‘Through the Looking Glass’ at Sinai

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Hametargem pasuk ketzurato barei zeh badai; vehamosif barei zeh megadeif

One who translates literally creates fiction; one who revises blasphemes.

Tosefta Megillah 3:21

It is altogether fitting that Matan Torah, one of the great religious moments in human history, should have gone unpreserved for posterity by a camcorder. In fact, Midrash has it that all 600,000 witnesses transmitted their own private experience of the encounter of Israel and God on Mt. Sinai, ranging from a word for word transcript to the mystical silence of dry mouth. Furthermore, it did not just happen once. It’s always happening. It is always potentially being experienced. Therefore, there can be no single description. Even the Bible contains several contradictory accounts of the theophany. Therefore, there can be no transparency for Sinai.

While literary accounts dominate the Jewish tradition, Sinai is outstanding in its visuality. Even before de Mille, artists produced thousands of images of the event. Saturated with these images, we chose a single weird picture whose psychological insight is unanticipated in a medieval manuscript.

Our point of departure is the enigmatic illustration of Matan Torah in the Kaufmann Mishneh Torah of 1296. Written by Maimonides over a ten-year period and first published in the 1180s, the Mishneh Torah quickly became a ‘best-seller’ throughout the medieval Jewish world. Despite religious and political conflicts of the time, a number of Hebrew illuminated manuscripts attest to cultural and artistic interchange between Christian and Jewish artists. The Kaufman Mishneh Torah is the last testimony of such contact in Northern France, since Jews were expelled from France in 1306.

An elegantly coiffed and robed Moses, tablets of the Law in hand, faces the Children of Israel crowded behind a window in the mountain. The dictates of Northern French style at the end of the 13th century portrayed them with child-like faces, curly hair and tiny mouths. The judenhut (Jews’ hat), which marks their identity, was employed both by Jewish and Christian artists as early as the 12th century.
One puzzling feature of the illumination is the angle at which Moses and Israel confront each other. If this is Matan Torah, where is God? But the strangest feature is that the people seem to be trapped in a hole in the mountain. There’s a riddle here. What is the biblical narrative behind the many faces of Matan Torah?

You shall set a boundary for the people round about, beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death . . .

On the third day, at dawn, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud voice of the shofar; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled. The voice of the shofar grew louder and louder . . .

All the people saw the thunder and lightning and the voice of the shofar and the mountain smoking. And when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. You speak to us, they said to Moses, and we will obey. But let not God speak to us, lest we die. Moses answered the people, Be not afraid, for God has come only in order to test you and in order that the fear of him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray.

Exodus 19:12, 16–19; 20:15–17

A supra-natural upheaval shatters the Richter scale. Fear and trembling, smoke and fire, lightning and thunder. An earthquake (the mountain trembled)? An actual appointment with God (ikrat ha’Elohim)? But alas (or maybe hurrah), no further details. Of the 600,000 scenarios, let’s take two other artistic renditions to see if they can help us unpack the Kaufmann picture.

The Moutier Grandval Bible of ca. 840 presents the event in two stages: above, Moses receives the tablets from the hand of God that extends out of the circle of the heavens that has descended to the top of Mt. Sinai; the cloud and mountain meet one another to close the gap between God and humanity.1 The mountain actually appears to be the burning bush as well; Moses reaches upward in a gesture attested as early as the 3rd century; joining his hands with the hand of God, via the Tablets of the Law; below, Moses presents the tablets to the people of Israel, assembled attentively.

The Cursus Sanctae Mariae is a thirteenth century Bohemian Book of Hours containing several typical elements of medieval Christian iconography of Sinai.2 As in many other Christian illustrations, Moses is horned and Matan Torah is connected with the apostasy of the Golden Calf. Here he stands, while an anthropomorphic God hovers above him, handing him the Tablets from a starry cloud. The Golden Calf atop a central pedestal divides the picture into before and after. On the left Moses ‘tears up the contract’ as faithless Israel on the right ‘hones down’ joyously before the calf.
To summarize: The medieval pictures we've seen have led us to expect certain standard elements in the portrayal of Matan Torah: God, Moses, the people of Israel and the mountain. Israel is alternately portrayed as willing or sinning. God appears fleshed out or abbreviated in shorthand. Moses has the leading role, standing at the peak or on the ascent of Mt. Sinai, holding the Tablets.

Back to our perplexing picture from the Kaufmann Mishneh Torah. Familiarity with the conventional only highlights the enigma. The Kaufmann shows the mountain, Moses and the Tablets, but God is missing and Israel's tortured position seems stranger than ever. Visual comparison has not solved the riddle; let us try the verbal, by way of Midrash.

At three different points the biblical text asserts how willing Israel is to receive the Torah: “We will do, We will do and listen (obey)” (Ex. 19:8; 24:3,7). Some midrashim highlight this willingness by contrasting it with the refusal of the other nations to accept the Torah, offered to them before Israel was approached.3 Yet both before and after Sinai, Israel is anything but willing to trust in God and Moses. Already in his first vision, Moses doubts their sustained commitment: “They will not believe me” (Exodus 4:1). At the banks of the Red Sea they balk (Exodus 14:11f.): “Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out here to the desert?” And they continually murmur about water, or food or clear direction (Numbers 11:1f.): “And the Children of Israel also wept and said, ‘Who will feed us meat?’” After all this naysaying, how shall we account for the sudden and uncharacteristic willingness at Sinai?

Considering Israel's whining and complaining from the outset, we can only wonder: how willing were these fugitive Egyptian expats with Holy Land visas to commit to this deal, after all? Can we infer any reflection, an internal shift, a transforming moment?

Why is their acceptance of the Law repeated three times? Perhaps this overkill of consent is whining anxiety to sign the contract and come out of the firestorm. Were they saying, “Yes, yes, okay, okay.” (“Israel doth consent too much”)? Uncertainty and fear are rampant. The people see the voices, evoking God's response: Don't be afraid (to be afraid), because God has come to give you the experience of God (leva'avor nasot etkhem) (Ex. 20:20[17]).

Midrash picks up on this ambivalence, zeroing in on a single preposition buried under a mountain of words: Israel is variously described as standing “at the foot of the mountain” (tahit—Ex. 19:17) or “under the mountain” (tahat—Deut. 4:11). The ambiguity of the word tahat/tahit invites two scenarios. Their ‘position’ is both physical and emotional.

In both scenarios, God has uprooted the mountain. But one scenario, found in Mekhilta Deabodesh 3, places Israel ‘under the mountain’ eagerly seeking protection from the fiery upheaval.5 The alternate scenario, found in Talmud Shabbat 88a, forces Israel under the mountain that God has lifted like a gigit, proclaiming: “if you accept the Torah, fine; but if you do not, your graves will be right here!” Generations of Jewish scholarship have understood this second midrash as expressing coercion.

But the ambiguity of these accounts and the ambivalence of Israel have produced additional midrashic interpretations. In these interpretations, the looking glass (aspektaria), transparent and reflective, becomes the central image. In Targum Yonatan to Exodus 19:17 we find:

And Moses led the people out of the camp to meet the Divine Presence, and forthwith the Lord of the Universe lifted up the
mountain and held it in the air and it became clear as an aspekaria as they took their places under the mountain.

And the late Midrash Tehillim 8 states:

When the Lord of the Universe was about to give Israel the Torah, He said to them: Give me guarantors that you will observe it. They said, Our patriarchs will be our guarantors. He replied, They already are in my debt; may they fulfill their own obligations . . . give Me guarantors who are not yet in my debt . . . They said, Who is not in your debt? He said to them, Babies. Fortwith they brought their babies at the breast and those yet in the womb. Their mothers’ bellies became as glass and they saw the Lord of the Universe from the womb and spoke to Him. The Lord of the Universe said to them, Will you be guarantors for your parents, that if they do not observe the Torah, you will be held liable? They said, Yes.

How should we understand these midrashim and this image of the looking glass? What is the relationship between the image of the uprooted mountain and the image of the glass? Our picture from the Kaufmann Mishneh Torah provides the link. But in order to understand this link, we must first examine the visual imagery of the midrashim in detail, not previously recognized.

The common understanding of the pregnant phrase in Shabbat 88a, kafa aleihem har kegitgit, is a tub or a barrel, held like Damocles’ sword over Israel. If released it will crush the people—thus their refusal to accept the Torah will cause their deaths. But a closer look reveals that it is not a threatening sword but a jail. The phrase kafa al is used consistently in rabbinic literature to mean invent or cover. For example, in Y. Pesahim 3b, in order to sequester the last bit of hametz one puts it under an overturned vessel (kofeb alav kli).

As for the gigit, it is a large vessel with a narrow rounded base and a wide mouth. When overturned, with a little imagination it might look like a mountain. Right side up the gigit is a man-sized container; used throughout the ancient Mediterranean world over several millennia for storing both dry and wet goods. Or, as in the famous story of Diogenes (404–323 B.C.E.) and Alexander, it could even be used to house the homeless. Upside down, it isolates whatever is under it and can even trap a person(s) in solitary confinement (B. Shabbat 88a), as cited in criminal law.

Imagine this—kafa aleihem har kegitgit: the people of Israel is trapped under the dome-like mountain. In the widely-held misunderstanding, a cruel God terrorizes Israel into submission—in our interpretation, a shrewd, demanding God compels Israel to freely decide. If they do not, they will spend the rest of their lives stranded.

The gigit was normally made of clay, but could also be made of other materials, including glass (Maimonides Commentary to Mishnah Shabbat 24:5). Here is the key to the glass imagery of Targum Yonatan: “The Lord of the Universe lifted up the mountain and held it in the air and it became clear as an aspekaria as they took their places under the mountain.” This is the same vignette as the midrash of the gigit, except that here the mountain is made of glass and held over Israel in order to force a visual confrontation with God, a negotiation over Matan Torah. On the one hand, the Targum has bought into the mistaken impression of the gigit held aloft by God. On the other hand, it has imaginatively pictured a glass gigit, in order to enable eye contact.
Up to now we have been considering the gigit as a window. But, aspeklaria also means mirror. When aspeklaria means window, God is out there (transcendent); when aspeklaria means mirror, God is within us (immanent). Thus the dual meaning of aspeklaria defines the simultaneous revelation of God inside of us (self-discovery) and beyond us.

Transparency turns up again in Midrash Tehillim. Pregnant and nursing women are present at the giving of the Torah. Their babies, in utero, can converse with God, because their mothers’ bellies have become transparent. Negotiation is again taking place, b’nai yisrael opposite God in an enclosed, transparent place. The mountain has morphed into the pregnant belly, the adults into their own children. What is the negotiation? It is over the eternal commitment to the Torah. It is not enough for the current, frightened throng to accept the commandments—it is not enough to enlist the avot—the “Children of Israel” must commit for all future generations—this can only be done by their unborn babies, the literal children of Israel. Rivkah Kluger, Jungian psychologist, says this is not a cruel God threatening death to a community of hesitant believers. It is the irreversible nature of birth. When the emergent moment arrives you have to be born. Otherwise you die. Awareness of a special destiny is the conscious moment of Israel’s birth. This dual perception of God is a new level of consciousness, of being born to a special destiny. This is the birth image of the gigit.

The babies in the bellies of Midrash Tehillim are the folks in the Kaufmann transparent mountain a la Targum Yonatan. Remnants of an earlier version of this painting portray Moses receiving the tablets from the hand of God. In its present status that hand is awkwardly emerging from the children of Israel in the window. But they are not looking through the window at Moses—rather they are peering into the mirror and seeing the God in themselves. Moses is simultaneously receiving the tablets from God and giving them to Israel. The moment of consciousness, of the special destiny of Israel, is the metaphorical moment when Israel is born into a commitment to Torah.

What has become of the coercive nature of the gigit midrash? Through a close examination of the imagery, we realized that the gigit is a womb. When the time is right for birth, the baby must be born, or die. Israel can be born to a special destiny, or Israel can die in utero, under the gigit. Unlike natural childbirth, however, these babies must make a conscious decision to be born.

The earthshaking effect of this decision is rendered by the explosive Resh Lakish, in an addendum to the midrash of the gigit in Shabbat 88a. He connects Revelation with Creation, Matan Torah with Maaseh Bereshit. Each day of Creation is named: Day One, Second Day, Third Day, etc. The formula changes for the Sixth Day—THE Sixth Day (yom ha-shishi rather than yom shishi, Genesis 1:31). True to the midrashic fascination with any textual aberration, Resh Lakish asks rhetorically why ha-shishi? “HEH” is the presence of God—if Israel doesn’t accept “HEH” at Sinai, the world will revert to an apocalyptic “unformed and void.” The matter of coercion has taken on an entirely different character as a result of our connecting these midrashim. Israel is not being forced to accept Torah, but rather without this acceptance, there simply is no future, no world.
From all this, it appears that the Kaufmann Matan Torah portrays the children of Israel peering through the transparent mountain window of the midrashim. But rather than looking at God, they face Moses. The key to this mystery was discovered when backlighting revealed that the original painting had Moses standing opposite a nimbed God, much like several of the paintings discussed above. This Christian anthropomorphism, inappropriate to a Hebrew manuscript, was replaced with the midrashic image of the children of Israel. Nonetheless, we can still see part of a divine hand delivering the tablets to Moses.

While this substitution of the captured children of Israel for God might seem like a mistake, in fact it is ingenious. Moses is receiving the tablets from God and at the same time he is giving the Torah to Israel. God is within Israel.

Moses at Sinai, Ms. Kaufmann A77 (detail).

REFERENCES

Brand, Y. “Gigit,” in Ceramic Ware in Talmudic Literature (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1953).

NOTES

1. British Museum codex Add. 10546, fol. 25v.
2. Pierpont Morgan Library MS 739, folio 15v.
3. See for example Mekhila deBahodesh 5:67v.
4. Our reading of the convoluted syntax of the verse.
5. “And they stood: crowded—this teaches us that Israel was afraid of the sparks, the horrors, the thunder and the lightning.”