

Rabbi's Column

These past two months have been filled with commemorations of various historical events. Some of them more recent than others. Today, however, my focus is on the Festival that just ended, Shavuot (Weeks).

The religious event that Shavuot commemorates is the Revelation on Mount Sinai. The Torah relates that when Moses was speaking to the descendants of the original group which left Egypt, he informed them that they had witnessed those events. The Midrash goes a bit further, and indicates that all Jews in every generation were there at that moment. Some quibble mystically about whether it was really only the "root souls" that were present or if it was indeed all the billions of Jewish souls were present for an event that feels timeless despite being anchored in a temporal moment.

The Midrash also has a lengthy discussion as to what, precisely, was communicated to the people. The answers range in precision from the entire 10 sayings (beginning with "I am" and ending with "to your neighbor") to the first statement only, to the first word, to the first letter.

This sounds reasonable, until you realize what the first letter is. It is Aleph, which is silent. So, the sound of the silent letter is the sound which was heard by the people and which was what God communicated, and was so terrifying that the people asked Moses to be the only one God talks to directly from now on? What could possibly be meant by that?

Years ago, before dialing a phone number, you had to pick up the phone and wait until you heard the dial tone. That tone told you the line was ready to process your attempt at communication. In my opinion, the people heard God's dial tone. In contrast to the older concept of only a select few people able to tune in to God's constant radio broadcast, God's communication lines were open to all.

That is a very scary thing.

In the past, you could always blame the wiring, or the times, or any number of reasons to indicate that God was not communicating well with you since you were not Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. If you liked blaming others, you could say that God played favorites. If you liked blaming yourself, you might easily become frustrated at not being like any of those three.

With one silent sound, that was no longer true.

One sidebar: Grief is like static on the line. God does not intrude upon those who are grieving, acting like Job's comforters did during the first seven days, keeping the line open until grief has lessened.

We uncovered at the Revelation on Mount Sinai that God is communicating with each one of us, and we are communicating with God. The task of this communication remains, as ever, to aid us in striving our utmost to be the most humane human each of us can be, always aiming towards growth and respect for each other.