

We've been counting for 48 days, since the second night of Pesach, towards the moment of revelation. Tomorrow night and the next day, at the holiday of Shavuot, we gather to receive revelation again. Arguably, whether or not we even choose to join the community in studying Torah or hearing the revelation read, we are still there, as according to Midrash Tanchuma, when the Israelites asked to receive Torah, Hashem demanded a surety that we would fulfill it. Ultimately, the Israelites persuaded Hashem to entrust Torah to us by promising, "Our children shall be our guarantors."

We recollect that moment in the Sinai wilderness – and Alex will discuss tomorrow why Torah was given in the wilderness, rather than in the land of Israel, or in a Temple anywhere. And we join with hundreds of generations of our ancestors before us to face the holy fire in all its beauty and terror.

And it really is terrifying. In Exodus 20, verses 15 and 16, with the echoes of the 10 Commandments still ringing in our ears, it is written: "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.

"You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, פן נמות, lest we die." Whatever else the people understood at Sinai, they understood that there was some very raw, powerful and potentially dangerous force at work very near them, and they'd rather have it mediated by someone who knew how to handle it.

We witness that same approach to the sacred in this week's Torah portion, Bamidbar. While the parasha is largely concerned with a census, first of the whole Israelite community and then of the Levites in particular, it also deals with instructions for the set-up and take down of the *mishkan*, the holy portable sanctuary, moved through the encampments, and the specific role of the Levites, the tribe that was instructed to deal with the construction and carrying of the different pieces.

Not one or two but three times in this portion, in the instructions about the mishkan, are we warned, “הזר הקרב יומת” – literally, “an outsider who approaches will die.” But “outsider” here doesn’t mean stranger, just as in Leviticus 10, when Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu brought אש זרה – “strange fire” (and died) the fire wasn’t actually strange. זר here clearly means, “unauthorized,” as in “someone who is not properly trained for this task.

The final verse of the Torah portion even warns that if a member of the Kohath clan of the Levites sees a part of the mishkan being dismantled that they are not supposed to see, then they will surely die. Boom. End of portion.

So, the mishkan, the physical manifestation of God’s presence in the Israelite encampment, clearly carries some risks. And the Levite’s job seems as much to protect the Israelites from the volatile forces of the mishkan, as it is to take care of the mishkan itself. Participants in Torah study yesterday were understandably upset about a vision of a God who is so persnickety about how people touch Her things that He erupts violently and kills whoever does it wrong. And yes, that is upsetting – if we think of God as a big, powerful Someone, parental or coercive, obsessed with our behavior. But there is another way of thinking about this.

If you’ve ever contemplated a fire, you’ve probably felt in awe of the beauty and complexity of the flames, as well as grateful for the warmth and heat. But perhaps you’ve gotten burned, too. And when you get burned, it is not because the fire is angry with you for behaving “badly.” It is because fire is powerful and we need to try to be careful with it.

There are mysteries in this universe that remain mysteries no matter how much we scientifically can explain.

As Rabbi Toba Spitzer, a Reconstructionist colleague and author of the recently published, *God is here: Reimagining the Divine*, writes, “Human experience of the sacred – that is, a sense of connection to Something beyond our immediate, mundane lives and a desire to interact with that Something – seems to be as old as humanity itself.”

She points out that in TaNaKh, God is described “as life-giving water, as devouring and refining fire, as a rock, as light. Our biblical ancestors employed a breathtaking palette of metaphors to describe their experiences of the sacred. . .” This includes experiences that are frightening. The mystery of a lightning storm. Of standing at the edge of a cliff. Of being in the room when a loved one dies. There is a need to move carefully in any of these spaces. There is *yirah* - awe and fear all rolled together. If humans tend to feel most “spiritual” in those moments that remind us of our smallness, of our vulnerability, is it any wonder that our ancestors assumed that when they encountered the Divine, it would be risky business?

It would be comfortable to take one attribute that we admire or to which we aspire and call that the sum total of God: God is love. God is connection. God is Peace. And I believe those things, for sure. But I do not believe that God is *only* those. There is a cost to sanitizing the sacred, to saying that God is just love, or just peace. If we do that, then we risk cutting ourselves off from the idea of divine connections in those moments when are furthest from love, or peace or connection. Our tradition warns against limiting the sacred from the very moment that Hashem reintroduces Herself to the Israelite people, after they have almost forgotten Him during their sojourn in Egypt. Moshe asks at the burning bush (another terrifying experience)¹, “When the Israelites ask me, “What is God’s name?” what shall I say to them?” Hashem replies, “tell them Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh,” “I will be what I will be.” As Rabbi Yael Levy teaches, this name means, “I am always becoming.” “I am always in motion. Do not try to freeze me in one posture.”

Revelatory experiences demand that we, like God, change. Even when we survive them, the experience of birth, of being in the room with death, of encountering lightening, or the ocean, leave us transformed. Even the experience of truly praying can transform us. And perhaps that is the internalized version of the risk that our portion describes: that of being transformed; of having to change.

¹ See Exodus 3:6

So whatever we believe, and however we experience revelation, I hope that this Shavuot, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to all in the universe that is beyond our control. May we be willing to embrace whatever the reality is of how we each personally experience the sacred. May we take the risk of seeking truths that will transform us, and may we remember that no matter how frightened we may be, we are not alone.