

Yitro 5779

The Field of Revelation

Did anyone see the lunar eclipse last week? It happened for us quite close to the middle of the night. I sat on the doorstep of 4708 and watched as the shades of copper and dark gray gradually crept up to cover the white disk of the moon. And I noticed how much more prominent the constellations became as the moon grew dark.

I had a similar experience previously, watching the solar eclipse in the summer of 2017. I had traveled with a group of friends to a tiny town - Rexberg, Idaho - which was in the path of totality. We had gone to the almost-empty practice field at the local school with our dark glasses and our bottles of water. At a certain point the light around us began to change. It began to get chilly - the temperature was dropping at the rate of about a degree a minute - and the skies began to darken.

As the shadow over the sun increased, only a tiny bright rim was left - more like a fingernail paring than a new moon crescent - and then, suddenly and with great finality, like a door shutting or the last chord of a symphony, totality. We pulled off our glasses. The sky was a cold twilight-blue, the sun was entirely covered by the blackest of black disks and around it the corona blazed magnesium-white. As I turned around on the spot, there was sunset on every horizon - all 360 degrees of it. You only get such a sunset during the totality of a solar eclipse. And once again, I saw the sun's corona - the light that surrounds the sun - and the constellations that during the day are obscured by the sun's light.

That image - of being able to perceive what is always there but we don't always see - is the idea I'd like us to consider this morning as we once again 'stand at Sinai' with our ancestors to hear the revelation, the giving of the Torah.

We know from the way the Torah tells the story that the people also experienced a disruption of the natural order of things. There was audible lightening and visible thunder, we are told - a confusion of the senses that we call synesthesia. But after that, we are told, there was a silence.

And into that great silence came the sound of the Torah - the first words spoken by God to the people. When we read them aloud, still, we turn the first two of them into a continuous sentence to reflect the idea that they came direct and unmediated from the *pi hagevurah*, the mouth of God's own power, directly into the ears and minds and hearts of all the people present.

There is a Midrash that picks up on how Moses tells the story later in the book of Devarim, Deuteronomy. He describes the sound as *kol gadol velo yosif* a loud voice, never ceasing. *Lo yosif* doesn't have an end point in time - and so we get to the idea that the voice from Sinai never did cease. In some dimension of reality, the Torah continues to be given to anyone who is able to hear what is being broadcast on that particular wavelength.

But usually something is getting in the way. Like the daily light of the sun, our daily lives and concerns proliferate. It can be hard to be still, even for a second, to tune ourselves in to what lies beyond us.

Yet there are moments of eclipse. There are times when the details of our daily lives and concerns do fade into the background, just in the way that the main source of light is covered during an eclipse to enable us to see what is always there, just invisible to us most of the time.

What is an eclipse? Really, it's a shadow. A lunar eclipse happens when the moon passes into the shadow of the earth; a solar eclipse, when the shadow of the moon passes over the sun. In the presence of the shadow, perspectives alter and we perceive the reality that lies behind the everyday.

The shadows that fall over our lives can be joyous or sorrowful. Ask someone to remember a day in which they were exceptionally happy and they are unlikely to tell you about mundane details; more likely, they will describe an overall feeling. And when we are in pain, when we are challenged, the daily aspects of our life also recede.

These are the moments in which we can take a quantum leap in our own learning and understanding, seeing our lives with a clarity that has not been there before, reappraising what is important and what is not.

I want to suggest that these are the moments when we are at our most open to Torah - not necessarily the actual words we read this morning, but to wisdom a broader sense. A version of creation that never quite made it into the final cut - Proverbs 8 - gives us the vision of God as architect of creation with a feminine Wisdom personified as God's advisor in the enterprise. So Torah - as well as everything I said about it in the brochure this week - can also mean this broader kind of wisdom, this insight, this enlightenment.

So at a time of great joy we might learn the secret of opening our hearts to it fully, receiving it as grace, inhabiting it entirely even though it is ephemeral.

At a time of great sorrow we might learn that even though our own lives feel broken, we have a tradition to hold us and a community on which to rely, so we are not alone.

At a time in which we deliberately try to be silent and listen we might learn something about an obstacle that has stood in our way, perhaps something that we have created, even; and we can gently contemplate how to remove it, with compassion, so that we can grow into who we were always meant to be.

These are all moments when we stand in the field of revelation. They are all moments of receiving Torah and claiming it as our own. And perhaps, if we reach for wisdom as the shadows fall on our lives, we might find that the voice from Sinai has never fallen silent.

Shabbat shalom.