

There is endless possible iteration what we might make of this first commandment: Genesis 20: 2-3

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּיַת עַבְדִּים: לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרָיִם עַל-פְּנֵי

I Hashem am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods before/besides/in front of Me. (it's a hard proposition to translate).

I want to get to a possible meaning tonight, but in order to get to it, I want to look at the communication – and the interpretation of that communication – that precedes revelation.

The Ten commandments begin at the beginning of Chapter 20, and all of Chapter 19 is the preparation for revelation.

Exodus 19:11-12

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל-הָעָם וְקֹדֶשְׁתָּם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֹתָם: וְהָיוּ נְכוֹנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי אֲבִיחַ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד יְהוָה לְעֵינֵי כָל-הָעָם עַל-הַר סִינַי:

and Hashem said to Moses, “Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and they should wash their clothes.” And for some reason, the translations translate *kidashtam* as “warn them to stay pure” – we’ll see why in a few verses. “Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai.”

So they should become holy; they should be sanctified in preparation for this moment. Those are the words that Hashem commands Moshe to convey to the people.

Three verses later, Moses relays to the people:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָעָם הָיוּ נְכוֹנִים לְשִׁלְשֶׁת יָמִים אֲלֵתִּגְשׁוּ אֶל-אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day:” (so far so good) “do not go near a woman.” Huh.

Let’s notice what happens here. Hashem gives an inclusive commandment: they should be holy. All of them; tell the whole people. Moshe, in his transmission of that commandment, may not even realize he’s narrowing it. He may not even realize that the words he is saying are not the words Hashem said to him. In Moshe’s own interpretive mind as prophet of Hashem, he might be very much taking for granted, “okay, they should be holy. Obviously, that means they should be pure. Obviously, that means there should be no sexual contact” – it’s a lot of extrapolation – “Obviously I am presuming that my listeners are the normative listeners that I always think are listening, which is the male Israelites – therefore: do not go near a woman.” Except all of that is probably unconscious.

The interesting thing is that even our very patriarchal commentators refuse to consider the idea that women were not included in revelation. Case in point:

Rashi: DO NOT GO NEAR A WOMAN during the whole of these three days, this was in order that the women may immerse themselves on the third day and be pure to receive the Torah. If they have relations within the three days, the woman could [involuntarily] expel semen after her immersion and become unclean again.

In Rashi’s mind, this is for the sake of the women receiving revelation. The men and the women all need to be pure, hence the commandment. He’s *sort of* solving the problem. He is retroactively inviting women into the experience of revelation, saying “this mitzvah that’s given to men isn’t saying, ‘*You* be ready, don’t go near a woman because they are inherently impure, but but because all sides of the gender line need to be pure.’” But it does render – as Torah so often does, women as invisible and absent from the audience.

Contemporary scholar Judith Plaskow talks about how painful these verse are: “Moses wants to ensure that the people are ritually prepared to receive God's

presence, and an emission of semen renders both a man and his female partner temporarily unfit to approach the sacred (see Lev. 15:16-18). But Moses did not say, "Men and women do not go near each other." Instead at this central juncture in the Jewish saga, he renders women invisible as part of the congregation about to enter into the covenant."

So she phrases these questions very poignantly:

"The whole Jewish people supposedly stood at Sinai. Were we there? Were we not there? If we were there, what did we hear when the men heard "do not go near a woman"? If we were not there originally, can we be there now? Since we are certainly part of the community now, how could we not have been there at that founding moment?"

This is not just an academic question. When I read these words, too, they have the impact on me of making me wonder if I exist, as a reader, as a listener, as part of the intended audience. And this remains a pertinent problem as we try to create revelatory experiences – inclusive revelatory experiences, no less. If we presume Rashi's commentary on Moshe's words, that he isn't presuming to exclude women from revelation; he's presuming to talk to the men about how they need to relate to the women in order that men and women can all receive revelation – and yet he does it in a way that marginalizes the very presence and idea of women – this is common. I know that I have made these linguistic mistakes myself. After we talked about this in Torah study yesterday, I received an email pointing out that one of the blessings I give marginalizes non-binary members of our community.

So thank God that we studied this, so that it would set up the conversation such I could receive that feedback!

This is so challenging. And I am so grateful, that in spite of 2000 years of patriarchal slant interpreting revelation, Torah preserves the inclusive spark at the

heart of revelation. Torah doesn't say that Hashem told Moshe to tell the people, "Don't go near a woman." Torah says Hashem told Moshe "sanctify the people," and that Moshe did an act of interpretation that changes the meaning. But the original, all-inclusive spark of revelation is preserved in the text. And the problematic of what happens when that is interpreted by yes the holiest prophet in our tradition, but a human being no less, with the biases and slant of his time – the problematics are there for us all to see and us all to wrestle with and us all to continue to learn from to this day.

As Judith Plaskow also writes, "Several lessons can be drawn from this. One is the inseparability of revelation and interpretation. There is no revelation without interpretation; the foundational experience of revelation also involves a crucial act of interpretation. Second, we learn that the process of interpretation is ongoing. What Moses does, the Rabbis in this case seek to undo. While they reiterate and reinforce the exclusion of women in many contexts, they mitigate it in others. Third, insofar as the task of interpretation is continuing, it now lies with us.

What a fabulous introduction to revelation! To the standing at Sinai together, those of us who are named as part of the group; those of us who have been invisibilized, all of us ongoing receiving Torah, to get to this moment:

"I Hashem am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me.."

Don't be mistaken: you are not Me. And your interpretation of revelation will always be limited. Come back to *this* if you are confused about what it is that we worship, if you are confused about what we call "God." It is going to be that which frees us, that makes us more whole, that invites us to stand, all together, in sanctification.