5 Perspectives on Sinai in an Age of Empiricism

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We live inside assumptions about what counts as real. If something cannot be measured, reproduced, or verified through peer-reviewed data, we tend to greet it with raised eyebrows. That skepticism has served us well.

But this posture creates a genuine problem for anyone who wants to take the Torah seriously, particularly its account of revelation at Sinai. The event refuses to play by empirical rules. It happened once, left no physical trace a laboratory could analyze, and asks us to trust something that exceeds what measurable data can provide.

For those who grew up inside this tradition, these aren't abstract philosophical puzzles. They're questions about whether the ground you stood on was ever solid, whether what you were taught has any claim on you, whether walking away means freedom or loss. This guide won't resolve that tension. What we can do is examine what the Torah actually claims about revelation, evidence, and ways of knowing in a framework that takes both the text and your questions seriously. Whether it speaks to you is genuinely yours to decide.

1. The Interpretation of Evidence

Parshat Yitro opens not with revelation but with a reaction to news. Exodus 18:1 tells us that Yitro, a Midianite priest, heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel. What exactly did he hear? Rashi on Exodus 18:1 specifies the content as the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the war with Amalek. These stories had spread through trade routes to every nation in the region. While everyone heard, Yitro acted by traveling to join the Israelites and recognizing in these events a God worth acknowledging.

We see this pattern in debates about economics, public health, and countless domains where identical data produces irreconcilable conclusions because people process information through different frameworks. Interpretation always stands between raw data and conclusions.

William James made this point in "The Will to Believe," arguing that genuine neutrality before significant questions is impossible. We always operate with prior commitments, prioritizing either the fear of being wrong or the hope of discovering something true.

But notice what we do for the rest of our lives. We build careers on incomplete information. We enter marriages without guarantees about how our partner will change. We make major decisions based on sufficient rather than absolute evidence, and we don't consider ourselves irrational for doing so.

Previous *18Forty Podcast* guest Samuel Lebens has explored this territory. Why should religious commitment be held to a standard we apply nowhere else? You might respond that religious claims feel different, that they ask for a different kind of trust. But marriage asks us to commit our entire future to another person whose changes we cannot predict, and career choices shape decades of our lives based on incomplete self-knowledge. The stakes in these commitments rival anything faith asks, yet we don't demand certainty before making them.

2. Commitment Precedes Understanding

Modern empiricism operates on what seems obviously correct. Understand fully before you commit, demonstrate the evidence, and only then consider whether to believe.

What happened at Sinai inverts this sequence. Exodus 24:7 records the Israelites' response to the covenant as "*na'aseh v'nishma*," meaning "we will do and we will understand." Action comes before comprehension, with the people pledging to follow before they've grasped what following will entail.

You might find this troubling, since it sounds like obedience without thought. But consider how understanding develops in domains that can't be grasped from outside. Musicians practice scales for years before understanding harmonic theory, yet that embodied knowledge eventually transforms into genuine musical comprehension. Language learners must speak badly and make countless mistakes before they can speak well, and medical students memorize procedures they don't yet understand while trusting that comprehension will follow practice. In each case, the doing creates conditions for understanding to emerge. This isn't self-deception, but how human learning works.

Sefer HaChinuch articulates this, teaching that sustained action shapes internal states and that consistent practice of virtue gradually produces virtuous character. Cognitive behavioral therapy confirms this, treating depression and anxiety by helping patients change behaviors first, understanding that changed actions lead to changed thoughts. We often cannot think our way into right acting, but we can act our way into right thinking.

The philosopher Michael Polanyi documented this pattern in scientific practice. All knowledge, he argued, rests on commitments that must be accepted before investigation can proceed. You cannot stand outside all frameworks because the tools of evaluation depend on prior commitments. Polanyi called this tacit knowledge.

Simi Peters addresses how we ground faith when the dominant culture treats empirical verification as the only legitimate path to knowledge. But that standard itself rests on assumptions that can't be empirically verified. Science requires faith that the universe operates consistently, that our senses report reality reliably, that math maps onto physical truth. None of these can be proven without circularity. If all knowledge rests on prior commitments, religious commitment isn't categorically different from scientific commitment.

Peters argues that immersing yourself in a tradition to test its claims requires willingness to see what the tradition sees, experience what practitioners experience, and only then evaluate whether the experience matches the claims. If you enter with your mind already closed, every practice will seem meaningless. That's not a fair trial.

Receptivity changes as we age and as our questions evolve. Practices forced on children often feel like impositions rather than opportunities. People who walked away in their twenties sometimes find the tradition fits differently in their 30s or 40s, when questions of meaning and mortality press harder. The clothes that didn't fit at 25 might fit at 45. The only way to know is to try them on again.

3. The Experience Overrides the Senses

At the peak of revelation, the Torah describes something that strains comprehension. Exodus 20:15 states that the people saw the sounds and the lightning, with the Hebrew unambiguous that they perceived thunder visually. This crossing of sensory categories does not happen under normal conditions, yet the text presents it without apology.

You may have had moments that gesture toward this. Standing under stars that made you feel tiny and vast at once. Holding a newborn. Being present when someone died and feeling the room change in ways you couldn't explain. These experiences suggest that consciousness sometimes encounters realities that overflow our usual categories.

What is the text doing with this impossible language? Those who receive the Torah as Divine record might understand it as describing genuine perceptual breakdown in the presence of something beyond ordinary categories, while those who approach it as human composition might see poetic hyperbole. Either way, the text signals that whatever happened exceeded what normal perception could process.

The philosopher Rudolf Otto spent his career studying such experiences across cultures. In *The Idea of the Holy*, he describes encounters with what he called the wholly other, moments when people experience something so far beyond ordinary categories that normal perception overwhelms. This experience, he found, constitutes a distinct category of awareness reported across cultures throughout history.

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg has documented what happens in the brain during such experiences. His research in neurotheology shows that people in deep spiritual states exhibit patterns differing markedly from ordinary consciousness, including decreased activity in the parietal lobe, which maintains boundaries between self and world. When this activity decreases, experiential boundaries become fluid, and people report transcendence and dissolution of ordinary distinctions.

The Torah's description corresponds to something that actually happens in human brains. The impossible language may describe the same kind of state that modern scientists can now observe. This doesn't prove God spoke at Sinai, but the experience described corresponds to a genuine category we are only now beginning to understand.

4. Revelation Is Relational, Not Informational

When you ask whether God really spoke at Sinai, the question expects a certain kind of answer, perhaps an audio recording or empirical trace of Divine sound waves. The text offers something different. Exodus 20:2 records the first utterance as "I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

The very first word is *anochi*, meaning "I." The revelation opens not with a command but with self-identification, an assertion of presence. Before any instruction, there is a relationship: I am the one who acted in your history, Who brought you out when you were helpless.

Rambam, in *Guide for the Perplexed*, wrestles with the problem that Divine speech poses for rigorous monotheistic thinking. Voice is physical, yet God possesses no physical attributes. Rambam suggests that this question remains for Moshe but for the people of Israel in general, what matters most is the experience of presence itself, with the precise words secondary to the relationship established through encounter.

Think about the difference between analyzing someone and encountering them. You can study a person's biography and behavior, treating them as an object to understand. Or you can sit across from them and be addressed by their presence in a way that changes you. These are fundamentally different modes of relationship. Martin Buber called them I-It and I-Thou in *I and Thou*. In I-It, you experience an object. In I-Thou, presence encounters presence.

Sinai, understood through this lens, represents the ultimate I-Thou moment. The people stood before a Presence that transformed them through the very act of addressing. The question "Did God really speak?" may be asking for an I-It answer when the text is describing an I-Thou encounter.

Rabbi David Aaron approaches theology through this relational lens. God, he suggests, is less a figure issuing commands than an experience of awe that morally inspires. We don't prove God's existence the way we prove a theorem. We discover ourselves caught up in a relationship that makes claims on us we never chose. The evidence for that relationship lies in the relationship itself and its power to transform how we see and act.

5. The Echo Is the Evidence

How do we verify something that happened 33 centuries ago and left no physical trace? Exodus 20:19 states that "You have seen that I spoke to you from heaven." The proof offered is the people's own experience, with no external verification, just the memory of what was witnessed transmitted through generations.

Yehuda HaLevi's *Kuzari* 1:25 builds what has come to be known as the argument from history on this foundation. Unlike religions founded on private revelation to a single prophet, Judaism claims national public revelation witnessed by an entire population. The chain of transmission across millennia constitutes a form of evidence.

This argument has force, but also limits. The persistence of Jewish community is remarkable, but transmission of a narrative does not prove the narrative accurately describes historical events. The Pew Research Center's 2020 study on Jewish Americans documents that even among Jews who observe nothing and believe nothing specific about revelation, Jewish identity persists with remarkable stubbornness. This demonstrates the power of transmitted identity, but cannot establish that the founding revelation occurred as described.

Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann spent years studying how religious communities sustain a sense of Divine presence. Her book *When God Talks Back* documents that sustained religious practice may develop perceptual capacities, as we saw earlier with musicians and medical students. Whether this training perceives something genuinely present or generates compelling internal experience remains unresolved. But calling it self-delusion begs the question we're trying to answer.

Receiving this tradition means receiving its difficulties, passages that trouble us and commands we struggle to reconcile with our moral intuitions. Taking Sinai seriously has never meant pretending those difficulties don't exist. It means asking whether you can hold both the revelation and the wrestling.

A voice once heard, or believed heard, continues to echo through a people who have never stopped listening. Whether the voice was truly Divine or whether a powerful narrative simply took hold remains a matter of faith. The tradition has always understood doubt as part of religious life. Your questions don't disqualify you. They may be exactly what qualifies you to hear something.

If you've built a meaningful life without this, you're entitled to that assessment. Yet for those who feel some pull toward these questions, the tradition extends an old offer. Come and see. The echo is still sounding. Whether it compels you to respond is yours to decide.

Questions for Reflection

1. **Have you come to understand something deeply only after committing to practice it?**
2. **If evidence of the Divine is found primarily in relationship rather than laboratory data, what would testing that relationship look like?**
3. **Have you encountered moments when ordinary perception seemed inadequate to capture what you were experiencing?**

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