

Draft 1
8/11/08

How Does God Reveal Himself?

Children have asked me often, "Rabbi, if God spoke to Moses and to Abraham, why doesn't He speak now?" Out of the mouth of babes, sometimes, comes wisdom. This is a question every religious person owes it to himself/herself to pursue. Has God stopped speaking, or is it that we are unable to hear Him speak? Let us look back into Jewish history to come to some understanding in this matter.

At first, our ancestors accepted the old notion of humankind that God only appeared on rare occasions to a few selected individuals. Even today, throughout the Christian world, there are shrines where God is said to have appeared to certain rare individuals, and these shrines are regarded as unique and holy places. Some of them are considered to have special healing powers, and Christians (especially Catholics) will journey to these shrines, coming from all over the world to be healed of certain diseases. Abraham, like his contemporaries, thought that God chose only a few places to appear, and when Abraham seemed to hear a voice pleading with him not to sacrifice his son Isaac, and advising him to substitute, instead, a lamb, Abraham named that place, "Adonai Yireh", which means, "the place where the Lord provides" (Genesis 22:14).

Family ✓
has been translated ✓

While our ancestors took over some of the ideas of their contemporaries, they always managed to add a new dimension to the old idea. From scripture we learn that if God reveals Himself, if He appears to a chosen person, it is only to teach some new idea or to urge that person to perform a difficult and meaningful task. In the case of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac, we are told that God was trying to teach that human sacrifice was evil and that animal sacrifice was a preferable substitute. The makers of war, it would seem, have not yet learned that human sacrifice is evil. They have not yet shared this revelation. When God appeared to Moses in the desert in the form of a burning bush, Moses understood that he had to leave the safety of the desert to return to Egypt where he was a wanted man. The revelation came to Moses as a call, a call to the dangerous task of leading his people out of slavery.

New Concept of Revelation

Judaism can only be considered as an evolving and growing religion; for the next time that God appears to Moses, we are told that He instructs Moses in an entirely new concept of revelation. The Bible tells us that on Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the law, the Torah, and, henceforward, it became possible for all people to discover the will of God as it is revealed in the Torah. While Moses alone spoke with God "side by side", according to the Bible, nonetheless, he passed on to the general ^{Israelite} Hebrew community all that God instructed him. Thus, every ^{Jew} Hebrew who subsequently studied the Torah and followed its laws was as if he/she too, were in direct contact with God Himself. Henceforward, in Judaism, the Torah was the vehicle through which every person could behold the burning bush personally. People no longer had to travel to distant shrines to find a holy place. The Torah itself was a universal and portable shrine, carrying the presence of God with it. Just recently, a young lady, who is in the process of converting to Judaism, came to a service here in Beth Am and asked, "Rabbi, why does the congregation show such reverence for the Ark? I notice that you rise whenever it is opened", she said, "but I do not understand the reason for your rising." I tried to explain to her that it is not the Ark we Jews revere, but the Torah itself. For according to Jewish tradition, if one honors the Torah, one honors God. I said to her, "We Jews believe that the ethical law is evidence of the reality of God".

Perhaps, we can understand the revolution in religious thought that this idea represents, if we remind ourselves that, in ancient times, each people had an Ark in which it was believed their god was contained. The Pagans would put an idol of their god into the ark and take the ark into battle. They thought that as long as their god was physically present with them, they would win the battle. Consider, now, the totally different Jewish viewpoint that God is spiritually present in our midst only when we follow His moral law; or to put it in a more dynamic way, he who acts justly towards his fellow helps to bring God, as a living presence, into the community.

You can understand, I am sure, that if the Torah was thought to be a direct revelation from God, it would be very difficult to change the laws in the Torah. This became a problem when, hundreds of years after the death of Moses, the Israelites lived under different conditions. They needed some additions to and changes in the laws. A group of scholarly specialists in the developing traditions of the people, known as the Pharisees, said, "We do not wish to change the spirit of the law, but we have to change the letter of the law in order to meet the new

nation ✓ (?)

after people

needs of the people". The ^Sscholarly heirs of the Hebrew Prophets, the Pharisees, were the compilers of the Talmud, which is a group of laws extending the teachings of the earlier Torah. They were the liberals of their time, which was 2,000 years ago. The Pharisees taught that if God could reveal His will to Moses on the Mt. Sinai, He could also reveal his will to others. The past was sacred, said the Pharisees, but not so sacred that the living needs of the people had to be neglected. The Pharisees put forward the proposition that a selected group of scholars, deeply trained in the Torah, had the right to project new laws based on the spirit of the old law. This is how the Talmud was formed, and this is how Jews came to teach that the will of God can be revealed through human reason and scholarship, the old and the new interacting.

The Hasidic View

How does God reveal himself? This is the basic question, and Jews have given new answers down through the years. The Talmud, which began as a liberal extension of the Torah, unfortunately became an instrument of stagnant conservatism in the long centuries that the Jews spent in Europe. The Rabbis who applied the rules of the Talmud to Jewish life were less liberal than the compilers of the Talmud. Many of the European Rabbis were unable to recognize that the new conditions and new times required still another change in the letter of the law. A revolt had to come, and it came in the 18th century movement that we know as Hasidism. The Hasidism of 200 years ago taught that God was revealed in the Torah and in the Talmud, but He was more sharply revealed in the living world around us. Hasidism taught that while God appeared to Moses and to Abraham, He also appears to the simplest and most ignorant individual in the present. God, thought the Hasidim, was everywhere, throughout nature and in every human being. The Hasidism held that the Jews had become too bookish, too rationalistic, and not enough emotionally oriented. One Hasidic Rabbi, speaking in their customary method of parable, taught, "There is a key which opens the lock of the gate to heaven, but God prefers that we smash the lock with one heart-felt sigh". To this Rabbi, the key that would open the gate mechanically was the Talmud. There were those Jews who would get into heaven that way, but what God really preferred was the religion of the heart, the inner feeling of love and kindness which led to good deeds.

The teachers of the Talmud, or Orthodox Jews, taught: "Study the Talmud and you will see God revealed". The Hasidim taught: "Study the Talmud, but most of all, love humankind". In love, taught the Hasidim, God is revealed to the world. The emphasis of the Talmudists was on an intellectual respect for God. The emphasis of the Hasidim was on the emotional qualities of pathos and sympathy for all living beings. The Talmudists taught that life had no mystery, because all is worked out in the Talmud. The Hasidim spoke of the unfathomable mystery of life and the infinite possibilities of seeing God in new and different ways.

It was part of the Hasidic premise that every person has a spark of the divine within him/her. Since this is so, the person who becomes aware of this spark of greatness within himself/herself, participates in a revelation. The person gets a glimpse of the divine through his better-self. Whosoever recognizes that ~~the~~ other people have a divine spark and seeks to unite his spark with theirs, thereby, participates in a revelation of the divine. The Hasidim spoke of the sanctity of each simple human act. When a mother fed her child, aware that the source of her milk was God, and aware that her child was a creature of the divine, this act of feeding became a sacred act. When a man worked at his tailor bench, aware of the contribution that he was making to the community, and performing his task with all sincerity, his work became a sacred act. When a man walked through the woods and experienced the beauty of nature, this too, was to participate in a union with the divine. For the Hasidim, the sounds and visions of God were everywhere, anywhere, for the hand of God was to be found in everything.

How to Become a Revelation Yourself

Let me tell you a story which might make clearer the subtle differences between the Hasidim and the Talmudists. On Simchat Torah, the last day of the holiday of Succot, the followers of a certain Hasidic Rabbi gathered in the synagogue to watch him dance with the Torah, for it was the custom among the Hasidim that, after the march with the Torah, the Rabbi would do a mystical dance holding the Torah in his arms. On this occasion, the Rabbi did a very strange thing, something none of the pious had ever witnessed. First, he danced with the Torah, holding it close to his heart; then, he placed the Torah down on the reading desk and continued the dance, holding nothing in his arms. All those who watched in rapt attention were confused and curious. What could the Rabbi's dance symbolize?

Finally, his closest disciple solved the riddle. "First", said the disciple, "the Rabbi has danced with the Torah, since God's will have to be learned from it. But having learned God's will, the Rabbi is now acting out the laws of the Torah, as his own developed conscience and spirit dictate". From this time on, the Hasidim taught, "Every righteous person must first learn the laws of the Torah, but, then, he has the obligation to become a Torah himself, to become, through his deeds, a symbol of the divine presence".

✓ has

Let us make the Hasidic teaching a little more concrete. The Talmudists made a point by citing a law. The Hasidim made a point by describing an event, a happening. Their vehicle of teaching was not the law, but a story of a deed preformed. Once, their tradition teaches, a Rabbi was driving his horse and wagon down a country road. The wagon was filled to overflowing with people. Ahead of them, the Rabbi noticed a weary traveler, slowly dragging one foot after another. The Rabbi stopped the wagon and invited the weary traveler aboard. "Oh, no", said the traveler, "You are already much too crowded". "Come", insisted the Rabbi, "we will love each other a little more, and there will be more than enough room for all of us". God, taught the Hasidim, is revealed in the compassion and kindness that human beings show each other.

X ✓
y

You can recognize, I am sure, that the original force of Hasidism is consistent with the teachings of Prophetic and Reform Judaism. It is possible to honor the revelations of the past without limiting the possibility of revelation in the present and future. God is to be found in the Torah, in the exalted deeds of righteous people, in the tender meeting of one human with another. He us also to be found in the complex laws which undergird our universe, for these continuing laws, binding together the atoms and the galaxies, are evidence, not only of the creation, but of present creating.

)

I do not doubt that as our scientists explore the nature of things, they will experience new revelations. Einstein found God revealed as the impenetrable planner of our extraordinary universe; the poet found God revealed "As He whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air and in the mind of man". If you are not afraid to go in search of God, you too shall experience a revelation. You, too, shall see the equivalent of the burning bush and hear a call to duty. If you search deeply enough into reality, you may someday ~~claim~~ the Torah with passion, as if it were first revealed to you, and you shall

✓ u
a

claim ?
reverse

dance with it and seek eagerly to project its teachings into new situations. If you only do not surrender the search, you will someday hear the "sermons in stones" that Shakespeare heard, and you will find "books in running brooks and tongues in trees". Someday soon, you, like the Patriarch Jacob, may lie down to sleep and dream that you see angels climbing a ladder reaching from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. You, like Jacob, may awaken to say with wonder, "Surely, God is in this very place, where I am, and I knew it not".

*A Sermon Delivered at
Temple Beth Am, Miami Florida
Rosh Hashanah, 5728. 1967*