

So What Really Happened at Sinai?

So this is it!

This is the week that we read of the majestic moment at Mt. Sinai.



A 19th century CE oil painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme depicting Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai.

This was when the ancient Israelites experienced God's presence in the middle of the wilderness.

And according to our rabbis, each and every one of us was there!

Every soul – past, present and future were all standing at Sinai.

We were there!

Think of the magnificence, imagine the grandeur: the shooting stars above, the stars so close it felt almost as if we could touch them, the

lightning bolts striking the top of the mountain, the sounds of the blasts of the *shofar*, the crashing of the thunder so loud it shook our very bones.

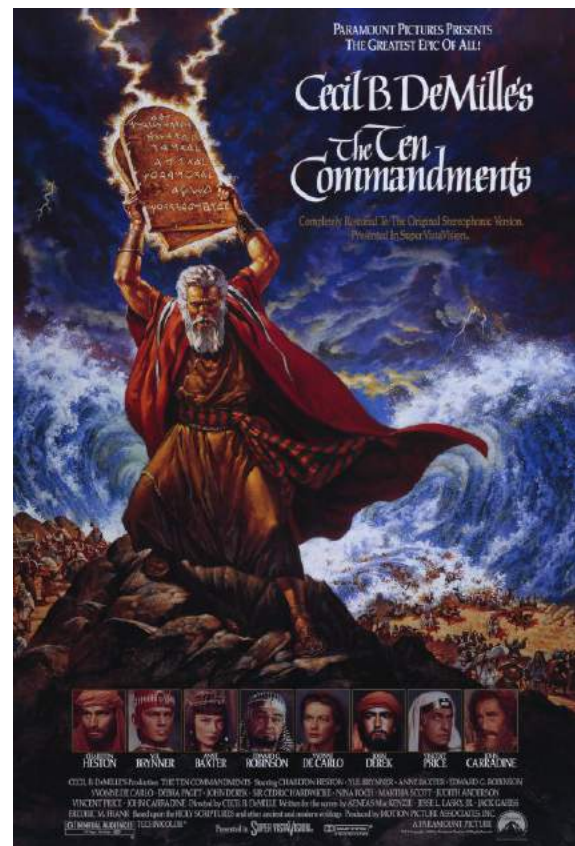
And we could see at the top of the mountain a figure, a man with a white flowing beard (presumably) holding his staff and being filled with the presence of the Holy One.

That was Charlton Heston, I mean: *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our teacher, receiving the core of God's revelation on top of the mountain: the two tablets of the Ten Commandments.

Those sublime seconds at Sinai still reverberate through the ages. We recall them in our prayers, as well as each time we read the Torah and most

especially this morning, we reenact this moment by standing, sensing a little bit of what this experience must have felt like.

On the festival of *Shavuot*, which this year falls on a Saturday night, May 19, we will experience it even more powerfully, staying up all night and



reading these same ten commandments outside as the sun rises behind the scroll.

Save the date – you don't want to miss that.

According to the traditional understanding, there were two million Hebrew slaves who made it to Sinai and they all shared this monumental moment.

Wow.

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But, two million?!?

Two million people in the middle of the Sinai wilderness?

Really?

That's a lot of people; that's a lot of garbage; that's a lot of port-a-potties.

Could it really have happened like that? And what about all the other events leading up to this? The plagues and the crossing of the Sea of Reeds – how do we make sense of those?

A few years ago, there was a big brouhaha [when it was announced that there was no archaeological evidence for the Exodus.](#)

I was asked these same questions by some of our 6th and 7th graders a couple of weeks ago and the truth is I have been asking those same questions since I was their age and this morning I want to offer two possible interpretations.

This first is based in science.

What do we actually know?

Well, we know there were natural cataclysmic events during the time the Exodus may have occurred. For example, the volcanic island of Thera, [now known as Santorini, in the Mediterranean Sea erupted about 3,500 years ago.](#)



Santorini Caldera

We know this from many archaeological remains including ocean cores. To produce an ocean core, a ship drills down through the sea bed and removes a core of sediment and debris. On dry land, scientists can see the layers of history deposited on the bottom of the sea. They have found layers of ash throughout the Mediterranean that prove this island erupted in a massive explosion that spread ash through that area, including as far away as Egypt. This would have been both unbelievably frightening and would have produced devastating darkness.

However, if you were shielded by being on the southern edge or protected by other natural or man-made barriers as the ancient Hebrew slaves may have been, they could have been shielded from this.

And, in the wake of this island's eruption would have been horrible destruction – just like the plagues – swarms of pests, death of livestock, disease would have run amok, which could have made the Nile fill with blood.

While it may not have been in the same order as our Torah, clearly, we can see how our narrative relates to these natural disasters.

Finally, within the marshy area in Northern Egypt, these events would have produced tsunamis flooding the area and then draining it. This could

have explained how the Israelites crossed the Sea and the Egyptian soldiers drowned.

Let me be clear: all of this is (a) not conclusive nor agreed upon by all scientists and (b) does not follow our text exactly; however, it does offer us a possible core to our narrative.

These were events that the Torah is relating, perhaps sharing them in a more poetic and structured form.

There are other problems to address as well and I will explain one of them. The numbers: in the census at the opening of the book of *B'midbar*, Numbers, the Torah relates that there were 603,550 men over the age of twenty who were able to bear arms. Given that, there must have been a similar number of women, in addition to children and those who were older or unable to fight; that is how we get two million people at Sinai.

That is hard to imagine.

But, there is another approach. The word "*ribu'a*" which is understood to mean "ten thousand" and thus, if there were *shishim ribu'a* – sixty times 10,000, you would arrive at the 600,000 number of men over 20.

But "*ribu'a*" could also mean a small military unit, the smallest of which was five soldiers. Utilizing this understanding, we would have sixty

multiplied by five or 300 able-bodied, fighting-age men and with an equal number of women and those who were older and younger, we would arrive at [a number around 1,000](#).

This makes much more sense and can be sustained by the other facts. During the events of and after a volcanic eruption, a group of 1,000 Hebrew slaves escaped Egyptian slavery into the wilderness where they were free to worship their God, culminating in the peak experience related in this morning's reading.

That works for me.

But not for everyone.

Some challenge the connection to Santorini and others simply have more doubts and claim that nothing happened.

While this is not actually possible, let's imagine that we found a digital video recording of the entire Sinai over all the aforementioned years (let's say 1600-1200 BCE just to be safe), and after viewing it, we find that NOTHING happened. There were no Hebrew slaves, no plagues, no Exodus, and no Sinai.

If all that were definitive, would it change things for us today? Would it cause Jews or Christians, for that matter, to rethink their lives, to change their belief system or even change their practices.

Many traditional Jews have said yes. If there were definitely no Sinai, they would stop practicing Judaism.

I can speak only for myself and my answer is no. It would not really make a difference in my life.

I would not change a thing.

While I might be a bit disappointed, I would still wake up tomorrow and put on my *tefillin* as I do each morning (tomorrow at the [World Wide Wrap](#)).



World Wide Wrap 2018 at Temple Emunah, Lexington, MA (photo by Mark Bobrow)

I would still offer my prayers of gratitude, appreciating the gifts of my life, helping me focus on the deepest values we hold.

I would still keep *kosher*, appreciating the distinctions in what I eat, elevating the mundane act of eating into a more spiritual practice.

I would still keep Shabbat, thankful for these twenty-five hours without the incessant ringing, buzzing, and dinging of my electronic devices, blessed to share this day each week with my family, friends, and this beloved community.

The truth is what makes this tradition holy is not the events that may or may not have happened exactly as our Torah states.

It is something much more sublime.

It is that hundreds of generations have struggled with these narratives, imbuing them with holiness and meaning. They have asked questions, dug deeper and created new understandings.

And as we gather in this sacred space, we can appreciate that we have been given this evolving tradition to study, to wrestle with, and to search out insights for us today.

What makes it holy is not the historicity of each element or narrative, but how the generations over millenia have created an ongoing conversation with what it means to us.

Judaism is alive because it continues to evolve in new and creative ways, while adhering to its anchors – its ancient roots.

As we just sang as we returned the Torah to the ark, *etz hayyim hee* – the Torah is a living tree.

That means that each successive generation is invited to study all the ancient rings of generations and texts that came before us, and then, we write the next chapter in this story, weaving the ancient threads into this newest layer.

Like those at a literal or metaphoric Sinai, we too, stand at Sinai, ready to take on the responsibility of this most ancient tradition and we commit ourselves to live the moral, ethical, and spiritual lives that it encourages.

That belief speaks to a deeper truth than any archaeological evidence.

Whether there were two million at Sinai or just 1,000 matters not; it is ultimately far more significant to understand its values of freedom and

redemption – for we surely need those today, as the ancient Hebrew slaves needed them 3,500 years ago.

May we all feel Sinai's call however we understand it.