

PARASHAT YITRO



בכח ובהדר

With Power, With Majesty

■ The Calm After the Storm

The weekly Torah portion of Yitro describes the formative, historic and commanding Stand at Mount Sinai, at which G-d gave the Torah to the children of Israel. The account begins as follows:

...וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל הָהָר

וְקַל שֹׁפָר חֲזָק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרְדּוּ כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בְּמַחֲנֵה. וְהָר סִינַי עָשָׂן כָּלוּ...

... there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very powerful shofar blast; the entire nation in the camp shuddered. The entire Mount Sinai was aflame... (Sh'mot 19,16-18)

The picture is filled out in the beginning of the Book of Deuteronomy: *"The mountain was burning in fire to the heart of the skies - darkness, cloud and fog"* (D'varim 4,11). Quite understandably, Bnei Yisrael reacted to this extraordinarily powerful scene with fear and recoiling: *"The people saw and trembled, and they stood from afar."* (Sh'mot 20,15)

Surprisingly, our Sages present a totally different picture of the events at Mt. Sinai:

R. Avahu said in the name of R. Yochanan: When G-d gave Israel the Torah, not a bird chirped, not an ox bellowed, not an angel flew, the seraphim did not say "Holy, Holy, Holy," the ocean did not make

waves, not a creature spoke; the entire world was still and silent. The Divine voice then went forth [saying the Ten Commandments]: *“I am Hashem your G-d.”* (Medrash Sh’mot Rabba 29,9)

R. Yochanan’s point is clear: The entire world had to be paralyzed and silenced, leaving the voice of G-d to stand out alone – clear, true and unmistakably Divine amidst the noise. But two important questions arise:

1. The Torah describes stormy, loud cacophony. How can this be reconciled with the scene R. Yochanan depicts?
2. Did the first commandment, beginning with the words *“I am Hashem your G-d,”* truly mar the world’s stillness? Or were the quiet and G-d’s voice able to co-exist?

To truly comprehend the depths of our Sages’ teachings, let us turn to the Prophet Eliyahu and accompany him on his trip to Mt. Horev, also known as Sinai. G-d told him to stand at the mountain and G-d would pass before him. Eliyahu waited:

וְרוּחַ גְּדוֹלָה וְחֶזֶק מִפְּרִק הָרִים וּמִשִּׁבְר סְלָעִים לִפְנֵי ה', לֹא בְרוּחַ ה'.

A great and strong wind splitting mountains and shattering boulders [came] before G-d, but G-d was not in the wind.

וְאַחַר הָרוּחַ רָעַשׁ, לֹא בְרָעַשׁ ה'. וְאַחַר הָרָעַשׁ אֵשׁ, לֹא בְאֵשׁ ה'.

And after the wind an earthquake – the G-d was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came fire – G-d was not in the fire. (Kings I 19,11-12)

This description makes it clear that the thunder and lightning, the fire, the quakes and clouds – they are all merely an introduction to G-d’s appearance. G-d is revealed in a *“small, still sound,”* as the passage next tells us. When Eliyahu heard it, *“he wrapped his face in his cloak, and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave; a voice came to him and said: “What are you doing here, Eliyahu?”* (verses 12-13)

What was the purpose of this stormy, thunderous introduction? It was a type of test, to see if the prophet can withstand the pressures of the Divine mission. The prophet will be under tremendous pressure vis-à-vis the entire nation, and he must pass a strong “stress test” in the face of the tremendous forces of nature that he sees in his vision.

What happened at Mt. Carmel teaches us about Mt. Sinai as well. The dramatic Giving of the Torah also began with thunder and lightning, and

with fire and shofar blasts – all as a prelude to the real thing, which must be accompanied by quiet. There was quiet after the thunder on Mt. Carmel, and the same occurred at Mt. Sinai, when the thunder was followed by nothing other than G-d's words. Our first question is thus answered: There was both - first loud cacophony, followed by silence and the word of G-d.

We turn now to the second question. Was the Voice of G-d heard, marring the world's stillness – or was it some other kind of voice? The answer is provided in the next passage of the above-quoted Medrash, which cites another descriptive phrase of the Stand at Mt. Sinai:

קוֹל גְּדוֹל וְלֹא יִסָּף – ***“These words G-d spoke in a great voice that did not add.”*** R. Shimon ben Lakish explained: **“When a man calls his friend, his voice has an echo – but this Divine voice did not have an echo; nothing was added to it.”**

It is known that an echo is caused when sound waves hit a barrier or obstacle, and then bounce backwards. But G-d's voice penetrates all, no barrier can block it, and its waves therefore do not bounce back. The Divine voice produces no echo.

On a deeper level, let us note that G-d's voice is not an external sound whose waves reach the human ear drum for interpretation. It is rather a prophetic voice reverberating up from the depths of human awareness, like a voice heard in a dream. This important inner voice - G-d's voice - does not mar the external silence. True, those who “hear” it react with trembling and fear – but it is not physical, it has no echo, and does not take the place of the silence.

Thus, the Ten Commandments did not mar the external silence.

■ **The Song of Creation**

The date of the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai was the 6th day of the spring month of Sivan – typically a day of bright sunshine and blossoming flowers, a time of golden yellow wheat fields filling the valleys and flowing in the breeze. But this pastoral picture does not seem to match the Bible's “weather report” for that day, given both in Psalms and in the Song of Deborah in the Book of Judges. King David writes:

אֲ-לֹהִים! בְּצִאתְךָ לִפְנֵי עַמֶּךָ בְּצַעֲדְךָ בְּיִשְׁמֹון סָלָה. אֶרֶץ רָעָשָׁה אֶף שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ...
O G-d! When You went out before Your nation, as You marched in Yeshimon; the earth quaked, the heavens gushed... (Tehillim 68,8)

And Deborah the Prophetess chants the continuation:

גַּם עֲבִים נָטְפוּ מַיִם. הָרִים נָזְלוּ מִפְּנֵי ה', זֶה סִינַי, מִפְּנֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

*Clouds, too, dripped with water; mountains seeped water before Hashem
– this is Sinai, before the G-d of Israel.* (Shoftim 5,4-5)

What should have been a beautiful spring day has turned rainy and stormy. What does this tell us? Let us look carefully at one of the most beautiful chapters of Psalms, Psalm 65, which begins with a directive to remain silent: “*Silence is praise to You, O God in Zion.*” One must be silent so that he might hear carefully the wondrous song of praise that erupts from every corner of Creation. This happens during the spring and summer, when the world sings and offers praise in its own way, by the very fact of it having been created.

This chapter expresses in song the cycle of the year. It begins with man and his High Holiday prayers, continues with the rainy and stormy winter, and proceeds to the flowering spring, accompanied by our silence – and the cycle then begins anew.

The Psalm describes the late-summer month of Elul: “*You Who hears prayer, all mortals will come to You. Sins prevail against me; You will atone our transgressions*” (65, 3-4). Man’s appearance before G-d on the High Holy Days is accompanied by prayer – the prayer of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, when man stands before Him, asks forgiveness, and begs atonement for his sins. He wishes to become clean and pure, and thus join all of Creation in its song of praise to Hashem.

This unique Psalm then takes us to the winter month of Tevet: “*He stills the noise of the seas and the roaring of their waves... Those who live at the far ends fear Your signs... The river of G-d is full of water*” (verses 8-10). This is a description of winter bursting forth with great power: The noise of the great waves and angry sea winds, and His heavenly signs – thunder and lightning – bring fear upon the residents of the earth; He brings powerful rains to fill the riverbeds and split off into flooding streams.

But these tremendous forces are brought to a halt with the arrival of the spring and summer, as described in the end of this chapter: “*The pastures of the wilderness drop moisture, and the hills will be adorned with gladness.*” The pastures will bring forth their produce, and the hills around will be overtaken with song and joy, like a belt (from the same root, חָגַר, as *adorned*) around one’s waist. “*The meadows are clothed with flocks, the*

valleys are enwrapped with grain, they shout for joy and sing” (verse 14). The sheep will be covered with fluffy wool, the valleys will be filled with breezy wheat fields whose stalks flow in tandem from side to side as good friends; their silent song shall be “heard” from a distance.

In the springtime, as depicted here, G-d speaks to us from within the beauty and glory of nature, which shines its face upon man and exudes upon him an ambience of magic and wonder. This then leads, once again, into the period of “*Silence is Your praise*” (verse 2) – quiet and attention to the song of creation.

■ The Hidden Energies

The Stand at Mount Sinai enwraps within it all three of the components of the above Psalm:

1. **Time:** The month of Sivan, springtime.
2. **Climate:** Powerful natural forces bursting forth with great energy as during the winter.
3. **Man:** The Children of Israel standing at the foot of the mountain with trembling and awe, waiting to receive the Torah.

This leaves us with an enigma: To where do all of the winter’s energies disappear? All the wind, rain, snow, lightning and thunder – what happens afterwards to all this tremendous energy?

The answer is linked to a famous law of nature known as the Law of Conservation of Energy. It states that the total amount of energy and mass in an object or system remains constant over time; the energy is neither formed nor destroyed, and can only be transformed from one state to another.

It appears that all the energy of winter is concealed in seeds in the ground, which then flower in the quiet, pleasant springtime. The winter is swallowed up by the springtime, and the winter energy is absorbed in its wondrous “new” mass.

Einstein’s theory of relativity tells us that tremendous energy is found inside every particle of mass: The amount of energy (E) there is equal to mc^2 , that is, the object’s mass multiplied by the square of the speed of light (some 300,000 kilometers per second). Mass, then, equals Energy divided by the square of the speed of light. For instance, the amount of energy that can be

produced from one kilogram of uranium, which has an exceedingly high atomic weight, is equal to the energy produced from two million kilograms of coal (!). The world experienced this quite potently at the end of World War Two in the form of two atomic bombs over Japanese cities, when several hundred grams of uranium exploded with the force of 20,000 tons of dynamite.

■ The Power and Glory

קול ה' בַּנְחַ קול ה' בְּהִדְרָה.

G-d's voice is powerful, G-d's voice is full of majesty. (Psalms 29,4)

This verse is taken from another most beautiful chapter of Tehillim, one that we recite every Sabbath. The powerful sounds at Sinai, and the lightning, thunder, and fire – this is קול ה' בַּנְחַ, *G-d's voice is powerful*. On the other hand, the total silence that followed right afterwards is an expression of קול ה' בְּהִדְרָה, *G-d's voice is full of majesty*. The majesty in nature and all of Creation conceals the tremendous energy hidden deep within it. Similarly, the majesty and glory of the Ten Commandments cover up the infinite Divine light revealed to the world through them.

The voice of the Creator of the World was heard by an entire nation just once in history – at Mt. Sinai. The Nation of Israel exists, for all generations, by virtue of this sublime event, up to this very day.

Let us analyze this Psalm 29 more in depth. It begins as follows:

מְזַמֵּר לְדָוִד ... הָבוּ לַה' כְּבוֹד וְעֹז, הָבוּ לַה' כְּבוֹד שְׁמוֹ ...

... Ascribe to G-d glory and strength, give G-d the glory due His name...

This means: “Believe with all your hearts that the source of strength and power is G-d – and as a result, give honor to G-d’s name.” We then skip to the end of the Psalm:

ה' עֹז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן, ה' יְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם.

*May G-d give strength to His nation,
may G-d bless His nation with peace.* (verse 11)

Our Sages taught us that Hashem’s name is *Shalom*, “peace.” This is derived from the verse, “*Gideon called the altar ‘Hashem Shalom’*” (Judges 6,24). This means that the light of G-d found within physical material is that which perfectly unites all the infinite components that comprise our world.

In other words: If we ascribe to G-d the source of honor and strength, as we saw in the first verse, then Hashem will honor us with the very same esteem that we give Him. In the merit of our belief and trust that He is the source of all strength and peace, Hashem will repay us by granting us parallel might and serenity. He will give us power and will bless us with peace and true unity.

This combination of strength-peace is the result of the power-majesty interplay. As we explained above, the majesty of creation contains within its atoms tremendous amounts of power, like those released in an atomic explosion. This means that within “peace” lies an incredible power, released during wartime. This is why to achieve peace, we must have strength: First, **“G-d will give strength to His nation,” and via this, “G-d will bless His nation with peace.”**

Returning to Psalm 29, we will note that there is a series of verses, all with the same structure, describing “power and majesty.” They mention seven “voices,” and the Sages correspondingly instituted seven blessings in our Sabbath *Sh'moneh Esreh* (B'rachot 29a). The verses are these (3-9):

<i>The Voice of G-d is upon the waters,</i>	קול ה' על המים,
<i>the Lord of honor thundered;</i>	אל הכבוד הרעים,
<i>G-d rules over many waters.</i>	ה' על מים רבים.

<i>The Voice of G-d is powerful</i>	קול ה' בכח
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<i>The Voice of G-d is in majesty.</i>	קול ה' בקדר.
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<i>The Voice of G-d breaks cedars...</i>	קול ה' שבר ארזים...
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<i>The Voice of G-d</i>	קול ה'
<i>strikes flames of fires.</i>	חצב להבות אש.

<i>The Voice of G-d shakes the wilderness...</i>	קול ה' יחיל מדבר...
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<i>The Voice of G-d makes hinds calve...</i>	קול ה' יחולל אילות...
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In total, there are six Voices of power, and one lone Voice (the third one above) replete with royal splendor. These numbers parallel the days of the week: Six days of hard work, followed by one day of Sabbath, about which is written in this same Psalm: **“And in His sanctuary, all says Glory to G-d”** (verse 9) – silence and communion with the Divine light.

■ Trembling of Sanctity

The theme outlined here, uniting strength and glory, or power and beauty, finds its expression in the following Talmudic passage. We know that one must not begin praying if he is not in a concentrated and serious state of mind. Seeking a source for this law, the Gemara (B'rachot 30b) cites the following verse:

...הַשְּׁתַחֲוּוּ לֵה' בְּהִדְרַת קֹדֶשׁ.

... *Bow to G-d in the beauty of holiness.* (Psalms 29,2)

What connection does the Gemara see between this verse and serious-minded praying? The Sages continue: “Do not pronounce the word for ‘beauty’ as הִדְרַת, *hadrat*, but rather say הֶרְדַּת, *herdat*, which implies trembling and severity.” Thus, we are to pray and bow to G-d only amidst great seriousness.

Very strange. It’s true that the two words are somewhat similar, and that the letters *heh* and *het* are similar in both form and pronunciation. But how can this justify switching around not only letters, but also the entire meaning of the word?!

In light of what we have learned above, we know that these words of Chazal actually represent the true depth of the meaning of this Psalm. It is entirely one of linkage between the power (חִדְדָה, *haradah*) and beauty/honor (הִדָּר, *hadar*), between the powerful inner world and the majestic outer world.

We see this clearly in the physical world: Within the heart of our planet Earth bubbles fiery, boiling lava. Volcanoes around the world periodically spurt forth millions of tons of this flaming rock and ash. Yet despite this, the face of the Earth is quiet and calm.

Man, too, appears generally quiet on the outside, even though within him, intense feelings of ardor, jealousy and other emotions rage, sometimes uncontrollably. Well did the Sages describe the combination of the world’s inner turmoil and its external calm by saying, “The entire world is like a pot cover of Gehinom.” (P’sachim 94a)

