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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT YITRO - Ma'amad Har Sinai

A wedding ceremony? Well, not exactly; but many sources in Chazal compare the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai to a marriage between God (the groom) and Am Yisrael (the bride).

[See for example the last Mishnah in Mesechet Taanit!]

In this week's shiur, as we study the numerous ambiguities in Shmot chapter 19, we attempt to explain the deeper meaning of this analogy, as well as the underlying reason for those ambiguities.

INTRODUCTION

Thus far, Sefer Shmot has discussed the story of Yetziat Mitzraim, and hence - how God had fulfilled His covenant with the Avot. However, that covenant included not only a promise of redemption, but also the promise that Bnei Yisrael would become God's special nation in Eretz Canaan. As Bnei Yisrael now travel to establish that nation in that 'Promised Land', God brings them to Har Sinai in order to teach them the specific laws [mitzvot] that will help make them His special nation.

Therefore, the primary purpose of Bnei Yisrael's arrival at Har Sinai was to receive God's LAWS. Nevertheless, the Torah describes in no less detail the 'experience' of how those laws were given. In the following shiur, we undertake a careful reading of Shmot chapter 19 (i.e. the events that precede the Ten Commandments), highlighting its complexities, in an attempt to better appreciate Chazal's understanding of Ma'amad Har Sinai.

[Before you continue, it is highly recommended that you quickly review chapters 19 and 20 to refresh your memory, noting its flow of topic. (While doing so, try to notice how many psukim are difficult to translate.) For a more comprehensive preparation, see the Questions for self-study (sent earlier this week).]

THE 'PROPOSAL'

Shmot chapter 19 opens as Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai - presumably, to receive the Torah. However, before the Torah is given, God first summons Moshe to the mountain, instructing him to relay a certain message to the people. As you review these psukim (19:3-6), note how they form a 'proposal':

"Thus shall you say to Beit Yaakov and tell Bnei Yisrael:

You have seen what I have done to Egypt... so NOW:

IF - you will OBEY Me faithfully and keep My COVENANT...and be my treasured nation, for all the Land is Mine.

THEN: You shall be for Me a 'mamlechet Kohanim v'goy kadosh' [a kingdom of priests and a holy nation]..." (19:4-6)

The 'if / then' clause proves that these instructions constitute a proposal (and not just a decree) - to which Bnei Yisrael must answer either 'yes' or 'no'. And that's exactly what we find:

"And the people answered together and said, 'Everything that God has spoken we shall keep,' and Moshe brought the people's answer back to God." (see 19:7-8)

Clearly, Moshe Rabeinu acts as the 'middle-man' - who must relay the people's answer to this 'proposal' back to God.

[In regard to what would have happened had Bnei Yisrael answered 'no', see the Further lyun section.]

Let's take a minute to discuss the meaning of the two sides of this 'proposition'.

The first part of the '**IF**' clause - "if you will OBEY Me" - makes sense, as God must first clarify if Bnei Yisrael are indeed now ready to follow His laws; in contrast to their previous 'refusals' (see Yechezkel 20:5-9, Shmot 6:9 & 15:26). However, the precise meaning of the second clause - "and if you will keep My COVENANT" is uncertain, for it is not clear if this 'covenant' refers to something old - i.e. 'brit Avot'; or something new - i.e. 'brit Sinai'.

SOMETHING 'OLD' or SOMETHING 'NEW'

It would be difficult to explain that the word 'covenant' in this pasuk refers to 'brit Avot', for brit Avot doesn't seem to include any specific action that Bnei Yisrael must keep. More likely, it refers to 'brit Sinai' - whose details will soon be revealed, should Bnei Yisrael accept this proposal.

However, this ambiguity may be intentional, for this forthcoming "brit Sinai" could be understood as an 'upgrade' of "brit Avot". In other words, 'brit Avot' discusses the very basic framework of a relationship (see Breishit 17:7-8), while 'brit Sinai' will contain the detailed laws which will make that original covenant more meaningful.

If so, then the proposition could be understood as follows: Should Bnei Yisrael agree to obey whatever God may command, and to remain faithful to this covenant, and act as His treasured nation (see 19:5) - **THEN**, the result will be that Bnei Yisrael will serve as God's 'model' nation, representing Him before all other nations [a "mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh"/ see 19:6].

As a prerequisite for Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael must both confirm their readiness to obey God's commandments while recognizing that these mitzvot will facilitate their achievement of the very purpose of God's covenant with them.

Whereas a covenant requires the willful consent of both sides, this section concludes with Bnei Yisrael's collective acceptance of these terms (see again 19:7-8).

MAKING PLANS (and changing them)

Now that Bnei Yisrael had accepted God's proposal, the next step should be for them to receive the specific MITZVOT (i.e. the laws that they just agreed to observe). However, before those laws can be given, there are some technical details that must be ironed out, concerning **HOW** Bnei Yisrael will receive these laws. Note how the next pasuk describes God's 'plans' for how He intends to convey these mitzvot

"And God said to Moshe, 'I will come to you in the thickness of a CLOUD, in order that the people HEAR when I SPEAK WITH YOU, and in order that they believe in you [i.e. that you are My spokesman] forever...' (19:9)

It appears from this pasuk that God plans to use Moshe Rabeinu as an intermediary to convey His laws to Bnei Yisrael, consistent with Moshe's role as His liaison heretofore. Nonetheless, God insists that the people will 'overhear' His communication with Moshe, so that they believe that these laws truly originate from God, and not from Moshe.

At this point, in the middle of pasuk 9, we encounter our first major difficulty in following the flow of events. Note that God has just informed Moshe of HOW He plans to convey His laws. Hence, we would expect Moshe to convey this message to Bnei Yisrael (just as he did in 19:7). However, when we continue our reading of 19:9, something very strange takes place:

"...Then Moshe reported the PEOPLE'S words to God." (19:9)

What's going on? The second half of this pasuk seems to omit an entire clause - for it never tells us what the people responded. Instead, it just says that Moshe relayed the people's response back to God, without telling us WHAT the people said!

BE PREPARED!

This question is so glaring (and obvious) that Rashi, taking for granted that the reader realized this problem, provides an answer based on the Midrash that fills in the 'missing details'.

"Et divrei ha'am" [the words of the people]... The people responded: 'We want to hear from YOU [God] directly, for one cannot compare hearing from a "shaliach" (a messenger) to hearing from the King himself, [or they said:] We want to SEE our King!' (see Rashi on 19:9)

Note how Rashi adds an entire line to this narrative. According to his interpretation, Bnei Yisrael don't accept God's original plan that they would hear the MITZVOT via Moshe. Instead, they demand to hear them directly - from God Himself!

What allows Rashi to offer such a bold interpretation?

Rashi's interpretation is based on an apparent contradiction between God's original plan in 19:9 and what appears to be His new plan, as described in the next two psukim:

"And God told Moshe, 'Go to the people and get them ready... for on the third day God will reveal Himself IN VIEW OF ALL THE PEOPLE on Har Sinai.'" (see 19:10-11)

Note how God commands Bnei Yisrael to ready themselves, for in three days time they will actually SEE God. This declaration that He plans to reveal himself before the 'eyes of the entire nation' suggests that God now plans to convey His mitzvot DIRECTLY to the people. These instructions appear to describe a NEW PLAN for Matan Torah (in contrast to His original plan that Moshe will act as an intermediary - as described in 19:9).

For the sake of clarity, from now on, we refer to the God's original plan (Dibrot via Moshe) as PLAN 'A' (based on 19:9), and to the new plan (Dibrot Direct) as PLAN 'B' (based on 19:11).

Rashi claims that God's suggestion of Plan 'B' stems from the people's unwillingness to accept Plan 'A' - for Bnei Yisrael want to hear the Commandments DIRECTLY.

This 'change of plan' can explain why the people now require THREE days of preparation. In order to prepare for this DIRECT encounter, Bnei Yisrael must first attain a higher level of spiritual readiness, as reflected in the three-day preparation period. Note how the details of this 'preparation' continue until 19:15.

In 19:12-13, Moshe is commanded to cordon off the entire area surrounding the mountain. In 19:14-15, Moshe relays these commands to the people. Hence, from now on, we refer to this section (i.e. 19:9-15) as 'PREPARATION'.

Are Bnei Yisrael capable of reaching this level? Are they truly ready to receive the DIBROT directly from God?

If so, why did God not suggest this direct encounter in the first place? If not, why does God now agree to their request?

[As you may have guessed, we have encountered a 'dialectic'.]

To answer these questions, we must analyze the psukim that follow to determine which of these two divine plans actually unfolds.

RUNAWAY BRIDE

According to the new plan, on 'day three' God should reveal Himself on Mount Sinai and speak the DIBROT directly to the entire nation. Let's continue now in chapter 19 and see what happens:

"And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, and there were loud sounds and lightening, and a THICK CLOUD on the mountain, and the SHOFAR sounded very strong, and the people in the CAMP all became frightened." (19:16)

If you read this pasuk carefully, you will most probably be startled by the fact that Bnei Yisrael never came to Har Sinai that morning! Instead, they were so frightened of God's "hitgalut" [revelation] that they remained in the CAMP.

[Our minhag to stay up (and learn Torah) the entire night of Shavuot is based on the Midrash that Bnei Yisrael 'slept in' on that morning. Note how that Midrash is based on this pasuk.]

This background explains the next pasuk, where Moshe goes back to the camp, and brings everyone back to the foot of the mountain (see 19:17). Now it's time to 'try it again'. Let's see what happens:

"And Har Sinai was full of smoke, for God had DESCENDED upon it in FIRE, and its smoke was like a furnace, and the entire mountain shook violently..." (see 19:18)

This pasuk certainly describes God's "hitgalut", and it appears to follow according to PLAN 'B'. Note how God's descends onto the mountain (note the word "va'yered" in both 19:11 and 19:18). Nevertheless, one could also understand the intense smoke as reflective of the protective 'cloud' described in 19:9 (Plan 'A').

The stage has now been set for Matan Torah. The people are standing at the foot of Har Sinai and God has revealed Himself - He has descended upon Har Sinai. Therefore, the next pasuk should

describe God's proclamation of the Ten Commandments.

Let's examine that pasuk (19:19) carefully:

"The sound of the shofar grew louder and louder; as Moshe would speak, God would answer him with a KOL." (19:19)

This pasuk is quite ambiguous, for it does not give us even a clue as to WHAT Moshe was saying or what God was answering. It is not even clear as to WHOM Moshe is speaking, to God or to the people!

If Moshe is speaking to the people, then this pasuk would be describing how he conveyed the DIBROT. If so, then Moshe speaking and God responding with a "kol" - implies that the DIBROT were given according to PLAN 'A', as Moshe serves as the intermediary. [Compare with 19:9!]

However, if "Moshe y'daber" (in 19:19) refers to Moshe speaking to God, then it not at all clear what their conversation is about; nor can we make any deduction in regard to how the Dibrot were given! [Note the range of opinion among the commentators on this pasuk!]

PLAN 'B' - MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING!

Rashi's commentary on this pasuk is simply amazing. Again quoting the Midrash, Rashi claims that Moshe is speaking to the people, telling them the Dibrot! However, what's amazing is Rashi's explanation that the clause "Moshe y'daber..." describes the transmission of the LAST EIGHT Commandments, but not the first TWO. This is because Rashi understands that the first two DIBROT were given DIRECTLY from God - in accordance with PLAN 'B' - while the last eight were given via Moshe - in accordance with PLAN 'A'. As this pasuk (19:19) describes PLAN 'A' it could only be referring to the transmission of the last eight DIBROT!

[See also Rambam in Moreh N'vuchim II, chapter 33.]

Note that according to Rashi, chapter 19 intentionally OMITS two key events relating to Plan B:

- 1) Bnei Yisrael's original request for Plan B (in 19:9), &
- 2) The story of the two DIBROT given at the level of Plan 'B'.

For some thematic reason that remains unclear, chapter 19 prefers to omit these two important details, leaving us with the impression that Plan 'B' may have never taken place!

Ramban rejects Rashi's interpretation of 19:19 (as do many other commentators), arguing that 19:19 does NOT describe how the Dibrot were given. Instead, Ramban explains that "Moshe y'daber..." describes the conversation between God and Moshe that immediately follows in 19:20-25.

[As usual, Ramban prefers to keep the sequence of events according to the order of the psukim, while Rashi is willing to 'change' the order for thematic considerations.]

LIMITATION/ A FINAL WARNING

To better appreciate this "machloket" between Rashi and Ramban, we must examine the last set of psukim in chapter 19 (i.e. 19:20-25).

"God descended upon Mount Sinai to the TOP of the Mountain and summoned Moshe to the TOP of the Mountain, and Moshe ascended... Then God told Moshe: Go down and WARN the people lest they break through toward God to SEE, and many of them will perish. And even the KOHANIM who are permitted to come closer must prepare themselves..." (19:20-22)

[Btw, note that 20:25 refers to Moshe's conveying this warning to the people, NOT to his conveying the "DIBROT," as is commonly misunderstood. See Rashi!]

According to Ramban, this additional 'warning' is given BEFORE Matan Torah, and serves as the final preparation before the DIBROT are given. However, according to Rashi's interpretation, it remains unclear when, where, and why this conversation (in 19:20-25) takes place.

[Even though Rashi explains 19:19 as depicting the presentation of the DIBROT, he maintains that 19:20-25 takes place beforehand - for it relates to the ceremony described in 24:3-11,

which Rashi himself claims to have occurred BEFORE the DIBROT. This "sugya" lies beyond the scope of our shiur.]

In any case, this final 'warning' clearly reflects the mode of transmission of the Dibrot that we have referred to as PLAN 'A' - God will appear only to Moshe (at the top of the mountain), while everyone else must keep their distance down below. Only Moshe will be privy to witness the descent of the "shechina" onto the TOP of the mountain, while Bnei Yisrael are prohibited from ascending to see, "lest they die."

As this section describes how God is now limiting His revelation to the top of the Mountain, we refer from now on to this section (19:20-25) as 'LIMITATION'.

Note how chapter 19 now divides into four distinct sections:

- I. PROPOSITION (19:1-8)
- II. PREPARATION (19:9-15)
- III. REVELATION (19:16-19)
- IV. LIMITATION (19:20-25)]

So what happened? Has God reverted to Plan 'A' (that Moshe is to act as an intermediary)? If so, why? On the other hand, if Plan 'B' remains in operation, why does God restrict His revelation to the TOP of the mountain? Could this be considered some sort of 'compromise'?

There appears to have been a change in plans, but why?

Even though chapter 19 does not seem to provide any explanation for what motivated this change, a story found later in chapter 20 seems to provide us with all the 'missing details'.

TREPIDATION [or 'FEAR' STORY ONE]

Towards the end of chapter 20, immediately after the Torah records the DIBROT, we find yet another story concerning what transpired at Har Sinai:

"And the people all saw the KOLOT, the torches, the sound of the SHOFAR and the mountain smoking; the people saw and MOVED BACK and stood at a distance. And they told Moshe: 'Why don't YOU SPEAK to us, and we will listen to you, but God should NOT SPEAK to us, lest we die.'

"Moshe responded saying: 'DO NOT BE FEARFUL, for God is coming to 'test' you and instill fear within you so that you will not sin.'

"But the people STOOD AT A DISTANCE, and Moshe [alone] entered the CLOUD where God was." (see 20:15-18)

This short narrative provides us with a perfect explanation for WHY God chooses to revert from PLAN 'B' back to PLAN 'A'. Here, the reason is stated explicitly: the people changed their mind because they were frightened and overwhelmed by this intense experience of "hitgalut."

But why is this story recorded in chapter 20? Should it not have been recorded in chapter 19?

Indeed, Ramban does place this story in the middle of chapter 19. Despite his general reluctance towards rearranging the chronology in Chumash, Ramban (on 20:14-15) explains that this entire parshia (20:15-18) took place earlier, BEFORE Matan Torah. Based on a textual and thematic similarities between 20:15-18 and 19:16-19 (and a problematic parallel in Devarim 5:20-28), Ramban concludes that the events described in 20:15-18 took place before Matan Torah, and should be read together with 19:16-18!

Thus, according to Ramban, the people's request to hear from Moshe (and not from God) that took place within 19:16-18, explains the need for the 'limitation' section that follows immediately afterward in 20:19-25. [See Ramban on 20:15.]

Rashi and Chizkuni offer a different interpretation. They agree with Ramban that 20:15-18 - the Fear Story - is 'out of place,' but they disagree concerning WHERE to put it. While Ramban places this story BEFORE Matan Torah, Rashi (based on his pirush to 19:19) & Chizkuni (on 20:15) claim that it took place DURING Matan Torah, BETWEEN the first two and last eight commandments.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS - FIRST OR THIRD PERSON

In fact, this creative solution solves yet another problem. It explains WHY the text of the Ten Commandments shifts from first to third person after the second commandment. Whereas the first two commandments (20:2-5) are written in FIRST person, indicating that God conveyed them DIRECTLY to the people [reflective of Plan 'B'], the last eight commandments (20:6-14) are written in third person, suggesting a less direct form of communication [reflective of Plan 'A']. This reflects Chazal's explanation that: "Anochi v'Lo Yihiyeh Lachem, m'pi ha'gvurah shma'um" - the first two commandments were heard directly from God (Makkot 24a); see also Chizkuni 20:2 and 20:15.]

Rashi and Chizkuni's explanation has a clear advantage over Ramban's, as it justifies the 'transplantation' of the Fear story (20:15-18) from its proper chronological location to after the Dibrot. Since this story took place DURING the Ten Commandments, the Torah could not record it beforehand. On the other hand, it could not have been recorded where it belongs (i.e. in between the second and third DIBROT), for the Torah does not want to 'break up' the DIBROT (whereas they form a single unit). Therefore, the Torah records this 'fear story' as a type of 'appendix' to the Ten Commandments, explaining afterward what happened while they were given.

To summarize, in chapter 19, it was unclear whether or not Bnei Yisrael would hear the DIBROT according to PLAN 'A' (as God originally had planned) or at the higher level of PLAN 'B' (as Bnei Yisrael requested). Later, in chapter 20, the Torah describes how Bnei Yisrael were frightened and requested to revert back to PLAN 'A'. Ramban claims that this 'fear story' took place BEFORE Matan Torah, and hence the people heard ALL Ten Commandments through Moshe (Plan 'A'). Rashi maintains that this story took place DURING the DIBROT; hence the first TWO DIBROT were transmitted according to PLAN 'B', while the remainder were heard according to PLAN 'A'.

[Ibn Ezra (see 20:15) takes an opposite approach, maintaining that the fear story is recorded right where it belongs; it took place only AFTER Matan Torah. Therefore, the people heard all Ten Commandments directly from God, as mandated by Plan 'B'.]

A PROOF FROM SEFER DEVARIM

Based on our discussion, we can resolve two adjacent yet seemingly contradictory psukim in the description of Matan Torah in Sefer Devarim:

"Face to face God spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire [PLAN 'B']. I stood BETWEEN God and you at that time to convey God's words to you [PLAN 'A'], for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain..." (see Devarim 5:4-5)

Once again, the Torah incorporates BOTH PLANS in its description of Matan Torah. Evidently, both plans were in fact carried out, as we explained.

Although we have suggested several solutions to problems raised by chapters 19-20, a much more basic question arises: why can't the Torah be more precise? Why does the Torah appear to intentionally obscure the details of such an important event in our history?

AHAVAH and YIRAH

One could suggest that this ambiguity is intentional, as it reflects the dialectic nature of man's encounter with God.

Man, in search of God, constantly faces a certain tension. On the one hand, he must constantly strive to come as close to God as possible ("ahava" - the love of God). On the other hand, he must constantly retain an awareness of God's greatness and recognize his own shortcomings and unworthiness ("yirah" the fear of God). Awed by God's infinity and humbled by his own imperfection, man must keep his distance (see Devarim 5:25-26!).

God's original plan for Matan Torah was 'realistic.' Recognizing man's inability to directly confront the "shechina," God intends to use Moshe as an intermediary (Plan 'A'). Bnei Yisrael, eager to become active covenantal partners, express their desire to come as close as possible to God. They want to encounter the "Shechina" directly, without any mediating agent (Plan 'B').

Could God say NO to this sincere expression of "ahavat

Hashem"? Of course not! Yet, on the other hand, answering YES could place the people in tremendous danger, as they must rise to the highest levels of spirituality to deserve such a direct, unmediated manifestation of God.

While Plan 'B' may reflect a more 'ideal' encounter, Plan 'A' reflects a more realistic one. One could suggest that by presenting the details with such ambiguity, the Torah emphasizes the need to find the proper balance between this realism as well as idealism when serving God.

GOD KNOWS BEST

Although God knows full well that Bnei Yisrael cannot possibly sustain a direct encounter, He nonetheless concedes to their request to hear the Commandments directly. Why?

One could compare this Divine encounter to a parent-child relationship. As a child grows up, there are times when he wishes to do things on his own. Despite his clear incapability to perform the given task, his desire to accomplish is the key to his growth. A wise parent will allow his child to try, even though he knows that the child may fail - for it is better that one recognize his shortcomings on his own, rather than be told by others that he cannot accomplish.

On the other hand, although a child's desire to grow should not be inhibited by an overprotective parent, a responsible parent must also know when to tell his child STOP.

Similarly, God is well aware of Bnei Yisrael's unworthiness to encounter the Divine at the highest level. Nevertheless, He encourages them to aspire to their highest potential. As Bnei Yisrael struggle to maintain the proper balance between "ahava" and "yirah," God must guide and they must strive.

Our study of Parshat Yitro has shown us that what actually happened at Ma'amad Har Sinai remains unclear. However, what 'could have happened' remains man's eternal challenge.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. What would have happened had Bnei Yisrael said NO to God's proposition? The Midrash posits that had Bnei Yisrael rejected the offer, the world would have returned to "tohu va'vahu" (void) - the phrase used in Breishit 1:2 to describe the state prior to Creation! [See Shabbat 88a & Rashi 19:17.] From this Midrash, it appears that Bnei Yisrael had no choice but to accept. Why is the covenant binding, if Am Yisrael had no choice?

Any covenant, by its very nature, requires the willful acceptance of both parties. Therefore, according to "pshat," Bnei Yisrael have "bechira chofshit" to either accept or reject God's proposition. Their willful acceptance makes the covenant at Har Sinai binding for all generations. Thus, had Bnei Yisrael said NO (chas v'shalom), Matan Torah would not have taken place! However, such a possibility is unthinkable, for without Matan Torah there would have been no purpose for Creation. Therefore, because the psukim indicate that Bnei Yisrael had free choice, the Midrash must emphasize that from the perspective of the purpose behind God's Creation, the people had no choice other than accept the Torah.

B. Most m'forshim explain that "b'mshoch ha'yovel hay'mah ya'alu b'Har" (19:13) refers to the long shofar blast that signaled the COMPLETION of the "hitgalut" - an 'all clear' signal.

One could suggest exactly the opposite interpretation, that the long shofar blast indicated the BEGINNING of Matan Torah.

Explain why this interpretation fits nicely into the pshat of 19:11-15, that limiting access to the Mountain is part of the preparation for Matan Torah. [What does an 'all clear' signal have to do with preparation?] Explain as well why this would imply that during Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael should have actually ascended Har Sinai!

Relate this to concept of PLAN 'B' and Bnei Yisrael's request to SEE the "Shchina." Relate to Devarim 5:5 in support of this interpretation. Why would "kol ha'shofar holaych v'chazak m'od" (19:19) be precisely what God meant by "b'mshoch ha'yovel."

Relate to "tachtit ha'har" in 19:17! Use this to explain why the psukim immediately following 19:19 describe God's decision to

LIMIT his "hitgalut" to the TOP of the mountain.

C. Compare the details of 19:20-24 to the Mishkan: i.e. Rosh ha'har = kodesh kdoshim; Har = Mishkan; Tachtit Ha'har = azara, etc. Where can Moshe and Aharon enter? What about the Kohanim and the Am? Explain how this may reflect a bit of a 'compromise' between plans A & B.

D. You are probably familiar with Kabbalat Shabbat. Based on the above shiur, explain why our weekly preparation for Shabbat could be compared to Bnei Yisrael's original preparation for Matan Torah.

Relate this to the verses of "I'cho dodi" and its 'wedding like' imagery!

ADDITIONAL NOTES AND SOURCES

A. WHAT WERE "DIVREI HA'AM" in 19:9:

In the shiur we mentioned Rashi's interpretation (based on the Mechilta), that though the Torah does not state this explicitly, Bnei Yisrael insisted on hearing Hashem's word directly, rather than through a mediator. Moshe then reports this request to Hashem. This is also the implication of the Midrash in Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:2. We will briefly review some of the other interpretations offered to resolve the difficulty in this pasuk:

1. The Abarbanel takes the same general approach as Rashi, that Moshe here tells Hashem of the nation's desire to hear His word directly. However, he claims that this request actually appears in the psukim (whereas according to Rashi the Torah never records the people making this request). The Abarbanel claims that their acceptance of the "proposition" - "everything that Hashem said - we will do" - included their wish to hear Hashem directly. (He appears to interpret the clause, "im shamo'a tishm'u b'koli..." which we generally explain to mean, "if you obey Me faithfully," as, "if you will hear My voice." Thus, when they accepted this proposition, they expressed the desire to hear Hashem's voice as well.

This approach appears more explicitly in the Netziv's He'amek Davar (19:8.) Hashem here tells Moshe that as not everyone is worthy of prophecy, He will speak to Moshe "b'av he'anan," which the Abarbanel explains as a physical voice, as opposed to the usual medium of prophecy, which involves none of the physical senses. (This understanding of "av he'anan" appears as well in the Or Hachayim and Malbim.) The nation will thus hear Hashem's voice without experiencing actual prophecy. Moshe then informs Hashem that the people want to hear Hashem speaking to them, rather than to Moshe. This general approach of the Abarbanel appears to be the intent of the Midrash Lekach Tov on our pasuk.

2. The Ibn Ezra, like Rashi, understands the "divrei ha'am" in this pasuk as referring to something not explicitly mentioned in the psukim. Whereas according to Rashi that something was the nation's desire to hear Hashem directly, the Ibn Ezra points to the skepticism on the part of segments of Bnei Yisrael. He claims that "vayaged Moshe et divrei ha'am" means that Moshe had previously made this comment to Hashem, prior to the beginning of this pasuk. It thus turns out that Hashem speaks to Moshe here in response to his report of the "divrei ha'am." Moshe had reported that some among Bnei Yisrael do not believe that a human being can survive a revelation of Hashem; they therefore doubted the fact that Moshe had been appointed God's messenger. Hashem therefore tells Moshe that Ma'amad Har Sinai will result in "v'gam b'cha ya'aminu l'olam" - Bnei Yisrael's complete trust and faith in Moshe's prophecy.

3. Other Rishonim suggest that when Moshe "returns the nation's words to Hashem" (see 19:8) - he does not actually tell Hashem what the nation said; he merely returned to God with the intention of telling Him. It is only in 19:9 that Moshe actually told this to God (see Ibn Ezra in Shmot 19:23 citing Rav Sa'adya Gaon's claim that just as in his day people could not initiate conversation with a monarch, but must rather wait for the king to begin speaking with them, so did Moshe abstain from addressing God until after God spoke with him.)

This explanation is also suggested by Rav Sa'adya Gaon (as explained by Rabbenu Avraham Ben ha'Rambam, and Rabbi Yaakov of Vienna in "Imrei Noam"), the Ba'alei HaTosfot (as quoted in both Hadar Zekeinim and Da'at Zekeinim), Rabbenu Yosef Bechor Shor, and the Ramban. The Rashbam, too, appears to take this position.

[Two Midrashic interpretations of this pasuk appear in Masechet Shabbat 87a and in the Mechilta on our pasuk.] This discussion surrounding 19:9 directly impacts another issue, one of the central points of our shiur: does Hashem introduce a "new plan" in psukim 10-11, after Moshe "reports the people's words" to Him? According to Rashi, as discussed at length in the shiur, He clearly did. The same is true according to the Abarbanel's approach. However, according to the second and third explanations quoted here, it would seem that Hashem is not describing here an alternate procedure. Indeed, the Ramban (on this pasuk) explains Hashem's original "plan" as having Bnei Yisrael watch as Hashem appears to Moshe. Thus, pasuk 11, in which Hashem says that He will descend "in the view of the nation," does not mark a change of plans. Similarly, in the introduction to his commentary to Shir Hashirim, as well as in his peirush to Shmot 3:12, the Ramban writes that Hashem's promise to Moshe at the burning bush, that Bnei Yisrael will "serve God on this mountain," involved their "beholding His glory face-to-face." This was God's intention all along.

B. PLAN A & PLAN B

In the shiur we worked with Rashi's view - i.e. God originally had planned to speak only to Moshe, as Bnei Yisrael listened in. In response to the nation's request, however, God switches to "plan B," by which He will address the nation directly.

An interesting variation on this theme is suggested by the Malbim. According to his explanation, plan B, which the people requested, involved their hearing directly from Hashem the entire Torah, not only the Ten Commandments. (The Ramban - 20:14 - writes that Bnei Yisrael feared that this was God's plan, though in actuality He had never intended to transmit the entire Torah to them directly.) Hashem initially agrees, but their sense of terror upon hearing the thunder and lightening signaling God's descent onto the mountain (19:16), and their consequent hesitation to go to the mountain ("vayotzei Moshe" - 19:17), reflected their unworthiness for this lengthy exposure to divine revelation. Hashem therefore presented them directly either the Ten Commandments or the first two. Only Moshe received the rest of the mitzvot directly from Hashem.

We should note that in contradistinction to our understanding of Rashi, the Maharal of Prague (in his Gur Aryeh to 19:9) explains Rashi to mean that Moshe simply confirms Hashem's plan. God tells him that He plans on revealing Himself to Moshe as the nation hears, and Moshe replies, "Indeed, this is what the people want." Apparently, the Maharal understands "hinei Anochi ba eilecha b'av he'anan..." to refer to the same level of "giluy Shechina" that actually occurs, such that there was never any change of plans. (According to the Maharal's approach, it turns out that there is no difference between the approaches of Rashi and the Ramban.)

C. "Moshe Yedaber Veha'Elokim Ya'anenu B'kol" (19:19)

As we saw, Rashi, following the Mechilta, understands this pasuk as referring to the procedure of the transmission of the Asseret Hadibrot. We also noted that the Ramban disagrees, claiming that it describes the manner in which the laws in the following psukim - concerning the "limitation" - were presented. This is the general approach of the Abarbanel and Rabbenu Yosef Bechor Shor, as well. The Ibn Ezra claims that the pasuk does not reveal what it is that Moshe says here, but it definitely does not refer to the Asseret Hadibrot. The point of the pasuk is to stress that despite the overpowering sound of the shofar, it did not interfere with Moshe's conversation with Hashem. The Or Hachayim writes that Moshe here spoke words of praise to Hashem, and He would then respond. According to all these views, this pasuk does not refer to Asseret Hadibrot, as Rashi claims.

A particularly interesting interpretation is suggested by the Malbim, Netziv and "Hadrash Veha'yun" (though with some variation). They claim that the sound of the shofar proclaimed, "Moshe yedaber v'ha'Elokim ya'anenu b'kol." In other words, they place a colon after the word "me'od" in this pasuk. The shofar blast thus informed the people that Moshe will serve as the intermediary in between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael in transmitting the Torah.

D. What Did Bnei Yisrael Hear?

The issue of whether or not Bnei Yisrael heard Hashem speak at Ma'amad Har Sinai involves both parshanut and machshava. In terms of parshanut, as we discussed in the shiur, we must accommodate several psukim: in our parasha - 19:9, which, as discussed, implies that Hashem (at least originally) planned to speak to Moshe as the nation listened; 19:19 - "Moshe yedaber v'ha'Elokim ya'anenu b'kol," which, if it refers to the Asseret Hadibrot (a point debated by Rashi and the Ramban, as discussed in the shiur), points to the involvement of both Hashem and Moshe in the transmission of the Commandments to Bnei Yisrael; 20:15-18, where Bnei Yisrael retreat from fear; and the transition from second to third person after the second Commandment. We must also resolve the contradiction noted in the shiur between Devarim 4:4 and 4:5. Devarim 5:19-28 strongly implies that Hashem said all the dibrot to the people and then they asked Moshe to serve as an intermediary.

The philosophical issue involves the question as to whether an entire nation can experience prophecy, or is this reserved only for the spiritual elite who have adequately prepared themselves.

We briefly present here the basic positions that have been taken regarding this issue:

Ibn Ezra (20:1) and Abarbanel (here and in Devarim 5:4) maintain that Bnei Yisrael heard all Ten Commandments. This is also the majority view cited in Pesikta Rabbati 22, and the implication of the Yalkut Shimoni - Shir Hashirim 981. Although in Parshat Vaetchanan Moshe describes himself as having stood in between Hashem and the people serving as an intermediary, the Ibn Ezra there explains that this refers to the situation after the Dibrot, when Moshe conveyed the rest of the Torah to Bnei Yisrael.

It emerges from Rashi's comments to 19:19 and 20:1 that Hashem first uttered, as it were, all Ten Commandments in a single moment and then began repeating them one by one. After the second Dibra, however, Bnei Yisrael became too frightened and asked Moshe to serve as their intermediary. This is the position of the Chzikuni, and is found in an earlier source, as well - Midrash Asseret Hadibrot l'Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan, as cited by Rav Menachem Kasher (Torah Shleima, vol. 16, miluim # 4). In his commentary to Masechet Brachot 12a, however, Rashi seems to imply that Bnei Yisrael in fact heard all Ten Commandments from Hashem.

The Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 2:33) maintains that all Bnei Yisrael heard and understood the first two commandments (without any need for Hashem to repeat them). They then asked Moshe to hear the other commandments on their behalf; he therefore heard the last eight Dibrot and conveyed them to Bnei Yisrael. Though the Rambam claims that this is the view of Chazal, many later writers could not find any sources in Chazal corroborating this view. Rav Kasher, however, notes that this is the implication of the Mechilta as quoted by the Da'at Zekeinim mi'Ba'alei haTosfot (20:1; the Mechilta is cited differently in other sources). The Rambam claims that since one can arrive at the first two Dibrot (the existence and singularity of God) through intellectual engagement, even without divine revelation, Bnei Yisrael understood these Dibrot as clearly as Moshe did. This philosophical point sparked considerable controversy and drew strong criticism from later rishonim and achronim. See Sefer Ha'ikarim 17, the Abarbanel here and in Vaetchanan, Shut ha'Rashba 4:234, and Shnei Luchot Habrit - Masechet Shavuot.

The Ramban (on 20:6), explaining the Mechilta, claims that Bnei Yisrael heard all Ten Commandments but understood only the first two. Moshe then explained to them the final eight. The Sefer Ha'ikarim (ibid.) concurs with this view.