

# Ma'amad Har Sinai

- Menachem Leibtag

A wedding ceremony? Well, not exactly; but many sources in Chazal compare the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai to a marriage between God (the groom) and Am Yisrael (the bride). In this week's shiur, as we study the numerous ambiguities in Shmot chapter 19, we attempt to explain why.

## INTRODUCTION

Unquestionably, the primary purpose of Ma'amad Har Sinai was for Bnei Yisrael to receive the LAWS of the Torah. Nevertheless, their experience during that revelation is thematically no less important. In the following shiur, we will study the dialectic nature of the Torah's presentation of Ma'amad Har Sinai; in order to better appreciate Chazal's understanding of these events.

To do so, we must undertake a careful reading of Shmot chapter 19 (i.e. the events that precede the Ten Commandments), in an attempt to identify its primary topics, and the flow from one topic to the next. [As we proceed, you will see why this methodology is so important.]

[Before you continue, it is highly recommended that you quickly review chapters 19 and 20 to refresh your memory, noting its flow and primary topics. (While doing so, you will probably notice several ambiguities that you had never noticed before.)]

## MOSHE THE "SHADCHAN"

Chapter 19 opens as Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai (see 19:1 2). Immediately upon their arrival, God summons Moshe to the mountain. However, unlike the earlier times when God

commanded Moshe to serve as a leader (i.e. to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt etc.), this time Moshe Rabeinu's is commanded to serve as a 'middle man'.

Let's take a look at God's command to Moshe in 19:3 6, noting how Moshe is charged to deliver a 'proposal' from God to Bnei Yisrael:

"Thus shall you say to Beit Yaakov and tell Bnei Yisrael:

You have seen what I have done to Egypt... so NOW:

IF you will OBEY Me faithfully and keep My COVENANT... and be my treasured nation, for all the Land is Mine.

THEN: You shall be for Me a 'mamlechet Kohanim v'goy kadosh' [a kingdom of priests and a holy nation]..." (see 19:4 6)

Note that this commandment is not merely to convey information, but rather a 'proposal' to which Bnei Yisrael must answer either 'yes' or 'no'. Furthermore, it is Moshe's job to relay their answer back to God (see 19:7 8).

From now on, we refer to this section of chapter 19 as 'the proposition'. Let's take a minute to discuss its meaning.

### SOMETHING 'OLD' or SOMETHING 'NEW'

Recall our explanation that the process of Yetziat Mitzraim (the primary topic thus far in Sefer Shmot) was the fulfillment of God's covenant with the Avot. However, that covenant included not only a promise of redemption, but also the promise that Bnei Yisrael would become God's special nation in Eretz Canaan (the primary theme of Sefer Breishit). As Bnei Yisrael now travel to establish that nation in that 'Promised Land', God first brings them to Har Sinai in order to teach them the specific laws [mitzvot] that will make them His special nation.

Hence, God's new proposition [= "brit Sinai"] could be understood as an 'upgrade' of sorts for the original covenant [= "brit Avot"]. Should Bnei Yisrael agree to its terms to obey whatever God may command, and to remain faithful to this covenant (see 19:5) then they will indeed become His special nation ["v'heyitem li segulah m'kol ha'amim ki li kol ha'aretz"]. Should they accept, the result will be that Bnei Yisrael will serve as God's 'model' nation, representing Him before all other nations [a "mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh"/ see 19:6].

In other words, before Bnei Yisrael can receive the Torah, they must not only confirm their readiness to obey God's commandments, but they must also recognize that these mitzvot will facilitate their achievement of this Divine goal.

Whereas a covenant requires the willful consent of both sides, this section concludes with Bnei Yisrael's collective acceptance of these terms:

"And the people answered together and said, 'Everything that God has spoken we shall keep,' and Moshe brought the people's answer back to God." (see 19:7 8)

In regard to what would have happened had Bnei Yisrael answered 'no', see the Further Iyun section.

### MAKING PLANS (and changing them)

Once Bnei Yisrael had accepted God's proposal, the next step should be for them to receive the specific MITZVOT (i.e. the laws that they just agreed to observe). However, there are some technical details that must be ironed out, concerning HOW Bnei Yisrael will receive these laws. Note how the next pasuk describes God's plan for how these mitzvot will be conveyed:

"And God said to Moshe, 'I will come to you in the

thickness of a CLOUD, in order that the people HEAR when I SPEAK WITH YOU, and in order that they believe in you [i.e. that you are My messenger] forever..." (19:9)

It appears from this pasuk that God plans to use Moshe Rabeinu as an intermediary to convey His laws to Bnei Yisrael, consistent with Moshe's role as liaison heretofore.

Nonetheless, God insists that the people 'overhear' His communication with Moshe, so that they believe that these laws truly originate from God, and not from Moshe.

Up until this point, the flow of events has progressed in a logical, straightforward manner. But here, in the middle of pasuk 9, we encounter our first 'glitch'. Note that God has just informed Moshe of HOW He plans to convey His laws. Hence, we would expect Moshe to convey this message to Bnei Yisrael (just as he did in 19:7). However, when we continue our reading of 19:9, something very strange takes place: "...Then Moshe reported the PEOPLE'S words to God." (19:9)

What's going on? The second half of this pasuk seems to omit an entire clause for it never tells us what the people responded. Instead, it just says that Moshe relayed the people's response back to God, without telling us WHAT the people said!

This question is so glaring (and obvious) that Rashi (on 19:9) finds it necessary to quote the Midrash that fills in the 'missing details'.

"Et divrei ha'am" [the words of the people]... The people responded: 'We want to hear from YOU [God] directly, for one cannot compare hearing from a "shaliach" (a messenger) to hearing from the King himself, [or they said,] We want to SEE our King!"

Note how Rashi adds an entire line to this narrative.

According to his interpretation, Bnei Yisrael don't accept God's original plan that they would hear the MITZVOT via Moshe. Instead, they demand to hear them directly from God Himself!

What allows Rashi to offer such a bold interpretation?

Most likely, Rashi induces the people's response from psukim that follow. Note how God responds (to whatever it was that Moshe relayed to Him in 19:9):

"And God told Moshe, 'Go to the people and get them ready... for on the third day God will reveal Himself IN VIEW OF ALL THE PEOPLE on Har Sinai.'" (see 19:10 11)

These new instructions to Moshe in 19:10 11 seem to describe a NEW PLAN for Matan Torah (in contrast to His original plan that Moshe will act as an intermediary as described in 19:9). Note how 19:11 describes how Bnei Yisrael will actually SEE God, suggesting that God now plans to convey His mitzvot DIRECTLY to the people.

From now on, we refer to the God's original plan (Dibrot via Moshe) as PLAN 'A', and to the new plan (Dibrot Direct) as PLAN 'B'.

Rashi claims that the people's unwillingness to accept Plan 'A' leads God to suggest Plan 'B' instead, in which Bnei Yisrael will hear the Commandments DIRECTLY.

This 'change of plan' can explain why the people now require THREE days of preparation. In order to prepare themselves for this DIRECT encounter, Bnei Yisrael must first attain a higher level of spiritual readiness, as reflected in the three day preparation period. Note how the details of this 'preparation' continue until 19:15.

In 19:12 13, Moshe is commanded to cordon off the entire area surrounding the mountain. In 19:14 15, Moshe relays these commands to the people. Hence, from now on, we refer to this section (i.e. 19:9 15) as 'PREPARATION'.

Are Bnei Yisrael capable of reaching this level? Are they truly ready to receive the DIBROT directly from God? If so, why did God not suggest this direct encounter in the first place? If not, why does God now agree to their request? [As you may have guessed by now, the stage is now set for a 'dialectic'.]

To answer these questions, we must analyze the psukim that follow to determine which of these two divine plans actually unfolds.

### RUNAWAY BRIDE

According to the new plan, on day three God should reveal Himself on Mount Sinai and speak the DIBROT directly to the entire nation. Let's continue now in chapter 19 and see what happens:

"And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, and there were loud sounds and lightening, and a THICK CLOUD on the mountain, and the SHOFAR sounded very strong, and the people in the CAMP all became frightened." (19:16)

If you read this pasuk carefully, you were most probably

startled by the fact that Bnei Yisrael never came to Har Sinai

that morning! Instead, they became so frightened from God's "hitgalut" [revelation] that they remained in the CAMP.

[Our minhag to stay up (and learn Torah) the entire night of Shavuot is based on the Midrash that Bnei Yisrael 'slept in' on the day of Matan Torah. Note how that Midrash is based on this pasuk.]

This background explains the next pasuk, where Moshe goes back to the camp, and brings everyone back to the foot of the mountain (see 19:17). Now it's time to 'try it again'. Let's see what happens:

"And Har Sinai was full of smoke, for God had DESCENDED upon it in FIRE, and its smoke was like a furnace, and the entire mountain shook violently..." (see 19:18)

This pasuk certainly describes God's "hitgalut", and it appears to follow according to PLAN 'B'). Note how God's descends onto the mountain (note the word "va'yered" in both 19:11 and 19:18). Nevertheless, one could also understand the intense smoke as reflective of the protective 'cloud' described in 19:9 (Plan 'A').

The stage has now been set for Matan Torah. The people are standing at the foot of Har Sinai and God has revealed Himself He has descended upon Har Sinai. Therefore, the next pasuk should describe God's proclamation of the Ten Commandments. Let's examine that pasuk (19:19) carefully:

"The sound of the shofar grew louder and louder; as Moshe would speak, God would answer him with a KOL." (19:19)

This pasuk is quite ambiguous, for it does not give us even a clue as to WHAT Moshe was saying or what God was answering. It is not even clear as to WHOM Moshe is speaking, to God or to the people!

If Moshe is speaking to the people, then this pasuk is describing how is conveyed the DIBROT. This would indicate that the DIBROT are transmitted according to PLAN 'A', with Moshe as the intermediary and the people only 'overhearing' a KOL from God. [Compare with 19:9!]

If Moshe is only speaking to God, then it not clear at all in regard to what their conversation is all about!

Once again, Rashi's commentary on this pasuk is simply amazing. Again quoting the Midrash, Rashi claims that indeed this pasuk describes the Ten Commandments. More specifically, Rashi explains that the clause "Moshe y'daber..." actually

describes the transmission of the LAST EIGHT Commandments, but not the first TWO. This is because Rashi understands that the first two DIBROT were given DIRECTLY from God in accordance with PLAN 'B' while the last eight were given via Moshe in accordance with PLAN 'A'. Hence, since this pasuk (19:19) describes PLAN 'A' it could refer only to the last eight DIBROT!

[See also Rambam in Moreh N'vuchim II, chapter 33.]

Note that according to Rashi, chapter 19 intentionally OMITTS two key events relating to Plan B:

- 1) Bnei Yisrael's original request for Plan B (in 19:9), &
- 2) The story of the two DIBROT given at the level of Plan B

For some thematic reason that remains unclear, chapter 19 prefers to omit the possibility that Plan 'B' may ever have taken place!

Ramban rejects Rashi's explanation of 19:19 (as do many other commentators). He explains this pasuk much differently, arguing that 19:19 does NOT describe Matan Torah; rather, it describes the conversation between God and Moshe recorded in the psukim that immediately follow in 19:20-25.

[As usual, Ramban prefers to keep the sequence of events according to the order of the psukim, while Rashi is willing to 'change' the order for thematic considerations.]

To better appreciate this "machloket" between Rashi and Ramban, we must examine the last set of psukim in chapter 19 (i.e. 19:20-25). "God descended upon Mount Sinai to the TOP of the Mountain and summoned Moshe to the TOP of the Mountain, and Moshe ascended... Then God told Moshe: Go down and WARN the people lest they break through toward God to SEE, and many of them will perish. And even the KOHANIM who are permitted to come closer must prepare themselves..." (19:20-22)

[Btw, note that 20:25 refers to Moshe's conveying this warning to the people, NOT to his conveying the "DIBROT," as is commonly misunderstood.]

According to Ramban, this extra warning occurs BEFORE Matan Torah, and as such this unit serves as a final warning and preparation before the DIBROT. According to Rashi, it is unclear where and how these psukim fit within the story of Matan Torah.

[Even though Rashi explains 19:19 as depicting the presentation of the DIBROT, it seems that he would maintain that 19:20-25 takes place beforehand for it appears to be related to the ceremony described in 24:3-11, which Rashi himself claims to have occurred BEFORE the

DIBROT. However, this "sugya" lies beyond the scope of this week's shiur.]

In any case, this final set of psukim seems to reflect PLAN 'A', by which God will only appear at the top of the mountain to Moshe, while everyone else must keep their distance down below. Only Moshe is worthy to witness the descent of the

"Shechina" onto the TOP of the mountain. Bnei Yisrael, however, are prohibited from SEEING, "lest they die." All of a sudden, it seems as though God now decides to LIMIT His revelation to the top of the Mountain.

[Hence we refer to this section (19:20-25) as 'LIMITATION'. Note how chapter 19 now divides into four distinct sections:

- I. PROPOSITION (19:1-8)
- II. PREPARATION (19:9-15)
- III. REVELATION (19:16-19)
- IV. LIMITATION (19:20-25) ]

So what happened? Has God reverted to Plan 'A' (that Moshe is to act as an intermediary)? If so, why? On the other hand, if Plan 'B' remains in operation, why does God restrict His revelation to the TOP of the mountain? Could this be considered some sort of 'compromise'?

There appears to have been a change in plans, but why? Even though chapter 19 does not seem to provide any explanation for what motivated this change, a story found later in chapter 20 certainly provides us with a very good clue.

#### A 'FEAR' STORY

Towards the end of chapter 20, immediately after the DIBROT, we find yet another story concerning what transpired at Har Sinai:

"And the people all saw the KOLOT, the torches, the sound of the SHOFAR and the mountain smoking; the people saw and MOVED BACK and stood at a distance. And they told Moshe: 'Why don't YOU SPEAK to us, and we will listen to you, but God should NOT SPEAK to us, lest we die.'

"Moshe responded saying: 'DO NOT BE FEARFUL, for God is coming to 'test' you and instill fear within you so that you will not sin.'

"But the people STOOD AT A DISTANCE, and Moshe [alone] entered the CLOUD where God was." (see 20:15-18)

This short narrative provides us with a perfect explanation for WHY God chooses to revert from PLAN 'B' back to PLAN 'A'. The reason is quite simple the people were frightened and overwhelmed by this intense experience of "hitgalut," and they therefore 'change their minds.'

But why is this story recorded in chapter 20? Should it not have been recorded in chapter 19?

Indeed, Ramban does place this story in the middle of chapter 19. Despite his general reluctance towards rearranging the chronology in Chumash, Ramban (on 20:14 15) explains that this entire parshia (20:15 18) took place earlier, BEFORE Matan Torah. Based on a textual and thematic similarities between 20:15 18 and 19:16 19 (and a problematic parallel in Devarim 5:20 28), Ramban includes these events described 20:15 18 within the Torah's description of God's first "hitaglut" in 19:19 the very same pasuk that reflects God's return to PLAN 'A' ["moshe y'daber v'Elokim ya'anenu b'Kol"].

This would also explain the need for the 'limitation' section that follows immediately afterward in 20:20 25. [See Ramban on 20:15.]

Rashi and Chizkuni offer a different interpretation. They agree with Ramban that 20:15 18 the YIRAH story is 'out of place,' but they disagree concerning WHERE to put it. While Ramban places this story BEFORE Matan Torah, Rashi (based on his pirush to 19:19) & Chizkuni (on 20:15) claim that it took place DURING Matan Torah, BETWEEN the first two and last eight commandments.

#### THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FIRST OR THIRD PERSON

In fact, this creative solution solves yet another problem.

It explains WHY the text of the Ten Commandments shifts from first to third person after the second commandment. Whereas the first two commandments (20:2 5) are written in FIRST person, indicating that God conveyed them DIRECTLY to the people [reflective of Plan 'B'], the last eight commandments (20:6 14) are written in third person, suggesting a less direct form of communication [reflective of Plan 'A']. This reflects Chazal's explanation that: "Anochi v'Lo Yihiyeh Lachem, m'pi ha'gvurah shma'um" the first two commandments were heard directly from God (Makkot 24a); see also Chizkuni 20:2.]

Rashi and Chizkuni's explanation has a clear advantage over Ramban's, as it justifies the 'transplantation' of the YIRAH story (20:15 18) from its proper chronological location to after the Dibrot. Since this story took place DURING the Ten Commandments, the Torah could not record it beforehand. On the other hand, since the Torah could not 'break up' the DIBROT (whereas they form a single unit), this YIRAH story could not have been recorded where it belongs (i.e. in between the second and third DIBROT). Therefore,

the Torah records it instead immediately after the completion of the Ten Commandments. [Ramban, does offer an explanation for why the Torah presents these parshiot out of order, but it is not a very strong argument.]

To summarize, in chapter 19, it was unclear whether or not

Bnei Yisrael would hear the DIBROT according to PLAN 'A' (as God originally had planned) or at the higher level of PLAN 'B' (as Bnei Yisrael requested). Later, in chapter 20, the Torah describes how Bnei Yisrael were frightened and requested to revert back to PLAN 'A'.

Ramban claims that this YIRAH story took place BEFORE Matan Torah, and hence the people heard ALL ten commandments through Moshe (Plan 'A'). Rashi maintains that this story took place DURING the DIBROT; hence the first TWO DIBROT were transmitted according to PLAN 'B', while the remainder were heard according to PLAN 'A'.

[Ibn Ezra (see 20:15) takes an opposite approach, maintaining that the YIRAH story is right where it belongs; it took place only AFTER Matan Torah. Therefore, the people heard all Ten Commandments directly from God, as mandated by Plan 'B'.]

#### A PROOF FROM SEFER DEVARIM

Based on our discussion, we can resolve two adjacent yet seemingly contradictory psukim in the description of Matan Torah in Sefer Devarim:

"Face to face God spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire [PLAN 'B']. I stood BETWEEN God and you at that time to convey God's words to you [PLAN 'A'], for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain..." (see Devarim 5:4 5)

Once again, the Torah incorporates BOTH PLANS in its description of Matan Torah. Evidently, both plans were in fact carried out, as we explained.

Although we have suggested several solutions to problems raised by chapters 19 20, a much more basic question arises: why can't the Torah be more precise? Why does the Torah appear to intentionally obscure the details of such an important event in our history?

#### AHAVA and YIRAH

One could suggest that this ambiguity is intentional, as it reflects the dialectic nature of man's encounter with God. Man, in search of God, faces a double edged sword. On the one hand, he must constantly strive to come as close to God as possible ("ahava" the love of God). On the other hand, he must constantly retain an awareness of God's greatness and

recognize his own shortcomings and unworthiness ("yirah" the fear of God). Awed by God's infinity and humbled by his own imperfection, man must keep his distance (see Devarim 5:25-26!).

God's original plan for Matan Torah was 'realistic.' Recognizing man's inability to directly confront the "shechina," God intends to use Moshe as an intermediary (Plan 'A'). Bnei Yisrael, eager to become active covenantal partners, express their desire to come as close as possible to God. They want to encounter the "Shechina" directly, without any mediating agent.

Could God say NO to this sincere expression of "ahavat Hashem"? Of course not! Yet, on the other hand, answering YES could place the people in tremendous danger, as they must rise to the highest levels of spirituality to deserve such a direct, unmediated manifestation of God.

While Plan 'B' reflects the 'ideal' encounter, Plan 'A' reflects a more realistic one. One could suggest that by presenting the details with such ambiguity, the Torah emphasizes the need to find the proper balance between realism and idealism when serving God.

#### GOD KNOWS BEST

Although God knows full well that Bnei Yisrael cannot possibly sustain a direct encounter, He nonetheless concedes to their request to hear the Commandments directly. Why? One could compare this Divine encounter to a parent child relationship. As a child grows up, there are times when he wishes to do things on his own. Despite his clear incapability to perform the given task, his desire to accomplish is the key to his growth. A wise parent will allow his child to try, even though he knows that the child will fail. Better one recognize the limits of his capabilities on his own rather than be told by others that he cannot accomplish.

On the other hand, although a child's desire to grow should not be inhibited by an overprotective parent, a responsible parent must also know when to tell his child STOP.

Likewise, God is well aware of Bnei Yisrael's unworthiness to encounter the Divine at the highest level. Nevertheless, He encourages them to aspire to their highest potential. As Bnei Yisrael struggle to maintain the proper balance between "ahava" and "yirah," God must guide and they must strive.

Our study of Parshat Yitro has shown us that what actually happened at Ma'amad Har Sinai remains unclear. However, what 'could have happened' remains man's eternal challenge.