

Matan Torah - Parshat Yitro

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Special Holiday Shiur

Yeshivat Har Etzion

MATAN TORAH - PARSHAT YITRO

by Menachem Leibtag

Parshat Yitro describes the historic event of Matan Torah, but the manner in which it does so is not as simple as meets the eye. This shiur contains two parts:

Part I serves as a general introduction to the methodology of analyzing the 'structure' of parshiot to find their 'theme'.

Part II discusses the significance of the Torah's PRESENTATION of the events that take place when the Torah is given at Har Sinai.

PART I - STRUCTURE AND THEME IN CHUMASH

When we study Chumash, we encounter two types of passages:

- (1) narrative, i.e. the ongoing story;
- (2) "mitzvot", i.e. the commandments.

Before Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai, Chumash contains primarily narrative (e.g. the story of Creation, the Avot, Yetziat Mitzraim etc.). In contrast, beginning with Parshat Yitro, we find many 'parshiot' consisting primarily of 'mitzvot' (e.g. the Ten Commandments, the "mishpatim", laws of the Mishkan, etc.).

Assuming that Bnei Yisrael are to receive all the mitzvot at Har Sinai, and then will continue their journey to inherit the Promised Land, one would expect to find the following order:

I. NARRATIVE

The story of Bnei Yisrael until they reach Har Sinai.

II. MITZVOT

ALL the mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael receive at HarSinai.

III. NARRATIVE

The story of Bnei Yisrael's journey from Har Sinai to

the Promised Land.

However, instead of this clear and structured order, Chumash presents the mitzvot in a much more complicated manner. Together with the description of the events that transpire when the Torah is given, Sefer Shmot records only a select set of mitzvot. The rest of the mitzvot that were given to Moshe Rabeinu on Har Sinai are interspersed amid the ongoing narratives of Vayikra, Bamidbar and Dvarim. Why are the mitzvot not presented in a more organized fashion?

We must assume that there is thematic significance to the order in which the Torah presents the mitzvot. In other words: to fully appreciate Chumash, we must not only study the mitzvot, but we must ALSO study the manner of their presentation. This requires that we consistently pay attention to the 'structure' of 'parshiot' in Chumash, as well as to their content.

CHRONOLOGY IN CHUMASH

It is only logical to assume that the narrative found in Chumash is presented in chronological order, i.e. the order in which the events took place. Sometimes, we may find instances when a certain narrative

concludes with details that took place many years later. Although this may seem strange, this too is logical.

For example, the story of the manna in Parshat B'shalach, concludes with God's commandment to Moshe to place a sample of the manna next to the Aron in the Mishkan. This commandment could only have been given AFTER the Mishkan was completed, an event which does not occur until many months later. Nevertheless, because that narrative deals with the manna (which first fell before Matan Torah), related events, even though they take place at a later date, can be included in the same 'parsha'.

[The story of Yehuda and Tamar in Sefer Breishit is another classic example. See perek 38, note from 38:12 must take place AFTER Yosef becomes viceroy in Egypt!]

How about the mitzvot in Chumash? In what order are they presented in Chumash? Do they follow the chronological order by which they were first given?

Because the mitzvot are embedded within the narrative of Chumash, and not presented in one unbroken unit (as explained above), the answer is not simple. A major controversy exists, popularly known as: "ein mukdam u'm'uchar ba'Torah" (there is no chronological order in the Torah). Rashi, together with many other commentators, consistently holds that "ein mukdam u'm'uchar", while Ramban, amongst others, consistently argues that "yaish mukdam u'm'uchar", i.e. Chumash DOES follow chronological order.

Rashi's opinion, "ein mukdam u'm'uchar", should not be understood as some 'wildcard' answer that allows one to totally disregard the order in which Chumash is written. Rashi holds that the mitzvot in Chumash are organized by TOPIC, i.e. thematically, without regard to the actual chronological order in which God gave them to Moshe Rabeinu. Therefore, even the slightest indication that a certain 'parsha' was given at a later date allows Rashi to 'change' the chronological order.

For example, Rashi holds that the mitzvah to build the Mishkan in Parshat Trumah (25:1) was given AFTER the sin of the Golden Calf (32:1) in Parshat Ki-tisa, because of the thematic similarities to that event.

Ramban argues that until there is 'clear cut' proof otherwise, one must always assume that the even the mitzvot in Chumash are recorded in the same order as they were given. For example, the commandment to build the Mishkan was given BEFORE "chet ha'egel" DESPITE the thematic similarities to that event!

Even though this controversy of "mukdam u'm'uchar" relates primarily to 'parshiot' dealing with mitzvot, there are even times when this controversy relates to the narrative itself. A classic example is found with regard to when Yitro comes to join Bnei Yisrael in the desert.

WHEN DID YITRO ARRIVE ?

Parshat Yitro opens with Yitro's arrival at the campsite of Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai (see 18:5). The location of this 'parsha' indicates that Yitro arrives BEFORE Matan Torah, yet certain details found later in the 'parsha', i.e. Moshe's daily routine of judging the people and teaching them God's laws, indicates that this must have taken place AFTER Matan Torah.

Based on several strong proofs, Ibn Ezra claims that the entire parsha took place AFTER Matan Torah ("ein mukdam u'm'uchar"). DESPITE these proofs, Ramban maintains the opposite: that the entire 'parsha' took place BEFORE Matan Torah ("yaish mukdam u'm'uchar").

Rashi suggests a compromise by 'splitting' the parsha in half. He holds that Yitro did arrive BEFORE Matan Torah (18:1- 12), HOWEVER, the details found later (18:13-27), e.g. how Moshe taught the people etc., took place AFTER Matan Torah. [See Rashi 18:13 and Ramban 18:1]

Ibn Ezra (see 18:1), who claims that the entire 'parsha' occurred later, must explain WHY the Torah recorded this 'parsha' here. Therefore, he finds thematic significance in the juxtaposition between this 'parsha' and the story of Amalek.

The dispute concerning 'When Yitro came' illustrates the various approaches we can take when confronted with apparent discrepancies. In general, whenever we find a 'parsha' which appears to be 'out of order', we can either:

1) Attempt to keep the chronological order, then deal with

each problematic detail individually. [Ramban's approach]

2) Keep the chronological order up until the first detail

that is problematic. At that point, explain why the

narrative records details that happen later. [Rashi]

3) Change the chronological order, and then explain the thematic reason why the Torah places the 'parsha' in this specific location. [Ibn Ezra]

MA'AMAD HAR SINAI

With this introduction, we can begin our discussion of the most important event of our history: "Ma'amad Har Sinai" - God's revelation to Am Yisrael at Mount Sinai - the most significant event to have shaped our collective identity.

"Matan Torah" - the giving of the Torah at Sinai, together with the events which immediately precede and follow it, are known as "Ma'amad Har Sinai".

This "ma'amad" includes the following 'parshiot': 19:1-25 [Narrative] The Sinai 'experience', God's revelation 20:1-14 [Mitzvot] The Ten Commandments 20:15-18 [Narrative] Bnei Yisrael's fear of God's revelation 21:19-23:33 [Mitzvot] Additional Mitzvot ("ha'mishpatim") 24:1-11 [Narrative] The ceremonial covenant (na'asseh v'nishma)

Bnei Yisrael declare "na'asseh v'nishma" before receiving the Torah - correct? NOT according to Ramban and, apparently, not according to Parshat Yitro!

Bnei Yisrael's declaration of "na'asseh v'nishma" takes place the ceremonial covenant recorded at the end of Parshat Mishpatim (24:7). In Parshat Yitro, when Bnei Yisrael accept God's proposition to keep His Torah, the people reply only with "na'asseh" (19:8).

Based on the order of parshiot (see above table), the "na'asseh v'nishma" ceremony takes places AFTER Matan Torah. Nevertheless, Rashi changes the order of the 'parshiot' and claims that this ceremony takes places BEFORE Matan Torah. Why?

Rashi ("ein mukdam u'm'uchar") anchors his interpretation in the numerous similarities between chapter 19 and chapter 24. Therefore, he combines these two narratives together. [However, he must explain the reason why they are presented separately.]

Ramban ("yaish mukdam u'm'uchar) prefers to accept the chronological order of the 'parshiot' as they are presented in Chumash, and explains that this ceremony takes place after Matan Torah.

This dispute causes Rashi and Ramban to explain the details of chapter 24 differently. For example, during that ceremony Moshe reads the "Sefer Ha'Brit" in public (24:7). According to Rashi, "Sefer Ha'Brit" refers to all of Chumash from Breishit until Matan Torah; while according to Ramban, it refers to the Ten Commandments (and possibly also the "mishpatim").

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PARSHAT YITRO / PART II

Part II of this week's shiur examines the complicated description of "Ma'amad Har Sinai". In our analysis, we will attempt to uncover the biblical source for several popular Midrashim and better understand the reason for the opposing opinions of various commentators.

THE SINAI EXPERIENCE

Although the obvious purpose of Ma'amad Har Sinai is that Bnei Yisrael receive the mitzvot, their experience during that revelation is of equal importance. To uncover the thematic significance of their experience, we must carefully examine the narrative that describes that event (19:1-25).

Chapter 19 can be divided into four distinct sections:

I. PROPOSITION (1-8)

II. PREPARATION (9-15)

III. REVELATION (16-19)

IV. LIMITATION (20-25)

As we will show, this division helps us understand the importance of each section.

THE PROPOSITION (1-8)

After arriving at Har Sinai (19:1-2), God summons Moshe to present Bnei Yisrael with the following proposition:

"IF: You will OBEY Me faithfully and keep My COVENANT...

THEN: You shall be to Me a "mamlechet Kohanim v'goy kadosh"

[a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation]..." (19:4-6)

It is not by chance that God's opening statement to Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai begins with: "im sha'mo'ah tish'm'u b'koli" - "If you will truly obey Me". As explained in the previous shiurim, it was precisely this call for obedience that Bnei Yisrael did not heed prior to their redemption. After the various incidents in the desert that helped build Bnei Yisrael's spiritual character, God must first verify that they are truly ready to receive the Torah.

In addition to confirming their total obedience, the second phrase in God's proposition: "u'shmartem et briti" - 'and you shall keep My covenant' - suggests that the time has come for Bnei Yisrael to fulfill the next stage of God's COVENANT with the Avot. As we explained numerous times in Sefer Breishit, the purpose of God's covenant with the Avot was for Bnei Yisrael to establish a ethical and just, model nation ["mamlechet kohanim"] in Eretz Canaan that will represent Him. By keeping the mitzvot which they are about to receive, Bnei Yisrael can fulfill this Divine goal.

[Whether this is the same covenant or an additional covenant

will be discussed in the shiur on Parshat Ki-tisa.]

Therefore, Bnei Yisrael must receive the mitzvot BEFORE they enter the Land. As these mitzvot will be binding for all generations, they must be given in a covenantal ceremony. [This ceremony will be discussed in next week's shiur. Note also that Matan Torah itself is referred to as a covenant, see Dvarim 4:13 & 5:2-3.]

A covenant, by its very nature, is only binding if both sides willingly agree. Therefore, the Torah must emphasize Bnei Yisrael's collective acceptance of this covenant (19:7-8).

PREPARATION (9-15)

After Bnei Yisrael accept God's proposition, they must prepare themselves for His "hitgalut" (revelation). First, God explains to Moshe that He plans to speak to the people using Moshe as an intermediary:

"And God said to Moshe, 'I will come to you in a THICK CLOUD

in order that the people will HEAR when I SPEAK WITH YOU,

... then Moshe reported the people's words to God" (19:9)

The second half of this pasuk is very difficult. What 'words of the people' did Moshe report?

It CANNOT refer to the people's acceptance of God's proposition, for that was already reported in the previous pasuk (see 19:8). More likely, it refers to the people's response to God's statement in the first half of that pasuk, i.e. that Moshe is to act as an intermediary. Unfortunately, the Torah does not tell us what that response was.

Rashi (quoting the Mchilta) 'fills in' the missing details of that response:

"We want to SEE our King, for one can not compare hearing

from a "shliach" (an intermediary) to hearing directly from

God Himself!"

Rashi's explanation is based on God's response, as explained in the psukim that follow:

"And God told Moshe, 'Go to the people and get them ready...

for on the third day God will reveal Himself IN THE SIGHT OF

ALL THE PEOPLE on Har Sinai." (19:10-11)

Bnei Yisrael's response can be determined from the apparent change in God's plan as to how His revelation will take place. This change is implicit in the contradiction between 19:9 and 19:11:

19:9 implies that Moshe will act as an intermediary.

From now on, referred to as PLAN 'A'

19:11 implies that Bnei Yisrael themselves will SEE God.

From now on, referred to as PLAN 'B'

According to Plan 'B', Bnei Yisrael will hear the Commandments directly from God. Therefore, this 'change of plan' requires that Bnei Yisrael reach even a higher level of spiritual readiness, as reflected in the three day preparation period (see 19:10-15).

Are Bnei Yisrael capable of reaching this level? Are they truly ready to witness God's Revelation in the manner that they requested? From the psukim which follow, it is not clear that they were.

REVELATION

On the third day, Bnei Yisrael become fearful due to the thunder and lightning that precede God's approaching "hitgalut". Apparently, the people remain in the camp instead of gathering at Har Sinai (see 19:16). Moshe himself must take them out of the camp towards God, to stand at the foot of the mountain (19:17). God reveals Himself in fire on Har Sinai, and the entire mountain is enveloped in a THICK CLOUD of smoke (19:18).

Now that God has revealed Himself, i.e. He has descended on Har Sinai, 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, Moshe spoke

and God answered him "b'kol" ("b'kol" could be interpreted

as either 'with His voice' or 'with thunder')." (19:19)

According to Rashi, this pasuk describes God's proclamation of the FIRST TWO Commandments. The "M'chilta" (quoted by Ramban) also claims that this pasuk refers to Matan Torah. Thus, one could

conclude that Bnei Yisrael actually heard the "dibrot" (at least the first two) directly from God, i.e. PLAN 'B'.

Ramban, together with many other commentators, argue that 19:19 does NOT describe Matan Torah, rather, it describes the nature of the conversation between God and Moshe regarding where everyone is to stand when Matan Torah takes place (19:20-25). From those psukim, it is clear that only Moshe will witness the "shchina" at the TOP of the mountain [PLAN 'A'], while Bnei Yisrael are not permitted to SEE, lest they die:

"... Go down and WARN the people lest they break through

toward God to SEE, and many of them will perish" (19:21)

Once again, Ramban prefers to keep the sequence of events according to the order of the psukim, while Rashi is willing to 'change' the order.

To better understand the "machloket" (controversy) between Rashi and Ramban, we must examine the last set of psukim (19:20- 25) precede the Ten Commandments (20:1-14).

LIMITATION (19:20-25)

The psukim that follow seem to indicate another change in plan. All of a sudden, God decides to LIMIT His revelation to the top of the Mountain:

"And God descended upon Mount Sinai to the TOP of the

Mountain, then summoned Moshe to the TOP of the Mountain,

and Moshe ascended" (19:20)

Since only Moshe can ascend, the people must be warned ONCE AGAIN to keep their distance. Even the "kohanim" who apparently are permitted to come closer than others, receive a special warning (19:21-25). [Note that 20:25 refers to Moshe conveying this warning to the people, and NOT to conveying the "dibrot", as commonly misunderstood].

From these psukim, it appears that God will reveal Himself to Moshe alone, and NOT to the entire nation. Has God reverted to Plan 'A' (that Moshe is to act as an intermediary)? If so, why? If Plan 'B' remains, why is God's revelation now limited to the TOP of the mountain? Could this be considered some sort of a compromise, perhaps Plan 'C'? [See Further Iyun.]

A possible solution to this dilemma can be deduced from the change in 'person' that takes place between the second and third commandment.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS - FIRST OR THIRD PERSON

The first two commandments (20:2-5) are written in first person, indicating that God conveyed them DIRECTLY to the people [as in Plan 'B']. The last eight commandments (20:6-14) are written in third person, indicating a less direct form of communication, i.e. that Moshe conveyed them to the people [as in Plan 'A']. [This reflects Chazal's explanation: "Anochi v'Lo Yihiyeh Lachem, m'pi ha'gvurah shma'um", i.e. the first two commandments were heard directly from God (Makkot 24a), see also Chizkuni 20:2.]

This change of 'person' between the second and third commandment supports Rashi's explanation in 19:19 that the people heard the first two commandments directly, i.e. the psukim that describe God's limitation of His "shchinah" to the top of the mountain (19:20-24) take place in the middle of the Ten Commandments.

Ramban argues that the people heard ALL the commandments through Moshe (Plan 'A'), i.e. NONE of the commandments were heard directly from God. According to Ramban, the people's fear of the thunder and lightning caused them to revert back to the original plan (see Ramban 20:15).

Ibn Ezra (20:15) takes an opposite approach. He maintains that the people heard all Ten Commandments directly from God [Plan 'B'].

In the description of Matan Torah in Sefer Dvarim, we face a similar dilemma when attempting to determine precisely what happened:

"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..." (Dvarim 5:4-5)

Even though Rashi's interpretation appears to be the most logical, the other commentators also present very solid arguments. The "machloket" between the various commentators undoubtedly results from the ambiguity in the psukim themselves.

Why can't the Torah be more precise about such an important detail of the most important event in our history?

AHAVA and YIRAH

One could suggest that this ambiguity is intentional, as it reflects the very nature of man's encounter with the Divine.

Man, in search of God, finds himself in a dialectic. 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 be aware of God's greatness, and recognize his own shortcomings and unworthiness ("yirah" the fear of God), and thus keep his distance (see Dvarim 5:25-26!).

God's original plan for Matan Torah was 'realistic'. Realizing man's inability to directly confront the "shchinah", God intends to use Moshe as an intermediary (Plan 'A'). Bnei Yisrael, eager to become an active covenantal partner, desire to come as close as possible to Har Sinai. They themselves want to encounter the "shchina" directly.

Could God say NO to this sincere expression of "ahavat Hashem"? On the other hand, answering YES could place the people in tremendous danger, for to be deserving, Bnei Yisrael must reach a very high level.

Plan 'A' reflects reality, while Plan 'B' reflects the ideal. One could suggest that by presenting the details in an ambiguous way, the Torah is emphasizing the need to be both realistic and idealistic at the same time.

GOD KNOWS BEST

Although God is aware that Bnei Yisrael are not capable of sustaining a complete encounter with the "shchinah", nonetheless, He concedes to the people's request to hear the Commandments directly. Why?

One could compare this Divine encounter to a parent-child relationship. There are times when a child is growing up and he wishes to do something by himself. Although the child may not be capable of performing that act, 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 fall. Better one recognize the limits of his capabilities on his own, than be told by others that he cannot accomplish.

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

Likewise, God is aware that Bnei Yisrael do not deserve 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 Bnei Yisrael must strive.

When studying Parshat Yitro, what actually happened at Ma'amad Har Sinai remains unclear. What could have happened remains man's eternal challenge.

shabbat shalom

menachem

----- FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. What would have happened had Bnei Yisrael said NO to God's proposition? The Midrash posits that had Bnei Yisrael rejected, the world would have been returned to "tohu va'vahu" (void) - the phrase used in Breishit 1:2 to describe the state prior to Creation! [See Shabbat 88a & Rashi 19:17.] From this Midrash, it appears that Bnei Yisrael had no choice other than to accept. Why then is the covenant binding, if Am Yisrael had no choice?

Any covenant, by its very nature, requires that both parties have free choice to accept or reject. Therefore, according to "pshat", Bnei Yisrael have "bchira chofshit" to either accept or reject God's proposition. Their willful acceptance makes the covenant at Har Sinai binding for all generations. Thus, had Bnei Yisrael said NO (chas v'shalom), Matan Torah would not have taken place! However, such a possibility is unthinkable, for without Matan Torah there would have been no purpose for Creation. Therefore, because the psukim indicate the Bnei Yisrael had free choice, the Midrash must emphasize that from the perspective of the purpose of God's Creation, the people had no choice other than to accept the Torah.

B. Learn the Ramban to 20:15 (after first reading Dvarim 5:19- 28). Based on the above shiur, explain why the Ramban changes the order of the parshiot in this specific case.

C. Most all the m'forshim explain that "b'mshoch ha'yovel hay'mah ya'alu b'Har" (19:13) refers to the long shofar blast that signals the COMPLETION of the "hitgalut" - an all clear signal.

One could suggest exactly the opposite interpretation! The long shofar blast should indicate the BEGINNING of Matan Torah. 1. Explain why this interpretation fits nicely into the pshat of 19:11-15, i.e. limiting access to the Mountain is part of preparation for Matan Torah. [What does an 'all clear' signal have to do with preparation?] 2. Explain why this would imply that during Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael should have actually ascended Har Sinai!

Relate this to concept of PLAN 'B' and Bnei Yisrael's request to SEE the "shchina". 3. Use Dvarim 5:5 to support this interpretation. 4. Based on this explain why "kol ha'shofar holaych v'chazak m'od" (19:19) is precisely "b'mshoch ha'yovel".

Relate to "tachtit ha'har" in 19:17! 5. Use this to explain why immediately after 19:19 we find thepsukim which describe God's decision to LIMIT his "hitgalut" to the TOP of the mountain.

D. Compare the details of 19:20-24 to the Mishkan! i.e. Rosh Ha'har = kodesh kdoshim. Har = Mishkan, Tachtit Ha'har = azara etc. Where can Moshe and Aharon enter, the Kohanim, the Am!

Explain how this may relate to our theoretical PLAN 'C'!

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