

PARASHAS SHAVUOS

Thunder and Lightning

The world had never seen anything like it, nor would it see anything like it ever again. As the Jewish people gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai watched with breathless awe, a thick layer of clouds descended over the mountain. Jagged streaks of lightning rent the heavens asunder, and the sounds of crashing thunderbolts were so ear-splittingly loud that the people trembled uncontrollably. Sheets of fire suddenly engulfed the mountaintop, and the entire mountain quaked and discharged thick smoke like a colossal furnace. The eerie blast of a ram's horn grew louder and louder. And then God spoke from the mountaintop and pronounced the Ten Commandments.

What was the purpose of this spectacular display of special effects? Wouldn't the experience of actually hearing God speak have been awesome enough? Didn't God's voice in itself inspire sufficient fear and reverence in the hearts of the people without the addition of artificial external stimuli?

The commentators explain that the spectacle at Mount Sinai was meant to serve as a metaphor for the future conditions under which the Jewish people would often attempt to study Torah and live by it. It would not take much courage to study the Torah and observe its commandments during tranquil and prosperous times. Who would turn away from the ultimate spiritual fulfillment in the absence of distractions and obstructions?

But rarely if ever does humankind experience such placid times. The world is always in upheaval, torn by wars and migrations, plagued by poverty and deprivation, struggling under oppression and exploitation and, in the best case, distracted by the material mirages of prosperity.

Where does a person find the presence of mind to study Torah and live by it under such daunting conditions? In the memory of the stand at Mount Sinai when the voice of God penetrated through the cacophony of the thunder and lightning and the raging fire, and the people heard His words. This is the only way Torah is absorbed, by the extreme effort to overcome external distractions and internal emotional turmoil, by a dedicated perseverance to penetrate to the divine essence of the Torah and through it to connect with God.

A young man traveled to a distant city to study with a famous sage. After many days on the road, he arrived at his destination, a large white building on a sun-drenched street. He walked up to the front door and

tried to open it, but it was locked. He knocked and knocked for a few minutes, but there was no response. He walked around to the side of the building where he found another door. It too was locked. Here too his loud knocking elicited no response.

Through the open windows high up on the wall, he could hear the sounds of excited young voices engaged in heated arguments and discussions. He called out to them, but no one heard him. He smelled cooking food and followed the trail of the odors to another window, which was surely a kitchen. Here too he called out at the top of his lungs, but no one came to the window.

Under the kitchen window, he noticed a coal grate. He pulled at it, and it came away in his hands. Gingerly, he lowered himself through the coal grate into the cellar. Covered with soot, he groped his way through the shadows and found the stairway to the upper floors.

The sage was waiting for him at the top of the stairway.

“Welcome, my son,” he said. “We have been waiting for you. I am happy to see that you have found your way here.”

“If you were waiting for me,” said the young man, “why was the door locked? Why didn’t anyone respond to my knocking or my calls?”

The sage smiled. “It was a test, my son. If you had not discovered the coal grate and clambered through the cellar, you could not have been a worthy member of our group.”

In our own lives, the pressures of everyday life often force us to forgo the opportunities to study or perform various other good deeds. Someday, when things settle down, we tell ourselves, we will devote more time to our spiritual growth, but the time is not yet right. But if we wait for this tranquil time, it may never come. Distractions are never lacking. Life is always full of thunder and lightning. It takes perseverance to penetrate to the truth.