

Everyone watched as Moses went up to the mountain. I held tight to Maratti's hand as my feelings fluctuated between excitement, anxiety, and most of all, fear.

To my relief, Moses soon came down and addressed the people. "This is what יהוה told me to say to the house of Jacob and the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to me. Now, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples.'"

I was astonished when all those assembled, including myself and the other outsiders, answered as one. "All that יהוה has spoken we will do!"

How could I have no doubts whatsoever?

Then Moses warned everyone to be ready for the third day, to wash their clothes, and, to stay pure, the men should not go near a woman. "For on the third day יהוה will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai." He continued. "Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. However, when the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up to the mountain."

So I washed our clothes and kept my distance from Maratti. As long as I had wash water, I washed my hair and had Shifra cut it so it hung only to my shoulders. I had no idea what it would be like to see Elohim, or if outsiders would even be able to see the Hebrews' god, but I did what Moses told us. I didn't remember ever feeling this nervous, except maybe before my wedding. I kept far back from the mountain.

On the third day, as morning dawned, I woke to thunder and lightning, but it wasn't raining. Curious, I peeked outside the tent and saw a dense cloud on the mountain. But it didn't look right; it whirled and churned. Jagged spears of lightning flashed within it, each followed by

an exceedingly loud horn blast that made me, and likely everyone, tremble. Yet no lightning hit the ground.

I hurriedly dressed and followed as Moses led us out of the camp to stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was smoking like a kiln, for Elohim had come down upon it in fire. I was thankful that my family, along with many other outsiders, stood at the rear. Heat rose like from a giant hearth, but there was no ash in the air or on the ground. The mountain shook violently—as did many people, myself included.

The blare of the horn grew louder and louder as Moses went down and spoke gently to the people to calm them. When he finished, there was a vast silence, as if even the land was waiting in suspense.

Then Elohim answered in thunder, saying:

*“I יהוה am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me.*

*“You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I יהוה am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

*“You shall not swear falsely by the name of יהוה your God, for יהוה will not clear one who swears falsely by that name.*

*“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of יהוה your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your*

*settlements. For in six days יהוה made heaven and earth and sea—and all that is in them—and then rested on the seventh day; therefore יהוה blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.*

*“Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that יהוה your God is assigning to you.*

*“You shall not murder.*

*“You shall not commit adultery.*

*“You shall not steal.*

*“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house: you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox or donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”*

At first I was too overwhelmed to move or open my eyes. I lay there, face down in the sand, every limb shaking, until I was certain Elohim had finished addressing me. I had no doubt that the words had been directed to me, for it was my mother’s voice I’d heard in my head. Tears in my eyes, I slowly looked up and gazed around me in wonder. Some people stood like statues, others were on their knees, but most were lying flat in the dirt.

The mountain’s smoking, thunder and lightning quieted, and as people recovered, they moved back and stood at a distance from the mountain. Many were crying, or had been. I was too stunned to move, but the unborn child in my womb was kicking vigorously.

I heard a woman cry out to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will obey; but do not let Elohim speak to us, lest we die.” I lifted my head briefly and saw that it was the white-haired old woman, Serach bat Asher.

“Be not afraid,” Moses answered gently. “Elohim has come only in order that you will remember this miraculous day on which you stood before יהוה your *God*, and in order that the awe of Elohim may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray.”

Then Moses stood quietly, apparently listening to Elohim, for Moses next said to us, “You yourselves have seen and heard Elohim speak to you from the very heavens. Therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor any gods of gold.”

When my subdued family shared our evening meal with Pua and Shaul, nobody spoke until I asked, “When Elohim spoke to you, what did you hear?”

Father replied first. “I heard nine things not to do, and only two that we should.” When I gave him a skeptical frown, he replied with a small smile and continued, “One: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy Two: Honor your father and your mother.”

The adults broke the tension by chortling, while I turned to Father and said, “I didn’t mean what exactly you heard, but how you perceived it, what voice Elohim used.”

There was silence as they each considered this question. “Elohim’s voice wasn’t always the same,” Shifra answered first. “Sometimes--most times--it was loving and encouraging. There was also disappointment and sadness over the commands I’d broken. But there was no anger.”

We learned that each of us had received an identical message from Elohim in the voice of a beloved and revered ancestor. Pua had also recognized our mother’s voice, as had my daughter Shifra. Father, Maratti and Shaul had each heard their own father’s voice. The men were surprised that none of us had felt any anger, only disappointment.

“No anger?” Maratti asked in surprise. “Elohim was very angry with Pharaoh.”

“That was different,” Shaul replied. “We are Elohim’s people.”

I wasn't quite convinced of that, but Eshkar interrupted my thoughts to say that he and Gitlam weren't sure if it had been their father or uncle talking to them, but we all assured the boys that it had actually been Elohim.

Father smiled at the children and asked if they understood what Elohim had said.

"So nobody is allowed to work on the Sabbath, not even animals?" Gitlam asked.

Shaul nodded and added, "Not even slaves."

Almost simultaneously Shifra and Eshkar asked, "What is adultery?"

There was a lengthy silence until I replied, "When a man and woman marry, they are only allowed to lie together with each other. If the woman lies with a man who is not her husband, it is adultery."

"Forbidding adultery ensures that a husband is the man who fathers his wife's children," Pua explained.

Shifra looked like she had more questions, but I quickly declared that it had been an exhausting day and we should all make ready for bed. "Poor little Rephaiah can barely keep his eyes open," I whispered. In truth, I couldn't either.

When Maratti and I finally retired to the privacy of our tent, I was still having trouble accepting that the Hebrew god had spoken to me, personally and individually. No Egyptian god had ever spoken to me or acknowledged me in any way. It was both an honor and a responsibility.