

**Remembrance of the Revelation at Mount Sinai in Moshe's
Speech**
By Rav Tamir Granot

I. Introduction

The lion's share of Moshe Rabbeinu's speech in *Parashat Va'etchanan* deals with the revelation at Mount Sinai and the lesson derived from it. The revelation at Sinai and the covenant that accompanied it are certainly founding events in the history of the Jewish faith and nation, and therefore the great length to which they are discussed is not surprising.

The primary exegetical question that arises when we read Moshe's description of the revelation and its significance pertains to the contribution that Moshe's speech makes to the first description of the Sinaitic revelation in the book of *Shemot*.

The great difference between the two accounts in the style of presentation is self-evident. The account in chapter 20 of the book of *Shemot* is written in an informative, if at times exalted, style. Scripture describes the event in a narrative style, and deals neither with the lessons to be drawn from it nor with its significance.

The revelation at Sinai as described in *Va'etchanan* constitutes the building blocks of a reproachful speech that is intended to teach the religious lesson that may be derived from that event. Many expressions of rebuke, address, calling, and the like, are found in our *parasha*. For example: "Only take heed to yourself," "take therefore good heed to yourselves," "for ask now," "know therefore this day," "see," "hear, O Israel," and the like.

As we explained last week, however, we must understand not only the purpose of repeating the story of the revelation at Sinai at that time, but also the value and novelty of that repetition for future generations. What is new here in Moshe Rabbeinu's speech, what did he stress and emphasize, what did he add and what did he omit, in relation to the original account in the book of *Shemot*, that is meaningful for all generations?

Before entering the thick of things, let us make the following exegetical introductory comment: Obviously, there are differences between Moshe's account and the way the story is related in the book of *Shemot*. It is, however, incorrect to ask why Moshe described the historical events differently than the way they actually occurred, based on the assumption that the book of *Shemot* describes what really happened, and Moshe's speech is a paraphrase or rewriting of that story. For the description in the book of *Shemot* is also a story, and not an archaeological record of events. That is to say, even the account in *Shemot* must be read and interpreted as prose – as a story that has an objective. In other words, we must ask the same questions regarding that account as well: Why does it say such-and-such, and not something else, why is this detail missing,

and the like. We must not assume that one of the stories is more precise or closer to historical reality than the other, for we have no access to that reality as it was, but only to the two accounts of that reality. Our discussion will deal then with the shaping of each story and the differences between them, and not with historical facts, which fall into the category of "that which is hidden" from us.

**II. The Account of the Revelation at Mount Sinai and its
Objective in Moshe's Speech in *Parashat Va'etchanan***

Many have already dealt with the complex structure of the description of the revelation at Mount Sinai in our *parasha*,¹ which divides into three separate units (one is advised to consult a *Chumash*):

- 1) 4:9-24
- 2) 4:32-40
- 3) 5:1-30

Let us first consider the particular message that is emphasized in each unit, and then examine the common elements:

- 1) a. The obligation to remember God's direct revelation to Israel and the way He uttered the Ten Commandments out of the fire (12-13). Remembering God's direct revelation and command will teach the people to fear God all their days, the primary meaning of which in this context is acceptance of the yoke of the *mitzvot*.

b. An admonition by way of negation to remember "the voice of God," and not to remember any form, for they saw no manner of form. From here follows the prohibition to make for God a manner of form and thus to break His covenant.
- 2) Remembering the monumental experience of the revelation, including both the very hearing of God's voice and His appearance in fire, which despite the danger inherent in it, the people survived and did not die: "Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and lived... Out of heaven He made you hear His voice, that He might instruct you. And upon earth He showed you His great fire; and you did hear His words out of the midst of the fire" (4:33, 36). This remembering is the basis for the belief in the unity of God and the negation of all other gods, for surely no other nation ever experienced a direct revelation of its god. Implicit in Moshe's words is the argument put forward by the priests of the other nations before their believers that their gods cannot reveal themselves to the masses, because they would die, and therefore the religion must be passed on through the mediation of the priesthood. The exclusive aspect of what occurred at

¹ The interested reader can review some of the *shiurim* catalogued in the archives of the Virtual Beit Midrash, e.g., the *shiur* of Rav Amnon Bazak and that of Rav Mordechai Sabbato.

Mount Sinai as a founding experience of faith lies in the proof it offers regarding the possibility of a direct encounter between God and man and nation. Thus, it follows that we alone have a living God, a true God, and that the other nations merely heard a "rumor": "To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord He is God" (4:35).

- 3) a. Remembering the event as the basis for the covenant that God made with the people of Israel and with all of us today – the primary substance of which is the readiness of the Jewish people to accept God's *mitzvot* in the future. "We shall do and we shall hear": We shall do what we have already accepted to do and we shall obey in the future whatever you command us. According to the words of Moshe, the covenant is founded upon God's face to face revelation to the entire nation.

b. After mentioning the covenant, Moshe asks the people to remember that it was they who had asked that God not speak with them further "lest they die," "and speak to us all that the Lord our God shall speak to you, and we will hear it, and do it" (5:24). From here we see that the people accepted upon themselves to relate to the prophecy of Moshe as the direct words of God. Thus, in the continuation of his speech, Moshe commands Israel with several new commandments, as the passage continues: "And these words, which I command you this day, etc." (5:6). And the people are expected to accept these commandments as if they were the actual words of God, for this is what they themselves had proposed following the revelation at Mount Sinai.

Despite the fact that the message of each unit of Moshe's speech is different, they fit together and complement each other, and there is a common line of memory and meaning:

The primary significance of the revelation at Mount Sinai according to Moshe's speech in *Parashat Va'etchanan* lies in God's direct and face to face revelation to all of Israel. This is the foundation of the fear of God that is implanted in the soul of each and every Jew for all generations. This is the basis for the monotheistic faith, as is indicated by the passage that immediately follows the conclusion of the description of the revelation at Mount Sinai: "The Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (5:4). This is also the basis for Israel's obligation to fulfill the covenant that it had made with God at Sinai, that is, to accept His *mitzvot* even if afterwards they come from the mouth of Moshe. And this is also the source of the concern that the people will make an image or form of what they had seen or what they imagine they had seen, and the reason for the admonition to remember the voices, but not the sights.

III. The Account of the Revelation at Mount Sinai in *Shemot*

Let us turn now to the description given by the Torah itself, from the mouth of God, in the book of *Shemot*. Despite the commonly accepted understanding that chapter 20 describes the direct revelation of God to the people and transmission of the Ten Commandments, an examination of the description of the events in chapters 20 and 24 reveals that such a thing is either not stated at all, or at the very least concealed. We shall adduce several proofs:

- 1) First of all, the most important point is missing then from the account. Nowhere anywhere in *Parashat Yitro* is it stated that God revealed Himself face to face to the people, or that He spoke to them in a direct manner. The heading to the Ten Commandments is vague: "And God spoke all these words, saying" (20:1) – to whom did He speak? To the people? To the elders? The Torah does not say, and this stands out in stark contrast to the detailed emphasis in the book of *Devarim*: "The Lord talked with you face to face in the mountain out of the midst of the fire... saying, I am the Lord..." (5:4-6).²
- 2) Second, the Torah describes a conversation between Moshe and God in the presence of the people, rather than God directly addressing the people: "And then the voice of the shofar sounded louder and louder; Moshe speaks, and God answers him by a voice" (19:19). More than this it does not say.
- 3) Third, immediately following the conclusion of the Ten Commandments, there appears the people's request of Moshe that he should speak to them. The Torah justifies that request as follows: "And all the people perceived the thunders, and the lightnings, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking" (20:15). And from this it follows: "But let not God speak with us, lest we die" (20:16). The people experienced the intensity of the event, and asked of Moshe that he speak to them, out of the fear that they themselves would be unable to withstand God's revelation. But take note: This verse appears after the Ten Commandments! Why does it not say: "And the people heard the words of the Lord," or "And all the people heard the Lord as He spoke to them," or the like? If we compare this description to our *parasha*, we will immediately note the difference: "And you said, Behold, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the fire; we have seen this day that God does talk with man, and he lives" (5:21) (as stated above, and not as the idolaters argue that their god cannot reveal himself to his creations and that his creations cannot bear his revelation). Here the matter is stated clearly and explicitly: The people were deterred because they had experienced the revelation of God face to face and they had heard the voice of God.
- 4) And fourth, the covenant described in *Shemot* 24 consists primarily of a ceremony involving the offering of sacrifices by the representatives of the people and the writing of the book of the covenant. At the end of the ceremony there is indeed a direct revelation, only it is not to all of Israel, but only to the elders who serve as their representatives: "Then Moshe went up, and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel... And they beheld God..." (24:9-11). And in comparison to *Devarim*: we have already mentioned earlier that the third unit dealing with the covenant bases it on the experience of the direct revelation to the entire people: "The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Chorev... The Lord talked with you face to face in the mountain out of the fire" (5:2-4). According to the book of *Shemot*, the covenant is indeed based on face to face revelation, but only to the people's representatives, and not

² For joining the word "*leimor*," "saying" to verse 4, see the commentators, especially the Ibn Ezra.

to the people themselves. From the positive, you can infer the negative, that is to say, this implies that the people at large did not see.

The manifest difference between *Shemot* and *Devarim* with respect to the description of the event and especially the description of the revelation, raises a great difficulty. Surely the entire religious lesson that is learned from the revelation at Mount Sinai, according to Moshe's speech, stems from the one-time, face to face revelation. If according to the account related in *Shemot*, there was no such revelation, or at the very least it was concealed, what then was the objective of the revelation at Mount Sinai?

The answer to this question is simple, and it follows from what is stated explicitly at the beginning of the account, when God informs Moshe about what is to happen. Immediately after the people of Israel accept God's proposal that they enter into a covenant with Him, God informs Moshe of the next stage: "And the Lord said to Moshe, **Lo, I come to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you for ever**" (19:9). In light of the striking absence of any description of God's direct revelation to the people, God's announcement to Moshe precisely defines the nature and objective of the revelation:

- a) The revelation is that of God to Moshe in the presence of the people and not of God to the people. According to the book of *Devarim*, the people constitute the addressee of the revelation. God reveals Himself to them. According to the book of *Shemot*, the people observe the revelation, the addressee of which is Moshe Rabbeinu.
- b) From this it follows that the objective of the revelation was belief in Moshe rather than belief in God. When the people will see God speaking to Moshe, they will know that indeed Moshe is true and his Torah is true, and they will have to accept his prophecy in the future. The essence of the revelation at Mount Sinai according to the book of *Shemot* is expressed in the following verse: "That the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you for ever" (19:9).

IV. The Significance of the Differences between the Accounts of the Revelation at Mount Sinai in *Shemot* and *Devarim*

In light of what we have said thus far, we can explain most of the differences between the book of *Devarim* and the book of *Shemot* regarding their respective understandings of the revelation at Mount Sinai:

- In the book of *Devarim*, faith in the unity of God requires proof, and the revelation at Mount Sinai constitutes that proof. In the book of *Shemot*, faith in the unity of God is assumed, and the revelation comes to establish faith in the prophet of God.
- On the other hand: In the book of *Devarim*, faith in Moshe is self-evident, and through that faith and through his authority, Moshe teaches the people and commands them about remembering the revelation at Mount Sinai. In the book of *Shemot*, faith in Moshe requires proof, and the revelation at Mount Sinai constitutes that proof.
- Since the revelation, according to the book of *Devarim*, was direct, the fear arises that the people

will remember it and give form to what they saw. In the book of *Shemot*, this concern does not arise, for the people did not experience direct revelation, and thus there is no concern that the memory of the event will lead to giving it form.³

- According to both books, the covenant is connected to the revelation, but according to the book of *Devarim* the revelation is before the eyes of the entire people, whereas according to the book of *Shemot* it is only before the eyes of its representatives.

Now, after we have described the differences, explained them, and offered an understanding of each account, we must understand the reason for the two-fold description of the event, and why in the book of *Shemot* it is described in the one way and in the book of *Devarim* it is described in the other way.

In order to understand this matter, we must first of all understand the location and function of each account. In the book of *Shemot*, the revelation at Mount Sinai is in the present, occurring in close proximity to the events in the recent past, namely, God's revelation through His Providence over the people of Israel during the exodus from Egypt. The nation that just now had experienced the exodus from Egypt has no need of further proof regarding God's existence or His Providence over the people. Surely after the splitting of the sea, we read: "And they believed in the Lord, and in His servant Moshe" (14:31). While it is true that it is also stated there that the people believed in Moshe, they believed in him as one who acts in the name of God or performs wonders with His help, but not as a prophet who delivers His word. The goal of the revelation at Mount Sinai was belief in Moshe as a prophet who speaks the word of God, and for that the people had to observe God's revelation to Moshe. Forty years later, the exodus from Egypt was no longer a given that was fixed in their consciousness, but merely a distant memory. Thus, faith in the unity of God was also not a given, but a memory that had to be turned into psychological reality. The purpose of the speech in *Devarim* was to establish the faith for all generations even when individuals and the community as a whole do not experience a revelation as had occurred during the exodus from Egypt or at Mount Sinai. From here it follows that faith in the book of *Devarim* rests on the foundations of prophecy, memory, and story, and not on unmediated experience.

As for faith in Moshe Rabbeinu, the situation is just the opposite. In the book of *Shemot* faith in Moshe is not yet absolute, because among other things this phenomenon was a great novelty in human civilization. Moshe is not a religious priest, or a magician using special powers, but rather a prophet who proclaims the word of God that had been revealed to him. This novelty required proof and psychological rooting. However, for the next generation of the people of Israel, this was self-evident. They were raised on belief in Moshe Rabbeinu and his Torah. The belief in Moshe is the basis out of which grew the demand to believe in the unity of God based on the revelation at Mount Sinai. The belief in the unity of God is difficult to establish merely on the testimony that God spoke with Moshe, for there is

³ There are those who have explained that the vision that the elders saw on the mountain was the source for the fashioning of the Golden Calf, following the explanation of R. Yehuda Ha-Levi and the *Zohar*. This, however, is not the forum to discuss the issue at greater length.

no qualitative difference between this claim and the claims presented by the priests of all the other religions, to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Therefore, the emphasis in Moshe's account is upon God's direct revelation to the people. In the book of *Shemot* this idea is hazy, for God is not interested in public revelation becoming the fixed medium for delivering His word. On the contrary, prophecy is the fixed and legitimate conduit for delivering the word of God, and therefore God's unmediated revelation to the people is hidden in the story, so as not to create an expectation or a standard that will not be fulfilled in the future.

From a wider perspective, we are dealing here with two courses of faith. In the book of *Shemot* faith begins with objective, external Divine revelation. God's revelation becomes the basis for belief in a prophet. In the book of *Devarim* there is no external revelation. There is a prophet, who demands faith, and stirs up the memory. Belief in God grows out of memory, or out of the fear that is implanted in the soul of every Jew for all generations, or out of faith in a prophet. The source of faith is not an external, objective Divine event, but rather inner experience, tradition, memory and prophecy: "The Lord made not the covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are of us here alive this day. The Lord talked with your face to face in the mountain out of the midst of the fire" (5:3).

Historically speaking, the second generation was not at Mount Sinai, just as we were never there. Formally the covenant obligates us all. But what is most important is the psychological-spiritual aspect: If a person wants to remember something that he sees, he can photograph it. But a picture or a statue is idolatry. Why? Because it turns something that is alive into something that is dead; a living event becomes an object. We are called therefore to the memory of voice. Voice is not given to external perpetuation, it has no objective presence. Once it was, and now it is gone. But it is possible to listen to a voice through memory, and through the fear of God that is impressed in the heart of each and every one of us. The voice of God grows out of the soul and out of the memory of anyone who wishes to listen to it.

Here lies another difference between the two accounts (which brings us back to R. Tzadok and the Holy Jew mentioned in the [previous shiur](#)). In the book of *Devarim*, the revelation at Mount Sinai turns from the past to the present. In Moshe's description the "face to face" is not what occurred in the past, providing in the present historical proof for faith, but rather an experience that can be re-experienced in the present existentially. Not a "pyrotechnic" reproduction, not thunder and lightning, but rather Divine revelation to each individual. In my humble opinion, this is also Onkelos's understanding when he translates: "These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly in the mountain... with a great voice which *lo yasa*" – ***lo pasik - did not cease***. That is to say, that the echoes of that voice continue to be heard, not in the acoustic expanse, but inside a person, from then until today. And today is every day.

The revelation at Mount Sinai and the exodus from Egypt in the book of *Shemot* are the sources of faith, the origins of which are Divine and the movement of which is from God to man. Its arena is that of objective history.

The revelation at Mount Sinai in the book of *Devarim* is the source of faith, the origin of which is human, and whose birth in the social sense is in the prophecy of Moshe, man of

God, and in the individual sense, in the heart and memory of every Jew. In the book of *Shemot*, the arrow of faith is shot from God to man. In the book of *Devarim*, man restores that arrow to the Master of the universe.

V. EXPRESSIONS OF THE TWO PERCEPTIONS IN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

As is well known, there are various differences between the Ten Commandments found in *Shemot* and those found in *Devarim*. These differences have been discussed at length by the *Rishonim* and the *Acharonim*. We wish to add another point that may deepen our understanding of what has been explained thus far.

At the heart of the Ten Commandments stands without a doubt the *mitzva* of Shabbat. Quantitatively, this *mitzva* takes the most space. As for its location, it is found in the middle of the Ten Commandments, and ferries us from the commandments between man and God to those between man and his fellow. Qualitatively, it is the *mitzva*, and perhaps the only *mitzva* in the list – in the precise sense of the term. The first negative precepts of the Ten Commandments are positive and negative expressions of the faith and the covenant, and from this perspective they are self-evident. The latter negative precepts among the Ten Commandments are necessary conditions for the existence of civilized society, and indeed for the most part they are agreed upon and accepted by most human societies. Shabbat is a novelty, a *mitzva*, because it infers from faith and morality an obligation that is cast upon life itself, and changes and influences it in practice. In other words, here religious belief turns into a principle of conduct and a cause for a refashioning of time.

Indeed, the most important difference between the two lists of the Ten Commandments relates to the explanation given for the *mitzva* of Shabbat. The Shabbat of the book of *Shemot* serves as a reminder of the Shabbat of Creation, and thus it is an expression of thanksgiving of all of creation. The Shabbat of the book of *Devarim* is a social obligation the purpose of which is the establishment of an egalitarian day of rest, the meaning of which is the freedom of man, owners, and slaves from bondage to work and master.

The objective of Shabbat in the book of *Shemot* is faith in God, Creator of the world. The objective of Shabbat in the book of *Devarim* is man and society.

The fundamental Shabbat of the book of *Shemot* is that which was established by God at the time of Creation. We are called to remember it and join to it, but it stands on its own, it is part of the essence of time, whether we join it or, God forbid, not.

The Shabbat of *Devarim* depends upon man and society. It is not a fact that must be remembered, but rather a mission or an obligation that must be kept: "Keep the sabbath day." If we do not keep it, there will be no rest, no equality, no freedom for all men, and then there will also be no Shabbat. The Shabbat's home is in man.

According to the book of *Shemot*, the thirty-nine forbidden labors constitute an archetypal set of labors that

symbolize Divine creation, and through abstention from such labors, the rest on Shabbat from all labor.

According to the book of *Devarim*, the thirty-nine forbidden labors are a list of common labors in the world of man, the purpose of refraining from which is the fashioning of Shabbat as a day of rest on the real human level.⁴

We see then that the perception that establishes the nature of the account and the memory of the revelation at Mount Sinai, also establishes the various meanings given in the two lists of the Ten Commandments to the *mitzva* of Shabbat.

Translated by David Strauss

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⁴ These two understandings regarding Shabbat can explain many of the controversies found in Tractate *Shabbat*. For example, the question of the source of the thirty-nine forbidden labors, the dispute between R. Eliezer and the Sages regarding the separation of labors, and especially the series of disputes between R. Yehuda and R. Shimon regarding the basic concept of forbidden labor which are fundamental to all of Shabbat law.