

Moshe and the Giving of the Torah by Rav Yair Kahn

A Strange Debate

In *parashat Yitro*, immediately prior to the *Asseret Ha-dibbrot* (Ten Commandments), an enigmatic dialogue is recorded (19:21-25). God orders Moshe to warn the nation not to attempt to catch a glimpse of God. Moshe argues that this is unnecessary, since Mt. Sinai was already placed out of limits to *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish People). Nevertheless, God overrules Moshe and insists that the nation be warned. Moshe complies and warns the people. Suddenly, directly following this warning, while Moshe is still among the people, *Am Yisrael* experience revelation. Some obvious questions arise. Why did God insist on repeating the warning to the people? What is so significant about this strange debate that it is recorded in the Torah? Is there any connection between this warning or debate and the mass revelation that followed?

According to R. Yossi (*Shabbat* 87a), God and Moshe differed, as it were, regarding another issue as well. While God demanded two days of preparation prior to the giving of the Torah, Moshe decided to add a third day (see also Rashi, *Shemot* 19:15). Although the Almighty accepted Moshe's modification, we must attempt to understand the significance of this episode. Furthermore, we cannot avoid pondering the relationship between this incident and the mysterious debate mentioned above. We will return to these issues later, after a short discussion of the *Asseret Ha-dibbrot*.

Ten Commandments or Two

It is commonly assumed that all Ten Commandments were issued directly from God to the children of Israel. This was not, however, the assumption of our Sages. We are all familiar with the tradition that there are 613 commandments (see *Makot* 24a). This number is derived from the verse, "*Torah tziva lanu Moshe*" – "Moshe commanded us Torah." The numerical value (*gematriya*) of the word Torah is 611. This is the number of *mitzvot* commanded by Moshe. The additional two – the first two commandments of the *Asseret Ha-dibbrot* – were issued directly by God. This tradition is supported by the switch from first person of the first two *dibbrot* ("I am the Lord your God") to the third person in the remaining eight ("Do not take God's name in vain").

The Ibn Ezra (20:1) argues that all ten *dibbrot* were given directly from God. He supports this position by quoting verses that clearly attribute the *Asseret Ha-dibbrot* in their entirety to God (see *Devarim* 5:19).

The Ramban (20:7), disturbed by this seeming contradiction, suggests a compromise. All Ten Commandments were spoken by God directly to the children of Israel, but the people only managed to comprehend the first two. As a result, the last eight were repeated by Moshe Rabbeinu. This compromise neatly resolves the contradictory sources, but it leads to quite a puzzling conclusion. Were the first two commandments easier to understand than the last eight? Is it simpler to comprehend the existence of an infinite, invisible, incomprehensible God than the prohibitions against murder or theft? And what was the purpose of reciting commandments to the people that they found impossible to understand? The Ramban addresses these difficulties, but I would like to suggest an alternate solution based on a statement of the Ramban in his comments on *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*.

The Experience of Sinai

Moshe Rabbeinu warned the Jewish People never to forget the day that they received the *dibbrot* at Har Sinai:

Be careful and diligently guard your souls, lest you forget those things which you witnessed with your own eyes and they be removed from your hearts all the days of your life. And you should inform these events to your children and you children's children – the day you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev..." (*Devarim* 4:9-10)

The Ramban writes that this verse is the source for a biblical *mitzvat lo ta'aseh* (negative commandment), one that the Rambam omitted in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*. The Ramban maintains that there is an *issur de-oraita* (biblical prohibition) against forgetting the experience of Har Sinai. Memory and awareness of this great encounter between *Am Yisrael* and the Infinite must be passed down to future generations as a basic part of the great Massoretic tradition. This living tradition, that *Am Yisrael* personally experienced Divine revelation, upholds our faith in absolute terms.

This distinction between comprehension of the *dibbrot*, as opposed to the experience of *ma'amad Har Sinai*, is accepted by the Rambam as well. In his Guide (II:33), the Rambam denies that the Jewish People as a whole could have directly received the word of God at Mt. Sinai. (The reason has to do with the Rambam's theory of prophecy; II:32). Therefore, the Rambam claims, only Moshe comprehended the content of the *dibbrot*, whereas the Jewish People only heard the "great voice" without comprehending the meaning, or even actually hearing the words.

It is clear that the significance of the revelation of the *Asseret Ha-dibbrot* is not limited to the specific content of the commandments. The experience of the Divine revelation and its theological and religious implications are the crucial

components of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*. As a matter of fact, this was the stated purpose of the revelation:

And God said to Moshe, "I am hereby coming to you in the midst of a cloud in order that the nation should hear as I speak to you and in you they should believe forever." (*Shemot* 19:9)

According to the Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, ch. 8), our faith in Moshe and the Torah is not based on miracles. Rather, it is rooted in *ma'amad Har Sinai*, which was experienced by the entire nation. The Rambam states:

They did not believe in Moshe Rabbeinu because of the miracles that he did, for one whose belief is based on miracles has doubt in his heart that the miracle may have been done by magic or sorcery... Based on what did they believe in him? On *ma'amad Har Sinai*, that our eyes saw and not a stranger's, our ears heard and not another's; the fire and the sounds and the torches, and he [Moshe] entered the fog and the divine voice spoke to him and we heard ...

The previously mentioned Ramban on *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* echoes this Rambam in explaining the significance of the prohibition not to forget *ma'amad Har Sinai*.

Based on the above, it is no longer perplexing that incomprehensible commandments were recited by God at Har Sinai, since it is not necessarily the content of the *mitzvot* that was critical, but the experience of divine revelation. However, we have not yet explained the distinction between the first two *dibrot* and the remaining eight.

Study of the people's reaction to *Ma'amad Har Sinai* is instructive. After experiencing the divine revelation, *Am Yisrael* requested that the remainder of the Torah be received by Moshe Rabbeinu, and subsequently transmitted to them. This request, while mentioned only briefly in *parashat Yitro*, is recorded in greater detail in *Parashat Vaetchanan*:

On this day, we have witnessed that God can speak to man and he can survive. And now, why should we perish... if we continue to listen to the voice of God our God any longer we shall die. For who is of flesh that has heard the voice of a living God speaking from amidst the fire, as we have, and lived? You approach and hear all that God our God shall say, and speak to us all that God our God shall say to you. (*Devarim* 5:21-24)

At first glance, this argument seems somewhat contradictory and inconsistent. After reaching the conclusion that one can survive divine revelation, the people paradoxically avoid further revelation lest they perish.

The solution, however, is simple. The experience at Sinai was a dual one. Primarily, it brought about a profound awareness of the absolute and infinite nature of God's existence – the true existence that precludes all else. However, there was a secondary aspect of the Sinai experience which resulted from this awareness – the people in their finitude were enveloped by the infinity of the divine encounter. They became acutely aware that, aside from God, nothing else really exists. They therefore realized that their own finite lives were actually meaningless and insignificant. Although *Am Yisrael* survived *matan Torah*, they felt overwhelmed and erased by the awareness that only God exists in absolute terms.

This idea is expressed in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 41) in midrashic style. The midrash states that the literally breathtaking experience of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* actually caused the demise of the children of Israel, but they were subsequently revived.

We have already established that it was the experience of Sinai, as opposed to the content of the commandments, that was of critical importance. Furthermore, we claimed that the content of this experience was of the absolute nature of God's existence and the negation of the existence of all else. Based on these two premises, we can return to the distinction between the first two *dibbrot* and the remaining eight. After all, the first two *dibbrot* reflect the Sinai experience; "*Anokhi*" expresses the absolute existence of God, while "*lo yihyeh lekha*" refers to the negation of the existence of all else. Although *Am Yisrael* did not manage to comprehend the content of the Ten Commandments, they profoundly experienced the divine revelation. "*Anokhi*" and "*lo yihyeh lekha*" were experienced deeply by the nation.

God was pleased with the reaction of the people: "And God said unto me, 'I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you; they have done well all that they have spoken'" (*Devarim* 5:25). It is interesting, however, that according to *Chazal*, Moshe was not pleased at all (see Rashi, *Devarim* 5:24).

Perhaps we can suggest that Moshe Rabbeinu, who had a singular and unique relationship with God, perceived the purpose of the *dibbrot* as an opportunity for the entire nation to elevate themselves to his level and to fully comprehend the infinite word of God. In his characteristic humility, Moshe saw no reason to distinguish between himself and others. He was therefore disappointed when the people rejected this opportunity, preferring that the Torah be transmitted indirectly. God, on the other hand, knew that this was not the main purpose of the Sinaitic revelation. The Divine plan was that *Am Yisrael* should collectively experience Sinai and develop a collective awareness of the essential messages of the revelation. *Am Yisrael* must become profoundly aware of "*anokhi*" and "*lo yihyeh lekha*."

We can at this point return to the previously mentioned differences between the approach of Moshe and that of God to *matan Torah*. The addition of the extra day of preparation described by the *gemara* is symbolic of Moshe's attempt to prepare the people to comprehend the infinite word of God. The Almighty, while accepting Moshe's proposal of an additional day, insisted on frightening the people with a stern warning immediately prior to the *dibbrot*. Moshe Rabbeinu was reluctant to warn the people, for he perceived Sinai basically as a learning experience. He correctly assumed that to frighten the nation immediately prior to *matan Torah* would be educationally counterproductive, since it would be difficult for the people to comprehend if they were terrified. God, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with the **experience** of revelation – that *Am Yisrael* should become acutely aware of "*anokhi*," the all-encompassing, absolute nature of the existence of God. God was interested in the nation discovering the frightful truth of "*lo yihiyeh lekha*" – the negation of the existence of the entire finite order. God realized that the people had already been warned, but demanded nevertheless that the *dibbrot* be issued specifically within the context of the frightening Divine warning.

Both the argument as described by the *peshat* and that described by the *gemara* revolve around the same point of disagreement. Moshe wanted the Jews to understand God's word, to relate to the contents of revelation, and to have an intellectual learning experience of Torah. (That is why, after all, he is Moshe Rabbeinu – our teacher.) Therefore, he wants additional preparation time and objects to increasing the emotional stress. God viewed Sinai as being primarily experiential, rather than intellectual.

After the *dibbrot*, when the people rejected further direct revelation, Moshe Rabbeinu was distraught. He felt that he had failed in his mission. God responded that the divine revelation at Sinai had, in fact, achieved its purpose. "O that their hearts would remain such to fear Me and guard all the commandments all their days" (*Devarim* 5:6).

It is incumbent upon us to pass on the tradition of Sinai throughout the generations. This obligation is not limited to the details learned at Sinai, but includes the profound experience of "*anokhi*" and "*lo yihiyeh lekha*." This awareness must not be lost, and it must be transmitted as a living tradition throughout Jewish history: "And you shall inform your children and your children's children" (*Devarim* 4:9).