

Shemot 19-20: A Change Of Plans?

Parashat Yitro 5778

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Based on shiur by R' Menachem Leibtag - <https://goo.gl/Dtr1NX>

The Four Part Structure of Shemot 19

- 1) Proposition (1-8)
- 2) Preparation (9-15)
- 3) Revelation (16-19)
- 4) Limitation (20-25)

- Why does the Torah state, "and Moshe told Hashem the words of the nation" (19:9)? We don't see Moshe conveying the message described in 19:8 to the nation. Rather, the Torah skips straight to Moshe sharing what they said with Hashem.

1. Mechilta, Yitro 2 - Quoted by Rashi 19:9 [translation by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein]

ויגד משה את דברי העם אל ד'...רבי אומר, וכי מה אמר המקום למשה לאמר לישראל, או מה אמרו ישראל למשה לאמר למקום, אלא אמרו, רצוננו לשמוע מפי מלכנו, לא דומה שומע מפי פרגוד לשומע מפי המלך. אמר המקום תן להם מה שבקשו, **בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך**. - ד"א, אמרו רצוננו לראות את מלכנו לא דומה שומע לרואה, [א"ל המקום תן להם מה שבקשו] כי ביום השלישי ירד ד' לעיני כל העם על הר סיני.

Rebbi says: Now what did the Lord say to Moses to say to Israel or what did Israel say to Moses to say to the Lord? They said: We want to hear it from our King. There is no comparing hearing it from an attendant to hearing it from the King Himself — whereupon the Lord said (to Moses): Grant them what they ask, (Ibid. 19:9) "so that the people hear, etc." Variantly: They said: We want to see our King. There is no comparing hearing to seeing, viz. (Ibid. 11) "for on the third day the Lord will go down before the eyes of all the people on Mount Sinai."

- 1) Proposition (1-8) - **Plan A**
- 2) Preparation (9-15) - Request for **Plan B**

Can the nation reach the requisite level of spiritual readiness?

- If yes, why wasn't this the plan from the beginning?
- If no, why would Hashem agree to the new plan?

Revelation: Which Plan Does Hashem Follow?

- 19:16** - Sounds, lightning, thick cloud, shofar
 - Nation stays in the camp and must be led out by Moshe
- 19:18** - Smoke, fire, וירד עליו ד'

2. Mechilta, Yitro 4 - Quoted by Rashi 19:19 [translation by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein]

משה ידבר והאלקים יענו בקול. ר' אליעזר אומר, מנין אתה אומר, שאין הקב"ה מדבר, עד שמשה אמר דבר, שכבר קבלו עליהם בניך, לכך נאמר משה ידבר והאלקים יענו בקול. אמר לו ר' עקיבא, בודאי כן הוא הדבר, ומה ת"ל משה ידבר, אלא מלמד שנתן הב"ה כח וגבורה במשה, והיה הקב"ה מסייעו בקולו, ובנעימה שהיה משה שומע בו, היה משמיע את ישראל, לכך נאמר משה ידבר והאלקים יענו בקול.

"Moses spoke and the Lord answered him with a voice": R. Eliezer says: Whence is it derived that the Holy One Blessed be He would not speak (a new commandment) until Moses said to Him that His children had already accepted (the previous commandment)? From "Moses spoke, etc." R. Akiva to R. Eliezer: This goes without saying. What, rather, is the intent of "Moses spoke, etc."? That the Holy One Blessed be He gave power and strength to Moses and assisted him with his voice, so that Moses could speak (the commandment) to Israel in the same manner that he had heard it from Him. Thus, "Moses spoke, G-d answering (i.e., assisting) him with (the) voice."

3. Gem. Makkot 23b

אמר רב המנונא: מאי קרא? יבתורה צוה לנו משה מורשה, תורה בגימטריא שית מאה וחד סרי הוי, אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמענו.

Rav Hamnuna said: What is the verse that alludes to this? It is written: "Moses commanded to us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 34:4). The word Torah, in terms of its numerical value [gimatriyya], is 611, the number of mitzvot that were received and taught by Moses our teacher. In addition, there are two mitzvot: "I am the Lord your G-d" and: "You shall have no other G-ds" (Exodus 20:2, 3), the first two of the Ten Commandments, that we heard from the mouth of the Almighty, for a total of 613.

Restriction - 19:20-22

- Limiting the revelation to the top of the mountain is more reflective of Plan A than the Plan B which should, ostensibly, be in effect.
 - If Hashem has changed back to Plan A, why?
 - If Plan B is still in effect, why is the revelation being limited to the top of Har Sinai?

4. Shemot 20:14-17

5. R' Menachem Leibtag

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 must the Torah obscure the details of such an important event in our history?

Ahava and Yirah

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

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

G-d's original plan for Matan Torah was 'realistic.' Recognizing better than anyone man's inability to directly confront the "Shchinah," G-d intends to use Moshe as an intermediary (Plan A). Bnei Yisrael, eager to become active covenantal partners with G-d, desire to come as close as possible to Har Sinai. They want to encounter the "Shchina" directly, without any mediating agent. Could G-d 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 G-d.

Plan A reflects reality, while Plan B signifies the ideal. One could suggest that by presenting the details with such ambiguity, the Torah emphasizes the need to find the proper balance between realism and idealism when serving G-d.

G-d Knows Best

Although G-d knows full well that Bnei Yisrael cannot possibly sustain a direct encounter with the "Shchinah," 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 will fail. Better one recognize the limits of his capabilities 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. Likewise, G-d 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," G-d 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.