YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

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<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/faith/14faith.htm>

Shiur #14: Moshe as a Prophet – *Torah min Ha-shamayim* part I.

# The Seventh Principle

Rambam's seventh principle is the superiority of Moshe's prophecy over all others’. The text of this principle is long so I will quote bits of it and paraphrase the rest. The Rambam claims that Moshe's prophecy was of a different quality than that of any other prophet, before or since. Moshe

…reached a state of exaltedness beyond humanity such that he perceived the level of sovereignty and became included in all the levels of angels. There remained no veil which he did not pierce, no material hindrance burdened him, and no defect whether small or great mingled itself with him. The imaginative and sensible faculties in his perceptions were stripped from him, his desiderative faculty was still, and he remained pure intellect only.

In short, Moshe, in prophesying, loses ordinary human constraints and becomes like an angel. In this state Moshe becomes pure intellect (for the Rambam the highest state) without interference from imagination, sensory perception of any sort of physical desire. The Rambam lays out four ways in which Moshe's state of prophecy is different from that of all other prophets:

1. God spoke to all other prophets through an intermediary. To Moshe He spoke directly, as it says: "Mouth to mouth did I speak with him" (*Bemidbar* 12:8).[[1]](#footnote-1)
2. Every other prophet received his or her prophecy only while asleep or in a trance. Moshe received prophecy while awake.
3. Every other prophet received prophecy in a vision in a manner that was traumatic and frightening. Only Moshe could receive prophecy without being overcome.
4. No other prophet could initiate when he or she received prophecy. Moshe, on the other hand, could enter into communication with God whenever he wished.

# Why is this a Principle of Faith?

Regardless of the degree to which we accept the Rambam's intellectualist notion of prophecy, it is would be absurd to deny Moshe's greatness as a prophet in light of the verses that the Rambam quotes. As God says to Miriam and Aharon when they complain about Moshe:

And He said: 'Hear now My words: if there is a prophet [among you], I the Lord make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moshe; he is trusted of all My house; with him I speak mouth to mouth, manifestly, and not in riddles; he looks upon the image of the Lord; why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moshe?'[[2]](#footnote-2)

However we unpack the metaphors of these verses, there can be no greater testimony to the greatness of Moshe. The context for that declaration of Moshe's greatness is clear – his brother’s and sister's challenge to his authority. However, we must ask ourselves the following question: why is the fact of Moshe's superiority as a prophet so important that the Rambam thought it needed to be a principle of faith? Why is it so central? The answer presumably relates to the fact that Moshe is not merely a great individual; his prophecy, i.e. the Torah, is the central document of revelation. However, the Rambam lists that the Torah is from heaven (more on this below) as the eighth principle. So why do we need both? In fact, if we take the claims that the Torah is from heaven to mean that it was transmitted word for word from heaven, then the standing of the prophet who received it is less significant – Moshe simply transcribed the Torah and that does not seem to take some special prophetic ability. In order to understand better why the Rambam insists upon treating the superiority of Moshe as a prophet as a basic principle we need to understand a fundamental tension that exists between the Rambam's understanding of prophecy and revelation and his philosophy of law.

# The Nature of Revelation according to the Rambam

For the Rambam, God's revelation at Sinai is a deep mystery, that occurred only once in history and will never occur again. All of the description of the events at Sinai must be interpreted metaphorically since the notion of God "appearing" or manifesting Himself on the mountain is obviously impossible given God's transcendent nature. It is clear to the Rambam that it is not possible that the children of Israel heard the ten commandments spoken by God. At most they heard the first two, and even in that regard, the Rambam seems to think that they really just heard a voice and only with the help of Moshe were they able to give it meaning.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The basic problem of revelation for the Rambam is the problem of divine speech. It is nonsensical to say that God spoke with someone in the way that one person speaks to another. Speech is irrelevant to the incorporeal, transcendent God and for that reason any communication between God and human beings must involve that person somehow transcending his or her corporeal, material reality and entering into a higher reality. At the highest level of this reality, communication is possible not merely through visions but through the analog of speech. But communication on a level that is equivalent to explicit speech is unique to Moshe – no other prophet achieved the equivalent level of prophecy.

The concept of *Torah min ha-shamayim* (Torah from heaven) as direct dictation of the divine word can thus be understood as a metaphor for this highest level of prophecy in which “divine overflow” is received at a level of clarity that allows for it to be “translated” through the medium of Moshe and his recording it, into explicit language. That is what it means that these are the explicit words of God.

# The Rambam's Positivist Philosophy of Law[[4]](#footnote-4) and *Torah min Ha-shamayim*

The understanding of revelation described above still does not explain why we need two principles – the superiority of Moshe as a prophet and *Torah min ha-shamayim*. In order to understand that, we need to understand how the Rambam understands the process of law.

For the Rambam, the legitimacy of a legal rule or legal decision is a function of its relationship to the foundational law. That is to say, every law draws its normative force from its source, and the correct law is always either a law that was explicitly established by the lawgiver or one that can be derived from one such law. Therefore there is only one correct answer to any legal question. The legal system can tolerate divergences in legal interpretation, or in *halakhic* terminology, *machloket*, only on the pragmatic level: we might allow for differences of opinion in our inability to conclusively decide some question but that tolerance should not lead us to believe that both of them are true.

Now we can begin to understand why for the Rambam the superiority of the prophecy of Moshe is a distinct principle from *Torah min ha-shamayim*. *Torah min ha-shamayim* is the ground, the foundation. All the normative force of the Halakha depends upon the Torah being Divine Law and the legitimacy of the Rabbinic method of deriving law from verses depends upon the text of the Written Torah being directly given by God.[[5]](#footnote-5) *Torah min ha-shamayim* serves this role if we understand that God gave the Torah as a written text (accompanied by oral explanation). But that is an absurdity according to the Rambam. God speaking (or dictating) in human language at a particular time and place would contradict the most fundamental aspects of His essence. The seventh principle, about the prophecy of Moshe, provides the way to get out of the dilemma. Moshe the prophet, in his ability to break through his human limitations and access a higher level of existence, can act as a medium of the Divine message. Metaphors such as God dictating the Torah to Moshe are appropriate ways to capture Moshe's success as a medium of this sort and it is this success that grounds the authority of the revelation at Sinai.

Moshe's prophecy must be superior to all others because the Torah given at Sinai must be the foundation of revealed law. The Torah plays this role within Halakha – laws are either *de-orayta* – laws directly grounded in the Torah – or *de-rabbanan* – laws established by the Rabbis with an authority (according to the Rambam) explicitly granted to them in the Torah.[[6]](#footnote-6) The authority of the whole system depends upon the Torah being the word of God. And it is the word of God, or the closest thing possible to being the literal word of God, because Moshe is the supreme prophet, and divine communication through him is the ultimate possible manifestation of divine communication. The Torah is thus truly *Torat Moshe*, the Mosaic Law, for it could not exist without Moshe's unique ability to convey the abstract Divine message in human language. This prophecy must be unassailable, and not subject to revision by the prophecies of future prophets because the Halakha must be unassailable and not subject to being pulled hither and thither by future prophecies.

# Conclusion

Both the Rambam's understanding of the nature of revelation and his understanding of the halakhic system are controversial, and thus it comes as no surprise that other Jewish philosophers have not seen a need to distinguish between the principle of *Torah min ha-shamayim* and Moshe's prophecy.

For many, the idea of direct revelation, of God speaking, is not such an impossibility and thus Moshe's role is more that of a teacher of the Torah than as its prophetic medium. Yet if we insist on understand the giving of the Torah in such literal terms, that God simply spoke, first to all at Sinai and then to Moshe in subsequently giving the rest of the Torah, something is also lost. It is possible to understand the miracle of revelation, of God breaking through into history in order to instruct his people, in overly simplistic terms. Even if the Rambam's conception of prophecy does not speak to us, there is a lot of appeal to the notion that the event of revelation was not a simple dictation. Otherwise we run the risk of what Rav Kook called "faith that is like heresy" instead of pursuing what he called the "heresy that is like faith."[[7]](#footnote-7) The sad rejection of *Torah min ha-shamayim* by many groups within the Jewish people in the last two hundred years has many reasons, including a desire not to be bound by Halakha. But at least for some, it might also be connected to a perceived shallowness in the conception of God's revelation as simple dictation. If we follow the Rambam, dictation is an apt metaphor but not a literal description of the revelation.

As opposed to the Rambam, I do not have a theoretical model by the means of which to understand the mysteries of prophecy and revelation, of human interaction and communication with God. The Rambam's intellectualist model is difficult to embrace wholeheartedly today. It is of great importance, nonetheless, not to lock ourselves into an overly simplistic understanding of these matters. It is the greatest of hubris to suppose that an event as momentous as the revelation at Sinai can be fully comprehended. There is still, of course, more to say about *Torah min ha-shamayim*, including the alternatives to the Rambam’s understanding of it and I will turn to that in the next *shiur*.

1. It is worth noting that such "speech" must not be understood literally. For the Rambam, prophetic communication is above mere material sound making. Rather "mouth to mouth" speech is a metaphor for a more direct form of spiritual communication than that achieved by other prophets. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bemidbar* 12:6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Guide of the Perplexed* part II chapter 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Space does not permit me to defend the interpretation of the Rambam's understanding of Halakha. This topic has been written about by many, mostly in Hebrew. What I have written about below is based mostly on my own understanding, especially of the Rambam's *Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishna*, *Shorashim of Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Introduction to the Mishneh Torah*, and *Hilkhot Mamrim*, though it is certainly influenced by writers on the subject such as Isadore Twersky, Gerald Blidstein, Moshe Halbertal, Avi Sagie, David Henshke and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I will discuss these themes more fully in the next *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Rambam bases the authority of Rabbinic decrees on the verse, "… do not diverge from that which they instruct you, right or left" (*Devarim* 17:11). See *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *shoresh* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Shemoneh Kevatzim* I: 533 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)