

Shavuot 5776

Mountain Marriage - Shaky Start: The rabbis compare Matan Torah to a marriage between G-d and Israel; but you would not want to take the wedding analogy too literally. According to the account we read on the first day of Shavuoth, not only was the bride (Israel) “shaking” (ו'חרד כל העם – Shemot XIX 16); the venue (Mt Sinai) was too (ו'חרד כל ההר מאד – XIX 18). It was also very noisy: זקק מאד וקל שפר – XIX 16. When it was all over – the Ten Commandments had been given – the first thing Bene Israel asked for was not to have to hear more from her spiritual spouse, lest they die (ואל ידבר עמנו אלקים פן נמות – XX 16). Moshe refers to the whole experience as a test or trial (לבעבור נסות אתכם – XX 17) for Israel, in order that the fear of G-d would be upon them, so that they would not sin. Not the most romantic Chupah, you might say Indeed, the two aspects of Matan Torah – one wedding-like, the other distinctly not - come head to head in Rashi’s commentary on the verse,

ויצא משה את העם לקראת האלקים מן המחנה ויטיצבו בתחתית ההר

And Moshe brought the people out from the camp to greet G-d; and they stood at the foot of the mountain (XIX 17)

On the first part of the verse, Rashi says that לקראת האלקים means that the Shechinah went out to greet Bene Israel like a chatan greeting the kallah; but on the second part of the verse, בתחתית ההר, Rashi alludes to the famous midrash of the mountain being held over the Bene Israel, suggesting overwhelming power, rather than sweet romance, was the dominant dynamic at Sinai. The problem with the wedding metaphor is, of course, the existential inequality of the parties: how can you wed the Infinite with the finite, the Creator with the created. It was this massive imbalance that caused the fear and trembling, the inability on Israel’s part to tolerate further intimacy with G-d. At the time of Matan Torah, there was an antidote to this in the form of the unique individual who “made the match” so to speak – Moshe Rabbenu.

He seems to occupy a position half way between a people who are united as never before (כא'ש אחד בלב אחד) and their G-d. He goes up (XIX 3) and down (XIX 14), up (XIX 20) and down (XIX 25), between G-d and Israel in the verses preceding the Ten Commandments, shuttling between a “couple” who clearly had trouble communicating directly between themselves. He is even credited with mediating the tremendous din – the sound of the shofar – that accompanied the revelation:

commenting on the phrase in Psalm 29, קול ה' בכו (the voice of Hashem is full of power), Rashi says that at the time of Matan Torah, G-d restricted His voice (את קולו) to accord with Israel’s “power” (כח). When the verse says,

ויהי קול השפר הולך וחזק מאד משה דבר האלקים יענו בקול

And the voice of shofar got stronger and stronger; Moshe spoke and G-d answered him in voice (XIX 19)

the voice with which G-d “answered” was, according to Rashi, none other than Moshe’s voice i.e. a voice that was attuned to the powers (or lack thereof) of Israel.

But Moshe was of course not a “long term” solution to the difficulties in this “marriage” – the (over) dependency on Moshe foreshadows the tragedy of the Golden Calf, when Bene Israel quickly went astray after Moshe went missing. And the shadchan, whilst uniquely gifted, would not be there to intermedate in this “marriage” forever. The real hope for this “marriage” lay in what, in the rabbinic metaphor, was the ketubah at this wedding: the Torah itself. The bride may not be able to tolerate the bridegroom for more than a short while, but she is devoted to the terms of the agreement between them:

ויענו כל העם יחדו ואמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה

And all the people answered together and said: all that Hashem has said, we will do (XIX 8)

In fact, reading the narrative, it is almost as if, for Israel, the Torah was relief from the awesome and intimidating experience of revelation itself. The simple reason for this was that the Torah, unlike the nature of G-d, was something they could understand. This perhaps explains why G-d chose the Ten Commandments, from all the ocean of Torah, written and oral, as the centrepiece of Matan Torah – it is short and accessible. Just like the ketubah read aloud under the chupah does not encapsulate everything about marriage, but rather sets out basic terms on which the relationship between the couple can grow, so too with the Ten Commandments “read aloud” at Sinai: they gave Israel, the young “bride”, the basics of a relationship with G-d that would develop and blossom through the Torah as a whole.

It is that ancient and continuing relationship that we celebrate and renew on Shavuoth.