

Master and Beloved

Harav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Special Holiday Shiur

Yeshivat Har Etzion

"MASTER AND BELOVED"

BY HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Adapted from a sicha given on Shavuot 5745 (1985) Summarized by Roni Kleinman, Translated by
Menachem Weinberg

"And Moshe led the people out' (Shemot 19:17)- R. Yose said R. Yehuda would teach as follows:

"Hashem mi-sinai ba' (Devarim 33:2) - God came from Sinai. Do not read it so but rather 'Hashem le-sinai ba' - God came TO Sinai to give the Torah to Israel." However, I disagree, and rather teach - 'God came from Sinai' to greet Israel, like a groom who goes out to greet his bride." (Mekhilta Yitro, 3)

A mere change of one letter - "mi-sinai" to "le-sinai" - leads to two totally different understandings! This argument exposes two opposing approaches in Chazal to the relationship between God and the Jewish people, between the Giver of Torah and its receivers. R. Yehuda cannot accept the literal reading of the verse 'from Sinai' - did God come from Sinai as an equal of the Jewish nation? Does the Torah not say 'God descended to Mount Sinai' and 'God is in the heavens and you are on the earth?' Rather, as the gemara says (Sukka 5a), 'Never has the Shekhina (Divine Presence) gone below ten cubits.' God came TO Sinai - the transcendental God, who threatens and commands, who suspended the mountain over our heads like a cask, came down to Sinai. There is commandment and a Commander, a Ruler and his subjects. God is the master, and Israel are his subjects. 'I am the Lord your God who took you out from the house of slavery' and therefore God declares 'For Me are the Children of Israel slaves, My slaves...'

R. Yose, however, disagrees - he reads the verse literally: 'God came FROM Sinai.' There is a dimension in which God comes from Sinai, as an equal, as it were, of Israel: 'like a groom who goes out to meet his bride.' In Shir Hashirim, when Israel is called by God "My dove, My pure one (tamati)," the midrash expounds, "Do not read 'tamati' but rather 'te'omati' - my perfect match." Here we have a relationship between a lover and a beloved, a bride and groom, nothing remotely resembling the master-slave relationship described above by R. Yehuda. The revelation at Sinai is described here as the climax of the period of engagement, 'your love as a bride' (Yirmiyahu 2:2). God set up a

rendezvous with his beloved, the Nation of Israel, in the desert at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He said, as it were, "You agreed - you did not say 'Let us meet somewhere more convenient;' you agreed to go out to the desert!" In R. Yose's scenario, God is seen as immanent; He comes from Sinai into the desert to meet His bride Israel.

These two strains are also present regarding the Torah. On the one hand, the Torah is a book of commandments incumbent upon us, God's servants, to perform. Yet, on the other hand, there exists within this framework of commandments an emotional side, the experiential element in the service of God. Here it is possible to feel closeness to God, not as a master, but as a friend; not as a ruler, but as a groom and a beloved.

The Mekhilta (Yitro, 9), however, points out that the experience of Revelation and Divine command must not be a passive one: "'And all the people saw the sounds ...' (Shemot 20:15) - Rebbe said: this teaches us the praise of Israel, that when they all stood at Mt. Sinai to accept the Torah, they would hear each commandment and analyze it, as it says (Devarim 32:10) 'Yesovevenhu yevonenehu' (midrashically interpreted as 'He encompassed them, and they studied it') - as soon as they heard a commandment, they analyzed it."

Israel stood at a momentous event - thunder and lightning, the blasts of the shofar, the Almighty Himself speaking and commanding. With all this enveloping them, they must have felt uplifted to tremendous spiritual heights. In such a state, most people would let the enveloping experience sweep them away; they would remain passive so as not to interfere with the power of the experience. Most would not use the mind or human logic at such a time, so as not to taint the experience, not to ruin or lessen its impact.

But the greatness of Israel was that they knew how to be engrossed in the event, 'they would hear the command,' but they did not settle for hearing the voice alone. Israel also 'analyzed it' - using their intellect, they tried to understand and gain wisdom. They grasped the Torah not only through pure experience, but through the intellect as well. What is easier than 'yesovevenhu,' being surrounded and enveloped, embraced by the Shekhina? But there must also be 'yevonenehu' - the intellectual dimension of our relationship with God and his Torah. Albeit 'He encompassed them' comes first, for without this dimension, a relationship is impossible. But this alone cannot suffice; the experiential dimension of the Torah must be accompanied by the intellectual dimension - 'they analyzed it.' It is this dialectic that forms the matrix of the relationship between the Jewish Nation and God, and between Israel and the Torah.

The Mekhilta (Yitro, 4) further expounds: "'Because God descended on it in fire' (Shemot 19:18) - this teaches us that the Torah is fire and from fire it was given, and was compared to fire. Like fire, if a person comes close to it - he is burned; if he goes far from it - he is cold; but rather one should warm himself near its brightness."

The Torah is compared to fire. God too is called 'a consuming fire' - it is impossible to get too close to the Almighty. Fire can be a destructive force, burning and consuming, yet on the other hand, fire can create and build. Fire illuminates the way in the darkness; when there is unclarity, its light can lead and guide. However, light alone is only external, something shined forth, and cannot penetrate deeply into one's being.

Fire, however, has an additional quality: heat. Fire radiates warmth on a cold day, and this warmth suffuses one's body, 'like water in his midst and like oil in his bones.' Man cannot break down the barriers of the enormous division between himself and his Creator; he cannot bring down the Creator to his level, for then, God forbid, we would reach the situation described by one of the philosophers as 'God being created in man's image.' On the other hand, if man shies away and retreats, he becomes colder and colder. All of the experience, the fire that warms and illuminates, disappears from his personality, and he will grow distant from a personal connection with God. "Rather one should warm himself NEAR its brightness." We must maintain the balance between nearness and distance, and must know how to remain within the framework of Torah and, through it, reach closeness to God.

This dialectic is well expressed by Chazal regarding the verse "And I will walk among you and be for you a God, and you will be My nation" (Vayikra 26:12). Rashi comments, "'I will walk among you' - I will stroll with you in the Garden of Eden like one of you and you will not quake in fear before Me. Perhaps this implies that you will not fear Me? Therefore the verse continues, 'and I will be for you a God.'"

God strolls among us as one of us, yet this is only after the framework described in the continuation of the verse exists: 'and I will be for you a God.' Only under the rubric of fear of Heaven and acceptance of God's commandments, can we hope to experience a personal relationship with Him.

We hope and pray that we will know how to integrate these two themes, as we request in our prayers: "Our Father, the merciful Father, the One who has mercy, have mercy on us," and we continue, "and plant in our hearts understanding, to understand and gain wisdom..."

To receive special holiday packages, write to:	majordomo@etzion.org.il
With the message:	Subscribe yhe-about

This is provided courtesy of the *Virtual Beit Midrash*, the premier source of online courses on Torah and Judaism - 14 different courses on all levels, for all backgrounds.

*Make Jewish learning part of your week on a regular basis - enroll in the
Virtual Beit Midrash*

(c) Yeshivat Har Etzion 1997 All rights reserved to Yeshivat Har Etzion

Yeshivat Har Etzion
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments