

Shavuot I 5786  
Not Just Moses  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Chag Sameach.

I was a little kid when my cousin called my house and asked to talk to me. She said, "Great news! My mom is pregnant!"

"Wow! That's amazing! Hold on a second."

I covered the phone. "Mom, what does pregnant mean?"

Revelation: in one word, that's what today's holiday is about. Wow! That's amazing! Hold on a second: do we really know what the word means? It means G-d *revealed* the Torah to the Jewish people in the form of the Ten Commandments. Which is why we read those same words today and preoccupy ourselves with studying Torah late at night, some people even all night long. Well, likely not *us* if we're in the room, but that's OK!

As far as I know, the Torah is the first account of a divine revelation to a faith group, but it is hardly the only one. Christianity believes in a different Revelation of G-d's word, as do Islam, the Bahai, and the Hindus. That's a few billion people right there. But something essential separates the Jewish account of Revelation at Sinai from these other faiths: nearly all other faiths believe G-d revealed Himself to *one person*: For example, Muhammad in Islam. But the Torah claims something radically different: *The entire Jewish people* stood at Sinai. It was a *national* event, not a *private* moment. Of course Moses had a front row seat, but *all* people heard G-d say the words "*Anochi* - I am the Lord your G-d..." (Ex. 20:1). As the Torah says: "All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance" (Ex. 20:15).

Why did everyone need to stand at Sinai? Why didn't G-d just tell Moses everything and then have him pass along the teaching?

The Torah addresses that earlier in today's reading. G-d said to Moses to speak to the Jewish people: "Indeed, all the Earth is Mine, but you all shall be to Me, *Mamlechet Kohanim VGo'i Kadosh* - a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5,6). Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.

I want to share two thoughts about what that might mean.

Perhaps this means the entire Jewish people plays a role in supporting the spiritual elite, the Priests. The 19th century rabbi known as Malbim offers an analogy: “A tree cannot be composed entirely of fruits. It needs roots, a trunk, bark, and branches. So too, we find that among the general population of a nation, most of the people are like the trunk and the leaves of a tree. These masses of individuals support the holy people devoted to G-d, the treasured few representing the fruit.”

Malbim is saying that the Jewish people have a spiritual leadership core, the priests. But they cannot exist on their own. Only through the support of a community are they able to focus on G-d and spirituality. When the community provides for the Priests, the full community earns an assist for their efforts, and G-d rewards them too. They are *all* deemed holy because ultimately they are all serving G-d in some way.

Today, of course, the Priests no longer serve in this spiritual role. Instead, rabbis and cantors assume that mantle of tending to the spiritual needs of the Jewish community. I can say, on behalf of the clergy here, we need a lot of help in order to do our jobs. One thing that makes Beth El so special is that so many community members step up to share their wisdom and expertise. We had congregants who are doctors guide us through the pandemic determining how we could safely gather during that time of virus transmission and social distancing. Rabbis can't do that. We have congregants who are architects offering insight and advice into our new construction project, the soon-to-open pavilion. Cantors aren't trained for that. We have congregants who are HR professionals share best practices about how to create the best employee handbook for our staff so our staff have the best work environment possible. Clergy can't do that. It's really a wonderful thing when so many congregants offer their time and expertise. With that in place, our clergy can focus exclusively on meeting the Jewish needs of our community. While we are the ones you see on the Bimah, it's really a team effort. You all play a role, which makes holiness the pursuit of the *full* community, not just the rabbis.

There's another way to look at our verse too. Instead of the Jewish people playing a *supporting* role to the priests, the entire nation participates in a *leading* role, as priests themselves. This is the direction offered by 19th century Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch. He writes: “With this statement, G-d declared that each and every individual Israelite is considered a ‘priest’ when they accept G-d's absolute rule over their life. When a person takes the will of G-d into account before acting in any way, when they serve as a model and example for realizing the mission of G-d for humanity, they are elevated to the status of a priest of G-d.” This means that not only are the priests supposed to dedicate their lives to following G-d's word, but every Jew. The Torah doesn't delegate spiritual commitments to the clergy, but instead says that the whole nation must reach that very

high ethical bar. That's why the Torah was given to the *entire* people: we are *all* called to live up to its ideals.

When we apply that approach to Beth El, it expresses itself by having congregants leading from the Bimah, not only clergy.

One area we do this incredibly well is reading Torah. You know about the cookies, and that we are over 150 different readers for the year. That's incredible. Another way to look at it is that our clergy almost never read Torah on Shabbat! They just don't need to because there is such a deep bench of congregants. We truly internalize the value that reading Torah is for *everyone*. It's not easy, but something achievable for every Jew. That's exactly the spirit of building a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Another area we do this well is by having non-rabbis share sermons and Divrei Torah. Every board meeting begins with a congregant sharing a brief Torah thought. During the summer, congregants share sermons instead of the rabbis. I think this is really powerful because it demonstrates that studying Torah is for *all*, and teaching Torah is something *everyone* can do. Not without preparation and work, but everyone can step up to share. Everyone has access to the words of our tradition in the Etz Hayyim Humash, just like our whole people stood at Sinai. And everyone has the ability to connect the timeless lessons from the Mitzvot and stories to today. Whenever I study with a congregant and help them prepare - and that is a standing offer I make to all of you - I encourage them to share something only they can say. To share an experience only they have access to. To speak about something that a rabbi cannot. Congregants sharing a Dvar Torah - even if it is just 3 minutes long - reminds everyone that the Torah belongs to all of us.

I believe we can do even better here. I encourage you in the year ahead to find a moment to share a Dvar Torah, even a short one. It could be at a synagogue meeting, or it could be at home. A family Simcha, a Seder, even a Shabbat dinner: they are all perfect moments to share insights from our tradition and today.

I want to speak directly to those who have not tried before. I'm talking to you now. I know it feels daunting to do this. But you can do this! Because so many others have, and because you are capable. You have a voice and insight no one else does, and it's a gift to the community when you share. I am here to help if you like. I assure you that people listening will be touched by your words and insights. And you will feel connected to our tradition in a deep and powerful way. In a way that perhaps Moses felt on this day when he stood at Sinai, surrounded by all of our ancestors.

Chag Sameach.