

PARASHAT YITRO

The Waters of Sinai

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

Right before the revelation of the Ten Commandments, God gives Moshe some last-minute instructions. After the preliminary negotiations (19:3-9), after the three-day preparatory period (19:10-15), and after Moshe has already escorted the people to the mountain and ascended (19:16-20), God tells him to go back down.

And God said to Moshe: Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to God to see and many of them perish. And also the priests, who come near God, must sanctify themselves, lest God break out against them. (19:22-23)

These last-minute instructions seem to come as somewhat of a surprise to Moshe. After all, as part of the command of the three-day preparation period, God has already ordered Moshe to set boundaries around the mountain (19:12). The people have already been told "not to go up onto the mountain" or "touch the border." Violation of the prohibition carries the death penalty (19:12-13). If so, why does God need to reiterate the prohibition and the apparent danger of its neglect at the very last minute?

This sense of surprise animates Moshe's reaction to God's orders. Moshe replies, "The people cannot come up onto Mount Sinai," and "You have already warned us to set boundaries around the mountain and make it holy" (19:23).

In response, God reiterates his orders one last time:

And God said to him: Go, get down and then you shall come up, you and Aharon, but do not let the people and the priests break

through to come up to God, lest He break out against them.
(19:24)

Sufficiently chastised and ever the obedient servant, Moshe descends the mountain and informs the people (19:25).

While Moshe may have swallowed his sense of surprise at God's last-minute instructions, that would not be the proper response for us, the readers of the story. God's double reiteration of the need for the people not to encroach upon the mountain (19:21-25) seems to break up the flow of the narrative. After Moshe's ascent to the mountain (19:20), we expect him to receive the Ten Commandments. Instead, we find the "prohibition of encroachment." Consequently, when the Ten Commandments finally do appear, they seem both anti-climactic and intrusive. Moshe is now at the bottom of the mountain reiterating the prohibition of encroachment (19:25). Suddenly, without preface and without bothering to mention Moshe's again ascending the mountain, the Torah reports God's speaking of the commandments (20:1).

Moreover, the reiterating of the prohibition is conceptually surprising. The flow of Chapter Nineteen seems to mitigate against the possibility of the people breaking through to "see" God. They have already been warned. More importantly, earlier on in the chapter, the Torah depicts them as "trembling" at the sight and sounds of the thunder, lightning and thick cloud upon the mountain (19:16). Moshe must "bring out" the people for their meeting with God (19:17). It seems hard to imagine that these very same trembling people, who have already been warned on pain of death not to approach the mountain, and who must be coaxed into approaching the terrifying presence of God, will suddenly break through and try to "see" God.

Finally, the actions of the people upon hearing God's words further highlight the problem of God's last-minute warning. Immediately after God's stating of the Ten Commandments (20:1-14), the Torah reports the people's reaction:

And all the people saw the thunder and lightning and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking, and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. And the people said to Moshe: You speak to us and we will listen, but let not God speak with us, lest we die. (20:15-16)

Rather than rushing forward to "see" God, the people rush away from the "sight," the overwhelming sensory experience of the signs of God's presence. The people choose distance and ask Moshe to serve as their intermediary. If so,

what was the need for the last-minute instructions and the double reiteration of the prohibition of encroachment? According to Chapters Nineteen and Twenty, the story of the revelation at Sinai, there seems to have been no real danger of anyone plunging into the divine presence. What was God so concerned about?

II

The narrative of the revelation at Sinai commences with the arrival of the Children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. The Torah reports that the Israelites departed from Refidim, arrived in the wilderness of Sinai, and encamped facing "the mountain" (19:2). A cursory reading of this relatively standard travel report gives the impression that the Children of Israel have arrived in a new locale, a place they have never been before.

Yet this is not exactly correct. The "mountain" across from which the people camp (19:2), and which God "descends" upon to deliver the Ten commandments (19:18, 20), has been visited previously by Moshe. Back at the burning bush, God had instructed Moshe that when he redeems the people from Egypt, "You shall serve God on this mountain" (3:12). In other words, when Moshe brings the people to Sinai, and to "the mountain" of Chapter Nineteen, he in fact brings them to the place he had first encountered God, the mountain of the burning bush. The key term "sneh," the unusual term for bush in the burning bush narrative, highlights this point. It constitutes a word-play on "Sinai" and hints at the proper name of the place.

This leads us to a crucial point. The narrative of the burning bush opens with Moshe's leading his father-in-law's sheep out to the desert, to "the mountain of God, to Chorev" (3:1). Similarly, later on in Sefer Shemot the location of the revelation at Sinai is named Mount Chorev (33:6), and in recounting the revelation at Sinai in Sefer Devarim, Moshe repeatedly refers to Chorev and Mount Chorev (1:6, 4:10, 5:2-5). In other words, "Chorev," meaning dry or desolate, constitutes an alternative name for the mountain itself, or a name for the immediate desert locale of the mountain. But shockingly enough, "Chorev" is in fact a place already encountered on the journey from the Sea of Reeds to Sinai, a place already known to the Children of Israel.

During their stay at Refidim, the camp preceding Sinai (see 19:2), the Children of Israel had quarreled with Moshe and tested God (17:2,7). They demanded water and began to question Moshe's taking them out of Egypt (17:2-3). The quickly deteriorating situation is resolved by Moshe's hitting the rock and bringing forth water for the people. God instructs Moshe, "I will stand before you on the rock at Chorev and you shall hit the rock, and water will come forth

and the people shall drink..." (17:6). As pointed out by both Ramban and Abarbanel, when God commands Moshe to "pass before the people," and "go," taking the elders and the stick with him (17:5), He in fact commands Moshe to continue on just a bit further in the journey. He commands Moshe to move on, at least temporarily, to Sinai, a place already known to Moshe, where He has previously met Moshe and will now be waiting for him. He commands Moshe to produce the water out of Chorev itself. But if so, Sinai is a place previously visited, not just by Moshe, but also by the thirsty Children of Israel. They have all been there before.

III

The story of the revelation at Sinai told in Chapter Nineteen and the story of the quarrel and test (Masa U-meriva) told in Chapter Seventeen (17:1-7) may bear far more in common than the locale of Chorev-Sinai.

In discussing the problem of place in the two stories, the question of where the Children of Israel are located and the geographic relationship of Refidim/Masa U-meriva and Sinai, both Ramban and Abarbanel cite Tehillim 78, a psalm describing the wilderness years.

He brought forth streams from a rock

And made them flow down like a river...

True he struck the rock and waters flowed

Streams gushed forth. (Tehillim 78:16, 20)

Based upon the double reference to a rock from which a flowing stream emerged, Ramban raises the possibility, and Abarbanel concludes, that there really was no need for all of the Children of Israel to visit Chorev-Sinai even temporarily. The people remained at a distance, back at Refidim. Only Moshe and the elders passed on ahead to Chorev-Sinai. Moshe performed the miracle and the elders, the select group, witnessed. The people remained behind and drew water from the newly created springs of Sinai, a river flowing down from Chorev.

Consequently, Abarbanel claims that God's command to Moshe at Masa U-meriva to take the elders with him on his journey to Chorev (17:5) creates a crucial parallel to the story of Sinai, and to the general structure of Sinaitic revelation.

The Sinaitic revelation was experienced differently by three groups: Moshe, an elite, and the people. The depiction of the revelation at Sinai included at the end of Parashat Mishpatim (24:1-11) constitutes the paradigm. It places Moshe alone at the top of the mountain, an elite group consisting of Aharon and his sons, i.e. the future priests, and the seventy elders somewhere behind Moshe, lower down on the mountain, and the people down at the bottom (24:1-2). Unlike the people down at the bottom who glimpse nothing of God's actual presence, the elite group "sees" and "beholds" God (24:10-11). They serve what might be thought of as "witnessing" function.

Likewise, the first depiction of the revelation at Sinai, the story of the Ten Commandments, refers to three groups: Moshe, "the priests who come near to God," and the people (19:21). While according to Chapter Nineteen, this elite group must sanctify itself (19:22) and is barred from ascending to God (19:24), the priests do seem to be treated differently than the people. While the people are explicitly barred by God in His last-minute instructions from "breaking forth to see [God]," in contrast, the "priests that come close to God" are merely required to "sanctify themselves" (19:21-22). The elite group is not barred from seeing. Once again, there is a three-part structure: Moshe, those who are close - perhaps even close enough to see, and finally, the people.

This brings us back to the story of Masa U-meriva. Like the Sinai stories, the text refers to three groups: Moshe, the elders-elite and the people (17:6). Like the Sinai stories, Moshe meets the divine presence at Sinai-Chorev. Like the Sinai stories, he is accompanied until the last minute, the actual meeting with the divine presence (i.e. the performing of the miracle), by the elite group. Everything happens, "in their sight" (17:6). The elite group witnesses. But the people do not see Moshe, the divine presence or the miracle. Abarbanel argues that in this proto-Sinai story, they remain behind, back in Refidim.

Thinking of the story of Masa U-meriva as a proto-Sinai story should clue us in to two other crucial linguistic and conceptual overlaps between the two stories. The last verse of the story of Masa U-meriva reads as follows:

And he called the name of the place Massa and Meriva, because of the quarreling (riv) of the Children of Israel and their testing (nasotam) of God saying, "Is God present among us or not?" (17:7)

The new name given to the spot in Refidim at which the Israelites had camped and complained literally means "Test (Massa) and Quarrel (Meriva)." It embodies Moshe's interpretation of the incident. While in fact the Children of

Israel did not have sufficient water (17:1), their excessive pressuring of Moshe, the quarrel (17:2), and the questioning of the exodus from Egypt (17:3) reflect a deeper agenda. The Children of Israel doubt whether God is among them. They view the immediate provision of water at their campsite as a test of God's presence and power. God must prove Himself to the people. Any delay means that it has been Moshe, and not God, leading them all along.

The term for test, the stem nun-samech-heh, also appears in the story of the revelation at Sinai. After the people retreat in fright from the thunder, lightning, sounds and smoke which accompany God's revelation of the Ten Commandments (20:15), they request from Moshe that he, rather than God, speak to them (20:16). They equate God's speaking to them with death, and request Moshe as an intermediary. Moshe replies:

Do not be frightened, for God has come only in order to test you, and so that the fear of Him will be upon you so that you will not stray .(20:17)

Like the story of Masa U-meriva, the story of Sinai is a test. The purpose of God's revelation is to test the people. Whereas before the people tested God, now God tests the people.

Finally, we may note a fourth connection between the two stories. Both are fundamentally concerned with the presence of God amongst the Israelites. God's presence or lack of presence among the people constitutes the issue at stake in the test of Masa U-meriva. Similarly, the story of Sinai (19:1-20:18), while a narrative of lawgiving, is nevertheless primarily a story about God's presence. The story is about God's "coming" (19:9, 20:17) and "descending" (19:11, 18, 20) to Sinai, right in front of the people (19:9, 11, 20:15).

In sum, we seem to face two stories that rather surprisingly bear much in common. They both involve Chorev-Sinai, and they both depict a three-part social and physical structure: Moshe-elite-people. Moreover, they both involve the concept of "test" and the issue of the presence of God.

IV

Connecting the two stories confronts us with a crucial question: What possible meaning is conveyed by these surprising connections? How do the stories interact and contribute to one another?

One possibility can be gleaned from the commentary of Abarbanel. On his account, understanding the link between the stories depends upon understanding the symbolism of life and death in the story of Masa U-meriva.

The Children of Israel find themselves in the desert without sufficient water (17:1). While they may not yet be dying of thirst, they do face imminent dehydration and death. In their lack of faith and doubt of God's presence and power, they accuse Moshe of bringing them out of Egypt to cause their deaths, the deaths of their children and the death of their cattle (17:3). The miracle that resolves the situation picks up on the life vs. death issue. It involves taking the stick with which Moshe and Aharon hit the river in Egypt (17:6) and striking a rock, in order to bring forth water. In other words, the stick that had turned water into blood, i.e. life into death, will now be used to turn imminent death into life. From the dry and desolate rock of Chorev, Moshe brings forth a gushing river of life, a stream that sustains and maintains the Children of Israel.

This reversal of the symbolism of the stick is meant to make the Children of Israel realize that it has not been the magic of Moshe and his death-dealing rod that has saved them. Just as God, the ultimate power, can turn water into blood and life into death, so too He can turn rock into water and dry death into a rushing stream of life. God, the source of life, is both present and powerful.

This brings us to the reason the miracle is performed not in the camp or at its edge, but rather at Chorev-Sinai, a short distance away. According to Abarbanel, God utilizes the occasion of the Israelites' complaint and their proximity to Sinai to create a psychological connection between water, the source of life, and Chorev-Sinai. The waters which save the Children of Israel flow from Sinai. Sinai constitutes the very fount of existence. The answer to the question of the Children of Israel as to whether God is among them, whether His power provides them with life and sustains their existence, can be found only through journeying to Chorev-Sinai. The experience is meant to create a mental triangle of life, Sinai and the presence of God.

On this account, the point of the connection between the two stories is to create a yearning for Chorev-Sinai in the hearts and minds of the Children of Israel. It is the place of God and the source of life. The story of Masa U-meriva constitutes a kind of proto-Sinai, a forerunner and stage in the revelation of the Torah. In a complex psychological process, God intends to transmute the instinctive association of life with water into a complex association of life with the word of God - the Torah learnt at Sinai-Chorev.

Alternatively, by factoring in the fourth connection between the stories, the notion of test, we may explain the link in a different fashion. At Masa U-meriva, the Children of Israel test God. In demanding water from Moshe, they openly speculate whether "God is among us or not." Mired in their own lack of faith and religious immaturity, they present a front of desiring the presence of God. In a self-righteous and human-centered inversion of the God-man relation, they test God.

Sinai constitutes God's real answer to the problem of Masa U-meriva, not so much the technical problem of thirst, but the underlying dynamic of religious immaturity. He now gives the Children of Israel precisely what they had asked for. He descends upon the mountain right before their very eyes and ears (19:9, 11, 20:15). He now is present among them exactly in the simple and tangible way they had claimed to desire. He is immediate and overwhelming. The parallels between our two stories serve not so much to highlight Masa U-meriva as a part of a preparatory process for Sinai, but rather to highlight Sinai as a reversal of Masa U-meriva. Whereas before the Children of Israel had tested God and desired His presence, now God provides them with exactly what they have claimed to want and tests their reaction.

V

Let us return to our point of departure, the problem of God's last-minute instructions to Moshe and His strange expectation that the Children of Israel will break bounds and rush forward to "see" the presence of God.

Whether we interpret the parallel between our two stories as part of a process of psychological preparation for Sinai or as a reversal of the Israelite's testing of God at Masa U-meriva, we need no longer wonder about God's last-minute reiteration of the prohibition of encroachment. His "expectation" of the imminent danger that the Children of Israel will rush forward and break through to "see" the very presence of God Himself should no longer seem mysterious.

According to Abarbanel, God has ordered events and structured the miracle of Masa U-meriva in order to engender a yearning for God and Sinai-Chorev within the hearts and minds of the Children of Israel. They have been taught to associate the place and the presence of God with life itself. While they may well be temporarily jolted by the thunder, lightning and dark cloud (19:16), there exists the real danger that at the crucial moment, forgetting the fireworks and the threat of the death penalty, they will surge forth to life itself. They must be warned, and warned again.

Alternatively, on the view that Sinai constitutes a reversal of Masa U-meriva, a case of God's testing of the Children of Israel, the last-minute warning comes not in response to imminent danger but as part of the lesson of the test. As part of the test, God acts as if the Children of Israel are truly able to withstand His presence. He warns them of the religious ideal of plunging forth to greet the divine, rather than the actual danger of their running away.

On the psychological plane, the warning may very well conjure up the gap between their previous demand for God's presence and their current attitude. Back at Masa U-meriva, they presented the front of desiring God's presence. It was they who were present and God who was distant. But now things are clearly different. The people are terrified by even the external special effects of God's actual presence. Upon hearing God's voice they run away. God is present and they are distant. If so, they learn the folly of their previous attitude and their demand for the constant tangible presence of the divine. They learn the need for the mediation of Moshe, for the "reduction" of God's presence, for the invisible and not-always-immediate presence of God. They learn the need to cling to God's intangible word, the truly special effect of the revelation at Sinai.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Reread 20:15-17. Consider the following question: Did the Children of Israel "fail" in some way at Sinai? Does this constitute the necessary conclusion from these verses and the shiur above? Try to utilize the following in relating to this issue. a) Reread 19:3-9. Might there be two distinct and different aspects to the revelation at Sinai? Reread 20:15-17 again. b) See Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban to 20:17 on the meaning of "nasot." Does it refer to the future? Does it mean something subtly different than testing alone? c) See Ibn Ezra and Ramban to 19:9. How do they explain the second purpose of the revelation at Sinai?
2. Take a look at 15:25, 16:4 and 17:15. What seems to be the pattern? Now factor in 17:2,7 and 20:17. Try to formulate a theory that explains the journey from the Sea of Reeds to Sinai. Work with the different interpretations of "nisayon" found in the commentaries above (question two).
3. See Ibn Ezra and Ramban to 20:16. In striking contrast to his usual position regarding the chronological or non-chronological ordering of the Torah, Ramban maintains that 20:15-17 are out of place. Try to figure out what motivates his position. Try placing 20:15-17 after 19:16, where Ramban claims these events actually happened. What impact does

this have on the question of God's warning discussed in the shiur? What impact does this have on the issue of the Children of Israel "failing" at Sinai?

4. Read 17:8-16. See Rashi and Rashbam to 17:11. Now see Ibn Ezra 17:9. On the assumption that Ibn Ezra is correct, what function does the incident of Amalek play in helping prepare the Children of Israel for Sinai? Think about Abarbanel's theory regarding the connection between Masa U-meriva and Sinai.
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