

When Were the 3 Days of Preparation for Matan Torah?

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By Rav Yaakov Medan

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A.

The date of the giving of the Torah is not stated explicitly in the Torah, and its connection with the festival of Shavuot requires some clarification. Even Shavuot itself has no fixed date – it falls fifty days after the 16th of Nissan, the day of the Omer offering, and may therefore occur on different dates depending on whether the months of Nissan and Iyar are full (30 days) or not (29 days).

The assumption of the author of "Seder Olam" (which is accepted in all the relevant sugyot in the Gemara) is that the 10th of Nissan in Egypt was Shabbat Ha-Gadol, the 16th of Nissan was a Friday, and the Torah was given on Shabbat. Hence, Matan Torah was actually the fifty-first day after the offering of the Omer, and not on Shavuot.

The Gemara (Shabbat 86a-88a) addresses at length the question of which day of the month the Torah was given on. A debate is recorded between R. Yossi (who maintains that it was given on the 7th of Sivan) and the Rabbis (who argue that the Torah was given on the 6th of Sivan). Both opinions agree that the "three days of preparation" began on the 4th of Sivan, but the Tana'im debate whether what actually happened was in accordance with God's statement – "For on the third day God will descend before the eyes of all the nation onto Mt. Sinai" (Shemot 19:11), i.e., on the 6th of Sivan – or in accordance with Moshe's statement: "Prepare yourselves for three days" (19:15) – i.e., the 7th of Sivan.

B.

A review of the literal text would appear to lead us to a third conclusion: that the Torah was given on the 3rd of Sivan. We are told, "In the third month... on that day they came to the wilderness of Sinai" (verse 1), and Moshe immediately ascended to God. On that same day (the 1st of Sivan), God told Moshe to command the nation to prepare themselves, and on the third day (3rd of Sivan) God descended in fire onto Mt. Sinai, and uttered the Ten Commandments.

Chazal, in their midrashim, address this difficulty, and "fill in" the first three days of Sivan in various ways. Some explain that on the first day the Jews rested from the exertion of the journey, on the second day they were told, "You shall be for Me a kingdom of priests," on the third day they were commanded to separate themselves from their spouses, and on the fourth day they actually separated (see *Shabbat 86b-87a*). The question arises: Why did Chazal find it necessary to stretch out the time until Matan Torah, assigning a full day (mentioned nowhere in the text) just for rest and spreading everything else over several days? Why not just squeeze it all, as the literal text would suggest, into the first three days of Sivan?

It seems that Chazal's need to arrive at the figure of six days arises from what we are told in *Shemot 24:16* – "And the glory of God rested upon Mt. Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days, and He called to Moshe on the seventh day." But the commentators are divided as to whether these are the six days preceding Matan Torah (Ramban, Rasag), or the first six days out of the forty that followed Matan Torah (Ibn Ezra; Rashi brings both opinions).

C.

The answer to our question appears to arise from the repetition noted by Rashi – a repetition expressing tension between two poles. The Torah relates:

"And all the nation answered together, and said: 'All that God has spoken we shall do.'
AND MOSHE RELAYED THE NATION'S WORDS TO GOD.

And God said to Moshe: 'Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud in order that the nation will hear when I speak to you, and will believe also in you forever.' AND MOSHE SPOKE THE NATION'S WORDS TO GOD." (24:8-9)

Most of the commentators explain the repetition, with the slight difference between "relaying" and "speaking," in technical terms. But Rashi proposes that the Torah is referring to two different messages. "And Moshe relayed..." was on the third day, while "And Moshe spoke..." was on the fourth day. "And Moshe relayed" concerned the nation's declaration, "All that God has spoken we shall do," while "And Moshe spoke" means: "I heard their answer in this regard: that they desire to hear it from

You. One who hears something from an agent is not like one who hears from the mouth of the king. Our desire is to see our King."

Rashi understands that Moshe's "speaking" is a response to God's words, when He told Moshe that He would speak only with him, and the nation would hear this and consequently believe in Moshe as a prophet of God. From where does Rashi learn that this was the nation's response to God's words? It seems that this was his understanding of the difference between the nation's response in our parasha – "All that God has spoken we shall do," and their response in the description of the Sinai experience as recorded at the end of parashat Mishpatim – "All that God has spoken we shall do AND WE SHALL HEAR" (24:7). This implies that they desired also to HEAR what God said and commanded, and not only to fulfill it.

D.

However, it is likely that Rashi deduces the nation's "objection" to God's words to Moshe from the contradiction between what God says in verse 9 – "Behold, I come to YOU... in order that the nation will hear when I speak to YOU," which would suggest that God would speak with Moshe alone, and the continuation of what God says in our parasha: "For on the third day God will descend before the eyes of ALL THE NATION onto Mt. Sinai" (verse 11). Indeed, the Rambam (Yesodei ha-Torah, chapter 8 and elsewhere) understood that the crux of the Sinai experience was the belief in Moshe's prophecy – as we derive from verse 9. But Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, in Sefer Ha-Kuzari, perceives the essence of the experience as the transformation of the entire nation into prophets – as verse 11 would suggest. Rashi, as we have noted, sees the possibility of the Holy One being revealed only to Moshe as God's original plan, while the revelation before the eyes of the entire nation was the result of the nation's demand, as conveyed to God by Moshe: "And Moshe spoke the nation's words to God."

As we have said, the difference between the original plan and the final one may explain the need for six whole days at the beginning of the month of Sivan before Matan Torah.

On Rosh Chodesh Sivan, when Bnei Yisrael reached the wilderness of Sinai, they may well have rested from the exertion of their travels, as the Gemara proposes. But Moshe immediately ascended to God, atop the mountain. He had to prepare himself for three days - the standard period for preparation throughout the Tanakh (as, for example, in the parasha of the Akeida)- in order that God would be revealed to him for Matan Torah upon Mt. Sinai. If this had been all, the Torah would indeed have been given on the 3rd of Sivan. But Bnei Yisrael were not satisfied with this, and demanded that God be revealed to them, too. For this purpose, they likewise had to prepare themselves for an additional three days. Moshe prepared himself on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd of Sivan, while Bnei Yisrael prepared themselves on the 4th, 5th and 6th. And then God descended before the eyes of the ENTIRE NATION on Mt. Sinai.

E.

Further on, it turns out that even God's "original plan" was not superfluous.

The verses describing the revelation at Sinai (10-19) seem to contradict the verses that follow them (20-24), and combining them as a single narrative is very difficult. Verse 19, "And the sound of the shofar grew very strong; Moshe spoke and God answered him with a Voice," looks like the introduction to the transmission of the Ten Commandments, and not – as read in the context of the following verses – as the introduction to God's warning to Moshe that the nation should not ascend the mountain. Let us navigate our way amidst the tangle of explanations offered by the commentaries, and attempt to organize these verses according to their chronological order.

"And Moshe descended from mountain to the nation, and he sanctified the nation and they washed their garments. And he said to the nation, 'Prepare yourselves for three days; do not approach a woman.' And it was on the third day in the morning, that there was thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of the shofar was very loud, and all the nation that was in the camp shook with fear.

And Moshe led the nation out towards God from the camp, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. And Mt. Sinai was all in smoke because God had descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the entire mountain shook greatly.

And the sound of the shofar grew very loud; Moshe spoke and God answered him with a Voice." (19:14-19)

"And God spoke all these things, saying: 'I am the Lord your God Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me... performing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and who observe My mitzvot.'" (20: 1-6)

"And all the nation saw the thunder and the fire and the sound of the shofar and the mountain in smoke, and the nation was afraid, and they moved off and stood afar. And they said to Moshe, 'You speak with us and we shall hear; let God not speak with us lest we die...!' And the nation stood far off, and Moshe approached the cloud where God was" (20:15-18).

"And God descended upon Mt. Sinai, to the top of the mountain, and God called to Moshe to the top of the mountain, and Moshe went up. And God said to Moshe, 'Go down, testify to the people, lest they break through to God to see, and many of them will fall. And the

kohanim who approach God should also sanctify themselves, lest God break forth among them.'

And Moshe said to God: 'The nation cannot ascend Mt. Sinai, for You commanded us, saying, Fence off the mountain and sanctify it.'

And God said to him: 'Go, go down, and come up – you, and Aharon with you, and the kohanim and the nation should not break through to ascend to God lest He break forth among them.'

And Moshe descended to the nation, and said to them..." (19:20-25).

[The third commandment and on, communicated to the nation by Moshe, not God:] "You shall not take the Name of God your God in vain, for God will not forgive one who takes His Name in vain. Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it..." etc., until "and all that is your neighbor's." (20:7-14)

This ordering of the verses divides the Sinai experience into two. The first part is in accordance with Bnei Yisrael's wishes, while the second part follows God's original plan. In the first part of the event, God descended upon the entire mountain, and all the mountain was filled with His glory BEFORE THE EYES OF BNEI YISRAEL. The description of this part of the experience is frightening. It includes thunder and lightning, a loud shofar blast, heavy cloud, smoke like a furnace, descriptions of fear, and death for anyone who would touch even the outermost edges of the mountain. It was thus that all of Israel heard the first two of the Ten Commandments, which were conveyed to them by God speaking in the first person.

Bnei Yisrael were unable to bear the power of this experience, and after these two commandments they wanted Moshe to speak to them. The nation stood afar, and Moshe approached the cloud. The Shekhina contracted itself to the top of the mountain, and Moshe ascended there in order to hear God's Voice, while the nation was forbidden to ascend after him. At the top of the mountain Moshe heard the remaining eight commandments, and he conveyed them to the nation, speaking in the third person, in a less frightening atmosphere.

But as the text appears in the Torah, the Ten Commandments are presented together as a single organic unit.

F.

Let us return to Rosh Chodesh Sivan. In the beginning, it was God's suggestion that He would speak to Moshe. The nation would then believe in Moshe as God's prophet, and they would receive the

Torah from him – as we understand from the Rambam. Immediately upon arriving in the wilderness of Sinai, Moshe began preparing himself for the third day, on which God would give the Torah through him. But the nation wanted to hear God themselves, so they were commanded to prepare for another three days, until the 6th of Sivan. They began to hear the commandments but were unable to bear the experience, and from the third commandment onwards God spoke to Moshe alone.

We find a similar phenomenon occurring in the dedication of the Mishkan. Originally, on the eighth day, the Torah speaks about God appearing before the entire nation:

"And God's glory appeared TO THE ENTIRE NATION, and a fire emanated from before God and consumed the offering and the fats upon the altar, AND ALL THE NATION SAW, and they called out..." (Vayikra 9:23-24).

The nation had good reason to be afraid here: Nadav and Avihu "ascended the mountain and touched its edge," and they died before God. Bnei Yisrael's fears at Mt. Sinai – "And now, why shall we die, for this great fire will consume us" – were realized. In the second part of the Sinai experience, "After the death of Aharon's two sons," Aharon alone would enter the Holy of Holies (corresponding to the top of the mountain); he alone prepared himself, separating from his wife for seven days, and he alone would see God's face, as it were, and atone for the nation – like Moshe for the last eight commandments. Thus, Aharon declares: "For on this day He will forgive you to purify you; you will be purified of all your sins before God." (Vayikra 16:30)

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