

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## Revelation and Truth



### Context

*Many classical religious traditions make claim to being the sole route to understanding God (and, often, the only possibility of salvation). While this voice is found in some Jewish texts, many are less absolutist, more open to the knowledge and understanding of others. As the Tosefta asserts, "the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come".*

*How do we approach questions of truth and revelation as Reform Jews? **Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers**, Community Educator at Reform Judaism, who also teaches those in training to be rabbis and Christian clergy about interfaith relations, shares her personal understanding<sup>i</sup>.*

### Content

In dialogue I always encourage participants to speak from the 'I' not the 'we' or 'they'. We cannot represent anything other than ourselves, our faiths being diverse from within, and our lived experience unique to us. Our lenses and experiences are shaped by our faith, and we speak from within it, but not for its entirety.

One's approach to scripture and revelation is a key element in how one co-exists with others' truths - so this is my starting point, as it is for many intra-Jewish and dialogical conversations. In Exodus 33:18-20, Moses asks God to reveal God's full glory to him: *And he [Moses] said: 'Show me, I pray You, Your glory.' And God said: 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Eternal before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.' And God said: 'You cannot see My face, for humans shall not see Me and live.'*

How revelation is understood is crucial to any absolutist position. But so it is for me, as a theological pluralist. This text from the Torah encapsulates a universal truth embedded in the story of Jewish revelation - whether you understand Sinai literally or metaphorically. It couldn't point more clearly to the human inability to embrace the fullness of the Truth that is the Divine.

Moses, the receiver of Torah, is not granted the honour of seeing the fullness of God – he sees only God's back. The Torah he receives is couched in language and imagery specific to people, time and place. Moses, in Jewish tradition, is the greatest of all prophets but if even he can only see where God has been and experiences revelation in language specific to him and his people, how can anyone else be expected to grasp more? Indeed, isn't that the lesson from Sinai? Moses was a great leader but nonetheless human, limited - as I am limited - by the events and surroundings that formed him and, therefore, experienced revelation through his remarkable but particular lenses. So even with the revelation at Sinai, the giving of truth to the Jewish people, the Truth is limited. No one person – or group of people - can grasp divine fullness or lay claim to a monopoly on the Truth of God. There is space for more. There is room for the other.

This theme is beautifully expressed in the collection of classical Rabbinic Midrashim known as Pesikta de Rav Kahana, (12:25). The passage conveys the understanding of a God who appears for each person, and differently for different people, and yet who is still Whole and Complete: *R. Levi said: The Holy Blessed One appeared to them like a picture with a face looking at every side. A thousand people might be looking at [this picture], but it [appears to be] looking at each one of them.* The midrash asserts the possibility of each individual entering into relationship with God as an individual. It also conceives of God as appearing to each individual in a way they are able to grasp, expressed in a manner that speaks to them, where they are, with their limited yet unique and necessary individual mix of experiences and preconceptions.

In this midrash God is “seen” in many different ways. In Exodus Rabbah 5:9, God speaks and is heard in a way appropriate to each individual: *The voice of God spoke to each Israelite, that means to each and every person. God's voice was heard and understood because the voice spoke to each individual according to that person's particular ability to hear and understand...to the elderly in keeping with their ability, to the young in keeping with their ability, to the little ones in keeping with their ability, and so on.*

These Jewish insights into revelation give expression to what one might call a post-modern sense that we each experience and see things differently, yet God is able to work within these human limitations to be in relationship to us. So I come to dialogue keen to hear and understand what God has revealed to those around the table, wanting to share with them what is true in my religious life. We can see a little more of the whole together than alone.

Diversity, then, is at the heart of the matter. We are created, I would argue, to inhabit that diversity. As the Talmud says in Tractate Berachot 58a: *Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he says, Blessed is the One who discerns secrets, for the mind of each is different from that of the other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other.* If we are diverse and yet all in the image of God, it may well be that it is our infinite diversity and difference that is integral to the image of the All Encompassing.

But it is not just in the Torah and in the midrashim which explore its meaning that I discover Judaism is a faith with space for pluralism and multiplicity. The Talmud, that vast compendium of rabbinic debate – and disagreement – is a further, shining demonstration of this. Each page is constructed as a conversation, and the text contains redacted discussions from sages who lived generations apart. Each page contains a core paragraph, sometimes of Mishnah and always of Gemara - commentary on the Mishnah. The material in the Mishnah dates from the first two centuries of the Common Era and the Gemara is composed of voices from the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries. In columns to either side of this are the later commentaries of Rashi (11th century) and the Tosafot (medieval commentators following on from, and sometimes disagreeing with, Rashi). The page continues to work outwards with later and later commentaries and glosses. In all of these conversations, one voice does not necessarily agree with the other voice, but tries to understand the application of the rule or value in its own time. In the Gemara, importantly, conclusions are not always drawn, and minority opinions are fastidiously recorded, in case a later generation should need them. It is a model where the discussion is as important - if not more so - than the conclusion. Each page encourages us to add our own voice, for our generation. Rather than a simple rule book, it demonstrates that grasping what is demanded of us by God – and who God is - is far from easy to establish. The ‘Truth’ appears and sounds different - depending on who is reading the text when and in what circumstances.

If I do not possess all the truth - and neither do you - together we may come to understand something closer to the Truth. Whether literally or metaphorically, many eyes and ears received revelation at Sinai; no one will have seen exactly the same thing or heard the same words. So only when they recount the experience together, can the narration come closer to the reality.

What a wonderful metaphor of human experience and human faith!

## **Contemplation**

*Text can of course be used to argue any number of ‘truths’ – we can find texts to justify radical change, or to demand conservatism; to command conflict or to enjoin us to pursue peace. The same is, of course, true of our relationships with other faiths. However, what Debbie demonstrates is that openness to the Truths of others is an authentic voice in our tradition, that can speak loudly within our Judaism.*

*What does this mean in practice for us? How do we encounter disagreements about fundamental questions of human purpose with integrity?*

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<sup>i</sup> A longer version of this essay can be found in:

Deep calls to Deep: Transforming Conversations between Jews and Christians; Rabbi Tony Bayfield (ed); SCM Press, 2017