

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
(office@etzion.org.il)

**Why Was Moshe's Leadership Necessary?**

**By Rav Meir Spiegelman**

"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Kabasio taught: All my days I fled from exercising authority. However, now that I have assumed office, I will scald with boiling water anyone who tries to take it away from me..."

Rabbi Yossi bei Rabbi Bun said: Heaven forbid that he desired power; rather, he felt that no one else who would hold office would sanctify God's name as much as did he."  
(Talmud Yerushalmi, Pesachim 39b)

There are not many leaders throughout history who have assumed their position only due to some necessity, rather than out of their own desire for the job. Among these, few are those who, having attained their position, longed every day for their job to end - and even fewer the number who have actively sought to hand over the mantle of leadership. But we may point to Moshe as an example of a leader whose attempts to step down from his position were completely unsuccessful. This fact in itself is no innovation, but its implications in our parasha are substantial, as we shall see below.

God tells Moshe a number of times (see chapter 19, verses 12-13, 21, 24) to warn Bnei Yisrael against any attempt to ascend Mount Sinai. Our impression from reading these warnings is that all of Bnei Yisrael are rushing towards the mountain and that they must be restrained by force. This impression turns out to be completely false: not only is no one trying to ascend the mountain; the entire nation is actually trying to back away. Am Yisrael send Moshe to the forefront to speak with God in their name.

There are further questions. In Sefer Devarim, when Moshe reminds the nation of the Revelation at Sinai, he states clearly that the nation did not ascend the mountain because of the fear that seized them (5:5). This is most surprising: God explicitly commanded that no one should ascend; how, then, can Moshe claim that it was only their fear that held them back? If we examine what Moshe says in those places where he refers to the giving of the Torah at Sinai, we see that he is most consistent in his conduct: when God sends him to warn the nation against ascending the mountain, Moshe answers that there is no need, since he has already warned them himself (Shemot 19:23). When Am Yisrael ask, following the Revelation, that Moshe speak with God on their behalf, Moshe tries to alleviate their fear (ibid. 20:17).

In Sefer Devarim, the same picture arises: after the description of the giving of the Torah, when the nation asks Moshe to speak

with God, Moshe does not relay their request – he apparently assumes that God has heard their words (Devarim 5:23). From God's positive response to Bnei Yisrael's request, we may deduce that Moshe himself was not altogether happy with what they had said. Further on, again, when Moshe addresses the future of the leadership after his own death, he depicts the prophet who will replace him as who will function as such only because of the initiative of the nation at the time of the Revelation at Sinai, an initiative to which God agreed (see Devarim 18:14-19). Moshe fails to explain what alternative situation would be preferable in his eyes.

Further questions are raised by the Tablets. Up until the moment when God commands Moshe to ascend Mount Sinai in order to receive the Tablets (Shemot 24:12), there is no mention anywhere of the fact that there are going to be Tablets. If the Tablets are so important, why is there no hint of them earlier? Moreover, close to the description of the Tablets, we read of Bnei Yisrael's promise to God, "We shall do and we shall hear" (ibid., verse 7). This is a strange declaration: how can they perform God's will before they have heard what He wants? Chazal explain that Bnei Yisrael mean by this that their readiness to do what God asks of them is not dependent on what they will hear. But this answer does not solve the fundamental difficulty. In addition, it should also be noted that prior to the giving of the Torah (ibid. 19:8) Bnei Yisrael suffice with a declaration of "We shall do." Only after the giving of the Torah do they declare, "We shall do and we shall hear" – what is the meaning of this addition?

The Torah sums up the episode of Mei Meriva with the affirmation that Bnei Yisrael tested God in their demand for water: "... and because they tested God, saying: Is God in our midst, or not?" (Shemot 17:7). At first glance, it is not at all clear in what way they were challenging God; the nation wanted water only because they were thirsty, not out of any desire to rebel. But upon closer inspection, we note that the episode itself is composed of two stages. As a first stage, there is no water for the people, and they cry out and demand water to drink (ibid., verse 2). Only afterwards do we read, "And the nation was thirsty there for water" (ibid., verse 3). In other words, the demand for water preceded the thirst; it arose immediately upon their noticing the lack of water. The Torah itself defines the essence of the test by stating that they wanted to know whether God was in their midst or not. This test seems to express a doubt lurking in the hearts of Bnei Yisrael that God's Presence rested only in Egypt and that His rulership and providence were limited to that land.

Perhaps the background of this test may shed light on the significance of the warning not to ascend the mountain. It is possible that God is telling Bnei Yisrael that the true sign of His presence among them is not related to the question of whether they have water to drink or food to eat. The measure of God's presence depends of Bnei Yisrael's desire to come close to Him, to cleave to Him. The expectation is that Bnei Yisrael will surge forward, seeking to ascend the mountain – and this

expectation finds expression in the fact that they are explicitly forbidden to do so. This prohibition is relevant only where there exists a basic motivation to ascend, and it is precisely the importance of this motivation that the prohibition comes to emphasize.

We may take a step further. In His words to Moshe, God says that Bnei Yisrael may ascend Mount Sinai when the long shofar blast is sounded (ibid. 19:13). There is no indication of when that event will take place. It would seem that the earliest possibility would be following Moshe's descent from the mountain, forty days after the giving of the Torah. According to this estimation, it is not clear why there is any need for God to say now that Bnei Yisrael will be able to ascend in another forty days; right now it is irrelevant. Moreover, this prediction actually serves to weaken the power of the prohibition against ascending. We may, of course, posit that this sentence is meant to reassure the nation that at some future point they will be permitted to ascend, but our question is not thereby resolved.

It seems that a satisfactory explanation of this verse requires that we assume that the original plan was that Bnei Yisrael would, indeed, ascend the mountain – and this assumption appears altogether reasonable. The purpose of the Revelation was to confirm the truth of Moshe's prophecy before the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, when they would watch him actually meeting with God. But this was not the sole purpose of the Revelation. God wanted to see whether the nation really wanted Him to dwell amongst them, whether they wanted direct contact with Him. Thus, the Revelation was meant to create a direct, unmediated encounter between the nation of Israel and the Almighty. In order for both aims to be realized, the idea was that first Moshe would ascend alone – in order to highlight his status as the prophet of Truth; afterwards, there would be a long shofar blast, following which all of Israel could ascend. This is exactly the test that God presented to Bnei Yisrael: was their desire for His Presence strong enough to withstand the awesome experience of this encounter with the Divine Presence? Would they have the strength to ascend the mou?

In light of the above, we can certainly understand the reason for the repeated warnings not to ascend the mountain. It is precisely because such an ascent was meant to take place that there existed the possibility of some people attempting it too early. The kohanim, who were meant to ascend before the people, are therefore given an additional special warning (ibid. 19:24), lest they, specifically, try to bring forward the appointed time. Moshe himself wanted the nation to realize this original plan for the Revelation, according to which they themselves would see the Divine Presence. Therefore his words to them, "for you feared the fire and did not ascend the mountain" ([Devarim 5:5](#)), in fact express his personal disappointment over their failure to ascend.

The giving of the Torah could actually have taken place according to one of three different scenarios. Am Yisrael clearly chose the option in which there would be no direct encounter between them and God, with contact being made solely through Moshe's mediation. God, Who adopts this model in accordance with Bnei Yisrael's request, then presents the rules in this type

of relationship: whoever fails to heed the words of the prophet requested by the nation, will be punished ([Devarim 18:19](#)).

The scenario that Moshe desired was quite different. He felt that his role as prophet was redundant. The ideal situation would be one in which Am Yisrael would have direct contact with God, such that his role would not be necessary. Moshe expresses this position on several occasions. Aside from his continuing refusal to accept the leadership role in the episode of the burning bush, there is also his declaration with regard to Eldad and Medad, who are prophesying in the camp: "Would that all of Am Yisrael would be prophets!" ([Bemidbar 11:29](#)). Prior to this, in the same parasha, Moshe complains that God has placed the entire burden of the nation on his shoulders (ibid. 11:11-15; although the emphasis there is on the difficulty of the job from Moshe's point of view, rather than on his principled objection to the job of mediator), as well as in many other places. This aspiration on the part of Moshe – that Bnei Yisrael would themselves ascend the mountain – finds expression, inter alia, in the fact that he refrains from warning them once again, when God commands him to do so. He fears that too many warnings will cause the nation to forego the ascent altogether. Elsewhere we find no opposition on Moshe's part to repeating a particular warning over and over again.

From the very start, God's plan for the Revelation was somewhere in between these two possibilities. At first, He desired that Moshe would ascend alone. This stage was meant to strengthen the nation's belief in Moshe's prophecy and his special connection to God. Thereafter, the kohanim and the elders could ascend, and finally – as explained above – all of Bnei Yisrael were meant to ascend the mountain. According to this scenario, we can understand the requirement that the entire nation sanctify themselves ([Shemot 19:10](#)). Concerning the kohanim, the text explains their sanctification on the basis of their intended ascent (ibid., verse 22). It is reasonable, then, to posit that the sanctification of the nation as a whole was necessary in the context of the original plan, since they were all to ascend the mountain.

This scenario of the Revelation at Sinai assumes that the entire nation of Israel is worthy of prophecy – even if only a one-time, very specific type of prophecy. Still, this does not cancel the need for Moshe's prophecy. The connection between the nation of Israel and God was created mainly through Moshe's prophecy, while the ascent of the nation to the mountain was to be simply an expression of their desire and aspiration to achieve proximity to God. Therefore, God's words to Moshe in parashat Vaetchanan – "Would that they would have such a heart, to fear Me..." ([Devarim 5:26](#)) – come as no surprise. From the moment that Bnei Yisrael refrained from ascending the mountain not out of apathy but rather out of the fear of God that seized them, that was fine. In fact, this indicated that one of the central goals of the Revelation had been achieved.

However, it seems that at the end of parashat Mishpatim Bnei Yisrael changed their mind about ascending the mountain. Once the covenant had been forged, Bnei Yisrael turned to Moshe and expressed their desire not only to fulfill God's word but also to hear it. For the first time, Bnei Yisrael express a readiness for a direct encounter with God and His Torah. In fact, they are really asking for a repeat of Sinai.

God responds to their newfound readiness on several levels. Firstly, He invites seventy of the elders of Israel to ascend Mount Sinai as representatives of the nation (Shemot 24:1). In parashat Yitro, the elders were not mentioned as candidates for ascent. According to the text there, only Moshe and the kohanim were meant to ascend.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

Secondly, Bnei Yisrael are in fact given a sort of replay of the Revelation, in the form of the giving of the Tablets. The Revelation at Sinai was a one-time historical event, and there is no way in which it could be repeated. However, in the wake of Bnei Yisrael's enthusiasm to hear God's word, the Holy One Himself initiates a renewed encounter of a different type, via the Tablets. This encounter, via the Divinely-written word, is admittedly on a lower level than the encounter with God Himself, but it nevertheless facilitates once again a direct encounter between Am Yisrael and God. It is no coincidence that the Tablets are written by God's hand: this message in fact represents a substitute for direct speech. Thus we can understand the lack of any mention of the Tablets in parashat Yitro: at that stage they were indeed non-existent, from the point of view of the nation, since the need for them had not yet arisen.

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>

The third level is the most significant. The readiness of Bnei Yisrael for a direct encounter with God after the giving of the Torah finds a response in the possibility of a permanent encounter via the Mishkan. The command to build the Mishkan in the midst of the camp comes to provide a response to the nation's request for God's Presence and His word among them. Moshe could have continued to receive the Torah in the Ohel Mo'ed outside of the camp. The Mishkan was a device that facilitated continuous, direct contact between Am Yisrael and God.

The Torah hints, in several places, at a parallel between the Mishkan and the giving of the Torah; a discussion of these sources lies beyond the scope of this shiur. The Torah establishes – and repeats several times – that Moshe saw an image of the Mishkan when he was atop Mount Sinai. Likewise, the Torah recounts that Moshe ascended the mountain for a period of forty days. In parashat Yitro there is no hint of such a long stay. The purpose for which Moshe ascended, according to parashat Yitro, was to confirm the veracity of his prophecy in the eyes of the nation. For this purpose there was no need for a forty-day stay; a short encounter was sufficient. It was the display of the nation's desire to experience closeness to God, as expressed in their declaration, "We shall do and we shall hear", that led to God inviting Moshe for the lengthy stay atop the mountain, in order to receive the command concerning the construction of the Mishkan.

The Mishkan was able to create a direct, continuous relationship between the nation and their God, which in fact came to complement the partial encounter that had taken place at Sinai. The verses describing the completion of the construction of the Mishkan are reminiscent, in their style, of the verses describing the descent of the Divine Presence onto Mount Sinai (compare especially Shemot 24:16-18 with Shemot 40:34-38). God's word to His nation is conveyed from between the keruvim in the Kodesh Kodashim – the resting place of the Tablets, representing God's word to His people as presented to them because of their desire to cleave to God and His Torah.