

We act as though the word went out once and froze, that revelation was a one time event many thousands of years ago, but wasn't.

The Mishnah in Pirke Avot (6:2) tells us: "Every day a voice goes out from Mt. Horeb and announces...."

Every day - in the present tense....

You heard the voice of God at Sinai and that voice continues to speak. Are you listening? Are you responding to what you hear?

Another midrash:

Come and see how the voice went forth to all of Israel, to each and every one in keeping with his or her particular capacity! Children heard it in keeping with their capacity; suckling babes according to theirs. Women heard it according to their own capacities. Moses, too, heard it the voice as befit his own capacity. That is the meaning of: "God answered in with a voice" – with that voice which Moses was able to withstand. Thus it says: "The voice of God in strength" (Ps. 29) – not "in *God's* strength" – but according to the strength of each one of the Israelites. Pregnant women heard it in their own way....

Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina said: If you are astounded at such an assertion, then draw the relevant inference from the manna, which came down for Israel varying in taste, in keeping with each Israelite's particular need – to young men it tasted like bread, to the elderly it tasted like wafers made with honey, to sucklings it tasted like fine flour mingled with honey, while for the heathen it tasted as bitter as linseed. Now, if the manna, which was all of the same kind, changed into so many kinds to provide for the particular need of each individual, was it not possible for the Voice, in which there is much divine strength, to vary according to the capacity of each individual? (Exodus Rabbah 5:9)

Everyone heard the voice according to their own capacity. Even Moshe. The Torah placed before us by Moshe (as we sing each time we raise the Torah) reflects his capacity.

The midrash offers categories of people - pregnant women, old men, etc. Each group has a shared experience that enables them to hear different aspects of revelation. Their response to shared experience may not be the same, but the wisdom that comes from that experience may teach all of us.

This can be compared to the Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant - each describes the elephant through that which is in front of him. In the words of American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887):

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,

At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, "Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?

To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"

"So this is all very nice," you may be saying, "but what do we do with the explicit prohibition in the Torah?"

We are not the first generation to struggle with and even be offended by a text.

In Deuteronomy (21: 18-21), we are told:

g@Sht Qul, t UShuNt kleUct kleCgm d UBY vAnUrMx iCJHk vShF
UStuf :IneS rgD tUrhg hSz kt l, t UhmvNt uct Ic Gp; wyh:ovkE
Irgh hE kF UheSut f :t xukklz UkeCgm d UBY vAnUrMx vUUC Irgh hSz kt
:Urhg hSz hKf vShkfuWSEh grv TsgcU, #uohcEc

When a man has a rebellious and disobedient son, who doesn't listen to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother and that, when they chasten him, he does not listen to them - his father and mother will lay hold of him and take him to the elders of the city at the gate of his place. And they say to the elders of the city - this son of ours is rebellious and disobedient and will not listen to our voices, he is a glutton and a drunkard. And all the people of his city will stone him until he dies, so that you shall put the evil away from among you and all Israel shall hear and be afraid.

How many of you have kids work with kids, or were kids that are, at times, rebellious or disobedient? I think the rabbis did too. Because look at how they interpret this text. This is from the Mishna, (Sanhedrin 8:1-4), written down about 1800 years ago.

They begin by asking a question:

A rebellious and disobedient son - when does he *become* a rebellious and disobedient son? From the age when he can produce two hairs but before he grows a beard....

And then they quote:

When a man has a son - this means a son and not a daughter, a son and not a man, and a minor is exempt since he has not as yet entered into the general scope of the commandments.

And another:

When is the rebellious and disobedient son *liable*?

When he eats a *tartemar* of flesh and drinks a half a *log* of Italian wine.

Rabbi Yosi says: No - a *maneh* of flesh and a log of wine.

They go on: If he consumed it at a religious gathering, if he consumed it at the intercalation of the month, if he consumed it as a second tithe in Jerusalem, if he ate

carrion or torn flesh or the flesh of unclean animals or creeping things, etc., etc., if he consumed any food but did not consume flesh, if he drank any liquid but did not drink wine, he has *not* become a rebellious and disobedient son, unless he both *consumes* flesh and *drinks* wine, as it is said, a glutton *and* a drunkard....

If he stole from his father and consumed it in his father's place, etc. etc., he does not become a rebellious and disobedient son *unless* he steals from his father and consumes it in others' place.

Rabbi Yosi the son of Rabbi Yehuda says, Only if he steals *both* from his father *and* from his mother.

If his father were willing to bring him to the court for judgement, but his mother was not willing, or if his father were not willing, but his mother was willing, he does not become a rebellious and disobedient son unless both were willing.

Rabbi Yehuda says, If parents don't look and sound alike, he does not become a rebellious and disobedient son.

If either of them had a maimed hand, or was lamed, or mute, or blind, or deaf, he does not become a rebellious and disobedient son – because without hands they cannot “lay hold of him” and if they were mute they cannot say to the elders: “he will not listen to our voices.”

From all this, you can see that the rabbis were not anxious to see any teenagers stoned. In fact, in the Talmud, where these mishnayot are elaborated (Bavli Sanhedrin 71a), Rabbi Shimon says about the $\text{V} \text{R} \text{U} \text{N} \text{U} \text{R} \text{R} \text{U} \text{K} \text{ } \dot{\text{I}} \text{C}$ - the rebellious and disobedient son: “, $\text{U} \text{V} \text{K} \text{ S} \text{H} \text{ } \text{G} \text{ } \text{T} \text{K} \text{U} \text{V} \text{H} \text{ } \text{T} \text{K}$ ” – “there never was one and there never will be in the future.”

The rabbis defined the rebellious and disobedient son out of existence.

But they didn't eliminate the text. And we do not eliminate texts that make us uncomfortable, even if they are, as Phyllis Trible, the preeminent Protestant feminist bible scholar, called them in a series of lectures she gave at Yale in the '80's “texts of terror.” Perhaps because they have been texts of terror, and still play this role, we should not forget them.

You might say, “But hey, who are we to interpret the text? We're not scholars like the Sages.” Well with due respect to those in this congregation who are scholars like the sages, or more so – since they've mastered many years' more worth of texts, it is *not chutzpadik* to interpret the text, to read it and discover new meanings. To seek it's relevance for ourselves, our community, our children, our world. It's not *chutzpadik*; it's our responsibility.

Remember, the midrash says: ***The scholars who arise in every generation, each one of them received their teaching from Sinai.***

If we ignore the revelation we received – that we receive every day – we fail to bring Torah into the world. In order for it to be, as we call it – an Olam Chaim – a tree of life – we must water and feed and care for that tree so that it will continually bring forth new growth.

So here goes. Let's look at our text:

וְאִם אִישׁ יִשְׁכַּב עִם אִישׁ כְּשִׁכְּבָת אִשָּׁה, כָּל אֶחָד יָמוּת וְדָמָם עָלָיו, כִּי עָשָׂה אֲבֹמָה.
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And a man shall not lie with a man as with a woman, it is an abomination.
And a man who lies with a man as with a woman, they have done an abominable thing,
they will both surely die and their blood is upon them. (Lev. 18:20, 20:13)

As we know, these texts have been used and are being used, to exclude, oppress, and even kill gay men – and lesbians as well, although the text makes no mention of them.

Hertz (or as we call it here at BEKI, the blue Hertz *humash*) comments that “with a man” indicates that the text “Disclosed the abyss of depravity from which the Torah saved the Israelite. This unnatural vice was prevalent in Greece and Rome.”

Perhaps there is another way to understand this text?

We might begin by examining the words: וְאִם אִישׁ יִשְׁכַּב עִם אִישׁ – “as one lies with a woman.”

What might this mean - to lie with a man as one lies with a woman?

Perhaps we read that when one is lying with a man, one must not pretend that one is not doing so. One must face facts, despite fear and communal disapproval.

Maybe you've seen the t-shirt that reads: I'm not gay but my boyfriend is. I'm not a lesbian but my girlfriend is.

They're meant tongue in cheek, but have a grain of truth. There are many, many people who, for fear of repercussion, from internalizing what we hear on the news every day (this week's attempt to create a Federal Marriage Amendment being a prime example), are unable to be honest with themselves or others about the truth of their lives and loves.

This is a text about honesty.

Remember, at one time, the language of “coming out of the closet” referred to something that gay people did. Now it's a generic term for being open about something that might be hard depending on context - a Google search turned up coming out as Canadian, as a cancer-survivor, as a neo-con, as an atheist.

So this is the meaning of the text: be honest with yourself in all that you do. Lying with a man as with a woman is a metaphor for lying to yourself, (perhaps the English resonance of lying is

not coincidental!), for not facing the truth of your life and sharing it with others. If we are not honest with ourselves, we cannot be present to ourselves, to each other, to revelation.

Many gay people have successfully integrated, or at least have had a fruitful struggle with this teaching. To my mind, it's no coincidence that there are a disproportionate number of gay clergy. Half of my ordination class was gay or lesbian. The process of coming out of the closet, the work we've done to become whole and unashamedly ourselves is deeply spiritual.

Perhaps this is the Torah that gay men and lesbians have heard and give the world – the lesson that we all, gay or not, must be honest about our lives. And it's a lesson that is useful for all of us.

The weekday morning liturgy affirms this biblical instruction and includes this powerful statement about honesty:

אדם, נתיב רצונו, נתיב קדושתו- חכמתו, יצא חמתו ורשיתו ויחזק

A person should always be in awe of Heaven in private and in public, and admit the truth and speak truth in one's heart.

We recite this line before we recite the Shema, that powerful affirmation of the oneness of God and the interconnection of all things and our role in manifesting the Divine. We cannot make any such affirmation, and certainly not any such manifestation, in a state other than truth. What is the truth of your heart?

In the words of Albin, singing at La Cage aux Folles: “There's one life and there's no return and no deposit, one life so it's time to open up your closet. Life's not worth a damn 'til you can say, 'Hey world, I am what I am!'”

Echoing, perhaps, God's words to Moses at the bush: “I will be what I will be.”

The rebbe of my favorite Hasidic story essentially said the same thing – maybe Jerry Herman was channeling him! Reb Zushya was on his deathbed, surrounded by students, when he suddenly became fearful and began to cry out. His students said to him: “Reb Zushya, what are you afraid of? You were like Moshe!” Reb Zushya responded, “The Holy One, blessed be God, will not ask me, ‘was I like Moshe.’ He will ask me, ‘was I Zushya.’”

If we are not ourselves, we deprive the community, our children, the world, of that bit of Torah that was revealed to us, to our own souls – that others didn't hear. Torah, the Divine sharing of God's self, of God's love — אדם וצדק וצדק — with a great love You have loved us — has been placed into our hands. Into our very selves – in the language of Deuteronomy, “The thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it” (30:14). So I ask of you, of us all, that we do it, that we seek our truths, open to the Torah in our hearts, and share it with each other.

Shabbat shalom and Happy Pride.

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