

the mitzva... And it shall be on the day when
your cross over the Jordan to the land... that
you shall erect for yourselves great stones...."

Recalling the Revelation at Sinai

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. THREE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE REVELATION AT SINAI

In several places in Sefer Devarim, Moshe makes mention of the revelation at Har Chorev (Sinai), in different contexts and with different aims. Our parasha stands out in this regard, for the experience is described at length and in great detail. Our parasha mentions the revelation in three different places, and in each case it is mentioned as a subject in its own right, rather than incidentally. The three sources are 4:9-15; 4:32-36; 5:2-27.

This raises the question: why is the great revelation mentioned three separate times in our parasha, with a distance of only a few verses in between them? Why is the discussion of the revelation not concentrated in one place in Moshe's speech? In other words, what is the purpose of all this commemoration, and in what context is it mentioned?

B. TRANSITION FROM THE FIRST SPEECH TO THE SECOND

In several places in Sefer Devarim, the flow of Moshe's direct speech (delivered in the first person) is halted and the Torah itself speaks, describing Moshe in the third person. This assists in defining the boundaries of the speeches in Sefer Devarim.

It is with verses of this sort, describing Moshe, that Sefer Devarim opens (1:1-5). Only in verse 6 does Moshe start his speech, and it continues uninterrupted until 4:40 (in our parasha). Here the flow is cut off by a brief report by the Torah:

(4:41-43) "Then Moshe set aside three cities over the Jordan, on the east side, to which a murderer might flee...."

This report is followed by new introductory verses (4:44-49), which lead on to the next group of speeches. This group opens with the verse:

(5:1) "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the judgments which I speak in your ears today...."

and from here on the speech continues with no external break until parashat Ki-Tavo:

(27:1-2) "And Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the nation, saying: Observe all

This is followed by the command concerning the ceremony of the blessing and the curse, to be carried out on Har Eival, and the words of the covenant made on the plains of Moav - the blessings and the curses of chapter 28.

Thus, chapters 1-4 represent the initial group of speeches in Sefer Devarim, while chapters 5-26 comprise the second and primary group. The transition between these two groups takes place in our parasha.

This distinction adds weight to our question, for it demonstrates that the revelation at Har Chorev is mentioned in two different speeches in Sefer Devarim: it appears in the speech that concludes the first group, and again in the speech that begins the major, second group, starting in chapter 5. What, then, is the meaning of the repetition of the description in the two units that are actually consecutive?

C. BOUNDARIES OF THE SECOND SPEECH OF SEFER DEVARIM

Chapters 1-3 are characterized by a review of various events from the past. A new speech begins in 4:1, with a ceremonious introduction (although the opening words are meant to create a linguistic connection with the previous speech):

"And now, Israel, hear the statutes and the judgments that I teach you to do, in order that you may live and come and inherit the land..."

The nature of this new speech is very different from its predecessor. Here Moshe is not REVIEWING the events of the past, but rather EXHORTING the nation to observe the commandments as a precondition to inheriting the land and dwelling in it. The integrity of this speech, occupying most of chapter 4 (verses 1-40), is borne out by one of the classic literary devices assisting us in determining boundaries of biblical units - the conclusion of the speech echoes its introduction:

Verse 1:

"And now, Israel, hear the statutes and the judgments

that I teach you to do

in order that you may live

and come to inherit the land

that God, the God of your fathers, gives to you."

Verse 40:

"And you shall observe the statutes and the laws

that I command you today

in order that it will be good for you and for your children after you

and in order that you will have long life upon the land

that the Lord your God gives you, all the days."

Thus, the two occasions where the revelation is mentioned in chapter 4 are actually located within a single speech. Now we must clarify why it is mentioned in these two places. For this purpose, we must examine the connection between the sections of this speech, in terms of both structure and theme.

D. RAMBAN: REMEMBERING THE REVELATION IS A MITZVA

Based on the subjects addressed in the speech of chapter 4, it may be divided into five parts:

- a. 4:1-8 - the demand that Bnei Yisrael obey all the statutes and judgments, whose fulfillment will elevate Israel from among the nations.
- b. 9-15 - the demand that the revelation at Har Chorev not be forgotten.
- c. 16-24 - a warning against creating a graven image and against worshipping the heavenly hosts, and an emphasis of this warning at the time of entering the land, since Moshe will no longer be with them.
- d. 25-31 - transgression of the aforementioned warning will bring about exile; repentance of the nation in exile will be accepted by God.
- e. 32-39 - God demonstrated His choice of Israel by means of His revelation to them at Chorev and in the miracles performed in Egypt; by virtue of these, Israel recognizes that there is no other God.

The connection between sections 3-4 is obvious, and likewise that between sections 2 and 5. The question we must ask is how the three subjects treated in this speech are related to one another:

1. obeying all the mitzvot (section 1),
2. God's revelation at Har Chorev and in the Exodus (sections 2,5), and
3. the prohibition of idolatry and the damage it can cause to Israel (sections 3-4).

Ramban connects section 2 (the demand that Israel remember the revelation) to the preceding section as follows:

"Watch yourselves and guard your souls lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest they turn from your heart, all the days of your life. And you shall inform your children and your grandchildren of them - the day when you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev' (4:9-10) - This, to my view, is a biblical prohibition, concerning which Moshe is giving severe warning. For when he says [in the preceding verses] that we must take care concerning all of the mitzvot and observe the statutes and judgments to do them, he then repeats, saying: But I warn you severely to watch yourself and guard yourself exceedingly, and to remember FROM WHENCE YOU RECEIVED THE MITZVOT, that you should not forget the revelation at Har Sinai and all the things your eyes saw there - the thunder and lightning, God's glory and His greatness and His words that you heard from amidst the fire. And you shall tell all the things that you saw on that auspicious occasion to your children and grandchildren forever. The reason for this is that God performed that revelation in order that you will learn to fear Him all the days, and that you will teach your children for all generations; in other words, if you do this then you will not forget Him. So before listing [in chapter 5] the commandments that were given there, he warns - with a negative command - against forgetting anything of the revelation, or removing it from our hearts, forever. He also commands - with a positive command - that we teach it to all our offspring, from generation to generation - all that happened there, what we saw and heard."

The Ramban repeats his approach, with slight changes, in his critique of the Rambam's Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, in his list of "prohibitions that the Rambam forgot to include."

In his commentary on the Torah, Ramban notes the distinction between the purpose of mentioning the revelation in chapter 4 and the purpose of its mention in chapter 5:

"Before listing THECOMMANDMENTS THAT WERE GIVEN THERE, he warns - with a negative command - against forgetting anything of THAT REVELATION."

In other words, in chapter 5 the revelation at Sinai is mentioned for the purpose of reminding the Israelites of its CONTENT, for in chapter 5 we find the beginning of the lengthy speech reviewing the mitzvot. Ramban comments (5:5), "NOW he embarks on the Mishneh Torah (repetition of the Torah), by telling them the Ten Commandments." Chapter 4, in contrast, is still serving as an introduction: "He now begins to warn them concerning THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF THE MITZVOT" (Ramban, 3:24). In other words, in chapter 4 the command to remember the revelation at Sinai is meant to establish the

EXPERIENCE OF THE REVELATION that took place as the root of the general principles of the mitzvot as a whole.

The idea behind the Ramban's teaching is illustrated in the Mishna (Berakhot 2:2):

"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha said: Why does [the recitation of] 'Shema' (6:4-9) precede [the recitation of] 'Ve-haya im shamo'a' (11:13-21)? In order that a person first accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven, and thereafter accept the yoke of the mitzvot."

E. REMEMBERING THE REVELATION, AND THE PROHIBITION OF IDOLATRY

In his commentary on Rambam's Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, entitled Megillat Esther, Rabbi Yitzchak de Leon replies to the Ramban's critique of the Rambam on this point:

"It appears to me that the reason for the Rambam refraining to list [remembrance of Sinai as a mitzva] is because this is a mitzva that includes all of the Torah within it. This commandment means that we should not forget the things that our eyes saw - i.e., the concept of Torah as a whole, that we should walk in its ways and fulfill its mitzvot. This is what we learn from Rashi's commentary on that verse ... that this command refers to fulfillment of all of the Torah."

This explanation is based on the fourth principle that Rambam enumerates in his introduction to the Sefer Ha-Mitzvot:

"We should not enumerate [in the list of mitzvot] general commands that include all of the mitzvot."

The main difficulty posed by this explanation concerns the interpretation of the words "the things that your eyes saw" as "the concept of Torah as a whole, that we should walk in its ways and fulfill its mitzvot," as the author of the Sefer Megillat Ester maintains, following Rashi. Ramban is correct in insisting that the command refers TO A CERTAIN EVENT THAT TOOK PLACE AT HAR CHOREV - when God was revealed to Bnei Yisrael with His holy commandments - rather than to the Torah as a whole.

I wish to propose here a different explanation of the Rambam's understanding of this commandment - a solution based on a different perception of the connection between the sections of the speech in chapter 4.

Rashi and Ramban, in their respective discussions of the second section of the speech - "But watch yourselves and guard your souls well lest you forget the things your eyes saw" - regard it as a continuation of the first section, demanding adherence to all the statutes and judgments. They are divided only concerning the nature of the connection: Rashi regards the

second section as a condition for what is stated in the first section, while Ramban sees it as a demand to remember the root of all the mitzvot concerning which we are commanded in the first section.

However, an examination of the speech as a whole (1-40) proves that aside from the opening section (1-8) and the concluding verse (40), the speech does not deal with the body of mitzvot as a whole. Rather, it is devoted entirely to one single prohibition - that of idolatry. The existence of Am Yisrael in their land is conditional, according to this speech, only on taking care not to transgress this command.

This is hinted at - in fact, almost explicit - in the first section of the speech. When Moshe wishes to illustrate the significance of his demand that they obey the statutes and judgments "in order that you will live," he presents this precedent:

(3-4) "Your eyes have seen what God did at Ba'al Pe'or,

that every man that followed Ba'al Pe'or was destroyed by the Lord your God from among you.

And you, that cleave to the Lord your God - you are all living today."

Ramban himself senses this, and in his commentary on verse 3, on the words "Your eyes have seen," he writes:

"Now [Moshe] starts to warn them concerning the details of the mitzvot, AND HE STARTS WITH IDOLATRY, WHICH IS THE SOURCE OF ALL OF THEM."

I therefore propose that verses 1-8 be regarded as an introduction to the speech. It opens with a broad view of all the mitzvot that are meant to be fulfilled in the land, in order to be able to focus on the primary mitzva - the "source of all of them," upon which the fate of Israel in their land will rest, namely, the prohibition of idolatry.

If my assumption concerning the function of the first section as an introduction is correct, then the structure of the rest of the speech is revealed as being divided into two equal halves with a chiasmic parallel between them:

(1-8) INTRODUCTION: "And now, Israel, hear the statutes and the judgments..."

a. (15) "And God spoke to you from within the fire"

b. (16-24) "Lest you become corrupt and make for yourselves a graven image"

b(i). (25-31) "And you shall have dwelled long in the land and become corrupt..."

and you shall seek from there... He will not destroy you..."

a(i). (32-39) "Has a nation heard the voice of God speaking from within a fire?"

(40) CONCLUSION: "And you shall observe the statutes and the mitzvot..."

The primary exegetical significance of the discovery of this structure of the speech is that on this basis we may connect section a., dealing with the description of the Revelation, WITH THE SUBSEQUENT SECTION B., RATHER THAN WITH THE INTRODUCTION. This being the case, the mention of the revelation pertains not to the entirety of mitzvot, as Rashi and Ramban maintain, but rather to the prohibition of idolatry that appears immediately thereafter in section b.

What, then, is the connection between sections a. and b.? It is not difficult to point out connections between God's revelation at Chorev and the prohibition of idolatry. After all, the first Commandments that Israel heard on that occasion were, "I am the Lord your God" and "You shall have no other gods," AND IT IS THE OBSERVANCE OF THESE COMMANDMENTS THAT IS DEMANDED IN THIS SPEECH. Let us compare:

Shemot 20 / Devarim 5:

"I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt..."

You shall have no other gods before Me.

You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness

of what is in the heavens above or in the earth below

or that is in the waters beneath the earth.

You shall not prostrate yourself before them, nor shall you worship them

For I am the Lord your God, a jealous God..."

Devarim 4:

(35) "You have been shown to know that the Lord is God; there is no other beside Him.

(16) Lest you become corrupt and make for yourselves a graven image, a likeness of any representation..."

(17) The form of any animal that is upon the earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the heavens,

(18)... the form of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth.

(19) ... And you will be led astray to prostrate yourself before them and to worship them..."

(24) For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God..."

Thus, the demand not to forget the experience at Chorev IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS SPEECH is, fundamentally, a demand to remember the commands with which the Ten Commandments begin: to profess the uniqueness and unity of God, and not to engage in idolatry. The same idea arises from the parallels between section a. and section b.:

(9) "But WATCH YOURSELF and guard your soul well

LEST YOU FORGET the things that your eyes have seen"

(23) "GUARD YOURSELVES

LEST YOU FORGET the covenant of the Lord your God, that He made with you, making for yourselves a graven image, a likeness..."

This parallel teaches us that "the things that your eyes have seen" are the matters comprising the covenant between God and Israel: "And He told you His covenant, which He commanded you to do - the Ten Commandments" (verse 13). H, it refers not to ALL these things, but principally to the first of them: the prohibition against creating any graven image or likeness.

The description of the fire at the time of the revelation (11-12) - "And the mountain burned with fire, to the heart of the heavens... And the Lord your God spoke from within the fire" - likewise comes to signal the warning in the next section, against idolatry:

(24) "For the Lord your God is a CONSUMING FIRE, a jealous God."

In other words, the same fire from within which God's word was revealed - "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness" - is a consuming fire that will punish and utterly destroy those who transgress God's covenant that was made at Chorev.

There is another - quite fascinating - connection between these two sections of the speech: mention of the revelation at Chorev is meant to avoid any danger of realization, or anthropomorphism, which may come about as a result of the memory of this very revelation! The memory of the revelation is likely to become blurred over the course of the generations.

This blurring may lead to a perceived need for a concrete representation - a graven image or likeness that will immortalize the event. (The episode of the golden calf serves as an example of such a mistake.) Therefore, the command to remember the revelation is bound up with a memory of its unique NATURE. This is hinted at already in verse 12:

"And God spoke to you from within the fire; you heard a voice with words, but saw no image - only a voice."

The idea is made more explicit in verse 15, which represents the bridge to section b.:

(15) "Guard your souls well, for you did not see any likeness on the day when God spoke to you at Chorev from within the fire.

(16) Lest you become corrupt and make for yourselves a graven image, any likeness...."

In other words, lack of caution in remembering the revelation may bring about the making of a graven image, which would be meant to eternalize a revelation where, in truth, no image was seen.

The place of section a. now seems quite clear within a speech whose subject is the prohibition of idolatry: remembrance of the Chorev experience is connected to this prohibition. It is now likewise clear why the remembrance of the revelation at Chorev represents no new mitzva. The memory of it as an experience where only a voice was heard but no image seen, and the memory of its content - "I am the Lord your God" and "You shall have no other gods" - is meant only as a repetition and reinforcement of the prohibition of idolatry.

F. REMEMBRANCE OF THE REVELATION IN THE CONCLUDING SECTION OF THE SPEECH

What is the function of the mention made of the revelation at Chorev (together with the mention of the Exodus) in the final section of the speech?

The first verses of this section (32-35) deal with the greatness of Israel, their election, and their uniqueness among the nations:

(33) "Has any nation ever heard... AS YOU HAVE HEARD..."

(34) "Or has God attempted to come and take Himself one nation from the midst of another nation... AS ALL THAT GOD HAS DONE FOR YOU?"

(35) YOU HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO KNOW THAT THE LORD IS GOD..."

Therefore, I agree with the Seforno, who regards this section as a continuation and reinforcement of what was said at the end of

the preceding section - God will not forsake you, nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers:

"(32) 'For ask now' - The proof of what I said, namely, that the covenant of the forefathers will not be forgotten, can be found in what God did with all of Israel at the giving of the Torah. The fact that all Israel was worthy of the same level of prophecy was in order to take all of you unto Him as a nation, for the sake of the covenant of the fathers... Although this happened at some times to some individuals who prophesied, it never happened to a whole nation.

(34) 'Or has God ever attempted' - Although it may have happened that an individual, or a few individuals, fled from among wicked people, it never happened to any nation.

(35) 'You have been shown' - All this the blessed God showed you."

However, this section comes to teach not only of the uniqueness of Israel, but also of the uniqueness of God. The theme of this section is expressed beautifully in the prayer recited in the Mincha service of Shabbat:

"You are One, and Your Name is One, and who is like Your nation, Israel - one nation in the land?"

The mention of the revelation at the end of the speech, together with the mention of the Exodus and its wonders, is meant to elevate Israel and strengthen their faith in the validity of the covenant between them and God, even after a fall in their status - following their sins and their exile from the land.

In times of distress, "When you are troubled and all these things come to pass for you," at the time when Israel returns to God and obey His voice, then the memory of their selection as a nation at Chorev and in the Exodus will arise. They will remember their uniqueness and their closeness to God, and the promise will be kept:

"For the Lord your God is a merciful God; He will not forsake you, nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your forefathers that He promised to them."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.

The unabridged Hebrew version of this shiur is archived at:

<http://www.vbm-torah.org/hparsha-7/hparsha7.htm>.)