**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

***PARASHAT VA'ETCHANAN***

**Remembering Sinai**

**By Rav Yair Kahn**

**I. The Centrality and Complexity of Sinai**

One of the major themes in *Parashat Va’etchanan* is *ma’amad Har Sinai*, which appears in the *parasha* in three separate contexts. The most obvious is the repetition of the Ten Commandments:

Hashem spoke with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire. I stood between Hashem and you at that time, for you were afraid of the fire, and did not climb the mount, to declare unto you the word of Hashem saying: “*Anochi Hashem* *Elokecha* (I am Hashem your God)… (5:4-6)

However, already towards the beginning of the *parasha*, Moshe warns *Bnei Yisrael* not to forget *ma’mad Har Sinai*.

Only take heed of yourself and protect your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your children and your children's children; the day that you stood before Hashem your God in Chorev. (4:9-10)

Later, Moshe again refers to *ma'amad Har Sinai* in yet another context:

Did ever a people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and lived? … Out of heaven He made you hear His voice, that He might instruct you; and upon earth He made you to see His great fire; and you did hear His words out of the midst of the fire (4:32-36).

From all the above, we arrive at two separate conclusions regarding *ma'mad Har Sinai* – its centrality and its complexity. Moshe repeatedly hammers home memories of *ma'mad Har Sinai* because it is so central to our faith. Moshe is aware that his days are numbered; he will die in the wilderness and Yisrael will enter Canaan without him. Moshe spends his final days preparing the people spiritually for their future. It is therefore critical that a vivid legacy of Sinai be instilled within the collective memory of Yisrael, for without Sinai, Yisrael as a covenantal community ceases to exist.

On the other hand, the repeated references to Sinai indicate independent messages. There are various things that we learn from Sinai, each of which deserves separate notice. The first mention of Sinai emphasizes rejection of anything physical associated with Hashem. After describing *ma'mad Har Sinai*, the ultimate divine encounter, where Yisrael heard the voice, but saw no image (4:12), Moshe concludes:

Therefore take good heed unto yourselves for you saw no manner of form on the day that Hashem spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire. Lest you deal corruptly, and make yourself a graven image, even the form of any figure … (4:15-16)

The second mention of ma’amad Har Sinai focuses on the uniqueness of Hashem. *Ma’amad Har Sinai* as a singular unparalleled historic event is enlisted to illustrate this point:

 For ask now of the days past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from the one end of heaven unto the other, whether there has been any such thing as this great thing, or whether anything like it has been heard? (4:32)

To further demonstrate his point, Moshe quotes the people, who told him: "For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived" (5:22). Therefore Moshe continues to rhetorically ask the nation: "Did ever a people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and lived?” (4:32-33). Moshe finally gets to his point: "To you it was shown, that you should know that Hashem, He is God; there is none else beside Him" (4:35). Moshe concludes this section with a verse which our Sages placed in every prayer service (at the end of A*leinu*): “Know this day, and lay it to your heart, that Hashem, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else” (4:39).

These two mentions of *ma’amad Har Sinai* are found in Moshe’s first speech. When this speech ends, the Torah shifts to the narrative and refers to Moshe in the third person: “At that point, Moshe separated three cities on the east side of the Yarden” (4:41). The Torah then introduces the second speech, known as the speech of *mitzvot*:

This is the Torah which Hashem placed before *Benei Yisrael*. These are the testaments, the statutes and the laws which Moshe told to *Benei Yisrael* coming out of Egypt beyond the Yarden … (4:44-46)

We will now discuss the third mention of Sinai, which is found in the speech of the mitzvot.

**II. The Religious Messages of the Sinai Encounter**

After a brief introduction, Moshe’s second speech begins with a repeat of the Ten Commandments. At first glance, this is not an introduction, but rather the beginning of a review of the *mitzvot*. The Ten Commandments were the first of the *mitzvot* revealed to Yisrael at Sinai, and Moshe similarly began his review with the Ten Commandments. Closer inspection, however, reveals that Moshe mentions Sinai as an introduction as well.

Moshe begins by describing *ma'amad Har Sinai*:

Hashem spoke to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire, face to face. I was standing between Hashem and you at that time, to tell you the word of Hashem, for you feared the fire and didn't ascend the mountain …" (5:4-5)

According to Moshe's account, the people refused to climb the mountain out of fear. However, in *Parashat Yitro*, Moshe is commanded to warn the people not to climb the mount and is commanded to tell the people:

"Take heed to yourselves, that you do not go up the mount, or touch the border of it; whosoever touches the mount shall be surely put to death; no hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live" (19:12-13).

What message is Moshe trying to convey by altering the original account?

Let us consider the section which follows the Ten Commandments. Moshe describes how the powerful voice of Hashem, as it were, came from the fire. He then recalls the request of people:

“Behold, Hashem our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire; we have seen this day that God does speak with man, and he [man] survives. Now therefore why should we die if we should be consumed by this great fire; if we hear the voice of Hashem our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? You [Moshe] approach and hear all that Hashem our God may say; and you shall speak unto us all that Hashem our God may speak unto you, and we will hear it and do it" (5:20-23).

The people are frightened by the fire and the voice and ask Moshe to receive the Torah on their behalf. Hashem responds: "I have heard the voice of the words of this people … they have spoken well. Oh that this heart should remain as this always, to fear Me and keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever" (5:24-25). Moshe is then summoned to receive the Torah for Yisrael: "But as for you, stand here by Me and I will speak unto you all the commandment, and the statutes, and the laws, which you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land which I give them to possess" (5:27).

In retelling the story of the Ten Commandments, Moshe ignores the divine imperative prohibiting Yisrael from ascending the mount. Instead, he focuses on another reason, which is not any less factual; the people did not approach the mountain because they were frozen with fear. Even after the Ten Commandments, when the divine prohibition was no longer binding, the frightened people requested that Moshe receive the Torah.

Moshe recalls this dialogue within a very specific historic context. Yisrael are about to enter Canaan without Moshe. Moshe, who led the people on the path of Hashem from the time they left Egypt, who could present them with the direct word of Hashem as the need would arise, will not cross the Yarden with them. Moshe is faced with a challenge; to continue to guide the people and provide them with the direct word of Hashem as they continue on their covenantal journey without him.

The solution, of course, is *Torat Moshe*. The people themselves witnessed the direct transmission of the Torah during *ma'mad Har Sinai*. Out of fear, they approached Moshe to receive the Torah on their behalf and committed to fulfill it. Moshe returned to Har Sinai to receive the commandment, statutes, and laws that Yisrael must fulfill. Moshe, who has established the historic, spiritual and legal foundation of those laws, can conclude: "Now this is the commandment, the statutes, and the laws, which Hashem your God commanded to teach you, that you might do them in the land which you will go over to possess" (6:1).

**III. The Commandment Not to Forget Sinai**

In his Torah commentary, the Ramban interprets the *pasuk*: "Only take heed of yourself and protect your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes saw … the day that you stood before Hashem your God in Chorev” (4:9-10), as a biblical prohibition – one is not allowed to forget *ma'amd* Har Sinai. He further clarifies his position in his comments to the *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, where he actually enumerates this prohibition as one of the Taryag (613) *mitzvot* of the Torah.

Interestingly, this *mitzva* does not prohibit forgetting the Ten Commandments; it is *ma'amad Har Sinai* that one must recall. The Ramban bases the significance of this prohibition, on an idea which the Rambam developed in the *Mishnah Torah*:

*Bnei Yisrael* did not believe in Moshe [solely] because of the signs he presented, for someone who believes [in a prophet solely] because of the signs he presents is tainted, for it could be that his signs are performed by means of spells and witchcraft. All the signs that Moshe performed in the wilderness were done according to the needs of the moment, and not to bring proof to his prophecies… It was *ma'amad Har Sinai* that made them believe in Moshe, when our eyes, and no-one else's, saw, and our ears, and no-one else's, heard, and Moshe drew near to the darkness, and the voice spoke to him, and we heard it saying to Moshe, "Moshe, Moshe, go tell them such-and-such." In connection with this, it is written, "Hashem talked with you face to face." (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 8:1)

According to the Rambam, the collective experience of ma'amad Har Sinai is the basis of our belief in the prophecy of Moshe and, by extension, the entire Torah. *Am Yisrael* witnessed the transmission of the Torah in a direct way. Therefore, any challenge or denial of the divinity of the Torah should be rejected outright. The Rambam continues:

Therefore, if a prophet arose and performed great signs and wonders, and tells us to deny the prophecy of Moshe our Teacher, we do not listen to him, and we [will] know for sure that his signs are the result of spells and witchcraft. The prophecy of Moshe was not dependent upon signs, so the signs of this prophet cannot outweigh the signs of Moshe, for we saw and heard them, just as he did. This is similar to two witnesses who testify to an individual contrary to what that individual saw with his own eyes. He does not accept what they say, but knows that they are false witnesses. Therefore, the Torah said that if a prophet comes with signs and wonders, we do not listen to him, for he is coming to deny that which we saw with our eyes. (ibid 8:3)

R. Yehuda Halevi, author of the *Kuzari*, also considered *ma'amad Har Sinai* as the foundation of our faith:

The first leader, Moshe, made the people stand by Har Sinai, that they might see the light which he himself had seen, should they be able to see it in the same way. He then invited the Seventy Elders to see it, as it is written, “They saw the God of Yisrael.” Then he assembled the second convocation of Seventy Elders to whom he transferred so much of his prophetic spirit, that they equaled him, as is written, “And he took of the spirit that was upon him and gave it unto the seventy elders.” One related to the other concerning what they saw and heard. By these means, all evil suspicion was removed from the people, lest they opined that prophecy was only the privilege of the few who claimed to possess it. For no common compact is possible among so many people, especially where large hosts of them are concerned … Each elder served as a witness for Moshe and admonished the people to keep the law. (*Kuzari* 4:11)

According to the *Kuzari*, *ma'amad Har Sinai* serves as a foundation of faith because, at that point, Hashem revealed himself to the masses. Most religions are founded by charismatic leaders who claim to have experienced divine revelation. *Yahadut*, on the other hand, claims that Hashem revealed His glory directly to the entire nation. The *Kuzari* argues that it is unreasonable that such a claim could be artificially invented. Therefore, *ma'mad Har Sinai* must actually have occurred.

This argument is very different from that of the Rambam. According to the *Kuzari*, the claim of mass revelation is objective evidence, convincing even for one who was not present at Sinai. In fact, in *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, this argument is addressed to the King of the Kuzars, who is not of Jewish descent. The Rambam, on the other hand, speaks of a personal, direct experience. It is meaningful only for one who witnessed the prophecy of Hashem face to face. However, for both the Rambam and R. Yehuda Halevy, *ma'amad Har Sinai* is critical; it is crucial that the collective experience of *ma'amad Har Sinai* is transmitted as a living tradition from generation to generation.