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Does God Speak to Man?, 1956.

DOES GOD SPEAK TO MAN?

With Special Reference to the Revelations
at the Burning Bush at Mount Sinai
and the Ten Commandments

The Temple
December 9, 1956

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Like many of you, I have been very much intrigued by the reactions which I have heard to the film, "The Ten Commandments." Many who have spoken to me were impressed by its spectacular grandeur, by the rich coloring of the various scenes, and by the apparent meticulous concern with the detail which the producers of this film showed. Most with whom I talked thought that it was, at least, good entertainment. But a few, a few have told me that they were not taken by the film. They felt that the film was rather prosaic, that it dealt too literally, too fundamentally -- too fundamentalistically, rather -- with the details of the various miracles and of the sounding of the divine voice which the Book of Exodus recounts.

I find myself in agreement with these latter. The Bible is anything but a simple-minded historical account of some ancient history replete with pre-scientific credulities. The Bible is rich poetry. The Bible is profound philosophy. The Bible is important soul-searching on the part of the sages and teachers of our people, and these literary disciplines require an imaginative, a symbolic language. They lose everything but their superficiality when they are translated into literal terms. Imagine what would happen if we pictured the famous Twenty-Third Psalm in terms of the camera. We would see there God, dressed in a simple shepherd's robe -- man-size -- carefully, gently guarding a group of docile man-sheep. None

of us would be enthralled by this picture as we are by the lines of the Psalm. The Psalm appeals to our emotions, to our enthusiasms, to our mental thought processes -- not so much to our eye and to our senses.

The Bible is filled, even historical narrative portions of the Bible, with poetic imagery. The Bible represents the crystallization of the search by the Jewish people for meaning in life and the meaning behind life, and when the language of the Bible deals with one of its climactic moments, such as the events at Sinai, we are lifted above ourselves -- we are enthralled and thrilled by the language. When we read of the might which nature revealed at Sinai, we are thrilled by it. We look behind it and through it at the deeper layers of meaning which are in the Biblical text, but I must confess that when the thunder actually peals, and when the lightning actually strikes, and when a human voice is actually heard speaking the divine words, that we lose certain of the enthrallment which the Biblical text had for it because the photographic lens cannot capture the deeper layers of meaning which the poet's eye and ear can produce for us. But having said this, I must add that Mr. DeMille and his writers and producers did no violence to the Biblical text. They were not responsible for making any claims as to miracles or as to any revelation which the Bible itself does not make. If we disagree, if we have an argument with the belief that God can speak to man, that God has spoken to man, our argument is with the Bible -- our argument is with Judaism -- and not with some Hollywood scrivener because our faith considers itself a revealed faith. It is one of the postulates of our faith that God has in the past, and can in the future, and may be even at this moment speaking to man. The Bible story is replete with such examples -- Moses, in the wilderness, receiving his commission to enter the service of God from a voice speaking to him

from a bush that burned but was not consumed -- Moses at the court of Pharaoh, conducting his diplomatic maneuvering with the king, in each case consulting with God beforehand as to the tack and as to the position which he should take -- Moses in the wilderness atop Sinai, hearing then the voice of God giving to the Jewish people and to mankind the basic moral principles and the basic religious principles of life -- Moses during the rest of his life, leading the people in the desert through the long forty years of wandering, being guided by and directed by the will of God which came to him time and again revealing to him God's word.

The Bible does make these claims. And though Judaism would be far from assuming that we must believe in revelation, in the fact that God did speak to Moses and that God did speak to man, in any unsophisticated terms, in any terms such as the silver screen presents for us, Judaism does affirm that the truths of our faith, that which was revealed at Sinai, is the word of God, and because it is the word of God it represents a higher order of truth than any philosophy or any set of moral or religious principles which man has otherwise devised. Our set of truths, Judaism says, are timeless rather than timely. They are ordained by God rather than derived and defined by man and hence they are infallible. True and endearing, we say in our prayer book, is God's words which He has spoken to us through our prophets.

Now, many of us may disagree with the belief in revelation. Certainly, it is a common position to do so. There are many people who deny entirely any belief in the supernatural and these would prefer to think of the Bible as the prime example of human insight rather than as Judaism considers it, as the prime example of divine foresight. And others among us who do believe in the supernatural, who do believe in a God, are nevertheless gravely

troubled by many of the psychological factors which surround revelation. We know that when we transpose a belief in revelation into modern terms, we are dealing very often with an unbalanced and deranged personality. If one of our friends were to come to us and to say to us that he has heard the word of God and that God has commanded him to go to General Nasser and to demand from General Nasser, under threat of the most condign punishment, that he right all the wrongs which he has committed against Israel, we would consider such a person to be in need of psychiatric help. And when we transpose our thinking from the present to the past, we wonder if we can actually lend credence to men who did believe as this friend of our might have believed -- who did believe that God had actually spoken to them. We wonder if we are dealing with supernatural revelation or purely human psychiatric pathology.

Now, strangely, strangely as in almost all things, our Bible has long since developed disposition. In our Bible we read, for instance, that there is a constant struggle between the false prophet and the true prophet, between the man who speaks the word of God and the man who speaks that which he has not heard and predicts that which will never be. The Bible knows full well that there are many charlatons among those who claim to be spokesmen of God and knows full well that there are many who are demented and deranged and who, because of their derangement and lack of balance, feel that they are possessed of some spirit. After all, it was not Freud but Josiah -- Josiah, a prophet of Israel, who said "the prophet is a demented man, is a fool. And ever since that day Judaism has been quite critical in its willingness to accept any statement uttered by a man who claims to be speaking in the name of God. Yes, we must be very mindful of this fact -- mindful that since the earliest times the Bible has

been concerned with separating the chaff from the wheat, the false prophet from the true prophet. But the Bible knows another truth -- one which we in our day often forget. The Bible resists the temptation to generalize and to extend from its own experience and from our own experience. The Bible is unwilling to say that because whom we know who speak in God's name are demented, therefore all who speak in God's name are demented. The Bible, after all, reflects a society which was much more hypersensitive to matters spiritual and religious -- a society in which it was conceived to be normal to think of spirits and of voices abounding among men. But more important than this, I think, is the fact that if we argue if the man who speaks in the name of God is an unbalanced personality always and obviously, we are in a sense throwing a brick and shattering the mirror which reflects to the world the greatest contribution to mankind's spiritual advance which has ever been made because, after all, these demented men, if they were such, these men who claim to be speaking the word of God were those men who propounded for mankind a wholly new, a wholly unique, a wholly radical concept of human personality -- of human dignity, of the unity and the oneness and the moral personality of God.

Beliefs about religion and about moral life which man had never before considered and which ever since had been used as the bedrock and the foundation for all human advance. If we argue this way we are in the strange position of claiming that man's highest sanity is a product of his deepest insanity, and I think few of us would wish to make that claim. But we must, as the Rabbis and the Bible always was -- we must be very careful of the type of credence which we give to a belief in revelation.

The Bible, our sages, and Rabbis were very modern men. They were, if anything, hypercritical. They knew that something mysterious, something

the messianic
ged that in

Our Rabbis and our sages emphasized that in the daily ordering of life, in your life and in mine, in their age, in our age, in all ages, that have been since this great epochal beginning -- man's reason is preeminent and man must trust his reason. In our Talmud we read an interesting story to this effect. It is a story of a famous debate which took place in the school of Tiberius. An issue had been raised there as to the acceptability of a certain oven, an oven of aknai, as to its ritual cleanliness or not. The Rabbis heard the arguments of the advocates of its acceptability and those who claimed that it must be rejected, and they took a vote, and since they were seventy men in this academy, the vote was sixty-nine against its acceptability and one, a certain Rabbi Eliazar, in favor of it. And usually, since Jewish law demands that in such matters you need only a simple majority, this would have ended the debate -- but not so. Rabbi Eliazar was convinced

that his position was correct, that despite the weight of majority opinion, he was right, and he told us and rose and he looked at his colleagues and he said, "You know, I am so sure that I am right that the tree -- the famous Carob tree -- which stands in the courtyard of this academy will prove me so." How so, they asked. He said, "If I am right, let that Carob tree move three yards down the path." And the Carob tree moved three yards down the path, and the Rabbis took a vote and the vote was sixty-nine against the acceptability of this oven and one, Rabbi Eliazer, for it. But Rabbi Eliazer was a persistent soul, and he was so sure that he was right that he said, "If I am right, let the stream which flows in front of our college doors, flow backwards away from the sea." And the men tramped out of their seats and they looked at the river, and sure enough, its waters were flowing backwards away from the sea. And so the Rabbis re-entered the academy and another vote was taken, and the vote was still sixty-nine against and one, Rabbi Eliazer, for. But Rabbi Eliazer would not give up, and he said, God will yet prove me right. If I am right, let the heavens open and let a voice be heard from the heavens saying that the law is according to Rabbi Eliazer. And a voice was heard. The heavens opened up, and a (Hebrew) came down and the Rabbis heard from heaven the laws according to Rabbi Eliazer. And another vote was taken and there were sixty-nine against the acceptability of the oven and only one, Rabbi Eliazer, in favor.

Now, Jewish life has always followed this majority. We have had our Rabbi Eliazers, our men who were overwhelmed by the possibility of extra-sensory perception, of immediate continuous revelation -- men who sought to substantiate every claim of men of any age that God had spoken to them or that they had had some revelation of the will of God. But basically Jewish life has followed the rule of reason and of reasonableness, of interpretation,

and we have never, as a people, been willing to subordinate this basic attitude because of the reality once in history or perhaps once or twice at the climactic moments of history and the fact that God has spoken to man.

And I believe that a third factor must also enter our decisions -- the basic life attitudes, the basic prescriptions were ordained. The a factor which again reveals to us the very critical attitude which the Rabbis took towards this belief in revelation. It is one of the interesting inventions of Jewish thought, a pious fabrication made out of whole cloth, these were given at Sinai and ever since Jewish life has flowed within the one basic to all Jewish thinking that there were at Sinai not one revelation, but two. Not only the six hundred and thirteen laws which are written large on the pages of our Bible were given there to Moses and to every age. God chose the path which man must follow. Man chooses the vehicle, the mode of locomotion which he will use to travel that way. given there also an oral law -- a law which was spoken only, given to Moses and by Moses by word of mouth to Joshua and by Joshua to the elders of his generation and thence by word of mouth from the leaders, the teachers of it has always been very much a living, very critical, about the acceptance and the type of willing acceptance which man must make of this fact. And when we consider in our own day whether we believe in the fact that God Bible could be emended and if necessary abrogated. This oral law -- this concept that God revealed two laws at Sinai -- was important because it prevented Judaism ever from being confined into very narrow and restrictive lines, into a narrow and restrictive orthodoxy, because it was in effect, fathers tended to ask the theological question: "can God speak to man?" said that the religious teachers of every age could, through their use of reason, through their interpretation of this oral law, this ephemeral law which was actually their understanding of Jewish life, that these religious and the capability of hearing God? When we ask this question, we are asking teachers could interpret the laws of the Bible, emend the, change them, and what is an essential question about all life. We are asking how is it that if necessary let them fall into non-practice.

But what is more important for us in this discussion as to whether ability to create great poetry, to paint a picture which will enthral and God actually speaks to man, is that what this concept of a dual revelation

at Sinai implies is that our Rabbis considered the revelation at Sinai to be symbolically true rather than dogmatically true. Our Rabbis considered the fact that at Sinai the great essentials of our faith, the basic truths, the basic life attitudes, the basic prescriptions were ordained. The belief in the one God, the respect for human personality, the observance of the Sabbath and of the Festivals, the basic pattern of moral life -- these were given at Sinai and ever since Jewish life has flowed within the banks of these broad channels. But the details of religious life were, in essence, left up to the religious leaders and teachers in the community of every age. God chose the path which man must follow. Man chooses the vehicle, the mode of locomotion which he will use to travel that way.

So our Rabbis, our teachers, our faith has always accepted the truth of a Sinaitic revelation -- the truth that God does speak to man but it has always been very sophisticated, very critical, about the acceptance and the type of willing acceptance which man must make of this fact. And when we consider in our own day whether we believe in the fact that God can speak to man, we must take this critical attitude of our fathers into account. And if any change has taken place in the criticism or the attitudes or the arguments which we might advance, it is that whereas our fathers tended to ask the theological question: can God speak to man -- we in an age trained by Freud, and Jung, and Adler tend to ask the psychological question: how is it that the human being has the potentiality and the capability of hearing God? When we ask this question, we are asking what is an essential question about all life. We are asking how is it that there is genius among men. How is it that some men have an instinctive ability to create great poetry, to paint a picture which will enthrall and

thrill millions of people, to use their hands and to mold and to sculpt a figure whose lines and whose bulk and whose shape and whose symmetry will be a thing of beauty to all generations? How is it that some men have an ability to overleap the bounds of human knowledge and to bring back to mankind from the unknown some knowledge about our lives and about our universe? What we are asking is the question how is it that a Beethoven, how is it that a Michelangelo, or a Da Vinci, or a Plato, or an Isaiah -- how is it that such men have an instinctive ability to see and to hear and to feel depths of life, and depths of thought, and heights of thought which the average human being cannot. We are asking how is it that there is genius. How can we account for it? What makes for it? What makes for the sudden flashing forth of an idea? The sudden ability on the part of an individual, among millions of his compatriots, to synthesize the thought of his age or to create a thing which will appeal artistically and musically to all ages.

To the question -- how is it that there is genius -- we can offer no answer. All we can say is that there is genius. We recognize it. We know it when it is abroad among us. We know it by its works. We know that a Michelangelo was a genius by the pictures in the Sistine Chapel. We know that a David was a genius by his statues of Moses. We know that a Beethoven was a genius when we hear produced one of his great symphonies. There is no question about it. And we know that an Isaiah, that a Jeremiah, that a Moses was a genius when we read the lines of our Biblical text which revealed the new knowledge, the new insights into life which he revealed for man. And why -- why does a genius paint? Why does a genius produce great music? Why does a genius prophesy? Here, again, we can only ask the question. The

painter, Cezanne, was asked one day why it was that he painted, and his answer was simply, "J'ai besoin -- I need to." The prophet, Jeremiah, the most introspective of all the prophets, tells us in the Bible why he prophesies. His answer is a simple one: " -- I can't contain myself. I can't remain silent."

Genius cries out to express itself. Genius does what it must and the prophetic genius, the genius which senses God, which senses the voice of God, must, because of the reality which it knows, must speak God's word. Now, it is an interesting thing about prophetic genius that it flourished apparently in one brief span of time and has then tended to cease among men. Need this be so? We know not. Is it true that the physiology of our being is such that the potentiality to hear God's word has been destroyed? No one knows, but I really do not think so. I think that what has happened is that our inner ear, the ear of the prophet, has been so deafened by the clamor and by the cacophony of the civilization, that we can no longer hear the music of the spheres, that we can no longer hear the will of God. It is an interesting fact that all of the prophets of the Bible prophesied in solitude. Moses, alone in the vast wilderness of the desert, Moses there heard in a burning bush, with no one around him, the will of God. Moses, alone, climbed Mount Sinai and there, surrounded by no man, heard God's will. Elijah, whose story was read to us this morning, left Beer-Sheba, the last inhabitable place of the Negev, and went out a day's journey into the wilderness, and there he heard the still, small voice. And Amos heard God's voice alone while tending the flock of his sheep. And Isaiah heard God's voice when he was wandering alone through the deserted corridors of the Temple.

Men need solitude, introspection, quiet, in order to plumb and to hear the basic sounds, the voice of God in our universe. And if we wish to

cultivate some awareness of the basic meaning of life, we need too, I believe, in our lives a great deal more of silence, and of quietude, and of introspection.

And one other thought comes to mind about this ability of men, of men of genius, to hear the will of God. Moses heard it only after he had made the long, hard climb up the mountain -- up Sinai. You can hear the word of God, you can create great art, you can write magnificent poetry or music, only if you have begun the long, hard climb yourself. There are mute and glorious Miltons among us only because there are men who refuse to learn the techniques of poetry or to think through the basic attitudes of philosophy, or to learn the basic immutable laws of the position of color and of line in painting. Preparation is necessary to prophecy. Spiritual preparation was the first step of an Isaiah, of an Amos, or of a Micah, or of a Moses before he was able and prepared to see the will of God.

I believe that God spoke to man. I believe that in our age God continues to speak to man in many ways. I believe in the fact of genius and I believe in the fact of revelation, and I would only wish the wish which God in our own Bible makes for all of our people -- would that all Israel were prophets, would that all of us had that capacity, and would that all of us, at least, live up to the finest capacity that is in us. God spoke to man -- we are the better for it. We can only pray that somehow, some way, He will continue to speak to men of capability and of capacity in our age and help us, too, out of our difficulties.

Despite its acceptance of the reality of divine inspiration, Judaism has been quite sober-minded and critical of any claim of supernatural voices. Generally Judaism has preferred to grow by interpretation rather than by revelation. Little early prophecy dropped out of favor. The spirit of prophecy was said to have ceased with Malachi in the 4th cent B.C. It is a fundamental principle of Jewish law that no prophet is to be credited - unless he can be shown to be a reformer - whose advice is based on a noble moral and religious principle. ~~The~~ Reason replaced revelation as a guide to religious truth and was put in the Talmud as a wonderful illustration of the extent to which the rabbis developed the superiority of the human mind over apparent divine utterances in human affairs.



Finally, Judaism ^{had} ~~approached~~ ^{interpreted} the revelation at Sinai symbolically rather than literally. No one doubted the source. No one doubted the inspiration of the biblical teaching.

But the text which is now man's was all that our teachers only one of 2 sets of teaching which had been handed down at Sinai - along with the 613 commandments which had been given a complementary & more extensive oral law which had been passed down by word of mouth from Moses to Joshua & the elders then from the rabbis of one generation to that of the next.

Of course, this ^{2nd} ~~oral~~ revelation was a fiction created out of whole cloth - But it served a valuable purpose:

- ① It prevented Jew. from being restricted within the narrow limits of a rigid Bibleism - of a fixed & unmodified orthodoxy which could not be adapted to meet new conditions

And more important it seemed to make it a symbol of approval to the Jew. at Sinai. It made it possible for the biblical law to be amended & even changed when necessary - It raised

Judaism was far from naive or unsophisticated in its attitude toward the reality of revelation. It resisted the temptation to overly concern itself with the mystery of the Divine working among men. It preferred the light of human reason to the half-light of the fortune-teller's booth or sorcerer's tent. It concentrated on working out, reasonably and rationally, the relevance to the life of men that which had been revealed. Judaism asserted that man must never sacrifice his reason on the altar of awe nor allow his good judgment to be outweighed by an apparent manifestation of the Divine will. The Rabbi Eliezers were few among our people; the majority always insisted upon the primacy of human reason.

The Rabbis interpreted even the revelation at Sinai in a very sophisticated manner. They never doubted that the revelation took place. They never challenged the inspiration of the Biblical teaching. But, in effect, they treated the teachings handed down at Sinai symbolically rather than literally.

A unique creation of the Jewish mind is the concept that there were two complementary revelations at Sinai. On the one hand, God gave to man the 613 ~~xxxx~~ commandments which are inscribed in our Bible. On the other hand, he informed Moses of myriad other laws, which were not written down. Those other laws Moses related to Aaron, and Aaron to (?), and they were handed down from generation to generation by the religious leaders of our people. The Rabbis held that the whole oral tradition was given at Sinai at the same moment as the Ten Commandments. Of course this second revelation is a pure fiction. It is a pious fabrication ~~xxxxxx~~ created out of whole cloth.

It served, however, an important purpose. The Bible can be not only an ennobling document but a restrictive one, if your concept of its sanctity does not permit your changing or adding to its text. Judaism might have become, very early in its history, a narrow and restrictive orthodoxy...had not the Rabbis insisted that because of the equal sanctity

of the oral law, on which so much of Jewish life is based, Biblical proscriptions could be ~~amended~~ or even abrogated.

More important for us is the fact that in creating this fiction of a second revelation, ^{and thus an even more complete designation of} the Rabbis in point of fact emphasized the symbolic importance of the First Revelation at Sinai. They look^{ed} on Sinai as the fountainhead of Jewish thought, from which all else flows. Here the essentials of a new religion~~x~~ were revealed to man. Here a radically new way of life was outlined. The essentials of this new way of life were eternally true--they ~~were~~ immutable, they ~~were~~ guaranteed by their Divine origin.

Though numbered among the literalists of religious history, our Rabbis were actually--in practice--sophisticated, modern, critical thinkers, fully ~~xxxxx~~ capable of appreciating the difficulties of a belief in revelation, but also fully aware of the importance of believing ~~xx~~ ultimately in the truth of revelation.

We are ^{then} not the first generation of men ~~xxxxxxxx~~ to wonder whether God speaks to man. Many of the answers that other generations formulated will help us in our thinking. ~~And perhaps~~ if there is any difference between our age and theirs, it is that we ^{tend to} pose our questions in psychological terms. ~~They~~ asked the theological question--"Is it possible for God to speak to man?"--and we realize that we can never answer that question. We concern ourselves today with this question: "Is it possible for man to hear God?"

We are probing here the profoundest depths of our souls. We are asking about powers and talents which are apparently given to only a chosen few. We are asking, really, what makes for genius? What makes for that brilliant flashing-forth of a new idea or a new melody or a new poetic image? We are asking the question--"What makes the man of genius that which he is, what permits him to do that which he so patently can do"---and to that question there is no answer.

Creativity is one of the ^{profoundest} ~~greatest~~ mysteries of human life. What makes one man able to put colors upon a canvas in such a way that other men will thrill to his creation? What makes one man able to mold clay with his hands so that others will be inspired by his vision? What enables one thinker to overpass the limits of the human mind and bring back to ^{from the unknown} ~~us~~ new knowledge about the universe in which we live. How shall we account for a Michelangelo, a Raphael, a Da Vinci, a Beethoven, an Einstein? In all fields of human endeavor--that flashing-forth of human endeavor impresses us as the work of a mysterious force acting upon the individual. The artist cannot account for it himself. When Cezanne was asked why he painted, he answered simply: "I need to."

Genius does what it must. The power is simply there and forces itself to be used.

Where men in our day specialize in the artistic and scientific fields and where genius seems to flower especially in those areas, the ancient Jews were uniquely capable in the study of the human spirit, and genius flowered among them in matters religious. A Moses or an Isaiah, I am ~~xxxxxxx~~ sure, would not explain the power which made him certain that he understood the will of God. It was simply there. And because a whole series of men of spiritual genius lived among our people, our world has been dowered by the greatest spiritual literature of all time--by our Bible.

Cezanne painted because he needed to. Similarly, the prophets spoke because they had to. Jeremiah, the most introspective of them all, could offer no better explanation for his need to prophesy than--"I cannot contain myself."

The mystery of revelation, then, it would seem to me, is not one that permits of explanation. It simply exists. It is simply a gift which a kind God has given to man ^{at hand to enter me} and for which man ^{all men} should ever humbly thank his God. If we do not understand revelation, then it is perhaps that our make-up is such that the inner ear attuned to God has been deafened--deafened, I might suggest, by the constant clamor and cacophony of civilization, which has innured our ear to the really important voices in life and in Nature. / But we do not know. / All we can say is that the world is never the same for ~~XXXXXX~~ the men of genius who have walked among us--and the world is certainly not the same for men of genius having heard the word of God and having expressed that word to men.

Permit me one last thought. Moses, the greatest of the prophets who has ever lived, the only man for whom the Bible claims that he spoke with God face to face, had first to ascend to the heights of Sinai before God would condescend to speak with him. Whatever genius, whatever talent there may be in us, needs to be trained, needs to be developed, if we are to ^{There are "inner voice" millions" and when the temple of spirit has not been reached} have any chance of hearing God or of creating greatly. There are powers in each of our beings which we have not yet begun to realize. There are potentialities which have lain dormant in our souls through the long centuries until we have forgotten that they really exist. One of these is the power of being aware of the presence and the voice of God.

Moses heard it in a desert on a high hill. Amos heard it while wandering alone with his flocks in the wilderness near the Jordan. Isaiah heard it alone in the silent corridors of the Temple at Jerusalem. No man has ever heard this voice when he was surrounded by the busy-ness of every day living. It requires detachment. It requires the silent hours

of soul-searching. It requires quiet purposeful preparation. It requires that we be concerned with the basic elements of life. Would that each of us might learn to find time in his own life for the introspection--for the listening within--without which the voice of God can never be heard.

I believe that God has spoken to man. I believe that God speaks often to men, in a variety of ways. I believe~~x~~ that God can speak to you if you will but listen.

Would that all my people were prophets.

