

TORAHSCOPE: Yitro (Jethro)

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Exodus 18:1-20:23[26]
Ezekiel 28:25-29:21

“Shema Yisrael”

“Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin’ (Exodus 20:20).

When one thinks about *Yitro*, the most remembered aspect is undoubtedly the giving of the Ten Commandments by God from Mount Sinai. Here at the bottom of Mount Sinai, the people of Israel actually hear the voice of the Lord. One would think that this would be a blessed event, but from the reaction recorded, you can read that the people were absolutely terrified by the Voice:

“All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.’ So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God *was*. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven”’ (Exodus 20:18-22).

Prior to this time since the Exodus from Egypt, the Lord had chosen to communicate to Israel through His intermediary Moses. For the most part, the Israelites were quite content with this means of communication. After all, a considerable amount of the information that came to them from Moses was actually very encouraging. Consider some earlier statements from Moses just prior to the declaration of the Ten Commandments:

““Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.’ So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do!’ And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD” (Exodus 19:5-8).

Here, the Lord communicates a fairly simple if/then formula for Israel to become a holy nation of priests. On the surface, this statement sounded very hopeful to them:

“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel” (Exodus 19:5-6).

Consider the fact that the Israelites had just witnessed a great deliverance from the Egyptians and had only been in the desert several months. The Lord was fighting their battles. Their basic daily nourishment was provided for by the morning arrival of manna. They were probably feeling pretty confident about their relationship to the Lord. Without much hesitation, they responded to the proposal with these affirming words:

“All the people answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do!’ And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD” (Exodus 19:8).

Remarkably, the Scriptures record that *all* of the people agreed to do *all* that the Lord had spoken. This was apparently a sincere response. But little did the Israelites understand the magnitude of their commitment. At this point in the narrative, Moses reports their response to the Lord. But as you can imagine, He is already putting in motion a monumental event that will test the hearts of Israel and ascertain whether they can honor their pledge of obedience:

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever.’ Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD” (Exodus 19:9).

Apparently, the Lord is going to accomplish two objectives by letting His people hear His voice. First, He is going to let them understand more about His holiness and how they must consecrate themselves in order to even hear the voice. Secondly, He is going to solidify Moses’ position as their intermediary. Moses comes back to the people and begins giving them instructions on how to consecrate themselves, before the Holy One speaks to them. A period of separation commences as physical actions start preparing Israel for hearing the voice of the Lord:

“The LORD also said to Moses, ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, “Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death”...So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. He said to the people, ‘Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman”’ (Exodus 19:10-12, 14-15).

The people begin to prepare for hearing the voice of God. Looming in the distance was a dark cloud over Mount Sinai. The people could see, and maybe even feel, the presence of the Lord. They began to cleanse themselves and did not have sexual relations for several days. Limits were set around the base of the mountain. People were told not to touch it for fear of death. Each of these actions was preparing Israel for a profound event. By performing these physical actions, their hearts were being focused on the opportunity to hear the actual voice of the Most High.

On the morning of the third day, there was thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, and the blast of a piercing *shofar*. The moment for God to speak was approaching:

“Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder” (Exodus 19:18-19).

It is difficult to imagine how frightening this must have been for the Ancient Israelites. The noise of the *shofar* was increasing in intensity. The top of Mount Sinai was engulfed in fire and smoke. As they stood there, the whole mountain shook violently. The people thought they were going to die. After all, it had been much easier to listen to the statements of the Lord when Moses came back and reported his conversations with Him. At this juncture, Israel was fully engaged in hearing the actual voice of God—and then the Lord declares the Ten Commandments. **Can you imagine how petrified the people were when these commands came forth?** The intensity of the fear is recorded after the commands are declared:

“All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin”’ (Exodus 20:18-20).

With fear and trepidation the people immediately wanted to go back to the former way of communing with the Most High. Apparently, the voice of God was so powerful that the people believed they were going to die. Even after they were consecrated before the Holy One, the Israelites were convinced that they would rather have Moses as their mediator. **The fear was that intense!**

Interestingly, Moses immediately tells the Israelites that the Lord is using this event to **test** them, and to put a holy fear in them so that they would not sin. Apparently, this is how serious God is about His people not sinning. **Let us remember, He has not changed!**

How about today? Is there something we should be learning from the exploits of the Ancient Israelites? How should we be approaching the voice of the Holy One of Israel?

The author of Hebrews brings out a different response that we should exercise when we hear the voice of the Most High. Here the admonition is to not let our hearts be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin:

“Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS, WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED *Me* BY TESTING *Me*, AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS. THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION, AND SAID, ‘THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART, AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS’; AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, “THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.”’ Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Messiah, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, while it is said, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.’ For who provoked *Him* when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt *led* by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? *So* we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief’ (Hebrews 3:7-19).

In this passage, the author of Hebrews reminds the readers that the generation that came out of Egypt hardened their hearts instead of listening to God’s voice. By hardening their hearts, they did not know the ways of the Lord. In fact, because of their disobedience to His commandments, they were not allowed to enter into the rest of the Promised Land because of their unbelief.

We need to remember that according to the words of Yeshua Himself, the ability to hear the voice of the Holy One is now a critical component in communion with Him. Today, in this post-Resurrection period, we have a unique privilege of hearing the voice of the Most High. Instead of seeking others to listen for us, we should be listening for the voice of the Holy One. Remember that our Heavenly Father has sent His Son Yeshua to be the good shepherd over His people:

“I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd...My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:14-16, 27-28).

We know that in this passage Yeshua called Himself the “good shepherd,” and His flock were the people who would hear His voice. Are you part of that flock? Are you hearing His voice and obeying Him? If you are, then you can be comforted by your desire to please Him. But if you are not hearing His voice and not obeying Him, perhaps you need to cry out to Him for mercy. As the author of Hebrews reminds us concerning this encounter at Mount Sinai, there is a different mountain that we should be approaching:

“For you have not come to *a mountain* that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which *sound was such that* those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, ‘IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED.’ And so terrible was the sight, *that* Moses said, ‘I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling.’ But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and [congregation] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect, and to Yeshua, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the blood* of

Abel. See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned *them* on earth, much less *will* we *escape* who turn away from Him who *warns* from heaven” (Hebrews 12:18-25).

Here, the warning is to seek Yeshua as the Mediator of the New Covenant. We are reminded that we should not refuse this voice. If so, the consequences for Believers today are the same as those from the Exodus generation: **You will not enter His rest!** So without any hesitation, dear brethren, remember: hear and obey. *Shema Yisrael!*

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