

God's Descent unto Mt. Sinai

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Two Aspects to God's Descent onto Mount Sinai

By

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Following the approach pioneered by Rav Mordechai Breuer, I would like to examine "shtei bechinot" (roughly meaning two aspects) in the Torah's description of God's descent on Mount Sinai (Shemot 19). If we examine the verses carefully, we will see that there are actually two accounts of this event, each containing different instructions to the Jewish People.

The first account appears in verses 10-19 (the actual descent is described in verse 18); the second account is in verses 20-25 (the actual descent is described in verse 20). (It would help at this point to have a Tanakh open in front of you.) In the following shiur, I will try to distinguish between the two descriptions and their meanings, and then to try to explain the connection between the two descriptions.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO ACCOUNTS

1. In the first description (verses 10-19), the text emphasizes that the Shekhina (Divine Presence) descends on the entire mountain, as is explicitly stated in verse 18 - "Now Mount Sinai was ALL in smoke ... and the WHOLE mountain trembled violently." This is also the simple meaning of verse 11 ("the Lord will come down ... on Mount Sinai") and verse 16 ("and a dense cloud was upon the mountain ..."). Thus, we can understand the warning in verse 12: "Beware of going up the mountain or touching the edge of it" – no part of the mountain should be touched. And we can also understand the emphasis in verse 17 - "They took their places at the foot of the mountain."

In comparison, the second description emphasizes that God descends only to the TOP of the mountain, as we read in verse 20: "The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moshe to the top of the mountain." Here it seems that the descent of the Shekhina is more constricted, as far as the point of its revelation is concerned.

2. The first description is saturated with descriptions of trembling: "And all of the people who were in the camp trembled" (16); "and the whole mountain trembled violently" (18). Furthermore, the revelation is accompanied by phenomena which instill fear: "There was thunder and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain ... and a very loud blast of horn ... Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke ... for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln the blast of horn grew louder and louder."

In comparison, all similar expressions are missing from the second description. In this manner as well, we can consider the revelation of God's presence to be more constricted in the second description.

3. This line of thinking continues also with the threat placed upon the nation. In the first description, there are four expressions of death: "Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death ... either stoned ... or smitten ... he shall not live," and three of these phrases are emphatic double repetitions ("mot yumat," "sakol yisakel," "yaro yiyareh").

In the second description, such strong warnings of certain death do not appear. It should be noted that, instead, the text says twice: "Lest the Lord break out against them" (22,24), and says once: "Lest many of them perish" (21).

4. Even the contents of the warning and the prohibition are harsher in the first description: "Take care of yourselves ... [do not] touch the edge of it ... whoever touches it shall be put to death." In the second description, the wording of the warning teaches us that the essence of the prohibition is not touching the mountain, but rather ascending it and seeing the face of the Shekhina: "lest they break through to the Lord to gaze," (21) and "[let not the priests or the people] break through to come up to the Lord" (24).

5. In the first description, where the revelation of the Shekhina is accompanied by fear and awesome signs, even Moshe does not cross the border of the mountain! The entire nation stands together at the same level of closeness: "The Lord will come down, in the sight of all the people" (11); when the Torah warns, "Whether beast or man, he shall not live," this does not exclude Moshe! And so it is that at the hour of revelation, Moshe takes the nation out of the camp to meet God, and he is among them; the text states about all of them: "They took their places at the foot of the mountain." Indeed, it is logical that even Moshe Rabbeinu cannot come enter the very place of the Shekhina (Ibn Ezra explains verse 17 differently).

In contrast, in the second description the revelation of the Shekhina is confined to the top of the mountain and consequently is accompanied by less fear and awe. Therefore, Moshe and Aharon are given permission to climb up the mountain. It is possible that even the priests are allowed to climb the mountain (this point depends on the explanation of verse 22, and also on the punctuation of verse 24 -

see Rashi on verses 22 and 24 and the original in the Mekhilta; Rashbam on verse 22; Ibn Ezra on verse 22).

6. In the first description, the revelation is meant to be seen by the entire nation - "The Lord will come down, in the sight of all the people." However, in the second description, looking is considered a sin: "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze ..."

7. From here we can discern yet another difference. In the first description, the obligation to be purified devolves upon the entire nation: "Go to the people and purify them ... Moshe came down from the mountain to the people and purified them ..." (11, 14). In the second description, the nation is not obligated to purify themselves; however, "also the priests, who come near the Lord, must purify themselves ..." (22). (This point depends on the explanation of the verse, as I pointed out at the end of paragraph 5.)

8. To sum up: the first account describes a revelation of the Shekhina in full force, emanating from the entire Mount Sinai and appearing before the eyes of the entire nation; it thus requires the people to purify themselves. This revelation instills fear and awe both by its manifestations (fire and thunder), its warnings ("touching the edge") and its punishments ("whether beast or man, he shall not live"). This description does not distinguish between Moshe and the nation.

In contrast, in the second description the Shekhina's revelation is constricted to the top of the mountain. Here God does not appear before the entire nation (in fact, if the nation views Him, it is a sin), and the nation is not commanded to purify itself. The frightening signs are diminished, and some of them even disappear. This constriction is not without purpose, for it allows Moshe and Aharon (and possibly the priests) to ascend the mountain.

9. Now we can understand why God repeats His warning to Moshe in verse 21, a repetition so strange that Moshe himself inquires about it in verse 23. The constriction of the Shekhina and the ability of some people to ascend the mountain might reduce the effect of the prohibition that is placed upon the nation in verses 12-13. Since an exception has been made to the seemingly absolute prohibition of touching the mountain, perhaps people might be led to believe that the prohibition is no longer in effect, thus allowing them to climb the mountain and gaze at the Shekhina. Therefore God has to repeat His warning - "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze ..." (For another perspective, see Rashi's explanation of verses 23-24, Rashbam on verse 23 and Ibn Ezra on verse 23.)

THE MEANING OF THE DIFFERENT ACCOUNTS

What idea lies behind each description? The first description expresses the idea that all of the nation of Israel are prophets. The entire nation stands and faces the revelation in its full force. The stringent

warnings are necessary only because of the fact that when one stands in the full presence of God's self-revelation, any small blemish which one possesses can cause disaster.

Thinkers such as Rav Yehuda Halevi have emphasized that the ideal of a nation of prophets is the central aspiration of the Jewish People, and the nation reached this level at Mount Sinai.

Thus they were commanded to become pure ... in preparation for hearing the words of God. They were purified and they prepared themselves for a level where they would be worthy of receiving prophecy ... for all to encounter the word of God face to face ... The revelation was preceded by mighty signs ... and behold, the nation heard God's words explicitly when they heard the Ten Commandments... (Kuzari I:87).

The Rambam (Hilkhos Yesodei HaTorah 8:1) also emphasizes that the entire nation witnessed the fire and the thunder.

But can any human being stand before this great light? Does a paltry man have the ability to purify himself, to be worthy of God's revelation, to stand in God's presence?

Therefore, the Shekhina is constricted in the second description; God's presence descends (in a much less impressive manner) only onto the top of the mountain, and is beheld only by the nation's elite, those with the appropriate spiritual capacity. The idea behind this is that the vision of God depends on careful spiritual preparation, similar to that of Moshe and Aharon. Prophecy does not appear before the entire nation, as if all are at the same level; rather, according to the Rambam (Moreh Nevukhim II:23): "During the revelation at Mount Sinai, not everything that Moshe heard was heard by all of Israel, but the speech was to Moshe only, and therefore the language of the Ten Commandments is in the singular. And he went down ... and told the people what he had heard. Thus the Torah states: 'I stood between God and you at this time to tell you the word of God.'" Similarly, in the words of Rav Yehuda Halevi: "However, the nation did not possess Moshe's ability to behold this great vision face to face" (Kuzari, *ibid.*).

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Chazal and the Rishonim pondered whether the Ten Commandments were given directly to the nation or whether Moshe stood between God and the people as a messenger (see Shir Hashirim Rabba, Parasha 1; Rashi, verse 19; Ibn Ezra, 20:1; Rambam, Hilkhos Yesodei HaTorah 8:1; Moreh Nevukhim II:23, etc.) It seems that this question depends on our discussion. According to the first description, it would be appropriate for God's words to be spoken directly to the nation, but according to the second description, it is only appropriate for Moshe to hear God's words and then impart them to the people.

In Parashat Yitro, the Torah leaves this question shrouded in mystery. The first description concludes with these vague words: "As Moshe spoke, God answered him in thunder" (Shemot 19:19). (The commentaries are divided in their explanations: see Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Ramban here, and others.) The second description concludes with, "And Moshe went down to the people and spoke to them" (25) - but we are not told what he said. (Here too, the commentaries are divided: see Rashi, Rashbam and others.) This is followed by the verse, "God spoke all of these words, saying" (20:1), without the text telling us whom God is addressing (Moshe or the people). Without going into the description of the revelation at Mount Sinai recounted in Sefer Devarim, I will only point out that these two possibilities appear in two consecutive verses that seem to be contradictory: "Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire - I stood between the Lord and you at that time to convey the Lord's words to you ..." (Devarim 5:4-5).

Our commentaries struggle to resolve this difficulty, each according to his explanation (see Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and others). Perhaps it is possible that the contradiction really expresses the two ways of giving the Ten Commandments, two ways that are tied in to the two aspects we presented above.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Now the reader will ask, how were these two aspects expressed in the actual events? It is possible to explain like Rav Yehuda Halevi that the entire nation saw the revelation, and even heard the entire Ten commandments from God, but did not attain the same level of vision and prophecy as Moshe. It is possible to understand the matter as did the Rambam: although the entire nation beheld the fire and heard the thunder, nevertheless God's speech (the Ten Commandments) was heard by Moshe alone. We can also adopt Rashi's approach (verse 19), namely, that the nation heard only the first two commandments ("I am the Lord" and "You shall have no other gods") while the rest of the commandments were conveyed by Moshe. Other explanations are also possible (see Ibn Ezra on verses 17 and 19, and at the beginning of chapter 20; Ramban on verse 19; etc.).

I have discussed only the two aspects apparent in verses 10-25. One who examines Parashat Yitro and, in parallel, Sefer Devarim, will find that there are additional aspects to the revelation at Mount Sinai; but this is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

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