisper. We build a word for love on page 18.

Tonight, whisper a couple things to people.