

"Lest You Forget What You Have Seen"

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The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

"Lest You Forget What You Have Seen"

Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

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Take heed to yourself, and guard your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life, but teach them to your children and your childrens' children: the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev, when the Lord said to me, "Gather the people to Me, and I will make them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children." (*Devarim* 4:9-13)

According to the Ramban (addition #2 to the Rambam's *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*), the above verses describing the remembrance of *ma'amad Har Sinai*, the revelation at Sinai, constitute a positive commandment. In his Torah commentary on this passage (verse 9, s.v. *rak*), he expands this notion, explaining that this verse teaches that we must be extremely careful to remember the source of all the *mitzvot*. Additionally, we are charged to recall the experience of *ma'amad Har Sinai*, the thunder and lightning (based on *Shemot* 20:14), the experience of "His glory and His greatness," hearing His words from the midst of the fire (based on *Devarim* 5:21). We are charged to transmit this experience to our descendants throughout all future generations.

Our remembrance of *ma'amad Har Sinai* takes place at two planes. First, there is the perpetuation of the memory of the event itself. This needs to take place both on the cognitive plane, recalling and understanding the events, as well as on the experiential, existential planes. It needs to penetrate to your innermost self. You need to re-experience the awe and power of *ma'amad Har Sinai*, feeling it in the depths of your personality.

The description of *ma'amad Har Sinai* in *Tehillim* captures some of this power.

God, when You went out before Your people, when You marched through the wilderness, the earth shook, the heaven dropped at the presence of God, even Sinai itself, at the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel. (68:8-9)

Clearly, it was an overwhelming experience.

Furthermore, the revelation at Sinai represented a high level of prophecy. The Rav *zt"l* understood the Rambam to say that Moshe's level of prophecy exceeded Avraham's only after the revelation "in the cleft of the rock" (*Shemot* 33:21-23). Nonetheless, the level attained at *ma'amad Har Sinai* was quite high. Some *midrashim* refer to Moshe as a novice in prophecy at the burning bush (*Shemot Rabba* 3:1), developing and growing to his eventual unparalleled level over time. It is clear that *ma'amad Har Sinai* constituted a crucial stage in his development.

Not only Moshe, but the nation as well rose to an extremely high level in their relationship with God upon accepting the Torah. This can be seen from the striking parallel between the Torah's descriptions of Moshe's level of prophecy - "whom God knew face to face" (*Devarim* 34:10) - and the people's experience at Sinai - "God spoke to you face to face in the mountain out of the fire" (*Devarim* 5:4).

Beyond the power of the experience itself, the receiving of the Torah was also a crucial formative stage for the Jewish people, playing a central role in the very emergence of the Jewish people as a nation. Moshe refers to the day of *ma'amad Har Sinai* as "*Yom ha-kahal*, the day of the assembly" (*Devarim* 9:10, 10:4, 18:16). While this phrase could be taken to mean simply "a day on which the assembly was gathered together," it seems that in this context it means far more than that. It was a day when the Jewish people grew into an assembly. God tells the people prior to *ma'amad Har Sinai*, "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*Shemot* 19:6). Aside from the implications regarding the royal and priestly status of the nation, this verse indicates that the Jewish people will be regarded as a nation, a unit integrally connected to God. *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, therefore, serves as a crucial stage in the development of the Jewish people into a nation.

The relationship between God and the Jewish people reached a climax at *ma'amad Har Sinai*. The Gemara (*Ta'anit* 26b), based on a verse in *Shir Ha-shirim* (3:11), portrays *ma'amad Har Sinai* as the "marriage day" between God and the Jewish people. There are also verses that speak of this relationship in very strong terms. For example, "For He who made you will espouse you, the Lord of hosts is His name" (*Yeshayahu* 54:4).

In remembering the revelation at Sinai, we are called upon not only to re-experience the events of the revelation itself, but to attempt to attain greater closeness to God. Through the unbounded acceptance, and tireless studying, of the Torah, we can hope to achieve this goal in an ongoing way. We need to "take heed" and "guard" the experience of

ma'amad Har Sinai, allowing it to pervade our personalities and our service of God, bringing us ever closer to Him.

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