



5778 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Yitro / פרשת יתרו

Seeing G-D in Yerushalayim

During the revelation at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people “saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain.” R. Akiva, in the Midrash, noting the irregular combination of sight and sound, comments: “They saw what was audible and heard that which was visual.”¹ In other words, there was a total suspension of the usual laws of nature.

Rashi, however, in his commentary on this verse only seems to cite the first half of the midrash: “**the voices:** They saw what was audible, which is impossible to see elsewhere.” In contrast to the midrash that adds that the Jews heard the visual, Rashi solely focuses on seeing the auditory. Thus, it seems that Rashi asserts that the Sinai experience was dominated by sight.

This thesis is supported by another midrash. Originally, God was not supposed to appear on the mountain. However, when the people heard about this, they argued:²

We want to see our king, as one who hears but does not see is not comparable to one who hears and sees. God responded, ‘I will give them what they desire.’

According to this midrash it seems that the people’s desire to “see” God as opposed to just hearing him was proper. God himself acquiesces to their request and “modifies” his plans accordingly.

What is the advantage of the visual over the auditory? The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that sight creates an unmediated connection between the one seeing and the object being seen.³ The vision becomes imbedded in the personality of the viewer and a deep bond can be formed. It was for this reason that the Jews wanted to “see” God, as that represents the deepest connection possible for a human being.

¹ Mechilta DeRashbi 20:15.

² Mechilta DeRashbi 19:8.

³ See, R. Eli Touger, “The Power of Sight,” http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/82733/jewish/In-the-Garden-of-the-Torah-Reeh.htm.



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With this background in mind, it is important to note that the prophecies of the future connection with God in Yerushalayim use visual metaphors. For example, the above midrash continues:

Also in the future, the Jewish people will see the Shekhina, eye to eye as the verse states: “for eye to eye they shall see when the Lord returns to Zion.”⁴

In the end of times, when God returns to Yerushalayim we will “see” him. Similarly, Yeshayahu tells Yerushalayim: ⁵

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has shone upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and a gross darkness the kingdoms, and the Lord shall shine upon you, and His glory shall appear over you.

Once again, there is a focus on seeing the light of the city (Yerushalayim) as opposed to the lack of sight that exists elsewhere in the world.

Perhaps, this idea is one reason that the very name Yerushalayim is connected with sight. In the aftermath of the near-sacrifice of his son, Avraham named the mountain: “The Lord will see, as it is said to this day: On the mountain, the Lord will be seen.”⁶

May we merit to once again experience the full power of the sense of sight and “see” God in Yerushalayim!

⁴ Yeshayahu 52:8

⁵ Yeshayahu 60:1

⁶ Bereishit 22:14.