

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Cloud

By Rav Tamir Granot

INTRODUCTION

In this *shiur* we shall address a certain aspect of God's revelation in the world, as described in Tanakh. The commonly-held conception is that of God's presence in the heavens; the heavens are His dwelling place, that is where He is usually to be found, and from there He reveals Himself from time to time within the world. *Tanakh* shows no signs of a pantheistic theology [1], as Spinoza noted, nor even a gentler theology of immanence, as maintained in Hassidism and Kabbala [2].

On the other hand, it is clear that God's transcendence in *Tanakh* is not absolute – for God is, indeed, revealed in the world; He appears, directs, influences. This idea is expressed most eloquently by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Levi in the distinction that he draws between the God of Aristotle and the God of Avraham.

It appears that the characteristics of Divine manifestation in the world may be presented schematically as follows:

1. speech – prophecy
2. phenomena contravening the laws of nature – miracles
3. management of history – Divine Providence, reward and punishment
4. appearance – revelations of God's glory

The entire *Tanakh* is based on the assumption that the timing and frequency of these manifestations rests with God alone. There is no way of understanding biblical history, or the Torah with its concept of religious obligation, without a recognition of God's ability to speak with people – and especially His prophets, to manage history according to His will, and to change the laws of nature so as to fulfill His objectives.

This *shiur* will be devoted to trying to understand the fourth manner of Divine manifestation in the above list. Many times, God is revealed through tangible phenomena that represent Him. Less frequently, God's appearance reminds the prophet or seer of a human form. Clearly, the prophet may imagine the appearance of God in his mind, but he does not see it manifested in reality. We are speaking here of seeing God as revealed in reality, in the world: seeing God sitting on His elevated, lofty throne, His robes filling the Sanctuary. The *Tanakh* offers various terms for describing the manifestation of God: "vision," "form (of God)," "face (of God)," and sometimes directly – as in the verses in *Yishayahu* Chapter 6. But the most frequently used term to describe God's appearance is "*kavod*" – glory. We shall yet examine the exact meaning of this term, but we may already say that the expression "God's glory" means His embodiment, or concretization [3], within some real, worldly entity.

In this *shiur* we shall examine this manner of Divine immanence which comes to the world through concretization of God through some entity or phenomenon. We do not intend to elaborate on visions that include anthropomorphic images of God. When God reveals Himself to His prophets as a figure, or form, this is usually just a prophetic vision, such that the revelation is part of the prophetic imagination rather than a real entity in itself. Revelation of God by means of His concretization is described in *Tanakh* as a real, tangible occurrence, actively influencing what is happening in reality [4]. This is the simple meaning of the text when it says, "For you did not see any image on the day that God spoke with you at the mountain, from amidst the fire." In other words, you did not see any image other than the fire, in which I was embodied. The fire was the manner of revelation; there was no image other than that.

Let us address the fundamental significance of revelation through some tangible entity. What this means is that God is revealed as an object or phenomenon within nature. When He is revealed, whoever views the revelation knows that he is experiencing a Divine manifestation. The occurrence of revelation is an extraordinary phenomenon; on the other hand, it is not necessarily miraculous, in the strict sense of the word – meaning, it does not necessarily involve a deviation from the laws of nature.

Because we are speaking of a natural event, it is also characterized by ups-and-downs and side-effects. The appearance of God in the world is certainly an elevating, inspiring event, but it is also threatening and traumatic. Thus, in many instances the revelation has some central focus, but the experience and the description of it include attention to events that merely accompany the revelation or are results of it. A prominent example of this is to be found in the description of the revelation at Sinai, which was accompanied by some most impressive vocal and meteorological phenomena. In attempting to understand the revelation we must draw a distinction between the accompanying phenomena and the revelation itself. God's glory appeared within a certain medium, and this revelation made an impression on what was going on all around. The accompanying events may be symptoms of the revelation itself and may point to the atmosphere in which it takes place and which it creates.

We shall attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Which are the natural phenomena within which God is manifest in the world?
2. What is the significance of the codes of revelation, such as "God's glory," "face," "dwelling" etc.?
3. What is the purpose of revelation specifically through a natural phenomenon? Let us explain this question. Often God speaks to a person, and there is no description of any Divine concretization. The question is, why are there descriptions of Divine revelation within natural phenomenon in some instances, but not in others? Is it because God reveals Himself in tangible phenomena only in special cases, or because often a tangible revelation within reality is irrelevant to the issue at hand, and therefore no mention is made of it? It is clear, in any event, that a story about the manifestation of God's glory – and even more so in the event of advance notice of such an event, or a

mortal request that it take place – proves that there is a special need for it. We shall try to discover the purposes of the revelation in different instances.

In light of the answers to the questions above, we shall also try to propose new interpretations of a number of well-known biblical events that have at their center a revelation of God's glory.

Note: our comments below relate only to one, central aspect of Divine manifestation: revelation through fire and a cloud. We may extrapolate from this concerning other stories of revelation, but our discussion will be limited to this issue alone. On some other occasion we will hopefully address other aspects of Divine revelation.

## Part 1

In most of the descriptions of Divine revelations in *Tanakh*, God appears in the form of fire and cloud. In many cases, the description includes both phenomena at the same time. In some others, the revelation involves only one of them – especially the appearance of a cloud. In their description of revelation itself, biblical texts adopt a range of different styles in accordance with the occasion and the special character of the book in question.

Let us illustrate the above with some examples:

Revelation in fire and cloud:

1. "And behold, when the sun had gone down and it was dark, THERE WAS A SMOKING FURNACE AND A BURNING TORCH THAT PASSED BETWEEN THOSE PIECES" (*Bereishit* 15:17).
2. "Moshe ascended to the mountain, and the CLOUD covered the mountain. And the GLORY OF GOD dwelled upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. He called to Moshe on the seventh day from amidst THE CLOUD. And the sight of THE GLORY OF GOD was LIKE A DEVOURING FIRE, at thee top of the mountain, in the sight of *Bnei Yisrael*" (*Shemot* 24:15-17).
3. "SMOKE WENT UP FROM HIS NOSTRILS AND FIRE FROM HIS MOUTH devoured; coals burned from it. He bent the heavens and came down, and there was DARKNESS under His feet. He rode upon a keruv and flew, and was seen upon the wings of the wind. HE SPREAD DARKNESS AROUND HIM LIKE WALLS, THE MASS OF WATER, THE THICK CLOUDS OF THE SKY. FROM THE BRIGHTNESS IN FRONT OF HIM, COALS BURNED WITH FIRE" (II *Shemuel* 22:9-13).
4. "I looked, and behold, a storm wind came from the north – A GREAT CLOUD AND A FLARING FIRE, and a brightness around it, and from the midst of it – something like the appearance of electrum, from the midst of the fire" (*Yechezkel* 1:4).

Revelation in fire alone:

1. "An angel of God appeared to him IN A FLAME OF FIRE from the midst of the bush, and he saw, and behold – the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed" (*Shemot* 3:2).
2. "God went before them by day (in a pillar of cloud, to guide them on the way), AND AT NIGHT IN A PILLAR OF FIRE, to illuminate for them as they went by day and by night" (*Shemot* 14:21).
3. "God will create, upon every dwelling place of Mount Zion and upon her assemblies, a cloud by day and smoke, AND A BRILLIANT FLAMING FIRE BY NIGHT, for upon all the glory there shall be a canopy" (*Yishayahu* 4:5).
4. "For behold, GOD WILL COME WITH FIRE and like a storm with His chariots, to turn back His anger with fury and His His rebuke with flames of fire" (*Yishayahu* 66:15).

Revelation in a cloud alone:

1. "God went before them by day IN A PILLAR OF CLOUD, to guide them on the way, and by night in a pillar of fire, to illuminate for them as they went, by day and by night" (*Shemot* 14:21).
2. "And it was, as Aharon spoke to all of the congregation of the children of Israel, they turned to the wilderness and behold – the glory of God appeared IN THE CLOUD" (*Shemot* 16:10).
3. "God said to Moshe: Behold, I shall come to you in a THICK CLOUD, in order that the nation may hear when I speak with you, and they will believe in you, also, forever. And Moshe told God what the people had said" (*Shemot* 19:9).
4. "And it was, when Moshe came to the Tent, the pillar of CLOUD descended and stood at the entrance to the Tent, and He spoke with Moshe. And all the nation saw THE PILLAR OF CLOUD standing at the entrance to the Tent, and all the people rose and prostrated themselves, each at the entrance to his tent" (*Shemot* 33:9-10).

As we have noted, the text adopts different images to describe the revelation in a cloud or in fire. The fire in which God is revealed is mentioned as plain fire, and also as a "flaming torch," a "pillar of fire," a "consuming fire," a "flaming fire," "smoke," and a "brilliant flame of fire." Similarly, the cloud in which He is revealed is described simply as a cloud, and also as a "smoking oven," the "smoking furnace," a "pillar of cloud," a "thick cloud," a "black cloud of darkness," a "darkness like walls, a mass of water, the thick clouds of the sky."

The revelation in cloud often has consequences and ramifications that are related to the meteorological essence of a cloud - darkness, opacity and concealment, on one hand, and on the other hand, phenomena related to water - a river of peace, a flowing brook, "upon many waters," etc.

Revelation in fire has consequences related to the physical essence of fire, on one hand, destruction – "a fire is kindled in My anger," "He is a consuming fire," on the other hand consequences related to light, "The glory of God has risen over you," "the land is illuminated by His glory," "from the brightness in front of Him," "at night – in a pillar of fire, to illuminate for them" etc.

Let us now clarify the significance of the differences between these instances, and the relationship between revelation in a cloud and revelation in fire.

## Part 2

There are two fundamental approaches to analyzing our question.

1. One is to assume that the various descriptions of revelation are simply different angles of the same vision, and the differences relate either to the specific function of each revelation or to the perspective of the people viewing it or describing it. If this is the case, we must locate, among the many descriptions, the primary, fundamental elements, and then explain all the revelations that are partial or different from the full revelation.
2. The other possibility is to assume that the multiplicity of descriptions is a true reflection of the fact that, from a substantive perspective, there are in fact many forms of Divine revelation, not only one, or that the various spectators to revelation – prophets and other biblical narrators – are divided among them as to its form.

I propose to accept the first approach since it provides us with a better understanding of the significance of Divine revelation and allows us, through a systematic understanding of the manner of revelation, to arrive at a better interpretation of several biblical narratives.

The key to understanding the manner of revelation is to be found, to my view, in an examination of the relationship between visions of fire and visions of a cloud. As stated, in any instances we find these visions independently of one another. Thus, in the Exodus, the text describes God going before the Israelite camp to lead it; by day He is revealed as a pillar of cloud by night – as a pillar of fire. Some opinions maintain that these are two functionally distinct revelations that are fundamentally different from one another. The pillars are emissaries of God, sent to guide His nation; God creates a pillar of cloud in the day and fire by night so that both will be visible.

But it is clear that the manifestation in fire and in cloud here is more than just functional. God does not reveal Himself in fire and in cloud on a merely *ad hoc* basis; rather, He is always manifest specifically in a cloud and/or in fire, and hence *Bnei Yisrael* have not only a guide, but also the very Presence of God going before the camp.

Are there really two revelations here – one in a pillar of clouds and the other in a pillar of fire? In order to answer this question we must grapple with a most problematic literary unit: the description of the journey of *Bnei Yisrael* to the Red Sea.

## Part 3

Let us focus on Chapters 13-14 of *Sefer Shemot*, describing the journey of *Bnei Yisrael* from Egypt.

The description of the journey consists of four clear sections:

1. The description of the expulsion of *Bnei Yisrael* and Pharaoh's subsequent change of heart (*Shemot* 13:17-14:8)
2. The description of *Bnei Yisrael's* fear as they encamp by the sea and notice the Egyptians in pursuit (14:9-15)
3. The description of *Bnei Yisrael's* entry into the sea (14:16-22)
4. The description of the Egyptians' entry into the sea and their drowning (14:23-29)

Right now we are interested in the third section, because it is here that God begins to act through the essences that represent Him. Let us review the verses:

(15) "God said to Moshe; Why are you crying out to Me? Speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, and let them journey on.

(16) And you – raise your staff and stretch your arm over the sea and divide it, such that *Bnei Yisrael* will come into the midst of the sea on dry land.

(17) As for Me – behold, I shall harden the hearts of the Egyptians and they shall come after them, and I shall be glorified through Pharaoh and through all of his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.

(18) Then all of Egypt will know that I am God, when I am glorified through Pharaoh and through his chariots and through his horsemen.

(19) Then an angel of God who was proceeding before the camp of Israel went and walked at the back of them, and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood at the back of them.

(20) And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel and there was the cloud with darkness, and it illuminated the night, and one [camp] did not come near to the other all night.

(21) Then Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea, and God drove the sea with a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the water was divided.

(22) So *Bnei Yisrael* came into the midst of the sea on dry land, and the water was for them a wall on their right and on their left."

In the above excerpt we find the command for *Bnei Yisrael* to enter the sea and the promise that God will harden the heart of the Egyptians so that they, too, will enter the sea. The basic storyline could be recounted on the basis of verses 15-18, and then verse 21 onwards. It is not clear what verses 19-20 are doing here, describing as they do the relocation of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. The problem, in fact, is a dual one:

- a. It is difficult to understand how this relocation of the pillar of cloud from its regular place in front of the camp to a new station at the rear is a necessary element within the narrative.
- b. It is also difficult to understand what exactly the verses here are describing, and the purpose of the relocation of the manifestation of God.

We may list as follows the internal difficulties arising from these two verses:

- Who, or what, is this "angel of God" described as journeying behind the camp of Israel?
- Why does the angel / pillar of fire change its location?

- From verses 20-21 it would appear that all of this happened at night – but during the night the pillar was of fire, not of clouds!
- The following phrase is a peculiar one: "There was the cloud with darkness, and it illuminated the night." How does the cloud with darkness illuminate the night?

Rashi is sensitive to these difficulties and attempts to resolve them, as follows:

"And it went at the back of them' – to create a division between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, and to absorb the arrows and stones cast by the Egyptians. Wherever the text refers to an angel of the Lord – and here angel of God – it refers only to [the attribute of justice], teaching that *Bnei Yisrael* were subject to Divine judgment at that time – whether they would be saved or whether they would be destroyed along with the Egyptians.

'The pillar of cloud moved' – when it became dark and time for the pillar of cloud leading the camp to become a pillar of fire, the cloud did not disappear, as it used to disappear altogether at night, but rather traveled and went at the back of them, to make it dark for the Egyptians.

'And it came between the camp of Egypt' – this may be compared to a person who goes on the way and has his son walking in front of him. If robbers come to harm him – he takes [his son] from before him and places him behind himself. If wolves come from behind – he places him in front of himself. If robbers approach ahead and wolves from behind, he takes [his son] in his arms and fights them. Thus (*Hoshea* 11), "I showed Ephraim to walk, taking them in His arms."

'And there was the cloud with darkness' – for the Egyptians;

'and it illuminated' – the pillar of fire illuminated the night for Israel, and went before them – as it usually did, all night, casting black darkness towards the Egyptians.

'so one did not approach the other' – (*Mekhilta*) – one camp [did not approach] the other camp."

Rashi attempts, in this explanation, to resolve all of the above difficulties. At first the pillar is a pillar of cloud because the beginning of the journey was during the day. However, on this particular one-time occasion, the pillar of cloud remained even when it was dark. The purpose of moving to the back of the camp was to bring darkness upon the Egyptians and to protect Israel from their arrows. The pillar of fire remained in its usual place, and it was this that illuminated the night for Israel, so that they could see their way to the sea. Thus, according to Rashi, each of the pillars fulfills a distinct function, with the overall objective being the same: to protect Israel and to lead them safely towards the sea. The major problem with Rashi's explanation is that the crux of what he is saying is missing from the text. Nowhere does the Torah say anything about the purpose of the pillar being to protect Israel. The verse appears to tell us only that the pillar of fire "illuminated the night" – i.e., it was there for illumination and not for any other purpose.

Furthermore, Rashi assumes that the pillar of fire gave light, as it usually would. But the text says nothing about this. It seems to be telling us that it was specifically the cloud with the darkness that illuminated the night. If we assume that the formulation here is in abbreviated form, and what the Torah means is indeed that

the pillar of fire illuminated, then the problem is that the pillar was now located at the rear of the camp rather than in front of it; how, then, did it give light from behind?

These difficulties inherent in Rashi's explanation demand another look at the verses, with special attention to two points:

- a. the significance of God's promise to harden the heart of Pharaoh and the Egyptians so that they would enter the sea, and
- b. an understanding of the revelation of the cloud and the fire.

Let us start with the second point:

Rashi's interpretation is based on the assumption that there are two distinct pillars: one of a cloud the other of fire. This, to my mind, represents the source of most of the exegetical difficulties. Let us propose for a moment, without presenting all the arguments in favor of this view, that the text is speaking not of two separate pillars, but rather of one single pillar of fire and cloud together – fire on the inside and a cloud on the outside. According to this understanding, the distinction that the verses point to at the end of Chapter 13 (beginning of *Parashat Beshalach*) between day and night is not a change in the essence of the revelation, but rather in the manner in which it is perceived by the viewer. The cloud is what is seen by day, and the fire is what they see at night. This is the difference between them. Indeed, further on in the *parasha*, when we find the description of the defeat of the Egyptians in the sea, we read, "And it was, AT THE MORNING WATCH, that God looked upon the camp of Egypt THROUGH THE PILLAR OF FIRE AND CLOUD, and He confounded the camp of the Egyptians." At the morning watch – when there is already light, but the moon and stars are still visible – the fire and clouds could be perceived together. And indeed, according to the description here, THERE IS ONLY ONE PILLAR, OF BOTH FIRE AND CLOUD, rather than of one of them alone.

This being the case, the pillar of fire and cloud, which is the only pillar that exists, moved to the rear of the camp of Israel and gave light – not for Israel, but for Egypt [5]. What illuminated was the fire, which always gave light; indeed, in many descriptions of revelation, fire is described as providing illumination. God's angel traveling before the camp is itself the pillar of cloud – as we read previously, "And God went before them in a pillar..." I.e., the text emphasizes that God placed Himself, as it were, between the two camps. Accordingly, our interpretation of the verse should be:

'The pillar of cloud moved from before them' – close to evening,  
'and came between the camp of Egypt... and there was a cloud' – the cloud placed itself, return to what was said before,  
'and darkness' – the night became dark, immediately afterwards,  
'and it illuminated the night' – the pillar of cloud which has been the subject all along – i.e., the angel of God, i.e., the fire of God within the cloud. All of this happens just after it grows dark.

Immediately thereafter Moshe stretches his hand, and then "God drove the sea with a strong east wind all night." This development sits well with the chronology that we have proposed, according to which the pillar of fire illuminates right at the beginning of the evening, and then Moshe stretches out his hand and the wind starts



up; it then blows all night and dries the middle of the sea. It is in the middle of the night that *Bnei Yisrael* enter the sea and also emerge from it, and the Egyptians enter the sea on their heels, by the light of the pillar of fire. At the morning watch God casts confusion among them with His pillar of fire and cloud, Moshe stretches out his hand, and the sea returns to its strength.

But the picture that emerges from the above interpretation is a very strange one! It seems paradoxical that at the most critical moment, the Divine pillar of fire works to the benefit of the Egyptians, rather than to the benefit of *Bnei Yisrael*!

In order to understand this point, let us return to our question a. above, concerning the hardening of Pharaoh's heart:

God promises Moshe that He will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will follow them into the midst of the sea. How did God harden Pharaoh's heart? How did He harden the hearts of the Egyptians?

We ask this question with respect to the specific point in time when they entered the sea, but clearly the question is of central importance in understanding the story of the Exodus as a whole. Already in verse 7, God tells Moshe:

"I shall harden Pharaoh's heart, and I shall multiply My signs and My wonders...."

Afterwards, in all the plagues save for the last, the text notes that Pharaoh hardened his heart, or that God helped him to do so.

Even after *Bnei Yisrael* leave Egypt, there is a need for God to harden Pharaoh's heart in order that he will decide to go off to the desert in pursuit of them:

"Then Pharaoh will say of *Bnei Yisrael*: 'They are lost in the land, the wilderness has closed in on them'; and I shall harden Pharaoh's heart, so he will pursue after them, and I shall be glorified through Pharaoh and through all of his army, and the Egyptians shall know that I am God...."

The purpose of hardening Pharaoh's heart is, as we learn from the verses quoted above, to teach the Egyptians to recognize God, by having God multiply His wonders among them. Indirectly, *Bnei Yisrael* also come to learn this – along with the other nations ("The nations heard and were afraid"). But understanding the purpose of the hardening of his heart in no way alleviates the difficulty inherent in the concept of using this tactic. The commentators and *Chazal* discuss at length the problems arising here in relation to the principle of reward and punishment. Rabbi Yochanan, in the Midrash, sees this as an invitation for heretics to make their case. A God who hardens the heart of a king in order to punish him would appear to be acting out of an evil obsession. One may, heaven forefend, try to prove from here that there are two opposing divine powers in the world – as Persian theology maintained – and the text under discussion records the actions of the "god of evil."

*Chazal's* major line of response – adopted also by the Rambam, in his Laws of Repentance (Chapter 6) is that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was a means of

punishment after his fate had already been sealed. If the hardening of his heart comes after his measure of sin was filled and the time had come for punishment, then it could indeed be a fair and just punishment. There is no difference between God causing someone to suffer or causing him to die and hardening his heart in order to cause him pain. Indeed, the commentators make almost no attempt to understand how the mechanism of "hardening the heart" operates. We must assume that most of them accepted that the hardening of his heart is achieved by manipulative intervention in the consciousness or will of the person in question, and that it is miraculous and not given to human understanding: "The heart of kings is in God's hand." The reactions of a person whose heart has been hardened are automatic; they are, in fact, non-human. Hence, they can only be justified as a punishment that comes to a person as a stage on the path to death.

It would seem that close inspection of the series of narratives in which expressions of "hardening of the heart" appear could lead us to a different understanding of the issue. Let us examine, for example, the opening section of Chapter 14, with the story of the Egyptian pursuit:

- (1) "God spoke to Moshe, saying:
- (2) Speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, and let them go back and encamp before *Pi Ha-chirot*, between Migdol and the sea, before Ba'al Tzefon; you shall encamp facing it, at the sea.
- (3) And Pharaoh will say of *Bnei Yisrael*, 'They are lost in the land; the wilderness has closed about them.'
- (4) And I shall harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue after them, AND I SHALL BE GLORIFIED THROUGH PHARAOH AND THROUGH HIS ARMY, AND THE EGYPTIANS SHALL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD.' And they did so.
- (5) When it was told to the King of Egypt that the nation had fled, the heart of Pharaoh and his servants turned, and they said: 'Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?'
- (6) So he readied his chariot and took his people with him.
- (7) And he took six hundred choice chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, with captains over all of them.
- (8) And God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and he pursued after *Bnei Yisrael*, and *Bnei Yisrael* went out with a high hand."

Here, too, there is a Divine promise concerning the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but in this case its purpose is to reverse Pharaoh's despair and submission and to "turn his heart" such that he will stop being afraid, and go out to pursue Israel. Once again, we may ask how God actually acts through the heart of this wicked king, and we may suffice with the assumption of the miracle and the All-Powerful will. But it would seem that there is no need to resort to this. In truth, the text itself supplies the answer. The narrative here, like all of Chapter 14, is built in a chiasmic structure with its climax – the point of the entire story – being, "THE EGYPTIANS SHALL KNOW THAT I AM GOD." It is around this central point that the story is set out, with symmetrical "arms" preceding and succeeding it. Thus, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart occurs by means of a simple manipulation of historical events. *Bnei Yisrael* escape, and one way or another this becomes known and is reported to Pharaoh. Pharaoh need only make his simple calculation: My nation of slaves is lost in the desert; there is apparently no-one to lead them. This may confirm the prophecy of his

astrologers: "They are heading towards evil." It may also be that this suited some metaphysical hypothesis that the God of the Hebrews did not rule the desert, but rather only inhabited areas. In any event, the internal pressures that had always weighed in favor of refusing Israel's request were effective this time, too. The need for slaves, the honor of the kingdom, and the ego of the humiliated king, all desperate to be shored up – these are the elements that count once the external circumstances calm down. God has no need to intervene in the ways of the royal will. It is enough that the surrounding factors be organized such that their general constellation will bring about a certain pharaonic reaction.

This may also be the intention behind the textual conclusion of each of the plagues with the record of God hardening Pharaoh's heart. The limited nature of the plagues in terms of time and quality (they were neither too long nor too severe) allowed the Egyptians, and Pharaoh, to act in a way that was subject to their fixed interests, rather than out of pressure caused by the plagues. The "hardening of Pharaoh's heart," according to this hypothesis, is not the forcing of his will, but rather the creation of circumstances that allowed for choice and guided the reaction in a certain direction, even if they did not actually dictate it. Rav Yaakov Medan explains further that the behavior of Moshe and Aharon in their negotiations with Pharaoh also helped him to harden his heart. More than once Pharaoh asks Moshe to remove a plague from him – "Pray to God that He may remove only this death from me." Moshe readily agrees – for example, "He said – By tomorrow, in order that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God." He accepts Pharaoh's promises without demanding any political or other guarantee. Pharaoh must certainly tell himself: "Perhaps they have power, but they have no idea how to exploit it for political ends." Their political ineptitude is thus a part of the hardening of his heart, opening channels of maneuverability which, had they not existed, would probably not have allowed Pharaoh to withstand everything that happens to himself and to his nation.

I propose that the withdrawal of the pillar of cloud and fire to the rear of the camp of Israel represents a fulfillment of the promise to harden the heart of Pharaoh and the Egyptians so that they would pursue *Bnei Yisrael* into the sea. It is an absurd move – but that is precisely its purpose. It is precisely at this dramatic moment, as God is ready to split the sea in order to save Israel and to exact revenge on the Egyptians, that an obvious question arises. There is no reason why Pharaoh and his army, upon seeing the sea split in half, should take their lives in their hands and enter. This vision would contradict the basic assumption of their pursuit - Once again the God of Israel is seen to be acting in favor of the slaves. In other words, He has power outside of Egypt, too. It is for this reason that the pillar of cloud (at the end of the day, immediately becoming a pillar of fire as night falls) moves from its regular position. The Egyptians see the pillar of fire approaching to lead them, and they see that *Bnei Yisrael* are left without any guiding figure. They have an excellent view of the Israelite camp, thanks to the illumination of the pillar of fire-cloud, while *Bnei Yisrael* themselves are shrouded in darkness. These conditions inspire the Egyptians with confidence to enter the sea despite what must have been great astonishment at the fact of its splitting.

It should be added that this may also be the reason for the sea splitting in stages: "God drove a strong east wind all night." If the sea would have split all at once, it

never would have entered the minds of the Egyptians to go after *Bnei Yisrael*. The pseudo-natural phenomenon thus played a role in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

A study of the structure of this narrative lends support to our hypothesis:

a. (16) *"And you – raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it:*

b. *Bnei Yisrael came into the midst of the sea on dry land*

c. (17) **As for Me – behold, I shall harden the heart of the Egyptians,** and they shall come after them

d. AND I SHALL BE GLORIFIED THROUGH PHARAOH AND THROUGH ALL OF HIS ARMY, HIS CHARIOTS AND HIS HORSEMEN

e. (18) That Egypt may know that I am the Lord

D. WHEN I AM GLORIFIED THROUGH PHARAOH, THROUGH HIS CHARIOTS AND THROUGH HIS HORSEMEN

C. (19) **and the angel of God that went before the camp of Israel journeyed and went to the back of them, and the pillar of cloud, journeyed from before them and stood at the back of them**

B. And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, and there was the cloud with darkness, and it lit up the night, and one did not come close to the other all night

A. (21) *And Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea* and God drove the sea with a strong east wind all night, and He made the sea into dry land, and the water was divided.

b. (22) *And Bnei Yisrael came into the midst of the sea on dry land,* and the water was a wall for them on their right and on their left.

It is immediately clear that this story bears a chiasmic structure, with the central axis – like the first story in the chapter – representing the point of the whole development: "That Egypt may know that I am the Lord." On either side of this central axis pairs of clearly parallel statements are arranged, lending the unit its perfect structure. But the parallel causes us to understand that the "arm" corresponding to the announcement concerning the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is the description of the relocation of the pillar of fire and cloud. It is by means of this relocation that God hardens Pharaoh's heart – as explained above.

According to the above interpretation, the phrase, "One did not come close to the other all night" actually implies a "nevertheless." In other words, despite the fact that God lit up the night for the Egyptians and made it dark for *Bnei Yisrael*, such that the Egyptians could seemingly have managed quite easily and naturally to capture them, they did not do so. Perhaps there was something miraculous about this, or perhaps the Egyptians feared some sort of trap, such that they continued to pursue – but at a distance.

To summarize thus far: the pillar of fire and cloud is one and the same. The relocation of this pillar at the end of the day (according to what comes next – we read "all night") created a night in which the pillar of fire gave illumination to the Egyptians. Later on, God was revealed at the morning watch and He cast confusion amongst them. As noted above, because this was a time of transition between day and night, the pillar was perceived as being both fire and cloud simultaneously.

## Part 4

Let us now explain that which we assumed above with no explanation. We proposed that the revelation in fire and a cloud is one and the same thing, and the differences between the various descriptions lies in the eye of the beholder, rather than in any objective quality of the revelation itself. God is always manifest in fire from within a cloud. The cloud conceals and hides the fire in its midst. We may assume that the cloud is the result of the waves of heat and moisture around the fire. This is not necessarily a cloud of water. It should be remembered that *Tanakh* offers various expressions in its description of the cloud: "*arafel*," "*ashan*," etc.

A striking and relatively clear description is provided in *Sefer Shemot*, where the Torah speaks of the Divine glory resting upon Mount Sinai, and later on the descent of God's glory to dwell in the Mishkan. There is a clear literary parallel between the two descriptions [6], and they point to one another. It is therefore worthwhile paying attention to the correspondence between them:

*Shemot* 24 – Mount Sinai:

- a. "The cloud covered the mountain"
- b. "God's glory dwelled upon Mount Sinai"
- c. "The cloud covered it for six days"
- d. "He called to Moshe on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud"
- e. "The appearance of God's glory was like a consuming fire at the top of the mountain"

*Shemot* 30 – *Ohel Mo'ed*:

- a. "The cloud covered the Ohel Mo'ed"
- b. "God's glory filled the Mishkan"
- c. "For God's cloud was upon the Mishkan by day"
- d. "He called to Moshe"
- e. "And fire was in it by night"

The parallel is clear. God dwells upon Mount Sinai, the glory of God rests within the cloud. The expression "the glory of God" means the revelation of the Divine Presence. Clearly, it has many kinds of functions; in this context, the main function would seem to be speech. But how is it recognizable to those witnessing it? The text explains, "Like a CONSUMING fire at the top of the mountain." In other words, God's glory appears like a fire. The fire is covered with a cloud. God's glory calls to Moshe – who previously was not able to approach. In the case of the *Ohel Mo'ed*, we are told this explicitly. Why could Moshe not come to the *Ohel Mo'ed*? "For the cloud dwelled upon it." What kind of explanation is this? How and why does the cloud prevent him from approaching? The answer is to be found in the second part of the verse: "And the glory of God filled the Mishkan." Moshe is prevented from coming before the glory of God which is fire! The same message arises from chapter 40: "Fire was in it by night." Specifically "in it" – for previously we were told that the cloud was covering, therefore now the text is explicit: "For the cloud of God was UPON the Mishkan by day." But His glory "fills the Mishkan" – and therefore "in it." Clearly, Moshe is not able to enter. For the very same reason he is prevented from approaching God at Mount Sinai – for the appearance of God's glory is like a

consuming fire. This is an expression implying threat: "For the Lord your God is a CONSUMING fire, a jealous God." This is the full description of the revelation, both at Mount Sinai and in the introduction to the Divine Presence coming to dwell in the *Ohel Mo'ed*. The structure is well defined:

God's glory, appearing as a fire, is revealed with a veil of a cloud. The cloud is on the outside; the fire is on the inside. The cloud is above the Mishkan; the fire is within it. Hence, the last verse of *Sefer Shemot*, describing the revelation of the cloud by day and the fire by night, is recounted from the perspective of the nation that is watching. From an objective point of view, the fire (God's glory) and the cloud both remain there all the time.

Attention should also be paid to the following parallel:  
*Shemot* 13 (our *parasha*):

- a. "God went before them
- b. by day – in a pillar of cloud, to show them the way
- c. and at night – in a pillar of fire, to make light for them

*Shemot* 40:

- a. "And the cloud covered the *Ohel Mo'ed*, and God's glory filled the Mishkan
- b. For God's cloud was upon the mishkan – by day
- c. and fire was in it by night."

Thus we learn that in the same way that God was revealed when *Bnei Yisrael* left Egypt, so He was revealed to them on Mount Sinai. And in the very same way He was revealed in the *Ohel Mo'ed*. And just as in the two latter cases His glory was manifest as fire within a cloud, so it was in the first case. Thus, there are not two separate pillars, but rather only one. By day it is perceived as a cloud; by night it looks like fire. And thus the final verse of *Sefer Shemot* ends – "In the sight of all of *Bnei Yisrael*, throughout their journeys."

Notes:

[1] Identifying God as reality.

[2] In the spirit of the dicta, "There is no place that is devoid of Him," and "He fills all the world."

[3] Meaning: manifestation, or appearance, via or by means of an object, as viewed by man. From a metaphysical perspective, the Ramban maintained that the "glory" is actually itself a created entity, i.e., there is no real manifestation here within something, but rather a representation by means of an intermediary. The description in the verses provide no basis for this view.

[4] This distinction does not exist for the proponents of the philosophical view of prophecy, including the Rambam, who maintains that every Divine revelation is a matter of consciousness rather than one of reality. This applies even to the revelation at Sinai and the "Covenant Between the Parts" that God forged with Avraham. But according to the literal text, there is a clear distinction between these occasions and, for example, the visions of the Divine chariot as experienced by Yechezkel or Yishayahu, which are described as personal, prophetic visions rather than as real events.

[5] But see *Yehoshua* 24:7 – "He placed darkness between you and the Egyptians."  
This tradition ignores the last part of our verse – or interprets it as Rashi does.

[6] As many commentators have discussed.

Translated by Kaeren Fish