

THE ETERNAL TORAH

Adapted from an essay by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z"l

The festival of Shavuot, which was the day the Torah was given to the Jewish people by God, is also called *Kabbalat Hatorah* – referring to the fact that this was the day that the Ten Commandments were received by Israel. It would seem to be a natural pairing of concepts – simply speaking, giving and receiving are two sides of the same action and it makes sense for them to be interchangeable as descriptions of the event.

But truthfully, they are not identical. Each of them has its own particular meaning. In Jewish mysticism, the giving of the Torah is a movement from above to below, while the receiving is a movement from below reaching upward. And in the dimension of time, the giving of the Torah is essentially a single act at a particular moment in time, while the receiving of the Torah is a diversified and continuing process throughout history.

Before expanding on this point, let's clarify what is meant by the word "Torah". To translate Torah as "law" misses the mark completely, even though the Bible could rightfully be seen as a book containing laws and moral instruction for living. On the other hand, this aspect of instruction – teaching us how to lead our lives – is certainly basic to Torah, as without it the Torah would just be a monumental work of literature.

Besides, Torah that is not a living framework for action is no longer Torah. Therefore, the *giving* and the *receiving* of Torah is more than just the transmission of a certain body of information. It is the communication of a message that causes a profound change in the thought and behavior of those who receive it. It is also clear that Torah constitutes a bridge between God's Divine essence and man.

The actual giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai was a very dramatic and awesome event, with heavenly voices, and trumpets, and lightning, and thunder. One may wonder a little at all the fuss, considering that the Ten Commandments are no more than fundamental rules for the conduct of any society. In part, at least, similar ideas are already found in the older law codes of Babylon and Egypt, India and China.

Therefore, it must be the case that the full weight of the Ten Commandments is not only just about their content, but actually in the special way they were given. Which means, for example, that when the Ten Commandments says: "you shall not murder", this is not a law set by some local chief to avoid vengeful blood feuds. As a result of all the fuss that accompanied the giving of the Ten Commandments, we know that it is the command of an Almighty God, and this is what gives it real power and meaning. To transgress any of the commandments of the Torah is primarily to defy God, and only after that is it an offense against society.

But this is only a relatively external, formalistic aspect of the giving of the Torah. More significantly, the giving of the Torah is an act of "from above to below", the crossing of the

infinite gap between God and the world. There is no way man can cross that gap. As a human being, one can only cry out in despair, "what has He – God – got to do with us, dwellers of the dust?"

And of course, this aspect of the giving of the Torah is not a modern thought; it is repeated often in the Torah itself and it is probably a basic experience in all religions. It would actually seem to be the case that this is the inner message of the Ten Commandments – namely that they are an answer to this feeling of man's insignificance. It is a central aspect of the confrontation between God and man at Mount Sinai, as the verse says in Devarim (5:21):
וַתֹּאמְרוּ הֵן הִרְאָנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת כְּבוֹדוֹ וְאֶת גְּדֻלוֹ -- "Behold, God our God has shown us His glory and His greatness" --
וְאֶת קוֹלוֹ שָׁמַעְנוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ -- "and we have heard His voice emerge from the midst of the fire" --
הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי יְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם וְחַי -- "we have seen this day that God does talk with man, and he lives."

The importance of this encounter as described in the verse is not in the actual words spoken by God, but in the fact that God appeared before man and told him what to do; that God established some sort of contact with man. And this is the meaning of the whole Torah – all the rest is commentary.

Consequently, the *giving* of the Torah is a single historic event in which the Divine is the decisive factor. The receiving of the Torah, by contrast, is an enduring process in time, with man as the decisive factor. The paradox is only resolved when the two movements meet. This was exactly what Chazal mean when they say, basing themselves on a verse in Isaiah, that when the Jewish people are not God's witnesses, God is not God. In other words, Israel has to be ready to bear witness to the Divine presence, which allows the encounter, the Revelation of Torah, to take place. And again, it is not the content that is important. It is that someone is ready to receive it even before knowing what it is. *Naaseh Venishma*. This becomes the decisive factor.

The receiving of the Torah is therefore not just a matter of passively listening to the message of Torah; it is an act of committing oneself to absorbing the poetry and the principles, and carrying out the commandments throughout one's life. To begin with, there had to be a certain receptive state of mind – *Naaseh Venishma* – "We shall do and we shall hear" – in order for the Torah to be given. On the other hand, the inner meaning of this formulation of readiness only became evident later, as expressed by what Moses said forty years later when he was about to die. In Devarim 29:3 he says to the Bnei Yisrael: וְלֹא נָתַן ה' לְכֶם לֵב לְדַעַת וְעֵינַיִם לְרֹאוֹת וְאָזְנִים -- "God did not give you a heart to know and eyes to see and ears to hear until this very day." Only many generations later could it be said that the Jewish people had developed a heart that was able to know the Torah which was designated for them.

This idea is not just a metaphorical way of saying something; it is a recurring theme throughout the Torah. You could say that the Torah as a whole is a detailed account of all the conflicts and reconciliations in the process of receiving the Torah. Time is needed for any truly revolutionary teaching to be understood, and there are any number of intermediate stages. In the entire history of the Jewish people, it was only during the time of the Second Temple that the nation

as a whole finally accepted the Torah as an obligatory way of life. From that time on until recent generations, there was no serious division between the Jews and Torah. They have been one consistent entity.

Think about it. I mean, really think about it. It is a stunning fact. More than a thousand years passed between the giving of the Torah and the total receiving of the Torah. Of course, it's not simply a matter of the spiritual and intellectual capacities of one generation or another. As long as we possess free will, the problem of receiving the Torah will be revisited for every individual in every generation.

But the point is this. The process of receiving the Torah has continued from the incident of the Golden Calf all the way through Jewish history until today. It is the process of training each Jew to genuinely absorb what is being offered to him. The giving happened already, a long time ago. But the receiving is happening – right now. And receiving the Torah is never a straightforward learning process. It is always being obstructed and delayed – and interestingly enough, those obstructions and delays are not just the result of diverse kinds of rejection, they also reflect the many forms of inadequate or premature acceptance.

After thousands of years and countless good intentions and incessant struggle on the part of generation after generation of devout Jews, we can only be sure of one thing: The Torah once given at Sinai continues to be received by the Jewish nation, and will continue to be actively received by the Jewish nation until the moment of final redemption. *Bimeheira Beyameinu Amen.*