

## When the Seraphim Kept Silent

Exodus 20 and Psalm 19

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 11, 2012, by the Rev. Dr. Lauren Winner

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So that you aren't sitting on the edge of your pew, wondering what this sermon is about, I will tell you:

It is about the first letter

Of the first word

Of the first of the ten commandments;

Which is, is the letter *aleph*.

You have an *aleph* there in your bulletin, in the "about the preacher" box.

It looks a little like an X – or a little like a dancing woman, her hands in the air, maybe holding tambourines, as she spins around – or some have said that the *aleph* is the image of a human face: the long slash in the middle is the nose, and the two curving commas on the left and right are eyes.

The *aleph* happens also to be the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, so in that sense it is a little like our letter "A."

But it is unlike A at the level of sound

For the letter A makes a sound, or rather many sounds: it makes the long sound of *ape* and *ache* and *amen* and the short sound of *black lab*. Linguists say that if you have the right accent, if you are an old-time long-ago New Englander, then the letter A can call forth up to nine different sounds from your throat.

The letter *aleph*, by contrast, is silent.

The English alphabet has no silent letters but Hebrew has two and *aleph* is one of them. It sounds like this: <pause>.

That is the first letter of the first word of the first commandment. *Aleph*.<sup>1</sup>

So here is what happened that morning, at Mt Sinai:

The people had been praying and cleansing themselves and even abstaining from sex in preparation for some kind of great revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> All of the teachings about the *aleph* in this sermon come from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. He has written about the importance of the aleph in the revelation at Mt. Sinai in numerous places, and the notes to this sermon will direct readers to various passages in his oeuvre. An insightful and illuminating critique of some readings of the *aleph* may be found in Moshe Idel, *Old World, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 121-125.

And when the day came it came with thunder, and with lightning, and with clouds so thick it was like heaven itself had dropped down around the mountain. And Moses gathered the people at the foot of the mountain, he gathered the men and the women and all the children<sup>2</sup>, and if the thunder and lightning weren't enough, other miraculous things began to happen, such as the wombs of pregnant women were turned transparent, so that their not-yet-born babies could witness the revelation for themselves and decades later tell their great -grandchildren that they had really and truly been there.<sup>3</sup>

Also, a little less miraculously but still unusual, a trumpet sounded, and the people gathered, trembling,

and they looked up to the mountain

and the very first thing God said

was *aleph*.

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The Decalogue represents God's greatest revelation to Israel in the Hebrew Scripture. Nowhere in the Old Testament is "God's will for us ...shown [more] clearly [than] in the Ten Commandments."<sup>4</sup>

Today, we often acknowledge the Ten Commandments even as we minify them. We do this by invoking the Decalogue without really engaging it. So we will happily, heatedly debate the propriety of posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms; we read books with titles like *The Ten Commandments of Dating* and we check websites called The Ten Commandments to Decorating Your Home and The Ten Commandments of Dog Ownership. These eponymous gestures simultaneously highlight the Commandments and evade them.

The "Ten Commandments of" genre is easy to mock—but actually, our countless 21<sup>st</sup>-century variations on a Ten Commandments theme point to something important about the Decalogue – the Decalogue has been enduring and essential in part because it encapsulates an entire ethos in memorable, pithy form and authoritative, direct, and directive language.

When we stop to listen to the *actual* Ten Commandments, not the Ten Commandments of ouzo, phlebotomy or yoga, but the actual Ten Commandments from the actual book of Exodus – when we stop to listen to those, what we hear is liberation. Liberation is not all we hear, but liberation is the bass note, it is the root of the chord. These ten injunctions tell us about the kind of people we are to free to be, now that God has liberated us from Egypt. Now that God has liberated us, we are free to rest; we are free to live honorably and peaceably with our families; we are free to

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<sup>2</sup> The claim that women were present at Sinai arguably differs from the *psaht* (i.e. in Ex 19:15); the rabbinic tradition, however, women were at Sinai see Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 21.

<sup>4</sup> The Catechism of the Episcopal Church, Book of Common Prayer.

be a people that does not exploit or murder or steal. We are free to become one another's friends, and the friends of God.<sup>5</sup>

The Ten Commandments will thread through the rest of Scripture, and reading on we see how the Decalogue is, over time, both expanded and made more exacting, to better and more precisely shape our life with God: so just a few verses after God first prohibits stealing, that commandment is shown to apply to the theft of people – Israel is not to kidnap. And later on in the Pentateuch, the Sabbath commandment is shown to extend beyond Saturday rest to sabbaticals and jubilees; indeed the fourth commandment animates an entire economics, an economics that recognizes the goodness of land, labor, person, and time--an economics keyed to limits, and to the common good.

At the same time that the reader is learning all the Ten Commandments might encompass, she is also shown what *ignoring* the Decalogue can mean. Keep reading and you will see what happens when David covets his neighbor's wife, and when Ahab covets his neighbor's vineyard.<sup>6</sup>

So these ten words will ever after thread through Israel's life. They are strong thread; buttonhole thread; and they have the potential to hold us fast to God.

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God began that most important revelation of those most important commandments with an *aleph*, a silent letter.

You have noticed, no doubt, that we do not live in a silent world. We live in world full of sound.

Some of the sound is glorious. Some of it is music, or the sound of kindness; some of it is the sound of love and justice--and some of the sound is noise.

OSHA--the federal agency charged with overseeing workplace safety--requires that any workers who use tools emitting an average of 85 decibels, those workers have to wear ear protection. It is worth noting that many children's toys emit 85 decibels, 90 decibels, 100. The Dora Magic Adventure Wand and the Road Rippers Rush & Rescue Fire Truck can be as loud as some lawnmowers, and your hearing might be safer at a construction site than inside a classroom at your child's daycare center.<sup>7</sup>

Restaurants are another noisy spot, and it's no accident that they are. It turns out that when the human body hears loud noise, we begin to crave other kinds of overstimulation--so you will eat

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<sup>5</sup> The liberatory nature of the commandments maybe found in Thomas G. Long, "Dancing the Decalogue," *Christian Century*, 123 no 5 (Mr 7 2006), 17.

<sup>6</sup> The four examples of the Ten Commandments' featuring in other scriptural discussions (kidnapping; Sabbath economics; David's covetousness; Ahab's covetousness) are spelled out in Patrick Miller, "Preaching the Ten Commandments," *Journal for Preachers*, 25 no 2 (Lent 2002), 8.

<sup>7</sup> On OSHA, and for the observation that hearing in daycare centers may be more endangered than hearing at some other workplaces, see Garret Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book about Noise* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 5. For the specific decibel level of the two toys named, see <http://www.audiologist.org/component/content/article/18-press-releases/254-toys-sound-off-in-dangerous-zone-sight-a-hearing-association-releases-annual-noisy-toys-list.html>

more salty food when you are listening to loud music, and restaurant-goers drink 30% more alcohol when the music is loud. Restaurants that want us to run up the tab crank up the volume.<sup>8</sup>

If you're like me, the noisiest thing of all is your own inner chatter. Noisier than your grandchildren's toys is the inner prattle, the inner narrator, telling you both true things and false things, alternatively focusing your attention and turning your head; if you're like me, that voice is the loudest thing of all.

That morning at Mt. Sinai, God's *aleph* silenced all the inner chatter. God's *aleph* silenced the thunder. It silenced the trumpets. The aleph silenced the people's trembling, and the people's shakes.

God began the revelation at Mt Sinai with silence so that for once, we would be able to hear what God was saying.<sup>9</sup>

Rabbi Abahu said, in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: "When God gave the Torah no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed. None of the Ophanim stirred a wing. The Seraphim did not say 'Holy, Holy.' The sea did not roar, the creatures spoke not, the whole world was hushed into silence and then the voice went forth: 'I am the Lord your God.'"<sup>10</sup>

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It was the only time God ever spoke to the people like that. God never again did that, call us all together and clap some thunder and sound trumpets and speak like that.<sup>11</sup>

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In writing about the letter aleph, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has pointed out that although you teach kids in Hebrew school that *aleph* is a silent letter, really it's a little more complex. Really the *aleph* is a glottal stop. If you "open your mouth and [start] to make a sound [and then] STOP"

That STOP is the sound of *aleph*.

So it's silent, but it's a particular kind of silent.

It is the non-sound, the silent sound, that precedes the making of all other sounds.

It is the non-sound you have to make before you can say anything else.

It is the non-sound that makes speech possible.

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<sup>8</sup> George Prochnik, *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 100-101

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *God Was in This Place, and I, I Did Not Know* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1991), 30, 117-126.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus Rabbah 29:9, quoted in Lawrence Kushner, *I'm God, You're Not: Observations on Organized Religion* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 193.

<sup>11</sup> On this point, see Barbara Brown Taylor, "Four Stops for Wilderness Preachers," *Journal for Preachers*, 24 no 2 (Lent 2001), 6.

So in speaking the silent *aleph* at Mt Sinai, God did more than just still the interfering noise; God also created the conditions for speech – for God’s own speech, and also for Israel’s speech. In other words, at Mt Sinai, God began a conversation.<sup>12</sup> Which helps us remember that revelation is not just the giving of decrees; it is also the quickening of a relationship.

And yet, having quickened a relationship, never again did God speak to all of Israel that way. Sinai was the only time.

Which might be a cause for despair, only it’s not, for God gave and gives still many ways to hear God’s voice. Scripture, of course, is one of the places where now, in these post-Sinai years when we are not called to mountain bottoms in awe and trembling, we can still hear God speak.

And the Scriptures themselves tell us about places even beyond Scripture where we may still hear from God.

So our psalm, for example, tells us that the things we hear from and about God in the *commandments* – we hear those same things, or something awfully like them, from God’s Creation; from Creation itself; from the natural world and the cosmos. Just as the sun illumines the earth, the Psalmist says, so too “The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.” And just as nothing can hide from the sun’s heat, so too a sinful person’s transgressions cannot be hidden from the Lord. It seems that the kind of truths about God that we know from the commandments we can also know from the wordless praise that creation continually sings.<sup>13</sup> So God may not call us to the mountain with a trumpet but we can still hear God’s voice in the very mountains themselves.

And also we can hear God from one another.

Remember how the aleph looks like a face—the nose and two eyes?

So picture this:

There at the base of Mt Sinai

God’s voice went forth and the people heard what they heard

And then God finished speaking

And the people uncricked their necks and turned their gaze away from the mountain

And just as the sea began clearing its throat to roar again, and just as the Ophanim began unfurling their wings, and just as the seraphim began to take up their holy holies once more, just as the fowl began thinking about flight

Just then

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Miracles: A Young Person's Guide to Jewish Spiritual Awareness* (UAHC Press, 1987), 30; Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Letters: A Mystical Alef-bait* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights publishing, 1990 ed.), 21, 23.

<sup>13</sup> This reading of Psalm 19 comes from Jon Levenson, “The Theologies of Commandment in Biblical Israel,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 73 no 1-2 (1980), 29.

The people looked at one another,  
and they saw the *aleph* that they had just heard  
the *aleph* of God  
Imprinted on the eyes and nose of their neighbor's face  
And they knew that ever after  
This was a way they could hear from God, too.<sup>14</sup>

So on those days when God seemed very far away and silent  
On days when cracking open a Bible just didn't seem possible  
Days when instead of wordlessly singing God's glory, nature seemed to be standing around  
with its arms crossed  
On those days maybe a woman would be having what she thought was an ordinary  
conversation with her neighbor  
about a recipe, say, or perhaps about the upcoming presidential election  
And maybe down the street two colleagues in an office were talking about their weekend plans  
And maybe in a classroom across town a teacher was telling his first-graders about subtraction  
These were just ordinary conversations on a day when God was far away  
and lo and behold  
Unexpectedly  
In that discussion about whether or not it was a good idea to double the muffin recipe  
our two neighborly women actually heard from God  
and lo and behold unexpectedly  
the co-workers plotting their weekend outings heard God  
and lo and behold while discussing how many apples were left over if you took away two  
the teacher and his students heard from God.

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *The Way into the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 67.

That is part of the promise of the *aleph*

That you can look at the eyes and nose of your neighbor or your husband or your teacher, or even the person sitting next to you in the pew this morning whom you maybe haven't even met yet, you can look into her face

And you can hear God speak.