

Shabbat Parashat Yitro
“Why Doesn’t God Talk to Us Anymore?”

The dramatic scenes come fast and furious in the Book of Exodus/*Sh’mot*. It was only a few weeks ago that we read of the meeting between God and Moses at the burning bush. That was followed by two weeks of the ten plagues and the Israelites witnessing and experiencing the splitting of the Reed Sea in last week’s reading. In this week’s *parasha*/Torah portion, the Children of Israel arrives at Mount Sinai, encounters God “face-to-face” as an independent nation, and begins to receive the gift of the Torah (literally, “The Teaching”) there. God’s revelation of the commandments at Mount Sinai begins with the Ten Commandments this week and continues all the way through the rest of the Book of Exodus/*Sh’mot*, the Book of Leviticus/*Vayikra*, and until the nation begins its travels to the Promised Land at the beginning of the Book of Numbers/*B’midbar*. All in all, the children of Israel spends approximately one full year encamped at the foot of “God’s Mountain” receiving Torah/Teaching from God through Moses. In response to stories of God speaking directly to our prophets of the Bible, many students have asked me, “Why doesn’t God talk to us the way he talked Moses, or Abraham, or any of the other people in the Torah?” The answer is all a matter of perspective.

If we believe that the only way that God can speak to us is through a voice of the type that Moses and the people heard at Mount Sinai, or that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob literally heard according to their life stories as told by the Torah, then our children are correct. God does not talk to us anymore. However, describing God’s means of communication with humanity as limited to the type of speaking voice that humans possess would put limits on God that do not jive with our tradition. However, if we think more broadly about how it is that we may continue to hear God’s voice in our generations, even though we are not prophets in the mold of Moses and those that preceded and followed him, then we can change the question from the negative “Why doesn’t God talk to us any more?” to a positive: “How/When do we hear God’s voice?” or “What is God asking of me?”

One of the most powerful ways that children (and adults) are able to connect to and understand the idea that God may still be communicating with us is through the idea of the conscience. When I ask students if they ever hear a voice in their minds trying to tell them what “the right thing to do” is, most of them answer in the affirmative. They often think of cartoons they watch or watched where a devilish figure is resting on a character’s shoulder and whispering into his or her ear, encouraging a character to act in a trouble-making way, while an angelic figure on the other shoulder is arguing for “righteousness.” With this vivid image in mind, I ask the students to tell me where that conscience, encouraging them to make good choices, comes from. Eventually, we get to the possibility that it may be God. The voice of conscience is one way that we may still be hearing God.

Anytime we study from the Torah or our other holy texts, whether we are reading a literal quotation from God speaking to a prophet or learning a lesson in a more indirect way, we are stepping into the shoes of those who did indeed hear the message directly from God. Our study of Torah and our holy tradition engages us in communication with God and any lesson or inspiration from that experience that we take with us is a form of God’s on-going communication with us. Therefore, while we may not be hearing the booming voice from Mount Sinai or the still small voice from later prophets in our ears today, there certainly are ways that God is reaching out to hearts, minds, and souls throughout our lives. It is only up to us to try to listen, study, and learn a little bit more closely.

Sh'ma Yisra'el! Hear, O Israel!
Shabbat Shalom!