

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2017 Sermon Slam
Rabbi William Kaufman
“The Concept of Revelation”

Shavuot is known as the time of the giving of the Torah. The Giver of the Torah is God. How God gave the Torah is called Revelation. It is an ultimate mystery—namely, the communication of the Infinite God with finite human beings.

The leading contemporary Jewish thinker on revelation is A.J. Heschel. (On June 10th at a Kiddush conversation, I will compare and contrast A.J. Heschel, who believed in revelation with Mordecai M. Kaplan who did not.) In addressing the concept revelation, Heschel makes us aware of an obstacle to understanding it. The obstacle is literal-mindedness: taking it literally, imagining that God spoke on a long distance telephone. Heschel wrote: “The error of literal-mindedness is in assuming that things and words have only one meaning. The meaning of words in scientific language must be clear and distinct, conveying the same concept to all people. In poetry, the right word is one that evokes a plurality of meanings that must be understood on more than one level.”

To get into the spirit of Shavuot, then, we must think poetically and not literally.