

YISRO (EXODUS 18:1-20:23)

Modern-Day Prophecy

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Our Nation has had many prophets. Thousands. Perhaps millions. Most of their prophecies were not recorded for posterity. (Only 24 of them made into the Bible.)

The greatest of all prophets was Moses. (Deuteronomy 34:10) His level of prophecy was clearer than those of other prophets. (See “Who’s Your Brother?”)

In preparation for the Revelation at Mount Sinai, G-d wanted to ensure that we all would be aware of Moses’ greatness:

G-d said to Moses, “I will come to you in the thickness of a cloud, so that the people will hear when I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever.” (Exodus, 19:9)

Nachmanides explains: G-d said, *“I will come to you in the thickness of a cloud, so that the people will hear when I speak to you -- rather than the people hearing about it from someone else -- and they will also believe in you -- in later generations. If some day a future prophet will arise and try to contradict your teachings, he will be immediately dismissed as a fraud because they will have already seen and heard that you have achieved the ultimate level of prophecy.”*

My Rebbe, Rabbi A. Hensch Leibowitz, of Blessed Memory, questioned this explanation from Nachmanides. It’s all well and good to say that by personally witnessing Moses’ lofty level of prophecy, the people would be likely to accept Moses as their undisputed leader. But that should only work for the generation that actually witnessed the event. How would a prophecy that my great-great grandfather saw affect me and my great-great-grandchildren? How would we be able to resist the temptation to follow some new leader with new ideas?

Rabbi Leibowitz answers that our people experienced more than a one-time prophecy at Mount Sinai. The legacy that we possess as a result of that miraculous day is more than just the Torah itself. The entire prophecy of the Revelation is permanently installed on our spiritual “hard drive.” You and I stood at Mount Sinai, and to this day, that inspiration enables us to reject anything that is less than genuine Torah. This inspiration is what has given our people the ability to withstand persecutions and torture, clinging tenaciously to our precious Torah and its values.

In all due respect to my esteemed teacher, I am troubled by his observation. My Rebbe understands Nachmonides to be telling us that the very fact that the people of Israel saw Moses' prophecy enables us to rebuff all the various influences that attempt to lead us away from Torah.

If that prophecy works so well, why is there so much assimilation? Why are we not all sustained in our religious devotion by the prophecy of seeing Moses communicate with G-d 3500 years ago? How can it be that there are more than 200,000 Hebrew-Christians in North America and Israel? Where is that innate ability to reject false philosophies?

This week I read a book written by a political commentator who happens to be Jewish. The author is a very astute and insightful observer of the political scene. (I agree with him upwards of 90% of the time.) The book was somewhat autobiographical in nature; he provided an intimate glimpse into his personal life. I read about his wife, his kids, and his dogs.

What struck me about the book was how far apart he and I are on theological and philosophical issues. His casual mention of having ham in his house and driving on Saturday didn't bother me as much as his celebration of the "Hanukkah and Christmas season", complete with a menorah and stockings. Here is a man whose political views I share. He is a brilliant attorney and an accomplished author. I usually appreciate what he has to say, even on those occasions when I do disagree with him.

How does an individual who is otherwise so bright so totally clueless when it comes to religious values? What about my teacher's observations that throughout the generations, Jews are intuitively tuned in to the prophecy of Sinai? What happened to G-d's promise that the Jews would always believe in Moses' teachings?

Actually, we don't have wait until 3500 years after Sinai to ask this question. That morning our Nation heard G-d tell us that He took us out of Egypt, and that we may have no other gods before Him, along with eight other Commandments. A mere forty days later, we were dancing around a Golden Calf, singing, "*This is your god, Israel, who took you out of Egypt!*" (Ibid, 32:4) (See "Fool's Gold" and "Abs Of Steel/Calves Of Gold") How's that for a short memory?

The answer, I believe, is obvious. G-d put us here and gave us free will. We can choose to be inspired, or we can choose to be disinterested. The ability is there, the deep-rooted sub-conscious memory of that great prophecy is there, waiting to be awakened.

How do we awaken it? With Torah study. If we have the good fortune to have been exposed to our belief system, we must strive daily to re-connect with our Creator. We must delve into the teachings of the Torah and make every effort to get closer to G-d. The prophecy of Mount Sinai is there; we have to bring it out.

What about our neighbors? What about our fellow Jews who have not yet tasted the beauty of Torah? The problem is that they don't know what they are missing; therefore they tend to decline to make the effort. It behooves us to demonstrate, by our actions and attitudes, how uplifting a Torah lifestyle can be.

In other words, we have to teach. Each of us, in our own way, needs to find a way to share the prophecy – Oops! Do I sound like an evangelist? Not a problem! Once a Jew sees the depth, profundity, and warmth of authentic, unadulterated, Torah learning, he'll know the difference between Torah and the artificial stuff.

G-d promised.

Have a great Shabbos.

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