

High Holiday Sermons

Rabbi Ira F. Stone

Rosh Hashanah - Day 2

Revelation is not a word that most of us take seriously. It is one of those fictions of the religious tradition. The idea of God meeting humanity at Mount Sinai and promulgating not only a series of foundational ethical principles but following that up with a detailed legal and cultic code is simply preposterous. Or, perhaps some of us do believe that it happened just that way. If so, the rest of us counseled by our sophisticated training, by our higher educations, simply shake our head half in disbelief and half in pity. Any one who is religious in the conventional sense of the word, believing in the literal descriptions of events in the bible is a simpleton. And if they happen to be highly educated people, then they “will” simplicity in regard to religious ideas, usually for ulterior motives, even when these motives are unconscious ones. Their motives might be family stability, or escape from the rigors of contemporary life, or a sense of community in an otherwise lonely world. Both sides of the debate agree that the meaning of revelation is contained in the literal text of the Torah and therefore what they disagree about is the literal truth-possibility inherent in the description of these events. That being the case, as I indicated yesterday, the scientist has won the debate because the so-called religionist has acceded to his definition of the terms of the debate.

The futility of this debate and its consequences we see around us almost everyday. It is in response to this futility, the futility of literalism, that I spoke yesterday of having spent a lifetime opposing. It is the one idea that I have wanted to clearly articulate over all these years and which I have stated as clearly as I can yesterday and reiterate today. Literalism is among the greatest contemporary dangers to thought, to right action and to faith. In that regard the meaning of Revelation, not the literal meaning but the fundamental idea which we have inherited via our tradition needs to be investigated so that it may be recovered from the futility this debate has relegated it to.

Let us suggest that the terms of the debate are different. Let us suggest that the story of Sinai and God’s appearance there is precisely a story, but a story intended to convey hard won insights into the nature of life and its meaning. Insights forged out of centuries of difficult speculation, insights that attempt to meet the criteria of conforming to the real, felt experiences of what human beings hold dear and to convey those experiences within a framework suitable both for easy transmission, and suitable for meeting the needs of people of all ages and intellectual capabilities. Let us suggest that this story represents the highest level of meditative philosophy able to express not only that which is provable by reason as the Greeks would have it, but also what is empirically true about human experience outside the bounds of mere reason. On this reading we must ask ourselves: ‘What does this story reveal and transmit about the human condition such that it can be considered a truth about that condition as incontrovertible as any rational argument?’ We must also ask ourselves: “If the story conveys these truths, what are the consequences for action incumbent upon us?”

If creation functioned to affirm our experience of the fact that we are not responsible for our own creation, then I would suggest that Revelation affirms our experience that we are not created without a past. We come into this world weighted down with a history, a past we never lived but is none the less ours. This is an existential fact of every human being. We are no sooner conscious than we are conscious of where we come from, though we've never been anywhere else. In order to have a present we must use the material of the past to shape it. And without a pre-existing past we would not be able to shape ourselves at all. Again, as I said yesterday, the past comes to us from another. It comes to us from outside of ourselves, from outside of our own being and therefore it simultaneously delivers us a past as a revelation and also reveals to us the fact that our individual being is not the only being. We exist next to someone else. The fact of Revelation by virtue of its establishing a relationship between us and others must convey to us not only the presence of another, but the appropriate laws that guide that relationship. I use the word laws self-consciously. It is part of the assertion of the Revelation story that the past that reveals the other to us comes accompanied by unbreakable laws constituting what we call ethics; laws no less necessary to posit than the natural scientist needs to posit the existence of certain laws of nature without which the system simply would not hold together. Clearly the idea conveyed is that violating these fundamental laws forged out of the past out of which we shape ourselves results in our shaping a malformed present. Disobedience, in other words, of these laws is not a matter of some literal reward and punishment delivered with fire and brimstone, but perhaps a much more terrible punishment and wonderful reward for their being real rather than consigned to fiction, a world that works versus a world that does not. It is these laws and their consequences that challenge us and cause us to be so easily lulled into dismissing the story. If we can consign it to its literalist form we can dismiss it as fiction and fiction makes no demands on us. Perhaps, given the seriousness of the consequences of making the choice whether or not to take the story and its implications seriously, it would do us well to use this occasion to re-visit the laws that our past bequeaths to us as we enter consciousness: the so-called Ten Commandments. Some of you have probably heard me or other Rabbis talk about the mistranslation of *aseret ha-dibrot* as Ten Commandments. The Hebrew only means the ten words, or perhaps the ten statements. However in light of the discussion of these two days I want to suggest that the translation be altered to understand the meaning as the Ten Fundamental Laws of Moral Nature, which is probably why the tradition grew up of translating it as Ten commandments to begin with. I do not want to work through each one of the statements; they are familiar enough. But I do want to suggest that at their heart the Ten Commandments deal with various manifestations of idolatry, but idolatry understood in a particular way, probably its original way. The vigor with which biblical tradition attacks idolatry at every turn is not so much occasioned by the fear that we will set up statues and pray to them, or call rocks God. That level of idolatry is another instance of literalist interpretation of scripture this time assuming that the writer's of the bible, and their antagonists for that matter, must have had a primitive, simplistic and literal idea of God such that it could contain the obviously ludicrous idea of making a God with one's own hand. If that had been the problem there not would have been a problem for very long. However, the idea of not seeing the debt that we owe the other, not recognizing the gap between ourselves and the other to whom we owe the gift of our creation, replacing the other in our vision and more

importantly in our sense of obligation to the self, to the ego, that is the idolatry that is at the heart of destabilizing the world. It is this idolatry that requires vigilance not only in regard to the images we make, but also in regard to how we treat our parents, how we spend our time and how we resist spending time through the Sabbath; it is this idolatry that destabilizes society through murder and theft; that destabilizes families through adultery and envy. Most of all it is an idolatry that deceives us into thinking that we are not indebted an idolatry that convinces us that we need not be grateful for the very life we possess. In this way, the Ten Fundamental Laws of Moral Nature are as inviolable as the laws of physical nature. Not that they cannot be transgressed. Indeed just as someone can jump off a bridge thinking that the law of gravity does not apply to him, so too one can ignore the law of keeping the Sabbath, or adultery, thinking that these laws do not apply to him. But in the end, the consequences for those around us will prove the folly of that belief. We will have traded the immemorial past that has been given us to shape the present for good, instead shaping or contributing to the shaping of a monstrously deformed reality.

To dismiss this empirical reality of Revelation is to deny that we have a past. Despite the fact that so many of us profess an interest in history, that interest does not permit an interest in and affection for our past. History is an objective science. History is one of those tools that render Scripture into fiction. Its use in helping us deny the empirical reality of Revelation helps us to deny equally that our past is informed by an imperative for moral action in the present. To deny the past and to deny the imperative, the command for moral action in the present is to compromise the possibility of the future. This denial is a rejection of our very humanity. Since we know that we owe our existence to another, since we know that our consciousness of ourselves is formed out of the material given to us from the past that we did not experience literally, since we know that these gifts of life and consciousness come accompanied by obligation, when we deny the gifts and refuse the obligation we are denying ourselves. In that denial we are transformed into creatures with no past and therefore no future; we are transformed into creatures with no obligations and therefore no fetters on our naked will to power. The world we live in sometimes seems to be made up precisely of such creatures who I have refrained from calling people. That is because it is sometimes so. But, says our Torah not by way of fiction but by way of fact, the law is not far from you; it is not in heaven, it is in your mouth and in your heart to discover and to do. Therefore choose life: A life that includes a past, a present and a future.

It is to a consideration of the future that we must turn next. The future that is always a surprise and in so far as it is a surprise accounts for the possibility of something new. But before we can talk intelligently about the future, we must talk of the impediments that stand between our future and us. Thus on *Kol Nidre* we will take up the idea of sin and on Yom Kippur the idea of the world to come.

For now I conclude again with a prayer: That we loose the blinders that we ourselves construct that stand between us and our own experience of Revelation. That we learn to read again the Sinai narrative not as literal history but as a reminder of the fact that we are not born as the tabula rasa that the enlightenment would insist we are. And that we

know we are not, but hide this fact from ourselves in fear of being overwhelmed by the obligations that past places upon us. I pray that we again hear the voice of Sinai and like we once did commit ourselves to accept the challenge, promising to *na-ase v'nishma*, to do and to hear.