



Parshat Yitro

Interpreting G-d's Approach at Sinai

by Rabbi Robin Nafshi on Friday February 05, 2010

21 Shevat 5770

Exodus 18:1 - 20:23

In *Parshat Yitro*, the Israelites are preparing for revelation at Mount Sinai, where they will encounter God and receive the Torah. God says to Moses,

Go to the people and tell them to purify themselves today and tomorrow, and to wash their clothes. Let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day [I] will come down in the sight of all the people on Mount Sinai. You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death...' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain." (Ex. 19:10-13.)

After listening to God, Moses comes down from the mountain to the people and warns the people to stay pure and to wash their clothes. And he says to the [male] people, "Be ready for the third day: do not go near a woman." (Ex. 19:15)

When God tells Moses that the people must purify themselves, and Moses in turn tells the people to remain pure, the Hebrew words used contain the root letters *kof – dalet – shin*, to sanctify or make holy. The classical biblical commentators suggest two different ways in which the Israelites would fulfill this commandment. Most commentators claim it is a reference to abstaining from sexual relations, and point to Moses' interpretation of God's words in saying "do not go near a woman."

Other commentators, including Maimonides, assert that it is a reference to immersion in a mikveh, the traditional way in Judaism that people and objects are purified. Immersion in a mikveh, one might argue, is the opposite of abstaining from sexual relations. Under the laws of niddah, a Jewish woman immerses in a mikveh following her menstrual period and subsequent clean days in order to prepare for sexual relations.

Through these two interpretations, the Israelites are told on the one hand, "Prepare to meet God by refraining from sex," and on the other hand, "Prepare to meet God by preparing yourself as you would for sex."



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For GLBT Jews, who are so often defined by or ridiculed for our sexual partners, our sexual or gender identity, or our sexual behavior, what are we to make of this duality? I believe that it is something we know, and that the ancient rabbis knew, but that much of the world ignores: Sex is both holy and fraught with danger.

The intimacy that comes from sexual relations is unlike any other intimacy we can experience. Ideally, we give completely of ourselves – body, mind, and soul – and trust that our partner will do the same in return. We use all of our senses to take in and give back. We create an environment that is meant to heighten our sensual awareness of ourselves and our partner. We laugh, we cry, we whisper, we shout – the same way many of us connect with God.

And at the same time, sexual relations can be dangerous. The previous paragraph describes the ideal. When one partner holds back, the imbalance can lead to distrust, self-doubt, resentment, anger, abandonment, and worse. Some relationships become abusive or violent, or put one partner in the position of powerlessness. Some people become addicted to the pleasure and thrill of sex – at the cost of all else.

So as the Israelites are preparing to meet God, God asks that they give of themselves completely, and promises in return to give in the same way – as they each know that the encounter will be both holy and fraught with danger, like a sexual encounter. It will be holy, as God will come to the people physically (thunder, lightning, a dense cloud, and a very loud blast of the horn – Exodus 19:16) and spiritually (“I am the Eternal your God” – Exodus 20:2). And it will be fraught with danger, as the Israelites literally will fear for their lives when they begin to hear God speak. They listen to the Ten Commandments, fall backwards, and plead with Moses for God to stop speaking, “lest we die.” (Exodus 20:16.) We often read of the Israelites “fear” of God in Torah – only one translation of the Hebrew *yire*, which also means, “to be in awe of.”

The sexual innuendo of the encounter between God and Israel is reflected in a Midrash. In commenting on Exodus 19:20, “The Eternal came down upon mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain,” the Midrash supposed that one might think that God actually descended from heaven and transferred God’s Presence to the mountain. Thus the Midrash notes that Exodus 20:19 reads, “You yourselves have seen that I have talked with you from heaven,” and deduced that God bent down the heavens, lowered them to the top of the mountain, spread the heavens as a person spreads a mattress on a bed, and spoke from the heavens as a person would speak from the top of a mattress. (Mekhilta Bachodesh 50:1:11–12, 4th century.) Was God alluring? Enticing? How else does one speak “from the top of a mattress?”

The ancient rabbis celebrated sex and its possibilities. So do we GLBT people. When we are ridiculed or worse for our sexuality, let us remember the holiness and awesomeness of who we are, who we love, and how we love.



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