

Shavuot Sermon 5779

Dr Esther Jilovsky

Kedem Progressive Synagogue, Melbourne, Australia

The sky hovered calm and blue. A mountain, draped in shadows of deep, sandy brown, rose from the desert floor like a jagged, rough molar, towering over the flat earth below. At the foot of the mountain, the people bustle in their camp. The women emerge from dark animal-skin tents to stir simmering pots of lamb and goat, their chatter echoing from one stuffy tent to the next. The men stoke the red-hot embers of the cooking fires, recovering after a long day of hunting in the relentless desert sun, having just butchered the meat that their wives and mothers now cook. Swarms of children, covered in deep red dust and smelling like soot, laugh and run and play, skipping joyfully through their dusty desert home.

It's the third month since the people of Israel left Egypt, fleeing for their lives after generations of slavery. The mixed multitudes dwell at the foot of Mount Sinai, in limbo, unsure of what lies ahead. They are free but waiting, waiting to see what unfolds, what is revealed.

One day, as a cool dawn gently breaks over the camp, the mountain suddenly begins to tremble. A great shaking and a thunderous noise ripple along the ground, rousing the people from their cosy dreams, waking the children who scream for their mothers. Lightening flashes violently with the intensity of creation, thunderclaps boom long and deep. In the softly breaking dawn, a dense grey cloud descends upon the mountain (Exodus 19:16). The people hear a long, loud blast of the shofar. The anguished, soulful cry booms down to them, majestically calling them, stopping them, asking them to listen.

וְהָרַסְתִּי עֵשֶׂן בָּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה בָּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עֲשָׂנוּ כְעֵשֶׂן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁן וַיִּיחַר
כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד

(Exodus 19:18)

'Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Eternal One had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently.'

The earth itself is trembling. The heavens are thundering. The mountain is smouldering, smoke billowing from its peak. The people stand together. And in this moment of revelation we, the people of Israel, receive the Torah. The ten commandments. The stories of our ancestors. Our people's long journey from slavery to freedom. Mitzvot that guide us in ethical and moral living. Beautiful stories, disturbing stories, stories of struggle, stories of love, stories of redemption.

This encounter between the people of Israel and God cements them as a nation in covenant with God, gifting them the Torah, the most wondrous of gifts. And on this Shavuot morning, like Jews around the world, we celebrate receiving the Torah by eating cheesecake! Blintzes! Pizza! But what exactly is the role of Torah in our lives? For us modern, progressive, liberal Jews, the Torah is a sacred text. But we recognise that the Torah has many authors, who wrote at different times and in different places, sometimes editing and combining existing texts, resulting in a multi-layered and sometimes contradictory document.

Ancient wisdom can be beautiful. Sarah laughing at the thought of bearing a child in old age. Rebecca's first-time meeting with her husband Isaac, when she falls spectacularly off her camel. Jacob's struggle with the mysterious angel, who leaves him with a permanent limp, but also renames him Israel, for he struggled with God and prevailed. Miriam dancing and leading the women in dance after the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds.

But ancient wisdom can also be jarring. We cringe at the Akedah, as Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac, waiting for the moment Abraham pulls his hand away. We rejoice as the people of Israel miraculously cross the Sea of Reeds, yet give little thought to the Egyptians who drowned in their wake. And perhaps even more disturbing are verses concerned with capital punishment, stoning a wayward son to death, not to mention Leviticus 18, which explicitly prohibits sexual relations between two men.

We were gifted the Torah at Mount Sinai, but we were also gifted these troubling texts. As we commemorate revelation and celebrate Shavuot, let us also ponder the challenging parts of our Torah, of our tradition.

Our rabbinic tradition has evolved over the last two millennia. Less than a week ago, I found myself at a gathering of over one hundred women rabbis in California. A gathering of professional clergy that even a generation ago would not have been possible. We celebrated with Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first woman to be ordained a rabbi in America, as she marked forty-seven years since her ordination on the third of June 1972. We remembered Rabbi Regina Jonas, the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi, who perished in Auschwitz in 1944. And we sang and prayed and talked and studied and ate and celebrated a profession that had been closed to women for almost two thousand years.

On Shavuot, as well as the Ten Commandments, we read a story of female friendship. The Book of Ruth, a short and sweet text found in Ketuvim, the Writings section of the Tanakh, documents the experience of Ruth and Naomi after they both lose their husbands. Naomi, an Israelite, had moved with her husband to Moab to escape a famine. Their sons both married Moabite women, Orpah – from which Oprah got her name – and Ruth. Tragically, Naomi's husband and sons all die. Naomi decides to leave Moab

and return to her people and her land. Orpah stays in Moab. But Ruth chooses to follow her mother-in-law, uttering the words:

כִּי אֶל-אֲנֹכִי תֵלְכִי אֵלַי וּבְאֲנֹכִי תֵלִינִי אֵלַי עַמִּי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי:

'For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.' (Ruth 1:15)

At a time of tragedy, there is friendship. Ruth accompanies Naomi back to Bethlehem, her birthplace. They are there for each other, they help each other, and they are both able to move on from their grief. It is a story of *chesed*, loving kindness, of two women supporting each other through a difficult time. It is a story worth telling.

Today we relive the moment of revelation. We no longer live in tents, covered in red dust, slaughtering goats to make dinner. Instead we live in warm, clean, insulated homes that shelter us from the elements, connected and disconnected from each other by the miracle of technology. We may not find it so easy to accept Torah in the way that previous generations did, but we still yearn for and need its guidance and wisdom. It is our challenge to ensure that the revelation of Torah continues in our own day and into the future. A nuanced revelation. An inclusive revelation. One that honours women and men and people of all genders, no matter what their sexual orientation. Those like us and those who are different from us. One that continually calls us, in the words of our prophet Micah:

כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֵסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לִכְתּוֹת עִם-אֱלֹהֵיךָ:

'to do justice, to love kindness and walk modestly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

May revelation continue to inspire us to be the best person we can be, and on this Shavuot, may we each find our Torah.

Chag Sameach!