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Arnold Schoenberg and Ahad Ha'Am

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The Ten Commandments were given to Israel against a dramatic environmental backdrop.

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּהֵיחַת הַבֶּקָר וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבָרָקִים
וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הַהָר וְקֵל שֶׁפָּר תִּזְק מְאֹד
וַיִּתְרַד כָּל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה

וַתֵּר סִינַי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו ה' בְּאֵשׁ
וַיַּעַל עֲשָׂנָהּ כְּעֵשָׂן הַכִּבְשָׁן וַיִּתְרַד כָּל-הַהָר מְאֹד

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the shofar; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.... 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 violently.

(Exod. 19:16, 18)

God explains to Moses the need for making such a scene:

הַיְהוָה אָנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעָב כֶּהָעָנָן בְּעֵבֹר וַיִּשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּרִבְרֵי עֲמֹד
וְגַם-בָּרָק יֵאָמְרוּ לְעוֹלָם

“I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and trust you forever.”

(Exod. 19:9)

How do we reconcile the theatricality of the smoke, the earthquake, the thunder and the lightning with the concept of Divine transcendence? How can we reconcile the concept of God as a metaphysical essence with this very physical display at Sinai? Why such a “Cecil B. DeMille” production?

How different is the revelation, the theophany, experienced at Mount Sinai by the prophet Elijah:

וַיֹּאמֶר צֶא וְעַמְדָּתָ בְּהָר לִפְנֵי ה' וְהִנֵּה ה' עֹבֵר וְרוּחַ גְּדוּלָּה וְחֶזֶק מִפְּרֶק הַרִים וּמִשֹּׁבַר סְלָעִים לִפְנֵי ה' לֹא בְרוּחַ ה' וְאַחַר הַרוּחַ רֵעַשׁ לֹא בְרֵעַשׁ ה'

וְאַחַר הַרֵעַשׁ אֵשׁ לֹא בְּאֵשׁ ה' וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה וְדָקָה

(1Kgs. 19:11-12)

Elijah felt the earthquake, he saw the wind and the fire, but the Biblical text clearly states that God was not in any of those physical manifestations. Elijah then experienced God in a still small voice, or to translate more accurately, the sound of thin silence. Similarly, in the case of Moses, God reveals himself not in elaborate visions, but by simple communication. (Exod. 33:11) אֶל-מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים.

But to Israel the revelation is through thunder and lightning. There is an implication that to humans of rare spirituality, to prophets such as Moses and Elijah, God is revealed as pure spirit; whereas to the common folk, an image is required.

בְּעִבּוֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֲמֹד (Exod 19:9)

The great twentieth century Austrian composer, Arnold Schoenberg, closely identified with this concept. Like the mature Beethoven, in his music, Schoenberg was addressing God, not mortals. His tonal language was extremely cerebral. Accordingly, Schoenberg despaired of the possibility that his sophisticated musical ideas could be understood by the masses. He once said:

Is one supposed to talk only about matters that the most stupid can understand? ... It is self-evident that art which treats deeper ideas cannot address itself to the [multitudes]. ... In the end, art and success will yet again have to part company. (*Style and Idea*, p. 336)

Schoenberg was convinced that if music is pure, if it is created for the purpose of expressing deep sentiments through the worlds of sound, uncompromised by a self-conscious striving for accessibility, affect or

financial success, then music can convey a prophetic message, revealing a transcendent reality. In a 1951 letter to the Director of the Israel Academy of Music in Jerusalem, he wrote:

I would have tried to give this Academy universal significance so as to place it in a position to serve as an alternative for a mankind that caters in so many ways to an amoral, business-inspired materialism. A materialism behind which any ethical assumptions of our art are rapidly disappearing... From such an institution must go forth true priests of art who confront art with the same sense of consecration that the priest brings to God's altar. For, just as God chose Israel, whose task it is to preserve, in spite of all suffering, the pure, true, mosaic monotheism, so it behooves Israeli musicians to offer the world a model possessed of the unique capacity to make our souls function once more in ways apt to further the development of humanity toward ever higher goals. (Ringer 1990, p. 246)

Schoenberg was an ardent Zionist, who on several occasions expressed his willingness to give up his career as a composer in order to give speeches to raise money and consciousness for the establishment of a Jewish homeland to save the doomed Jews of Europe. In 1926 he wrote a prophetic play, *Der biblische Weg (the Path of the Bible)* about the establishment of a modern Jewish state in the ancient holy land.

He was drawn to the concept of an unfathomable Supreme Being who had chosen the Jewish people to preserve the pure faith through the ages. He wrote:

We Jews call ourselves the chosen people of the Lord, and are the keepers of His promise. And we know that we were chosen only to think the thought of the one, eternal, unimaginable, invisible God through to completion, in short, to keep it alive! And there is nothing that can compromise with that mission. (Ringer 1990, p. 36)

For Arnold Schoenberg, compromise was the greatest sin. He saw in the second commandment his credo—do not reduce the concept of the infinite God by limiting it to an image or to a name or to an easily recognizable icon. He remembered God's words to Moses in the desert. When Moses asks God, "By what name shall I call You?" the response is אֱלֹהֵי אֱשֶׁר אֱדַע, אֱדַע אֱלֹהֵי

usually translated as "I am what I am." Or, in Schoenberg's *midrash*, "don't limit your concept of God by giving it a name or a shape as the pagans had done."

Arnold Schoenberg composed this poem in 1925 (opus 27, no. 2):

You should not make yourself an image!
For an image limits, reduces,
Strangles that which should remain unlimited and unimaginable.
An image warrants a name:
You can take that only from below;
Do not worship that which is base!
You must believe in the spirit!
Immediate, unfeeling and unselfish,
You must, if you want to remain the chosen one!

In 1928 Arnold Schoenberg wrote his own libretto for an opera that he subsequently set to music. *Moses and Aaron* deals with the struggle between the purity of a great idea and the inability of the masses to grasp that idea. The opera revolves around the conflict between the two brothers who lead the Israelites in two very different ways. Moses understands the Divine Idea, but realizes that by putting the Idea into words it immediately perverts and cheapens that Idea. He is thus frustrated at his inability to communicate his great vision.

Aaron has no such compunctions. Aaron realizes that the Israelites have no idea what Moses is getting at, and that in order to make the people go along with this covenant he has to be able to present it in a way that ordinary mortals can readily understand. He is willing to compromise. This attitude was recognized some 2,000 years ago by Rabbi Hillel who wrote, "be thou of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and bringing them closer to the Torah." (Mishnah *Avot* 1:12) And so, to Moses' eventual chagrin, it is Aaron who speaks to the people, translating Moses's obscure ideas, working miracles for the impressionable slaves, and even fashioning a golden calf as a tangible object of worship.

In Schoenberg's opera, Moses never sings, his words are delivered in

severe inflected speech (*sprechstimme*). Aaron's words are always sung, conveying an appealing lyricism, an aura of popularity. Of course, this is based on the Biblical account that Moses had a speech defect, a problem communicating with people.

...לא איש דברים אנכי...
כי כבדפה וכבד לשון אנכי

I have never been a man of words
I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.
(Exod. 4:10)

...and on the image of Aaron as the great communicator.

הלא אהרן אחיך הלוי ידעתי כי דבר ידבר הוא
ודברת אליו ושמת את הדברים בפיו
ודבר הוא לך אל העם ותהיה הוא ותהיה לך לפה
ואתה תהיה לו לאלהים

There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily.
You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth...
and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your
spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him,
(Exod. 4:14-16)

Now look at this dialogue from the libretto of Schoenberg's opera:

Moses speaks:

My love is for my idea.
I live only for that idea.
To serve the divine idea is the purpose of the
freedom for which this people has been chosen.

Aaron responds:

No people can grasp more than just the perceivable part of the
whole idea, so it becomes understood by all the people in their
own accustomed way.

Then Aaron addresses Moses:

I was to speak in images,

while you spoke in ideas.
I was to speak to the heart,
you to the mind.

Listen also to the frustration in Moses' words:

Inconceivable God!
Inexpressible, many-sided idea,
will You let Yourself be explained in such a way?
Shall Aaron, my mouth, fashion this image?
Then I have fashioned an image too,
false, as all images must be.
Thus I am defeated!
Thus, what I believed before was but madness,
it can not and must not be given voice.
O word, thou word that I lack! (act 2, scene 5)

Moses is frustrated. He realizes that by putting God's words, the Decalogue, into stone, by phrasing the Divine idea in human language, by associating the Deity with such natural phenomena as thunder and lightning, he has reduced the Divine to the mundane.

There is a remarkable similarity between Schoenberg's concept of Moses and Aaron and that of Ahad Ha'Am. Ahad Ha'Am was the pen name for Asher Hirsch Ginzberg, a remarkable Hebrew essayist active at the turn of the century, and a leading figure of the Hibbat Zion movement. I have found no evidence that the composer was directly influenced by the Hebrew writer. The confluence of their ideas appears to be coincidental.

In his 1894 essay, "*Kohen Venavi*" ("Priest and Prophet"), anticipating Schoenberg's midrashic opera by some three decades, Ahad Ha'Am wrote:

In the early history of any epoch-making idea, there have always been men who have devoted themselves to that idea, and to it alone, all their powers, both physical and spiritual. Such men as these look at the world exclusively from the point of view of their idea, and wish to save society by it alone...they refuse to compromise. (p. 129)

The Prophet is essentially a one-sided man. A certain moral idea fills his entire being.... He desires nothing, strives for nothing, except to make every phase of his life around him an embodiment of that

idea in its perfect form. (p. 130)

The Prophet is thus a primal force. His action affects the character of the general harmony, while he himself does not become a part of that harmony, but remains always a man apart, a narrow-minded extremist, zealous for his own ideal, and intolerant of every other. And since he cannot have all that he would, he is in a perpetual state of anger and grief.... The other members of society, ...creatures of the general harmony, cry out after him, "The prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is mad!" (p. 131)

It is otherwise with the Priest. The Priest also fosters the Idea and desires to perpetuate it, but he is not of the race of the giants. He has not the strength to fight continually...he broadens his outlook and takes a wider view of the relation between his Idea and the facts of life. Not what ought to be, but what can be, is what he seeks....He accepts the complex "harmony" which has resulted from the conflict of that Idea with other forces. (p. 133)

In another essay, written in 1904 and entitled simply, "Moses," Ahad Ha'Am identified Moses as the archetypal prophet, citing as his proof-text the verses that conclude the Torah:

וְלֹא־קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ ה' פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים

Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses —
whom the LORD singled out (knew), face to face,
(Deut. 34:10)

And Ahad Ha'Am identified Aaron as the archetypal priest:

[Moses] has a brother in Egypt, a man of position, a Levite who knows how to shape his words to the needs of the time and place...the "Priest" of the future. (p. 320)

[Priests] are men who cannot rise to the Prophet's elevation and have no sympathy with his extremism, but are none the less nearer to him in spirit than the mass of humanity, and are capable of being influenced by him up to a certain point.... They stand between the Prophet and the world and transmit his influence by devious ways, adapting their methods to the needs of each particular time. (p. 314)

So where does this leave us in the struggle of the dialectic between the esoteric and the popular, between Moses and Aaron? Is there a way for ordinary people to transcend the intermediary and, like the prophet, confront God face to face?

In "The Lonely Man of Faith," Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (z"l) suggests that through the act of communal prayer we attempt to reconcile that dialectic.

The very essence of prayer is the covenantal experience of being together with and talking to God. ... Prayer is unimaginable without having man stand before and address himself to God in a manner reminiscent of the prophet's dialogue with God. ... Only within the covenantal community, which is formed by God descending upon the mountain and man, upon the call of the Lord, ascending the mountain, is a direct and personal relationship expressing itself in the prophetic "face to face" colloquy established. ... Prayer is basically an awareness of man finding himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, and to pray has one connotation only: to stand before God. (pp. 34-35)

Rabbi Soloveitchik's calling himself "a lonely man of faith" brings to mind the loneliness of the single-minded Arnold Schoenberg, or of the pure-thinking prophet Moses.

Arnold Schoenberg once wrote, "The ideas represented [in my opera, *Moses and Aaron*] are all so much tied in with my own personality." (Letters, p. 143) In other words, while Schoenberg closely identified with the purity of thought represented by Moses, he realized that only Aaron could have found the means of communication enabling him to compose an opera. The Moses and Aaron dialectic is the struggle within Schoenberg himself, and perhaps within all of us who grapple with these questions.

If we do not struggle, if we do not continue to discover, we fall prey to complacency. We worship the thunder and lightning and may be unable to realize that they are only the backdrop for the Divine idea. Each of us has the capacity to "ascend the mountain" and, like Moses, confront God face to face.

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