

SEASONS OF THE MOON

THE MONTH OF TISHREI

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The knowledge of my own existence is not an intellectual thing.

Nobody has to convince me that I exist and no one can persuade me that I am not here. Knowing that I exist lies above and beyond any other knowledge that I have.

The vast majority of the things that we “know,” are really the products of deduction. This kind of knowledge is like a labyrinth. Everything we already know helps us to integrate new information into the fabric of our overall world-picture. It’s axiomatic, however, that there must be some original point of cognition from which all other knowledge flows. If the majority of comprehension is associative, there must be some point of pure knowledge that is self-evident, known by itself and of itself. For without that elemental knowledge, without that point of departure, we could know nothing else.

That elemental knowledge is the knowledge of “I”. The very fact of our own existence. ■

The Torah commands us to never forget what happened at Mount Sinai. Several positive and negative commandments focus on not forgetting even one mitzva from Sinai. The Ramban explains¹ that because the Torah is transmitted to us as a personal experience, the truth of Sinai will never be called into doubt. For had we received the Torah from Moshe alone, even though his prophecy had been vindicated by signs and miracles, there would always be the possibility that some other prophet might use his own signs and wonders to contradict the Torah of Moshe. Doubt, says the Ramban, would then enter our hearts. However because we heard the Torah directly from God and our eyes saw at Sinai that there was no intermediary between the Almighty and us, the lie would be given to such a false prophet despite any miracle he might manufacture. Thus, says the Ramban, “*our eyes and our hearts must be constantly focused there.*”

THE “I” OF THE WORLD

We are obliged to preserve the same level of clarity that we had when we stood at Sinai. ■

This is a difficult commandment to understand. How can we hope to re-experience an event that we never attended? We are, at best, the recipients of a tradition, which, however scrupulously validated, can never even approximate first-hand experience. God does not make unreasonable demands of His people. How, then, are we supposed to fulfill this mitzva?

The Ramban himself answers² that it is axiomatic that “*we will not testify falsely to our children, nor will we bequeath to them something that is untrue. They (the children) will have no doubt whatsoever in the truth of our testimony to them.*”



But how does that answer our problem? The Ramban seems to be advancing a logical argument that Sinai is true because it’s axiomatic that parents doesn’t lie to their children about essential life information. However, he doesn’t seem to address the central issue: how can someone who was never at an event, believe with all the intensity of

someone who saw it with his own eyes and heard it with his own ears? ■

The Mishna in Avot begins with the words, “*Moshe received the Torah from Sinai...*” The wording of the Mishna is unusual. Did a mountain give the Torah to Moshe? Was it Sinai that gave Moshe the Torah? Why didn’t the Mishna say, “*Moshe received the Torah from God?*” The Mishna continues, “*and Yeboshua handed it down to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly.*” So we see from the continuation of this Mishna that the style here is to talk of “handing down”. Only the first step of the Torah’s transmission is called “receiving.” Why is this first step different from all the others?

THE "I" OF THE WORLD *continued*

The first words of this Mishna reveal the nature of the experience at Sinai. The Torah was not received at Sinai as a book, however holy or unique. What Moshe received was something called "*Torah from Sinai*" – a unique experience that altered each person's awareness of himself and of existence itself.

What was received at Sinai was a new and higher perception of self. A re-definition of "I." That existential clarity is what is called "*Torah from Sinai*." When our Sages teach us that the Jewish People reached a level of clarity beyond any doubt or contradiction, it was not because they experienced Har Sinai by means of an external sensory knowledge. If that had been the case then the certainty of future generations could never equal theirs. Rather each individual received *Torah from Sinai* as an awareness of existence as incontrovertible as the knowledge of self.

The Rambam calls the ninth of his Thirteen Principles of Faith "*the belief that the Torah was transferred from Sinai*." The Hebrew words that the Rambam uses for 'transferred' is *muateket*. *Muateket* implies a literal copy – a facsimile, a one-to-one copy of the original experience.

The experience of Sinai *is* the Torah that was passed down. The revelation at Sinai is more compelling than any empirical proof because it speaks to our *a priori* sense of existence, and just as no one can cast doubt on the fact that we exist, so it is impossible to cast doubt on the revelation at Sinai.

There are many well-documented cases of feral children who have, for one reason or another, been separated from human society at crucial stages of their development. When redeemed from the wild, they lack basic social skills. For example, they may eat with their hands at a great rate, have trouble learning to walk upright, and display a complete lack of interest in the human activity around them. They often seem mentally impaired and have almost insurmountable trouble learning a human language.

It is essentially impossible to convert a child who became isolated at a very young age into a normal member of society. In some basic way they lack an elemental knowledge of who they are, some fundamental aspect of identity.

Our parents, real or surrogate, give us much more than life itself. Our sense of self is inextricably bound up with the nurturing we receive from our them. From our parents we receive an essential part of our identity, our sense of "I".

In Masechet Sukka, the Talmud describes the great joy of the *Simchat Beit HaShoeva* celebration in the Beit HaMikdash. Hillel says, "*If I am here, everyone is here, but if I am not here, who is here?*"⁴ At first glance this seems a rather self-centered remark; however, the "I", to whom Hillel was referring was not himself. There is another "I" in the world. In Hebrew, "I" is a way of referring to God.

God is the "I" of existence. If He is here everything is here, but if He is not here, who is here? There can be no existence without the "I" of the world.

The *Simchat Beit HaShoeva* was the ceremony in which water was drawn up from the spring of *Gibon* and poured on the Altar. On a deeper level, what was drawn up through this celebration was a spirituality from the depths of being. The nature of true spirituality is always the connection of my sense of existence to the Source of all existence, when "I" connect to the ultimate "I". The absolute reality revealed at Sinai was that God is the "I" of the world. And just as no one doubts the existence of his or her own "I", so, at Sinai, no one doubted the existence of the "I" of the world.

This is what the Ramban means when he says that as parents "*we will not bequeath to them (our children) something that is untrue*," and "*They will have no doubt whatsoever in the truth of our testimony to them*."

As parents, we pass down to our children that sense of "I" that we received at Sinai, that incontrovertible knowledge of God's being that is inescapable as the knowledge of our own existence.

1. Ramban – Commentary on the Torah, Devarim 4:9

2. *ibid*.

3. Maharal

4. *Sukka* 53a