

We will never know what actually happened during the “Revelation at Sinai,” or if it happened at all. Because these *aseret ha-dibrot* (Ten Statements) are the basis of our Torah, it is understandable that their appearance is surrounded by supernatural events and enhanced by a wealth of midrashim. Indeed, their presentation is itself unique, since it is the only time that HaShem addresses the people directly, and not through Moses. But it is too much for them. “And all the people *saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar*, and the smoking mountain, and the people *saw* and trembled; so they stood from afar. They said to Moses, ‘You speak with us, and we will *hear*, but let God not speak with us lest we die.’” (20:15-16) Today we would define this experience as temporary synesthesia, a condition in which the brain causes one sense to create a simultaneous stimulation of another sense. But why didn’t they hear the smoking mountain, if their senses were so jumbled? Because the sense of sight is by far the strongest and most reliable of all our senses, which is reflected in the root ראה that forms words such as experiencing, prophesying, appearing, understanding. According to Samson Raphael Hirsch, it is also related to the root ירא (fear, awe), which in this context is abundantly evident. Many of us know that ditty “How odd of God to choose the Jews,” and its many witty responses, which include, “Not so odd; the Jews chose God.” According to some midrashim, this choice was more coerced than spontaneous. Talmud Tractate Shabbat 88a: “The Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One of Blessing overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.’” In other words, the Israelites had no choice – an extremely problematic idea. Since leaving Eden for the wide world, we do have choices; and we most certainly do not view HaShem as a tyrant. Worse yet, the story of accepting the Torah out of fear also plays into the persistent concept of Judaism as harsh and law-bound versus Christianity as loving and forgiving. Nonetheless, we are HaShem’s “chosen,” for better or worse, and HaShem’s choice of this little ragtag folk over all others is a paradox that echoes throughout our history. A midrashic story that appears in several different versions explains: In order to give the nations of the world no reason to claim that they would have accepted the Torah had they been asked, HaShem offers it to each of them in turn. But before they decide to commit, they all want to know what it entails, and in response, HaShem presents the commandment that best reveals each nation’s potential difficulties. Esau’s descendants are told, “You shall not murder,” and they answer, “Since Isaac’s blessing to Esau said that we would live by our swords, so how could we stop murdering?” The descendants of Ishmael learn “You shall not steal,” so they refuse because they make their living by stealing. Each of the 70 nations HaShem asks refuses because they are unable to accept all of the precepts. But when HaShem asks the Israelites, “All of the people replied in unison and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we shall do!’” (19:8) Without a thought as to what is expected of them, the people accept, and of course, we all know how challenging it is for them, and for us, to uphold this rash promise. What makes the Israelites so sure they are able to obey all the statutes and ordinances that will emanate from these Ten Statements, which, by the way, they have not yet even heard? Based on their incessant complaining and missteps over the past three months, they are unlikely to have suddenly put aside their doubts and fears and developed the capacity to really understand the momentous message from HaShem that Moses relays to them: “And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples ... And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation.” (19:5-6) Lacking the resources to process the barrage of events that have so profoundly changed their lives, and overcome by what they are now hearing, they blurt out their hasty acceptance without beginning to comprehend what their promise will entail. Now, let us return to the concepts of seeing and hearing. It is obvious that their “mind’s eye” is wide open, overpowering their ability to really hear, as the double verb שָׁמְעוּ תִּשְׁמְעוּ (shemo’u tishm’u) emphasizes. And what they will experience during their time of preparation and the event itself will open those channels even wider, until all of their senses are fused into one huge receptacle. In Midrash Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael Rabbi Akiva says, “They saw what was audible and heard what was visible. ... They saw a word of fire come out of the Mouth of Might and be engraved upon the tablets.” And they also tasted, smelled, and felt all that happened, however it happened. And slowly, they begin to realize the meaning of שמע (sh’ma): hearing with the deep understanding that they must obey – not in fear, but in awe that leads to the realization that the laws unfolding from HaShem’s Ten Statements are equitable and life-sustaining. Indeed, the ethical principles they contain have become the bedrock of Western civil law. If we listen as our ancestors did, with our eyes wide open, we will see with all our senses and understand what is expected of us as members of that tiny, diverse group of people who continue to choose to be chosen.

Shabbat shalom!