

Seeing (Four) Voices at Sinai

A stunning midrash illuminates the opening of the Song of Songs.

“O let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song of Songs 1:2), the lover says. And Rabbi Yochanan teaches this refers to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. An angel brought each of the Words of God to every single Israelite, asking, “Do you accept this matter upon yourself?” and the Israelite would answer “Yes!” Then the angel asked, “Do you accept the Divinity of the Holy One,” and the Israelite would answer *הן וְהן*, “Yes! And yes!” Whereupon the angel would kiss the Israelite upon the mouth—hence, “O let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!”¹

The midrash continues with an alternate version. Not an angel but God’s Word itself—*הַדְּבֹר עֲצָמוֹ*—would ask each Israelite, “Do you accept me upon yourself?” and the Israelite would answer *הן וְהן*, “Yes! And yes!” Whereupon the Word itself would kiss the Israelite upon the mouth.

“Thus is it written,” the midrash concludes, quoting Deuteronomy: “Do not forget the words that you saw with your own eyes” (Deut. 4:9), that is, how the Word spoke with you.²

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“The words you saw with your own eyes.” An obvious contradiction but one repeated elsewhere in the text. In the Book of Exodus, immediately after the Ten Commandments are delivered, we read, *וְכָל-הָעָם רָאוּ אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת*, “And the entire people saw the voices” (Exodus 20:15).³ This synesthetic turn of phrase evokes something numinous or supernatural, an indication that the voices emanating from Mount Sinai are unlike any other sound, conveying divine truth though multivocal harmony.

On Shavuot, we are invited once again into the timeless experience of Revelation. The encounter at Sinai is foundational, and we open our eyes to the voices echoing through the ages from its mythical peak. This year, I propose that we attune ourselves to four voices in particular, the voices originally responsible for composing the marvelous text we cherish and revere. Investigating the historical origin of the Torah and its wonderfully human authorship helps us to perceive in a new way the key insights that make it holy.

¹ Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:2:2.

² *Ibid.*

³ The plain sense is probably an idiom, not suggesting that the Hebrews literally “saw” sound but rather that they “perceived” it. The root *ראה* has a wide semantic range, including generic sensory perception as in this instance and Habakkuk 2:1. On the other hand, usually when *ראה* does not mean “see,” it means “understand,” “consider,” or “know.”

So let's dive in.

You might have heard of the Documentary Hypothesis. This is the most well-known theory explaining the origins of the Torah. At its heart, the Documentary Hypothesis contends that the Torah started as four separate and complete documents, which were compiled into the unified text we're familiar with today. These sources are known by single-letter names, held constant through the past two centuries though the assumptions behind them have changed. The Yahwist source is called J, the Elohist is E, the Priestly source is P, and the Deuteronomist is, naturally, D. Each of these sources – J, E, P, and D – has its own views on God, ritual, and the People of Israel; and each, importantly for us tonight, has its own Sinai story. These are the voices I'd like to invite us to see this year. Attuning ourselves to each unique voice helps us appreciate the diversity of our ancestors' theologies, expanding our own array of associations with the Mountain of God.

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Nearly 30 years ago, Baruch Schwartz of Hebrew University published a seminal essay in *Bible Review* (Oct. 1997) called "What Really Happened at Mount Sinai? Four Answers to One Question."⁴ There, Schwartz lays bare multiple inconsistencies in the biblical text, which, when lined up, reveal four distinct underlying stories.

For example, in some places, the Hebrews are shown to be eager to approach Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19:12, God warns them, "Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death;" and in Verse 21 God orders Moses, "Warn the people not to break through to the Eternal to see, lest many of them perish." However elsewhere, the Hebrews are very reluctant to encounter God. Exodus 19:16 portrays the Hebrews trembling at the sound of a very loud blast; and after the first ten statements, they beg Moses, "You speak to us and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die" (Ex. 20:16). We seem to have two different portraits of the Hebrews: eager on the one hand and terrified on the other.

After this plea for Moses to speak to God on the people's behalf, Moses does so: "And Moses approached the thick cloud where God was" (Ex. 20:18). God gives him a long list of rules, including the laws we read today in *Parashat Mishpatim*. At a certain point, the laws conclude, and the narration resumes with a curious inconsistency: "Then [God] said to Moses, 'Come up to the Eternal, you and Aaron and Nadab and Abihu and 70 elders of Israel, and you shall bow low from afar'" (Ex. 24:1). But Moses was already supposed to be on the mountain receiving the laws. This command to ascend, then, seems redundant.

In any event, this summoning seems to be for the purpose of receiving the tablets of law. As God says, "Come up to Me on the mountain and be there, and I will give you the stone tablets, the teaching and the instruction which I have written to teach them"

⁴ This article has been republished under the same name at thetorah.com/article/what-really-happened-at-mount-sinai.

replete with inventive, interesting, thoughtful, and substantive interpretations that address these difficulties in the text.

However, when taken as a whole, these inconsistencies build into a puzzle that an atomized approach cannot solve verse-by-verse. And when the Sinai event is held up against other episodes such as the Flood, the Plagues, and the Parting of the Sea, a new picture comes into view. Just like a two-dimensional “magic eye” image reveals a three-dimensional figure when you relax your gaze, our multi-dimensional text reveals a four-source background when we stack up the Torah’s heaps and mounds of inconsistencies.

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So what do we see when we isolate the four sources? In brief, E is the version most of us recall, and D retells E with a significant theological adjustment. In J, Moses ascends Sinai to enhance his relationship with God; and in P, Moses receives not laws but blueprints. Let’s take them one by one.

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The Elohist source, E, provides the basic account as most of us remember it. With thunder and lightning, God speaks within hearing of the People of Israel. The content includes עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים (Ex. 34:28), which we call the Ten Commandments, and then proceeds with the collection of laws in Exodus 21-23, which are called by Biblical scholars the “Covenant Code.” The purpose of the public revelation of the Ten Commandments seems to be validating Moses: “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after” (Ex. 19:9).⁸ In E’s telling, the laws that Moses promulgates should be venerated above all else since Moses is Israel’s greatest prophet (Num. 12:6-8) and also their last true one (Deut. 34:10-12, which is an E text).⁹ This story includes the Golden Calf episode, which takes place after the giving of the Ten Commandments, and it and describes the Tent of Meeting being established outside the camp.

⁸ See Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses*, “E’s Decalogue is not a covenant. It is *not* law. It is instead a demonstration of prophecy that prepares the Israelites to accept the covenantal stipulations that Moses subsequently receives while alone on the mountain and then conveys to the Israelites (Exod 20:21; 24:3-8). In line with these events, the first words that Moses is to speak to the Israelites after receiving the laws are a confirmation of the prophetic demonstration that they experienced: ‘You have perceived that I have spoken to you from heaven!’ (Exod 20:22)” (78-79).

⁹ See Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses*, “According to E, non-Mosaic prophets see visions and dreams. They also speak in riddles. Each of these prophetic modes E considers *obstructed*. E contrasts such obstructed modes of interaction with the divine—such *mediated mediations*—with Moses’s direct interactions with the deity” (112). Furthermore, “E hereby addresses its contemporary religious context. It acknowledges that other prophets exist but characterizes them as both unreliable and unnecessary in light of its alternative system of law and elders—a system that it claims was established already centuries prior” (116).

These are long texts, as you know, but I'd like to take a moment to read the portions of Exodus 19 that belong to the E source alone, using the 1985 JPS translation. It starts with the second half of Exodus 19:2 and continues through the first half of Verse 9. Then it skips to the middle of Verse 16, continues in Verse 17, skips Verse 18, includes Verse 19, and then omits the rest of the chapter before proceeding to Chapter 20 and the Ten Commandments. But as I read it, I suspect the text will sound complete to your ears and inclusive of all the main details of the story you know.

Exodus 19 ² And Israel encamped there in front of the mountain,	יט ב ויחננו במדבר ויחן-שם ישראל נגד הַהָר:
³ and Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel:	ג ומשה עלה אל-הַאֱלֹהִים ויקרא אליו יהוה מן-הַהָר לאמר פה תאמר לבית יַעֲקֹב וּתְגִיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
⁴ 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me.	ד אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל-כַּנְפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי:
⁵ Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine,	ה וְעַתָּה אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקֻלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים כִּי-לִי כָּל-הָאָרֶץ:
⁶ but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."	ו וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קֳדוֹשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֵל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
⁷ Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the Lord had commanded him.	ז וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיִּשֶׁם לִפְנֵיהֶם אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ יְהוָה:
⁸ All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord.	ח וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל-הָעָם יְחִדּוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁבַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הָעָם אֵל-יְהוָה:
⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after."	ט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵל-מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעַב הָעָנָן כַּעֲבוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עַמּוּד וְגַם-בְּךָ יֶאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם:
¹⁶ And, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.	טז וַיְהִי קִלְת וּבְרָקִים וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הַהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חָזֵק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרַד כָּל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה:
¹⁷ Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.	יז וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם לְקִרְאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְיַצְּבוּ בַתְּחִמֹת הַהָר:

<p>¹⁹ The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.</p>	<p>יט וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֹזֵק מְאֹד מִשָּׁה וַיִּדְבֹר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל:</p>
<p>^{20:1} [And] God spoke all these words, saying... [The Ten Commandments].</p>	<p>א וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאמֹר:</p>

After this dramatic scene and the public recitation of the Ten Commandments and the subsequent delivery of the Covenant Code, Moses writes down the words of God, reads a record of the covenant to the people, and they famously reply *נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע*, “we shall do and we shall understand” (Ex. 24:7). Moses enacts a covenantal ritual with sacrificial blood, and the people eat and drink. He re-ascends the mountain to receive a written copy of “the stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God” (Ex. 31:18), and it is with these in hand that Moses witnesses the people’s worship of the Golden Calf. Moses prevails upon God to forgive the people, and God agrees. However, God can send only an angel into the Promised Land with them, unable to tolerate their stubbornness. Moses is lauded as the special prophet who speaks with God face-to-face, and the events at Horeb conclude with a recounting of Moses’s writing down the second set of the Ten Commandments.

This familiar story emphasizes the laws and the role of Moses as a unique prophetic lawgiver. Though it refers to Israel as kingdom of priests, it also reveals their tragic penchant for idolatry. The revelation on the mountain is a unique event since God cannot abide for long among the people, and that makes the legal system all the more necessary and important. In all of these aspects, E’s account differs from P and J, to which we shall now turn.

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The Priestly source, P, presents both the briefest and the longest story of Sinai. In contrast with E’s lengthy description of God’s presence manifesting on the mountain, P’s scene is quite terse, starting with Exodus 19:1 and then skipping to 24:16-18:

<p>Exodus 19 ¹ On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai.</p>	<p>יט א בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי:</p>
<p>Exodus 24 ¹⁶ The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day God called to Moses from the midst of the cloud.</p>	<p>כד טז וַיִּשְׁכֹּן כְּבוֹד-יְהוָה עַל-הַר סִינַי וַיִּכְסְהוּ הָעָנָן שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִתּוֹךְ הָעָנָן:</p>
<p>¹⁷ Now the Presence of the Lord appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain.</p>	<p>יז וּמְרֵאָה כְּבוֹד יְהוָה כָּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>

¹⁸ Moses went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain.	יח וַיבֹא מֹשֶׁה בְּתוֹךְ הָעָנָן וַיַּעַל אֶל-הָהָר:
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That’s it. A cloud and consuming fire, and Moses goes up. What follows, though, are 13 chapters describing the building of the Tabernacle. So the revelation at Sinai is needed not for laws or prophetic validation, as in E, but rather for blueprints. The Mishkan – God’s sacred dwelling-place in the wilderness – takes center stage, and Sinai is simply the place where Moses learns how to build it.

In P, the Mishkan serves as a utopian model for the Temple in Jerusalem. It also provides a context for the elaborate laws of purity and holiness beholden on the People of Israel for all time. These laws are communicated to Moses in the Mishkan, and they are originally applied to the Mishkan. And generally speaking, they are followed. Projecting into the future of the story (or reflecting the present of its author), P depicts Israel as largely reliable and obedient, assuming perpetual adherence to its ritual standards. As for Moses, a dazzling vignette describes his descent from the mountain, his face aglow with divine light. Like in E, Moses is of central importance, though as we have seen, the rules he imparts in P are of a very different nature.

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The Yahwist source, J, on the other hand, contains almost no legislation whatsoever. J’s Sinai account focuses on the relationship between Moses and God, which symbolizes the divine relationship with Israel writ large.

In J, the typically quarrelsome Israelites had demanded water at a place which is renamed Massah and Meribah “because they tried the Eternal, asking ‘is the Eternal in our midst or not?’” (Ex. 17:7). As if in reply, when the Hebrews arrive at Sinai in the very next scene, they are instructed to prepare for the descent of the Eternal. God comes down in fire and beckons Moses to go up the mountain with Aaron, his eldest sons, and 70 elders. They heed God’s call and see the deity at the top of the mountain.

Following this encounter, God informs Moses that God will not accompany the Israelites personally into the Promised Land. Like E, though in contrast to P, J sees them as consistently rebellious; accordingly, God says, “I will not go in your midst ... lest I end you on the way” (Ex. 33:3). So far, J lines up with E. But then Moses intercedes. He begs God to go personally among the Israelites, and God agrees: “I will go in the lead and will lighten your burden” (Ex. 33:14), God says. But Moses wants further assurance and asks to see God’s face; accommodating him once again, God replies by revealing the Divine Attributes of Mercy and showing Moses God’s back. God repeats the promise that the Hebrews will inhabit Canaan and concludes, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I make a covenant with you and with Israel” (Ex. 34:27).

Thus in J, Mount Sinai is the place where Moses comes in closest contact with the God of Israel. It’s the site of covenant, negotiated and renewed, and the place where God discloses the most important of all divine characteristics: mercy. It’s no wonder the

compiler braided this story together with the Golden Calf. E and J, each in their own way, portray God as importantly and ultimately ready to forgive.

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In turning to the Torah's fourth historical source, the Deuteronomist, we also return to where we began. Well, almost. In D, Moses retells the story of Horeb just before the Hebrews enter the Promised Land, reminding them of what they'd experienced 38 years before.

Notably, in D, the generation on the precipice of entering Canaan is the same generation that escaped Egypt and stood at the foot of the mountain.¹⁰ Thus we read in Deuteronomy 5: "It was not with our ancestors that the Eternal made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today. Face to face the Eternal spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire" (Deut. 5:4-5). Historically speaking, this comes as no surprise. The tradition that a generation of Israelites had to die before the people could pass into the land belongs to J and P; however, E is the Deuteronomist's primary source.

Nevertheless, there are some key differences between E and D. Most prominently, the 4th and 10th commandments, which concern keeping Shabbat and the prohibition against coveting, vary significantly between these sources. As well, in D, the Ten Commandments first and foremost constitute a covenant (Deut. 4:13), whereas in E, as I mentioned earlier, the revelation serves primarily to credential Moses as an unparalleled prophetic authority (Ex. 19:9).¹¹ And finally – for tonight, at least – there is a major difference in how much the people heard of what was revealed at the mountain's peak.

To this point, E, as we mentioned, includes three chapters of legal text known to Jewish tradition as *Parashat Mishpatim*. After these laws are relayed, the narrative resumes with an elaborate covenantal ritual that binds the Hebrews to the requirements of all four chapters of laws. In D, however, Moses receives all of Deuteronomy's rules at Horeb but doesn't share them with the people until they stand at Canaan's border.¹² So whereas E presents laws as exercises in legal reasoning, D tells a story in which laws are communicated when they're needed. They are in human hands for the sake of human lives.

¹⁰ According to Jeffrey Stackert, the initial D document followed E in portraying no generation change in the wilderness: "the Deuteronomic (D) source of the Pentateuch, though it endorses the view that the Israelites sojourned in the wilderness for forty years, does *not* depict generation change during this period. The Deuteronomic authors instead imagined that the Israelites who experienced the Exodus survived the forty years of wilderness wandering and entered the promise land. Accordingly, though it knew the generation change tradition, D rejected the conceptualization of the prolonged wilderness trek as a punishment for Israelite faithlessness. It instead reimagined this period, transforming it from one of punishment to one of training and preparation" ("The Wilderness Period without Generation Change: The Deuteronomic Portrait of Israel's Forty-Year Journey," *Vetus Testamentum* 70, 2020, 696-697). References within Deuteronomy that suggest a generation change (such as 1:34-36 and 2:16), he suggests, are later interpolations.

¹¹ See above, note 8.

¹² See Ex. 28:69.

So in D, Moses ascends the mountain to inherit laws that he will promulgate in his own time when the need arises. The literary effect is subtle but significant as many of the laws in D are similar – but not identical – to those in E. For the Deuteronomist, then, laws can adapt to meet the circumstances of the time. After all, the Torah is not in heaven but rather in our very hearts and our mouths (Deut. 30:14). If E’s mountaintop revelation is about the laws *per se*, D’s revelation is about the *process* of receiving and transmitting those laws.

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This is the picture that comes into when we zoom in to the bumps and seams of the complete Torah text. In each of the Torah’s four historical sources, revelation at Mount Sinai – or Horeb – is critically important; though each source emphasizes something distinctive and unique. For E, Horeb is a place of lawgiving, and the public proclamation of the Ten Commandments validates the authority of Israel’s most exceptional prophet. For D as well, Horeb is a place of lawgiving, though the laws are presented to Israel only when they are needed. In P, Sinai is where Moses learns how to build God’s dwelling-place on earth; and in J, Sinai is where he strengthens his relationship with the Eternal.

Does this approach answer all questions? Certainly not. The Documentary Hypothesis isn’t airtight, and there are some questions it struggles to answer. However, it remains, in my opinion, the most plausible account of the Torah’s historic roots and solves many more problems than it creates.

Crucially, understanding the backstory to the Torah does not desanctify the text in any way. Yes, Rabbinic tradition posits that the entire Torah was communicated to Moses at Mount Sinai – but the Torah itself never claims that. Taking the Torah seriously and on its own terms leads us to see the integrity and the significance of each of its four sources. We learn that our ancestors did not see Sinai as a single event or even as a single place. The various stories they bequeathed to their spiritual heirs give voice to diverse theologies and values, reflecting the multiplicity of human experience and the mosaic nature of the Jewish people. We need not all see the same thing when we look at Torah, and how much the more must we not all see the same thing when we look for God.

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Our celebration of Torah on Shavuot means celebrating it in its fulness. We see the voices describing Sinai to us, individual and distinct and speaking to us across the ages; and we say to those voices, like each Israelite in the midrash, וַיֵּן וַיֵּן, meaning not only “Yes! And yes!” but also “Look! And see!”

Thus we can follow in the footsteps of the mythical King Solomon, the purported author of the Song of Songs. The midrash reports that he was a dedicated scholar of Torah, seeking wisdom wherever he could find it. He would learn from experts in Bible

and Mishnah, of course, and he would also seek truth in “everything that is done under the sun” (Kohelet 1:13), including poetry and science. In response to his quest for knowledge, the Holy One said to him, דְּבַרְי תוֹרָה אֵילְלֶתָּ, “You have scouted after matters of Torah. By your life, I shall not withhold your reward” (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:1:7).

We, too, who scout after all matters of Torah, will find in our quest many blessings of reward. Spiritual insight, legal reasoning, moral discernment, historical development, religious practice, artistic expression... all are found within Torah, and the more perspectives at the table, the richer the conversation.

May our holiday, our year, and our Jewish journeys beyond grow deeper and stronger with every voice we see.