

Reflections on Revelation
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Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, used to say, “When I pray, I speak to God; When I study Torah, God speaks to me.”

How can we understand the notion of God speaking to humans, the idea of revelation?

It is this idea of revelation, the Giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, that Shavuot celebrates. According to some, God only spoke the first two of the Ten Commandments, the others were given by Moses. So the question is: What did God reveal at Sinai? And in general, what does revelation mean?

According to scholars of religion, there are two types of revelation. First, verbal revelation or propositional revelation: God actually spoke in words and propositions or sentences. Second, non-propositional revelation in which God reveals only his presence. The words are human interpretation. Human beings experience the presence of God but do not actually hear words.

Whether God communicated by words or presence, what is the Bible claiming about revelation? The contemporary Jewish thinker who has the most to say about revelation is Abraham J. Heschel. In his book, *God in Search of Man*, Heschel writes that revelation means, “God does not stand aloof from our cries. Life is a response, not a soliloquy.” When we pray, we are responding to something greater than ourselves. It is not something we just make up. Shavuot calls us to answer which voice we respond to: the voice of Self or the voice of God. The claim is that we are not alone in the world, that we are not a soliloquy.