

Shabbat Shmot 5783 - Talking with G-d
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Shabbat Shalom!

One of the most interesting parts of my rabbi job is the *questions* I get from children.

Let me share a brief sampling, divided into categories. *Every question begins like this: I have two questions.*

First, there are the questions about dinosaurs: *How did dinosaurs live? When were dinosaurs created? Why weren't dinosaurs mentioned in the Torah?*

These are simple to answer: Ask your science teacher. Ask your science teacher. And I don't know.

Next, there are the curious questions I never thought of: *How do people speak English if Adam and Eve spoke Hebrew? Can you eat from the Tree of "Nolege" in heaven?*

Then there are the questions that are so on-point, they could be asked by *adults*: *Why isn't everyone one family? How did the first Torah come to exist? Why did G-d create a world with Covid? Why doesn't G-d talk to us anymore?*

This final question I will attempt to answer today because Parashat Shmot provides the scene of Moses and the Burning Bush, when G-d introduces Himself to Moses for the first time. Also, Passover is the season when we are all expected to channel *the child within us* and ask questions, and today we *begin* the Book of Exodus. The question of G-d's involvement with us today is important for *all of us* - not just children.

However, before I answer our question, let me ask two questions of my own: *If G-d were to talk to us today, exactly what do you expect G-d to say to us? How would you even know what G-d's voice sounds like?*

G-d still talks to us today, if only we knew how to listen.

I believe that G-d continues to speak to us today through the *Torah*. The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote:

People sometimes ask me: where was G-d in the Holocaust? But the real question is: where was humanity? G-d was in a voice that has been speaking since man first walked on earth. In the words, "Thou shalt not kill." In the words,

“Do not oppress a stranger.” In the words, “Your brother’s blood cries to me from the ground.” G-d wasn’t silent in the Holocaust. But when G-d speaks and we don’t listen, even G-d can’t save us from ourselves. And still we aren’t listening.

G-d’s expectations for all people of living honest, ethical lives, and being responsible for each other, are clear and available *for all to hear*. At least all *who are tuned in* to hearing G-d’s voice in the Torah’s commandments. It’s quite possible that G-d speaks today and some people hear that voice. Others may not because they aren’t aware, are distracted, or just don’t realize how G-d communicates.

While society has changed much over the past millenia, *human nature has not*. Consider what the Torah says in Leviticus: “You shall not hate your fellow in your heart. You should not take revenge or bear a grudge against people. Love your fellow as yourself.” That guidance is as applicable *today* as it ever was. It’s there in the Torah, if we *listen* for it.

If G-d were to speak to you today, what would the voice sound like? Would it be loud or soft? Hebrew, English or another language? Words or images? Male or female voice?

I believe that G-d *continues* to speak to us today, sometimes through text study, and sometimes through *a human voice*. And I don’t mean the famous actor *James Earl Jones* reading the Bible!

Let’s take a closer look at the scene where Moses encounters G-d for the first time. In our Parsha, Moses is born into Egyptian royalty, stands up for his Jewish kinsmen, and runs away to Midian. One day he is out shepherding his father-in-law’s sheep. G-d appears as a *bush* that blazes but does not burn down...and Moses *does not* realize that it is G-d.

Moses himself *does not* notice G-d right in front of him because he isn’t attuned to the possibility that G-d will speak to him. G-d then calls out, “Moses! Moses!” After this call, Moses answers, “*Hineni* - Here I am.” Pay close attention to the text here: G-d says, “Don’t come closer. Remove your shoes from your feet for the place on which you stand is holy ground. G-d said, “I am the G-d of your father, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob.” Moses hides his face for he is afraid to look at G-d.

Careful readers of the text will notice two surprises. First, G-d says, “Don’t come closer.” Immediately afterward, G-d says, “I am the G-d of your father, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” G-d is making two statements back to back, each introduced by the phrase “G-d said.”

It would be more natural for the Torah to say “G-d said” *just once*, instead of repeating it in consecutive verses here without anything happening in between. This tells me that there is some unreported action in between G-d’s two statements.

The second surprise is that G-d introduces G-d first not as G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as we might expect, but G-d of Amram, father of Moses.

The Midrash explains the two surprises. When G-d first appeared to Moses, He did not want to terrify him with a *thunderous* voice. Nor did G-d want to speak so softly as to be *inaudible*. So G-d spoke in the voice of Amram, Moses’ father.

Let’s imagine this scene: G-d says *in Amram’s voice*: “Moses! Moses! Remove your shoes for you stand on holy ground.”

Moses answers, “*Dad?* Is that you?”

G-d continues, “No it’s not your father. I’m the *G-d* of your father, along with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

For me, the takeaway is that G-d may speak to us *in a human voice*. Put another way, a human voice we hear may in fact be the voice of G-d.

Of course we can’t know who and when, but what’s to say that G-d has never spoken to us through the voice and words of another person? Just as Moses saw the burning bush and didn’t realize it was G-d until later, so too we may realize that somebody’s guidance or instructions may have been G-d speaking to us *only after the fact*.

Years ago, The New York Times published an outstanding five-part series with the heading “Invisible Child.” It’s an in-depth look at *homelessness* in New York City, and it tells the story of an 11-year-old Brooklyn girl named Dasani. The readers shadow her and her family in the shelter, in school, and around the neighborhood. It’s *heartbreaking* to read because her abundant intelligence and abilities are eclipsed by her family’s abysmal financial situation.

Let me read to you a selection:

God “is somewhere around,” Dasani says.

“We just can’t find him.”

When Dasani looks into the future, she sees who she won’t be.

She won’t be a dropout.

She won’t do drugs or smoke or drink.

She won’t get married, unless she finds “a gentle man, not a harsh man.”

She won’t have children unless she can support them.

She won't end up on the street.

"Spare some change?" she says, mocking a panhandler. Nuh-uh. Not me."

It is harder for Dasani to imagine who she might become.

If G-d were to speak to her, what would G-d say? Of course nobody knows for sure. But maybe it's something like this: "It takes a lot of courage to be different. But sometimes you have to be alone." That's what her favorite teacher, Miss Hester, says. Coincidentally, this teacher's first name is Faith. Is G-d talking to Dasani in this moment? I'm not saying that G-d is. But since Miss Hester's words shine like a lamp and inspire Dasani to grow, I'm not saying that G-d is not either.

For me, somebody asked me late in college if I had seriously considered being a rabbi. I hadn't, and that question prompted me to explore it deeply *VHineni*, here I am. Was that G-d talking to me? Maybe it was.

I learn something else from G-d's introduction to Moses: "I am the *G-d of your father, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob.*" The Torah uses the word "*G-d of*" four times with these four people. To me, the Torah is saying that G-d had a unique relationship with each of these characters. The G-d of Abraham was Isaac's G-d too, but not in exactly the same way. G-d told Abraham to leave home for Israel; G-d told Isaac to stay there; G-d told Jacob to leave Israel for Egypt. They were different people and thus had different relationships with G-d. In the same way, *we all* have different relationships with G-d because we have different experiences, different gifts, different expectations.

Let's zoom out now. In many important ways, the Jews of the Torah were *completely different* from the Jews of modernity. It follows that G-d's relationship with the Jews of the Torah *should* be different from that of us today. A parent or teacher with two children of two different ages, interests, dispositions, learning styles, etc. *should* interact with them differently. Why should it be exactly the same today as back then? Though I wish it were; it would be so much simpler.

I believe that the child's question, *Why doesn't G-d talk to us anymore?* is not a child's question at all. Parents know best that one must listen in order for the other to be heard. G-d continues to speak through the timeless words of the Torah. G-d may even speak in a human voice. After all, the biblical prophets were human too. *Shma, Yisrael.* Listen, O Israel. To the *Kol Demamah Dakah*, to the still, small voice. Listen well.

Shabbat Shalom.