

# Action, Accountability, and Awe: Revelation's Sacred Recipe for Relational Responsibility

By Rabbi Heather Shore

*"There is no promised land without a multitude. You think you can get there alone, and maybe by some rare chance you do. But what will become of the promise when it is collapsed by loneliness? Who is going to drink all that milk and honey with you?"*

-Cole Arthur Riley

The Pew Research Center (2005) defines social trust as “a belief in the honesty, integrity and reliability of others – a ‘faith in people.’”<sup>1</sup> Recent research<sup>2,3</sup> on national and global social trust trends paints a picture that many of us feel and live acutely on a daily basis. Interpersonally and institutionally, intra-communally and externally, “faith in people” is at an all-time low. An analyst of one such recent report notes,

We are choosing a closed ecosystem of trust that mandates a limited worldview, a narrowing of opinion, intellectual stasis, and cultural rigidity. Distrust is the default instinct; .... We choose individual benefit over common advancement, the Me over the We.<sup>4</sup>

The 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer Report<sup>5</sup> has named this “Me over We” shift a “crisis of insularity.” Per this same report, the side effects of insularity include resistance to change, halted action, and a global loss of optimism. Not exactly a recipe for the societal repair we so desperately need right now in any direction.

Looked at through a relational lens, the Revelation at Sinai springs forth from its own moment of teetering insularity. In fact, our entrance into sacred covenant seems to take place *in spite* of the rapidly unraveling social fabric of the (not-yet-officially) Israelite

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2007/02/22/americans-and-social-trust-who-where-and-why/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/08/americans-trust-in-one-another/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/trust/our-methodology>;

<https://www.edelman.com/newsroom/richard-edelmans-6am-blog/insularity-next-crisis-trust>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>; note this annual global research report is well-known in its field but not without its ethical critiques. See:

<https://caad.info/analysis/briefings/an-untrustworthy-barometer-edelman-polling-promotes-clients-standing-in-society/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>

people. In the space between crossing the parted sea and making it to Sinai, the Israelites' fantasy of freedom has settled into the far grittier reality of surviving freely. They complain to Moses about the bitterness of waters they find in the desert,<sup>6</sup> about the uncertainty that fills their hungry stomachs,<sup>7</sup> and about the thirst that scratches their throats.<sup>8</sup> Exasperated and exhausted, Moses asks both God and the Israelites what more they can possibly want of him and what he's to do with such a frustrating people.<sup>9</sup>

In the midst of uncertainty, frustration, and intra-communal resentments running rampant, the Israelites stumble their way to Sinai. In a moment in which distrust is rapidly becoming the default and the Israelites are hurtling towards insularity, something happens that fundamentally rewrites the spiritual DNA of the Jewish people, permanently alchemizing a collection of "Me's" into an eternal community of "We's."

In his work "Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy," psychologist Kenneth Pargament synthesizes years of study on the intersection of spirituality and psychology. Pargament suggests that there are three core qualities that define a sacred experience: transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy.<sup>10</sup> Under this formulation, an experience is sacred when it stands as something "out of the ordinary in a particular object or experience" (transcendence), when it puts us in contact with a sense of "endless time and space" (boundlessness), and when it reveals an "essential and absolute ground of truth" (ultimacy).<sup>11</sup> Transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. Three ingredients for sacred soup. For the Israelites, it didn't stop there.

At Sinai, in a haze of smoke and thunder, transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy wove an eternal braid around the Israelite people and forged a covenant forever expressed through awe, action, and accountability. For the first time, the Israelites became conscious agents of their collective fate, with new systems for moral and behavioral standards to steward together. If insularity resists change, halts progress, and stalls optimism, then revelation — both as the Sinaitic event and as the ever-unfolding process of bringing Torah into the world — reorients us to the sacred ingredients that bind our covenantal relationships in the very moments we want to maintain them the least. Revelation reminds us that, by design, there can be no "Jewish Me" without a "Jewish We," and then gives us the ingredients to live that into reality.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ex. 15:23

<sup>7</sup> Ex. 16:2-3

<sup>8</sup> Ex. 17: 2

<sup>9</sup> Ex. 17:3-4

<sup>10</sup> Pargamentt P. 39-40

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

## **Accountability-Ultimacy, Action-Boundlessness**

At Sinai, the Israelites became the stewards of sacred soul-ties to God and to one another. Once a collection of freed slaves beholden first to the will of their Egyptian masters and then to their life-and-death dependence upon Moses and God, at Sinai the Israelites gained access to shared agency and shared responsibility simultaneously. When the Israelites cried out in a single voice, “we will do and we will listen,”<sup>12</sup> they entered into a sacred relational system without an expiration date. Where fleeing enslavement marked the first steps towards a liberated survival, revelation formed the systems of interdependence that would help them actually *live*.

Sinai initiated Israel as a collective entity in reciprocal relationships of responsibility with God, one another, and the world around them. The sacred boundlessness of Sinai is that action is an eternal command; in becoming the people of the book, the Israelites bound themselves to a covenant demanding righteous action in every age. Threaded throughout the spiritual DNA of the Israelite people is the core truth that we are, all of us and each of us, needed and necessary in the group project of revelation because we are all pledged to act in service of one another. The ultimacy at Sinai is, for us like it was for them, that we only get through the desert through the steps we take together.

God introduces the covenant in the conditional,<sup>13</sup> and in their response, the Israelites commit to co-creating the lived reality that revelation demands as a collective. The Israelite response to covenant is fundamentally one of sacred solidarity. In the grammatical ordering of their entrance into the covenant, the Israelites declare a willingness to act as and on behalf of the collective, to “נעשה” (do) even before they fully understand/hear/listen, “נשמע” the call before them. There is an oft-cited midrash that posits that the gathering of Sinai was boundless not just in its synthesis of an eternal covenant, but also in that those gathered included “the souls [of every Jewish person to ever exist], [even] when [their] bodies had still not been created.”<sup>14</sup> For us, revelation is more than a story passed down through the ages. Sinai is a shared soul-memory of standing shoulder to shoulder, committing to a world order in which I don’t have to fully understand you to be bound up in a shared fate with you and to act beside you.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ex. 24:7: נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע:

<sup>13</sup> Ex. 19:6: תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי. *if you hear and protect my covenant...then you will be a precious people to me*

<sup>14</sup>Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 3:1, accessed via sefaria

## Awe/Transcendence

By the time we reach the revelation narrative verses in Exodus, the Israelites have lived through the enactment of the 10 plagues on the Egyptian population and fled slavery by the light of a pillar of fire guiding their way.<sup>15</sup> They have witnessed the sea split and seal itself before and behind them and seen creation rework itself to pave the path to their redemption.<sup>16</sup> That what happens at Sinai stands apart as climactic both spiritually and sensorially points to what must have been quite the display. What was it that made the awe of the Sinai encounter different?

Up until now, the miracles that the Israelites have witnessed have all been acts of God designed to get them free and maintain their survival.<sup>17</sup> At Sinai, the focus shifts from “mere” survival to the spiritual. For the first time, the Israelites meet God outside of a fight-or-flight encounter. For the first time, they have the luxury and privilege of imagining a future, a future in which relationships are sources of sacred agency rather than coercive oppression. For the first time, they get to stand in shared wonder at the scope of a sprawling world before them and think about a future that they figure out together.

Appropriately, the word used for awe throughout these passages is “יראה,” a term that carries within it a dual meaning of existential awe as well as existential terror. It is no coincidence that the texts of Psalms teach us that “The beginning of wisdom is “יראת', fear/awe in God.” When was the last time you found yourself stranded outside during a major thunderstorm or held a newborn baby in your arms? There is a rawness to the vulnerability that comes with being laid bare in this way, a special kind of knowing that comes from the rapid reorientation to how fragile we really are and how reliant we are on one another as a result.

Awe transforms us, it shrinks us into understanding our tiny place in the scope of the cosmos while simultaneously transcending our individual reach to be inextricably interwoven with the majesty of every living thing. Theologian and liturgist Cole Arthur Riley writes,

Wonder includes the capacity to be in awe of humanity, even your own... To be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintops, the sunlight refracting- this manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other. Wonder requires a person not to forget themselves

---

<sup>15</sup> Ex. 13:22

<sup>16</sup> Source (verse citation)

<sup>17</sup>



but to feel themselves so acutely that their connectedness to every created thing comes into focus. In sacred awe, we are part of the story.<sup>18</sup>

Through thunder and smoke, word and call, awe becomes a shared, energetic pulse that transmutes a collection of individuals into a spiritual collective. In awe, we are forged into a forever family pledged in perpetuity to tend to the dignity of one another and of the world we've inherited, warts and all.

### **On Returning to Revelation Today**

Revelation on its own isn't a magic remedy for relational repair or harmony. The relationships between God, Israel, and Moses continue to ebb and flow through rupture and repair for the remainder of the biblical narrative. What shifts in revelation is the introduction of action and accountability in tandem, amplified and clarified through the lens of awe. In a post-Sinai narrative, the Israelites make their way through literal and metaphorical rocky soil bound to one another. As they trudge through the wilderness, action, accountability, and awe become the shared language and living breath of the spiritual contact forged at Sinai's foot.

In a world of rapidly increasing insularity, revelation says: I am with you in the weariness and the work and also in the wonder, and I will stand with you when all of those things hit us at once. When we're burnt out and beaten down, when it feels like we've given our values everything that we've got to offer and the world is still broken beyond repair, revelation reminds us that we are part of the project of eternity. Taken together, awe, action, and accountability are the ancient, inherited ingredients that our tradition offers us as an insularity antidote today.

I choose to believe that some ancient soul iteration of me promised to be responsible for some ancient soul version of you and that both of us stood trembling as we witnessed the impossible and committed ourselves to its cause. Perhaps most relevant for us today as we figure out how to live in a world in which we are endlessly bombarded by the sheer scope of human suffering is the reminder that upholding the inheritance of "נעשה ונשמע," means pledging ourselves to something other than freeze-state paralysis. It means meeting our tendency towards insularity head on and remembering that we are

---

<sup>18</sup> Cole Arthur Riley in This here flesh, p. 36-7



obligated to *actually act* just as we are obligated to *actually listen* to the sacred contracts of responsibility that bind us as a Jewish human family. It is our spiritual birthright to choose to act on behalf of one another, alongside and beyond our burnout and uncertainty.

When we show up for one another, when we let solidarity take precedence over the convenience of solitude, we step into this spiritual inheritance. Each time we let ourselves be moved by beauty, by terror, by *something*, we shatter the numbness of complacency and burnout and make space for the sacred. When we find ways to act in ways that counter insularity, when we make decisions that uplift the dignity of one another instead of amplifying distrust, we return ourselves spiritually to Sinai's sacred call. Action, accountability, and awe are revelation's sacred recipe for relational responsibility. Each time we reorient our "Me" as part of an eternal "We," and remember that we are obligated to one another even and especially when we want that obligation the least, we bring revelation into our present day reality.

May the steps we take together in the desert bring us closer to milk and honey for us all.

*Rabbi Heather Shore (she/her) is a rabbi and licensed mental health counselor associate living in Providence, Rhode Island. Heather was ordained by HUC-JIR and completed an additional MA in clinical mental health counseling & spiritual integration from Fordham University after ordination. She currently works for Jewish Collaborative Services supporting individuals and communities clinically and spiritually across the lifespan.*



Sources:

*2026 Edelman Trust Barometer*. Edelman. (2026).  
<https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>

Arthur Riley, Cole. (2023) *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*: Convergent Books.

*An untrustworthy barometer: Edelman polling promotes clients' standing in society*. Climate Action Against Disinformation. (2025, January 22).  
<https://caad.info/analysis/briefings/an-untrustworthy-barometer-edelman-polling-promotes-clients-standing-in-society/>

*Insularity - the next crisis of trust*. Edelman. (n.d.).  
<https://www.edelman.com/newsroom/richard-edelmans-6am-blog/insularity-next-crisis-trust>

Pargament, K. I. (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. The Guilford Press.

Pew Research Center. (2007, February 22). *Americans and Social Trust: Who, where and why*. Pew Research Center.

Pirkei Avot 5:22

Silver, L., Keeter, S., Kramer, S., Lippert, J., Ramones, S. H., Cooperman, A., Baronavski, C., Webster, B., Nadeem, R., & Chavda, J. (2025, May 8). *Americans' declining trust in each other and reasons behind it*. Pew Research Center.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/08/americans-trust-in-one-another/>