FIRST DAY OF SHAVUOT
MAY 24, 2015
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Rabbi Benny Lau is the Rabbi of The Ramban Synagogue in Jerusalem, a social activist, a respected author and teacher, and the nephew of the former Chief Rabbi of Israel. He sees himself as a member of the religious Zionist stream, has served in the army and has made an impact upon Israeli civil society as he has worked with people with disabilities and people who need financial support. While he himself is Orthodox, he has spoken and written against the strictures instituted by ultra-Orthodoxy.

In commenting on the holiday of Shavuot, Rabbi Lau suggests that when we stand for the recitation of the Ten Commandments, we are accepting the Torah once more. However, he points out that there are two possibilities in understanding that acceptance. While we all hear the same words, the ultimate question is whether these words remain carved in stone, or allow us the opportunity for new innovations in both religious thinking and religious practice. He suggests that one of the great disagreements currently in Jewish religious thought is based upon these conflicting points of view. One group, the ultra-Orthodox maintain that it is the responsibility of the Jewish people to keep the tradition as it has been and to diminish the possibility of change. Thus, the chain going back to Sinai is uninterrupted, wedded to the words that were heard by the children of Israel as they stood at the base of the mountain. They currently are growing in numbers and are now part of the government coalition of the State of Israel.

The second opinion, he holds, suggests that Torah is renewed in each generation and it is the responsibility of those who study it and those who teach it to make it relevant, otherwise, it will be left listless and stagnant. According to Rabbi Lau, the first stream is interested in the outcome, the second stream, in the search.

Though Rabbi Lau is an Orthodox Rabbi, the second position can easily be seen as the philosophy of Conservative/Masorti Movement religious thought. One of the great debates in Jewish religious thought is what happened at Sinai and how does it affect our lives. The Torah portion states that G-d spoke and the children of Israel heard. However, already the rabbinic sages had difficulty with this concept. How is it possible for G-d to speak? After all, though we need to see G-d in human terms, through our anthropomorphic understanding of the Deity, this is not really G-d. And how could the children of Israel hear the voice of G-d? After all, there is no real voice. How could G-d talk to them? They might experience the arrival of G-d on the mountain as the entire earth moved, since the natural phenomena could be witnessed. But the voice of G-d, that is something else.

Throughout the ages, there have been various theories as to what actually happened at Sinai. If one reviews rabbinic literature, one is able to read a multiplicity of statements as to what was said, what was heard, and the process by which it was done. According to some Rabbis, all the Written Torah and the Oral Torah was given at Sinai. In fact, it is stated: "whatever a student is to say in a study hall was already given to Moses at Sinai." This is an all-inclusive statement which makes everything emanate from G-d's voice directly from the Sinaitic

experience. However, there are other points of view as well. Some Rabbis suggest that the Written law was given, but not the Oral law. Others understand the text stating that only the first two commandments were given, as G-d addresses the children of Israel directly in the first person, but the others were interpretations of the revelation. Still others suggest that only the first word "Anochi" was heard and there is even a Hasidic interpretation that only the "Aleph" was heard at Sinai. Thus, one can trace back all the way to the Rabbinic sages and then through much of medieval and modern Jewish thought that there are various theories as to what was heard at Sinai and how it is to be interpreted in our modern day.

Following Lau's understanding, the stagnant approach has everything emanating from Sinai, the more dynamic approach has human interpretation being critical as the search for the ultimate voice of G-d remains part of Jewish religious thought and behavior.

This is a significant disagreement in modern Jewish thought. Reading Rabbi Lau, one could claim that he is much closer to the Conservative/Masorti movement than he is to ultra-Orthodoxy. His behavior may be Orthodox, but his religious thinking is quite modern. One of the reasons is that he was trained secularly as well. He possesses a BA in Talmud from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and an MA and PhD in Talmud from Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv. That secular training is essential to gaining a modern view of living in the world and of gaining access to its great ideas. Rabbi Lau has written: "There is a type of 'middle of the road' approach in religious observance that is passed down from one generation to the next, an approach that does not always coincide with ones practiced in the world of the Yeshiva." I would agree with him wholeheartedly. As a Conservative Rabbi who has studied with him, heard him lecture, and read some of his books, I have been greatly impressed with his scholarship, his social activism, his religious thinking, and his willingness to stand up for religious and civil causes that are essential to the welfare of Israeli society and the Israeli religious system.

In Israel and in the Diaspora today, we need forward-looking religious thinking. We don't need necessarily to agree on all outcomes, but we do need to agree that the search for answers is part of our modern day world and that search is an integral part of standing at Sinai, of struggling with the revelation and its meaning today, of accepting G-d's word, and of making it relevant in our society. When events occur in the religious arena which strongly oppose this type of thinking we must call them out and be critical of them.

One of the significant programs of the Masorti movement in Israel is the Bar and Bat Mitzvah program for children with disabilities. Through the Cantor's Assembly we, at Beth El, allow our Bar and Bat Mitzvah students to twin with a child in this program and offer support to its participants. When my father passed away 12 years ago, our family made a significant contribution to this program with help from this community and our friends so that the Masorti Movement could provide gifts to the graduates on their Bar or Bat Mitzvah day.

The program allows children with disabilities from all over Israel to study for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The students span the spectrum of observance from completely secular to ultra-Orthodox. Parents are included and encouraged to participate in the entire process, which is totally voluntary. Each of the students has a special tutor who prepares the young man or woman

for the event and the teaching takes place at the school or the synagogue where the ceremony most often will take place. There is an intense period of acclimation to get the children ready for the experience with much work done in the Masorti synagogue where the child will celebrate his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah. There is a specialized Siddur in Hebrew with sign language for prayer and ritual to be used, if needed. Over 4,000 children with disabilities have celebrated their Bar and Bat Mitzvah in this program and it is now operating in 20 sites all over Israel.

Two weeks ago, 48 hours before the ceremony was to be held in Rehovot, Mayor Rachamim Malul cancelled the ceremony without warning because it was to take place in the Masorti synagogue in that city. There had been no complaints in prior years when the training and the ceremony had occurred. This year, a complaint was received from an Orthodox parent in the school, whose child is not participating in the program. The Mayor, who is ultra-Orthodox refused numerous requests to meet with the parents or with the Masorti leadership and disabilities specialist. When he finally did so, he could not be moved. He has offered to move the ceremony to an Orthodox synagogue which operates under the Chief Rabbi. That is not acceptable. Since girls could not participate in the ritual and, according to some Orthodox rabbis children with severe disabilities might not be called to the Torah, the ceremony would be very different than planned.

This type of religious intolerance is just unacceptable. A week ago, at a private meeting which I had set with Israeli Consul General to the Midwest, Roey Gilad, I protested against this type of activity and asked him to relay to the head of his ministry in Jerusalem my severe displeasure on behalf of our community and the Masorti/Conservative Movement throughout the world concerning this type of action. This past Monday I spoke with a representative of Israel's Foreign Ministry and I understand our protest has reached Prime Minister Netanyahu's office. As this is a voluntary program and done without coercion it seems to me that is unacceptable for the Mayor to stand up in the name of the Jewish religion and hurt members of his community, and other communities as well.

I am convinced that this program, in which I have witnessed some of the most emotional movements I have ever seen, is a true Kiddush Hashem, a sanctification of G-d's name in our world. The attitude and action of the Mayor makes Jewish religious practice less meaningful to generations of Jews who want to hold on to the best of Jewish religious thought and Jewish observance.

I believe that we must continually stand at Sinai, not only one day of the year, but every day. We must listen for G-d's voice and recognize that our tradition goes all the way back to that Divine-human encounter in the experience of the Israelite people. Throughout the ages, we have attempted to understand that encounter and make it meaningful for each generation of Jews. The search for that understanding is what Judaism is all about, and it is in the search itself, that we come closer to G-d, and make the tradition more meaningful and more relevant for each and every age. We may not agree on the result of the search and its outcome, but that search is integral to the process, to what it means to be a believing, learning, and striving Jew in our age and in every age. Rabbi Lau's writings and activities challenge us to live up to the great ideals of our faith. While he may not necessarily approve the outcome of the decisions of the

Conservative/Masorti Movement, I know that he approves of the continual attempt to make Judaism meaningful for our day and age in Israel and throughout the world.

As we stand once more at Sinai on this day of Shavuot, we must continue that search. Let us make the Divine-human encounter meaningful in our lives and let us teach succeeding generations of Jews that standing at Sinai is a privilege and a challenge for each and every one of us.