

Handout about parsing a text
Prepared by Frank Kurtz
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שמורת(Exodus) 20:15-18:

All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it,* they fell back and stood at a distance. “You speak to us,” they said to Moses, “and we will obey; but let not G-d speak to us, lest we die.”** Moses answered the people, “Be not afraid; for G-d has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray. So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where G-d was.

* The text reads literally, “they *saw* the thunder ... and the blare of the horn.” The experience of Revelation was so uniquely intense and overwhelming that the senses overflowed their normal bounds. People felt that they were seeing sounds and hearing visions.

**With the exception of rare individuals, human beings cannot endure direct contact with G-d. Thus every religion strives to mediate G-d’s Presence. Through ritual, through study, through the performance of *mitzvot*, and through our encounters with people who embody what G-d stands for, we are able to “meet” G-d.

- Why did the people distance themselves from the moment of revelation?
- Did the people fail G-d’s “test”?
- Since you were also at Sinai, how do you feel about “standing at a distance”?
- Do you rely on G-d’s words as spoken by Moses, or do you want a more direct source?
- Does hearing the divine words (or someone’s recitation of them) suffice in order for you to “obey”?
- Can you think of times and instances when you retreated before a challenge or threat rather than facing it more forthrightly?