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To Whom Did God Speak at Sinai?

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The Torah is ambiguous about the question of whether the Revelation at Mount Sinai was only to Moshe – "Lo, I come **to you** in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak **with you** and believe you forever" (*Shemot* 19:9) – or to the entire people – "For on the third day the Lord will come down **in the sight of all the people** upon Mount Sinai" (*Shemot* 19:11).

Another question arises as well: Did the glory of God reach the foot of the mountain, down to the Israelite camp – "**And Mount Sinai smoked in every part**, because the Lord descended upon it in fire, and the smoke of it ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and **the whole mountain** quaked greatly" (*Shemot* 19:18) – or did God's glory rest only on the top of the mountain – "And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, **on the top of the mountain**, and the Lord called Moshe up to **the top of the mount**; and Moshe went up" (*Shemot* 19:20)? Furthermore, if all the people stood at the foot of the mountain, to where did the priests ascend after the sweeping warning not to go up the mountain or even touch its perimeter?

Let us first consider three generally accepted interpretations of the Revelation.

The words of the Rambam suggest that God did not speak directly to the people of Israel. The essence of the Revelation involved God's speaking with Moshe. The people heard God speaking with Moshe, but they neither heard nor understood what God said to him. Through the Revelation, the people came to understand the strength of Moshe's prophecy and they learned to believe in his future prophecies. The heart of the Revelation took place, then, on the top of the mountain. The people stood at a distance, while Moshe ascended to the top of the mountain to speak with God:

What is the source of our belief in him [Moshe]? The [Revelation] at Mount Sinai. Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's. There was fire, thunder, and lightning. He entered the thick clouds; the voice spoke to him and we heard: "Moshe, Moshe, go tell them

the following..." Thus, it says (*Devarim* 5:4): "Face to face, God spoke to you," and it says (*Devarim* 5:3): "God did not make this covenant with our fathers, [but with us, who are all here alive today]." How is it known that the [Revelation] at Mount Sinai alone is proof of the truth of Moshe's prophecy that leaves no shortcoming? As it is stated (*Shemot* 19:9): "Lo, I come to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever." This implies that before that point, they did not believe in him with a faith that would last forever, but rather with a faith that allowed for suspicions and doubts. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 8:1)

In contrast, R. Yehuda Ha-Levi implies that the essence of the Revelation involved God's speaking with all of the people of Israel and that on that occasion they all attained prophecy and the experience of God's speaking to them. This is how Israel learned that God speaks to man through prophecy: "We have seen this day that God talks with man and he lives" (*Devarim* 5:21). It was only at the Revelation at Mount Sinai that all of Israel attained the level of prophecy; from that time on, the word of God was transmitted to them through the hand of Moshe:

Although the people believed in the message of Moshe, they retained, even after the performance of the miracles, some doubt as to whether God really spoke to mortals... They could not associate speech with a Divine being, since it is something tangible. God, however, desired to remove this doubt and commanded them to prepare themselves morally, as well as physically, enjoining them to keep aloof from their wives and to be ready to hear the words of God. The people prepared and became fitted to receive the prophecy, and even to hear publicly the words of God. This came to pass three days later, being introduced by overwhelming phenomena, lightning, thunder, earthquake, and fire, which surrounded Mount Sinai. The fire remained visible on the mount for forty days. They also saw Moshe enter it and emerge from it; they distinctly heard the Ten Commandments, which represent the very essence of the Law... The people did not receive these ten commandments from single individuals, nor from a prophet, but from God, but they did not possess the strength of Moshe to bear the grandeur of the scene. Henceforth, the people believed that Moshe held direct communication with God. (*Kuzari* 2:87)

Rashi maintains an intermediate position between that of the Rambam and that of R. Yehuda Ha-Levi. His words suggest that the question of whether God would speak only to Moshe or to the people as a whole was subject to negotiation between God and the people during the days of preparation for the Revelation:

"And Moshe told the words of the people [to the Lord]" – [He said to God:] I have heard from them a reply to this statement – that their desire is to hear the commandments from You and not from me. One who hears from the

mouth of a messenger is not the same as one who hears directly from the mouth of the King Himself. It is our wish to see our King. "And the Lord said to Moses" – If so, that they force Me to speak with them, go to the people. (Rashi, *Shemot* 19:9-10)

Chazal express different views on the matter. Let us consider the position of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, which in my opinion accords well with the plain sense of Scripture:

How many commandments did Israel hear from the Almighty? R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: Two commandments. And the Rabbis said: Israel heard all of the commandments from the Almighty. What is written after all the commandments? "And they said to Moshe: Speak, you with us, and we will hear, but let God not speak with us, lest we die" (*Shemot* 20:16). What did R. Yehoshua ben Levi say to counter this? There is no chronological order in the Torah. (*Pesikta Rabbati* 22)

According to R. Yehoshua ben Levi, the first two commandments were spoken to Israel directly by God, but the last eight commandments were given to them through Moshe, who heard them from God. This possibility is mentioned elsewhere in *Chazal* as well:

R. Simlai expounded: Six hundred and thirteen commandments were communicated to Moshe, three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments, corresponding to the number of solar days [in the year], and two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments, corresponding to the number of the members of man's body. R. Hamnuna said: What is the verse [that teaches this]? "Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaakov" (*Devarim* 33:4), "Torah" being in numerical-value equal to six hundred and eleven, "I am [the Lord your God]" and "You shall have no [other gods]" [not being reckoned, because] we heard them from the mouth of the Almighty.¹

It is for this reason that the first two commandments are formulated in the first person, as God Himself spoke to Israel, whereas the last eight commandments are formulated in the third person, as they were given to the people through Moshe. For this explanation, R. Yehoshua ben Levi invokes the rule that there is no chronological order in the Torah; the Ten Commandments were not proclaimed in one sequence, but rather the people's request that they hear the commandments from Moshe intervened between the second and third commandments.

¹ In the verse "Moshe commanded us the Torah" (*Devarim* 33:4), the numerical value of the letters comprising the word "Torah" is expounded as alluding to six hundred and eleven commandments. From here we learn that we received from Moshe six hundred and eleven commandments, and two additional commandments we received directly from God, they being the first two of the Ten Commandments. Together, the number of the commandments totals six hundred and thirteen.

We can add the verses appearing after the Ten Commandments to the data supporting the idea that God spoke directly with the people:

And all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking, and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood afar off. And they said to Moshe, "Speak you with us, and we will hear, but let not God speak with us, lest we die."
(*Shemot* 20:14-15)

This is the chronological order of the verses according to this explanation:

(19:10) And the Lord said to Moshe, "Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day;

(11) for on the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of the all the people upon Mount Sinai.

(12) And you shall set bounds to the people round about, saying: Take heed to yourselves, that you go not up into the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall be surely put to death.

(13) No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live; when the horn sounds long, they shall come up to the mountain."

(14) And Moshe went down from the mountain to the people and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes.

(20:1) God spoke all these words, saying:

(2) "I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

(3) You shall have no other gods beside me.

(4) You shall not make for yourself any carved idol, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

(5) You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those that hate Me;

(6) but showing mercy to thousands of generations of those that love Me and keep My commandments."

(20:15) And all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking, and when the people saw it, they were shaken and stood afar off.

(16) And they said to Moshe, "Speak you with us, and we will hear, but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

(17) And Moshe said to the people, "Fear not, for God is come to test you, and that His fear may be before your faces, that you sin not."

(18) And the people stood afar off, and Moshe drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

(19:20) And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai on the top of the mountain and the Lord called Moshe up to the top of the mount; and Moshe went up.

(21) And the Lord said to Moshe, "Go down, charge the people, lest they break through to the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish.

(22) And let the priests also, who come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them."

(23) And Moshe said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You did charge us, saying: Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.

(24) And the Lord said to him, "Go, get you down, and you shall come, you, and Aharon with you; but let not the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break forth upon them."

(25) So Moshe went down to the people and spoke to them.

(19:19) And then the voice of the shofar sounded louder and louder; Moshe speaks, and God answers him by a voice.

(20:7) "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain.

(8) Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

(9) Six days shall you labor, and do all your work,

(10) but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; on it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates.

(11) For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

(12) Honor your father and your mother: that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

(13) You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

(14) You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's."

According to this proposal, there were two parts to the Revelation at Sinai. In the first part, God's glory revealed itself on the entire mountain, down to its foot and in the sight of all the people, to the point where the people of Israel stood at the foot of the mountain. In this part, God proclaimed the first two commandments and the people heard them. The people, however, could no longer stand this awesome experience, and therefore they asked Moshe to speak to them in place of God.

Consequently, God's glory went up to the top of the mountain and called to Moshe to come up to Him. The people were once again warned not to ascend even part of the mountain, despite the fact that the *Shekhina* had already removed itself from the bottom of the mountain. Only the priests were permitted to go up to a certain level on the mountain after the *Shekhina* went up to the top, and Aharon was permitted to go up one level higher. At this stage, the last eight commandments were told to Moshe, and he passed them on to the people.²

We have explained some of the verses (the first two commandments) in accordance with the position of R. Yehuda Halevi, and some of them (the last eight commandments) in accordance with the view of the Rambam. We will try now to integrate into this the position of Rashi cited above.

Initially, God had intended to speak with Moshe alone. The people would be convinced that God spoke with him, and then believe in his prophecy forever:

And the Lord said to Moshe, "Lo, I come to you in a thick cloud, **that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever.**" (*Shemot* 19:9)

But the people ask to hear the word of God directly. This might follow from what is told about the Revelation in *Shemot* chapter 24,³ and it is possible that Rashi infers this from the difference between the two accounts of the people's response:

And all the people answered together, and said, "All that the Lord has spoken **we will do.**" (*Shemot* 19:8)

And they said, "All that the Lord has said **we will do and hear.**" (*Shemot* 24:7)

In *Parashat Yitro* (ch. 19), the people commit themselves only to action, whereas in *Parashat Mishpatim* (ch. 24) they wish to hear the word of God. This difference might lead to Rashi's conclusion. Since the people asked to hear the word of God, God sent Moshe to sanctify them for three days so that they should be fit for God's descent upon all of Mount Sinai, at the foot of which they are standing. God proclaims His word, but the people are shocked and ask to return to the original plan, according to which God speaks to Moshe alone.

The change in plan in the wake of the people's request to hear the word of God might explain another matter. According to *Chazal's* tradition, the Torah was given on the sixth (and according to R. Yose, on the seventh) of Sivan, the third

² The approach closest to our proposal is that of the *Chizkuni*.

³ According to Rashi and most commentators, the Torah goes back in chapter 24 to describe what happened at Mount Sinai prior to the giving of the Torah.

month. According to the plain sense of Scripture, based on the assumption that the people of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai on Rosh Chodesh Sivan (the plain meaning of the words "on the third month" is Rosh Chodesh), it would have been enough to say that on that very day God sent Moshe to sanctify the people in anticipation of the third day, and to explain that the Torah was given on the third of Sivan.⁴ It might be that *Chazal* pushed the Revelation off to the sixth or the seventh of Sivan based on the fact that initially there were three days of preparation for Moshe's receiving the Torah. But since the plan was altered, the people needed another three days to prepare themselves for hearing the word of God. Accordingly, the Torah was given on the sixth or the seventh of Sivan.

Something similar to what happened according to our understanding at the Revelation at Sinai happened also with the *Mishkan*. Initially, God appeared at the time of the dedication of the Temple to the entire people:

For today the Lord will appear to you [plural]. (*Vayikra* 9:4)

And Moshe said, "This is the thing which the Lord commanded you to do; and the glory of the Lord shall appear to you [plural]." (*Vayikra* 9:6)

And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And there came a fire out from before the Lord and consumed upon the altar the burnt-offering and the fat: which, when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces. (*Vayikra* 9:23-24)

But this great incident ended with a fire consuming Nadav and Avihu, recalling the argument advanced by the people at the Revelation at Mount Sinai: "Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us" (*Devarim* 5:22). In response to the death of the sons of Aharon, God gave Israel the service of the High Priest in the Holy of Holies at its appointed time:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon, when they came near before the Lord, and died; and the Lord said to Moshe, "Speak to Aharon your brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil before the covering, which is upon the ark, that he die not; for I appear in the cloud upon the ark cover. Thus shall Aharon come into the holy place..." (*Vayikra* 16:1-3)

By way of the Yom Kippur service, the glory of God reveals itself to the High Priest in the Holy of Holies alone, and not to the entire people. Thus, it is a sort of continuation of the last eight of the Ten Commandments, when God

⁴ It should be noted that according to the plain meaning of the verses, there is no need at all to identify the day of the giving of the Torah with the festival of Shavuot. Shavuot falls on the fiftieth day after the day of the waving of the Omer, the sixteenth of Nisan. At a time when there was no fixed calendar and the months were sanctified in accordance with sightings of the new moon, Shavuot could fall out on the fifth, the sixth, or the seventh of Sivan. At the time of the Revelation as well, the day of the giving of the Torah was the fifty first day of the Omer, and not the fiftieth day, when the festival of Shavuot is supposed to fall. This issue is discussed by the *Taz* and the *Magen Avraham* on *Shulchan Arukh* (*Orach Chayim* 494).

revealed Himself at the top of the mountain to Moshe alone, and not to the entire people.