



A Truly Sublime Moment: Torah Reflections on *Shavuot*

(First Day - Exodus 19:1 - 20:23)

Second Day - Deuteronomy 14:22 - 16:17, Numbers 28:26-31)

6-7 Sivan 5769

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Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Longinus' *On The Sublime* was considered a liberating force to French and English literary critics.¹ Because of its enthusiastic impressions on Greek and Hebrew writers, this work itself is considered among the finest examples of sublime writing. Longinus taught that the sublime dominates a reader's spirit not through lyrical persuasion but by evoking enthusiasm. The sublime gives us food for thought. The sublime draws us near to the "*heights or mind of G-d*".² Longinus teaches that descriptions of natural events in a majestic manner are passages that in their simplicity contribute to an elevation of thought and grandeur.³ They are meant to awaken the reader to the power of G-d's word.⁴ Longinus used this passage in our text this week.

"On the third day, as the morning dawned, there was thunder and lightening, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn. All the people in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp towards G-d, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain. ... G-d spoke all these words, saying."

(Ex. 19:16-17; 20:1)

Over 3300 years ago, this very morning at the foot of Mt. Sinai, our people reacted to feelings of being overwhelmed by standing frozen, and waiting silently in fear and awe for something to happen. Nothing moved. Not a sound was heard, only silence. But in that ultimate sublime moment, G-d the great empathic teacher gave us a very special life-affirming gift. It was from this sublime silence that the Torah was given to our foreparents and to us:

On that day, which we commemorate each year on *Shavuot*, the Midrash teaches that G-d's Voice reverberated with intensity and a strength that had never before been revealed. The Voice was so powerful that it penetrated into the heart of every individual standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai - and yet not a sound was heard.

G-d spoke to each heart in the most personal, sublime way. Each person was chosen by G-d to become the recipient of the Torah. But a most interesting theological thought is this one: There is a tradition that G-d never stopped talking from Mt. Sinai. It is only all the white noise surrounding us that prevents us from hearing the Voice.

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Longinus is a 1st Century C.E. Greek author. Such writers as Pope, Fielding, Gibbon and Milton were inspired by Longinus' enthusiasm. In Milton's *On Education* (1634), Longinus is placed on equal footing with Plato.

2 Longinus, xxxvi.

3 Longinus, xxxvi 2.

4 A well-known example of this is found in Longinus, ix 9- " 'G-d said' - WHAT? - 'Let there be Light and there was Light. Let the Earth be and the Earth was.' " The 'WHAT?' is designed to awaken in the reader to the power of G-d to create by word alone.

The dictionary defines silence as being the absence of noise. The Torah defines silence as being the key to a positive, healthy and holistic relationship between the Eternal and us. In Jewish tradition, silence contains the four healing virtues of hearing (the inner voice of our pain and love), memory (reclaiming our life story by refusing to forget the joys), action (continuing to live ourselves) and wisdom (every life is a teaching). Shavuot is the sublime gate that opens us to an existence above and beyond sound.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggested *“the essence of Shavuot is not the giving of the Torah but the preparedness of human beings to accept it. Just as the Jews in the wilderness prepared themselves so must we.”*

The blessing for Torah study concludes with the phrase- *“la’asok b’divre Torah.”* The verb ‘asak means to *“immerse”, “be involved with”* and *“work at”*. When we use Biblical narrative pieces to enrich our understanding of our own life story pieces and those moments when we too are frozen, then we can live truly the full sense of that special sublime moment at Sinai.

Only when we allow the sublime silence to engulf us can we hear it. Shavuot is the day that we decide if our hearts are going to listen to this sublime silence and unite together with G-d in genuine celebration.

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