

Parashat Vaetchanan



Closeness to and Fear of God

- Which set of Commandments did the Israelites hear from God's mouth?
- When did the Israelites ask Moses to transmit God's word rather than have God speak to them directly?
- Why did they become afraid of the experience of revelation after they had already withstood it?

A. Introduction

The
unique
revelation
to all of
Israel

In *Parashat Vaetchanan*, Moses goes back and recounts the Convocation at Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy, chapter 5). This convocation was of great power and influence upon the Jewish nation, the climax of which is God revealing Himself to the entire nation.

Generally, God does not reveal himself to humans and does not speak to them. The only communication between God and His creations is accomplished by prophecy, and only unique people merit this. Prophecy is a powerful experience which is difficult to withstand.¹ The only person who reached the high

1 In a number of places, prophecy is described as enervating for the prophet, e.g. Ezekiel 1:28-2:2 and Jeremiah 20:9:

...הוא מראה דמות קבֹוד ה' וְאִרְאָה וְאֶפְלַל עַל פְּנֵי וְאִשְׁמַע קוֹל מְדַבֵּר: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם עֲמוּד עַל כַּגְלִיד וְאֶנְדַּבֵּר אִתְּךָ: וַתָּבֵא בִי רוּחַ בְּאִשְׁרֵי דְבַר אֱלֹהֵי וַתַּעֲמִדְנִי עַל כַּגְלִי וְאִשְׁמַע אֶת מְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהֵי.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the

level of “With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even clearly, and not in dark sayings; and the form of the LORD shall he behold” (Number 12:8) was Moses himself. At the Convocation at Sinai, all of Israel, even the simplest person, apprehended the unique revelation of God.²

**Israel’s
fear of rev-
elation**

This experience is a great privilege, but it is difficult to withstand, as Moses describes in Deuteronomy 5:

<p>And it came to pass, when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, (for the mountain did burn with fire,) that you came near unto me, even all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; And you said, Behold, the LORD our God has showed us his glory and his greatness,</p>	<p>וַיְהִי כְשִׁמְעֵכֶם אֶת הַקּוֹל מִתּוֹךְ הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַהֲרַר בְּעַר בְּאִשׁ וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי כָּל רְאֵשֵׁי שְׁבֵטֵיכֶם וְזִקְנֵיכֶם: וַתֹּאמְרוּ הוּא ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֵת כְּבוֹדוֹ וְאֵת גְּדֻלוֹ</p>
---	---

LORD. And when I saw it, **I fell upon my face**, and I heard a voice of one that spoke. And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak unto you. And the Spirit entered into me when he spoke unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spoke unto me.

וַהֲרַר בְּלִבִּי בְּאִשׁ בְּעֵרַת עֵצִר בְּעֵצְמוֹתַי וְנִלְאִיתִי כִּלְכֵּל וְלֹא אֹכֵל.

But his word was in my heart **as a burning fire** shut up in my bones, and **I was weary from holding it back, and I could not.**

2 Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel (*Commentary to Exodus*, p. 175), believes that the Israelites experienced a lower level of prophecy – sensory prophecy. According to Maimonides (*Guide of the Perplexed* II, 33) not all of Israel reached a level of prophecy, while the 15th-century R. Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov in his *Sermons* (29a) argues with Maimonides and claims that all of Israel received prophecy at Sinai. (R. Eliezer Ashkenazi in his book *Maaseh Hashem, Maasei Torah*, VI, holds the same position.)

and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God does talk with man, and he lives. Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us: if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, then we shall die. 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? Go you near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say: and speak you unto us all that the LORD our God shall speak unto you; and we will hear it, and do it.

A parallel description appears in the Book of Exodus, chapter 20, after the convocation itself:

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they moved, and stood far off. And they said unto Moses, Speak you with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

וְאֵת קִלּוֹ שְׁמֵעֵנוּ מִתּוֹךְ
הָאֵשׁ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי
יְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם
וְחָי: וְעַתָּה לָּמָּה נָמוּת כִּי
תֹאכְלֵנוּ הָאֵשׁ הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת
אִם יִסָּפִים אֲנַחְנוּ לְשָׁמֹעַ
אֶת קוֹל ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ עוֹד
וּמָתָנוּ: כִּי מִי כָּל בָּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר
שָׁמַע קוֹל אֱ-לֹהִים חַיִּים
מִדְּבַר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כְּמוֹנוּ
וְחָי: קִרְבַּ אֶתְּהָ וּשְׁמַע אֶת
כָּל אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ
וְאֶת תְּדַבֵּר אֵלֵינוּ אֶת כָּל
אֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ
אֵלֶיךָ וְשָׁמֵעֵנוּ וְעָשִׂינוּ.

וְכָל הָעָם רָאִים אֶת הַקּוֹלֹת
וְאֵת הַלְפִידִם וְאֵת קוֹל
הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֵת הַהַר עֹשֵׂן וַיִּרְא
הָעָם וַיָּנֻעוּ וַיַּעֲמִדוּ מֵרָחֵק:
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֵתְּהָ
עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל יְדַבֵּר
עִמָּנוּ אֱ-לֹהִים פֶּן נָמוּת.

The Israelites felt that the power of the revelation was beyond them and were concerned that if they continued to hear God's voice, they would be likely to die. Because of this, they requested that Moses act as their intermediary, transmitting God's word to them.

B. The Timing of the Request

Before the Ten Commandments

According to Nahmanides,³ even before the Ten Commandments, the Jews made the request to have an intermediary (Moses), but God did not grant this, and they were compelled to hear the Ten Commandments from God's mouth.

After the Ten Commandments

However, most commentators⁴ do not agree with Nahmanides. According to them, we should not change the order of the verses without a sufficient reason, and therefore we should say that the Israelites' request was only after the Ten Commandments; thus, it relates to the other laws and rules that God wanted to tell Israel subsequently. According to this explanation, Israel heard directly from God all of the

3 He writes this in his commentary to Exodus 20. We will deal with this at length below.

4 See ibn Ezra, 20:16, and see Abarbanel to Exodus 20:

תמהתי מהרמב"ן שכתב שהיה כל זה קודם עשרת הדיברות, ומבלי הכרח יעוות הכתובים לשום המאוחר קודם. אבל שאר המפרשים לא אמרו כן אלא שאחר ששמעו ישראל עשרת הדיברות היה כל זה...

I am astounded by Nahmanides, who writes that this was all before the Ten Commandments; for no compelling reason, this twists the verses to put the later event earlier. The other commentators, however, do not say this, but rather that after the Israelites heard the Ten Commandments, all of this occurred.

Ten Commandments, and only the rest were from Moses

In the
Midst of
the Ten
Command-
ments

The roots of this exegetical dispute are in a Tannaitic dispute in the Midrash, in which we find a third, intermediate view (*Pesikta Rabbati [Ish Shalom]*, ch. 22, s.v. *Kamma*):

How many Commandments did Israel hear from the mouth of the Almighty?

Rabbi Joshua [ben Levi] says, “**Two Commandments.**” But the Rabbis say, “**All of the Commandments** were heard by Israel from the mouth of the Almighty.” After all the Commandments, what is written? “And they said unto Moses, Speak you with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”

How does R. Joshua ben Levi respond? He may posit that there is no chronological order in the Torah; or I might say that after two or three Commandments, “they said unto Moses, Speak you with us,” etc.

Said R. Azariah, R. Judah of the house of R. Simeon and R.

כמה דברות שמעו ישראל מפי הגבורה?

רבי יהושע [בן לוי] אומר:

שתי דברות. ורבנין אמרין:

כל הדברות שמעו ישראל

מפי הגבורה. אחר כל

הדברות מה כתב? “ויאמרו

אל משה דבר אתה עמנו

ונשמעה ואל ידבר עמנו

א-להים פן נמות” (שמות

כ', טז).

מה ענה לה ר' יהושע בן

לוי? – פליג שאין מוקדם

ומאוחר בתורה, או אני

אומר אחר שנים ושלשה

דברות “ויאמרו אל משה

דבר אתה עמנו” וגו’.

אמר ר' עזריה ור' יהודה

ביר' שמעון ור' שבי ר'

Simeon of the house of R. Joshua ben Levi (Deuteronomy 33:4): “Moses commanded us a law (torah), even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.” The Torah in its entirety includes six hundred and thirteen mitzvot, but the word “torah” only adds up to six hundred and eleven. Hence, Moses gave us six hundred and eleven mitzvot, but “I [am the LORD your God]” and “You shall have no [other gods before me] were not given to us by Moses.

יהושע בן לוי: “תורה צוה לנו משה מרשה קהילת יעקב” (דברים ל”ג, ד). כל התורה כולה שש מאות וי”ג מצות, ומניין “תורה” אינו עולה אלא שש מאות ואחת עשרה. תרי”א מצות דבר עמנו משה, “אנכי” ו”לא יהיה לך” לא דבר עמנו משה.

According to R. Joshua ben Levi, after the Israelites heard two Commandments from God, they felt that they were not capable of continuing to listen, and then they asked Moses to be their intermediary.

The first set is in first person.

It appears that the basis for this exegetical approach is that the first two Commandments are stated in the first person. Thus, we find in the beginning of Exodus 20:

I **am** the LORD your God, I **who** have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods **before me**. You shall not make unto yourself any graven image,

אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פְּנֵי: לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם

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. You shall not bow down yourself to them, nor serve them: **for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.**

ממעל וּמֵאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ
 מִתַּחַת וּמֵאֲשֶׁר בְּמִיִּם
 מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: לֹא
 תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם
 וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי
 אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ
 אֵל קַנָּא פֶקֶד עֵוֹן
 אָבֹת עַל בָּנִים עַל
 שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל רְבָעִים
 לְשֹׂנְאָי: וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד
 לְאֲלֹפִים לְאַהֲבֵי
 וְלִשְׁמֵרֵי מִצְוֹתַי.

The second set is in third person.

On the other hand, as the chapter continues, we find the third person:

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... But the seventh day is the Sabbath of **the LORD your God**... For in six days **the LORD made** heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day: **therefore the LORD blessed** the Sabbath day, and hallowed it. Honor your father and your mother: that your days may be long upon the land which **the LORD your God gives you.**

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת שֵׁם ה'
 אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקָה
 ה' אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא אֶת שְׁמוֹ
 לְשׁוּא... יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת
 לַה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ... כִּי יִשְׁׁשַׁת
 יָמִים עָשָׂה ה' אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם
 וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ אֶת הַיָּם וְאֶת
 כָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם
 הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל כֵּן בֵּרַךְ ה' אֶת
 יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ: כִּבְד
 אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ לְמַעַן
 יָאָרְכּוּן יְמֵיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה
 אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ.

Even the verses which express the stress and concern that the Israelites have about hearing the voice of God (“Now therefore why should we die? For **this** great fire will consume us”) appear to indicate that they are referring to the Commandments in this passage, not a generic issue of avoiding convocations such as this in the future, as Nahmanides explains.

**Retreating
and re-
turning**

An additional Midrashic source (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro, Ba-chodesh* 9) expresses in a unique way Israel’s hesitation about hearing God’s word.

“And when the people saw it, they moved, and stood far off” – at a distance of twelve miles; this tells us that Israel would retreat twelve miles and then advance twelve miles, amounting to twenty-four miles for each and every Commandment; thus, on that day, they walked two hundred and forty miles. At that time, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the ministering angels, “Lead and escort your brothers,” as it says (Psalms 68), “The kings of hosts, they march and they march” – “they march” walking, “they march” returning. Moreover, not only

“וירא העם וינעו ויעמדו מרחוק” (שמות כ’, יד) – חזן משנים עשר מיל; מגיד שהיו ישראל נרתעים לאחוריהם שנים עשר מיל וחוזרין לפניהם שנים עשר מיל, הרי עשרים וארבעה מיל על כל דיבור ודיבור, נמצאו מהלכים באותו היום מאתים וארבעים מיל. באותה שעה אמר הקב”ה למלאכי השרת ‘דדו וסייעו את אחיכם’, שנאמר: “מלכי צבאות ידודון ידודון” (תהלים ס”ח); “ידודון” בהליכה, ו“ידודון” בחזרה. ולא מלאכי השרת בלבד,

the ministering angels, but even Holy One, Blessed be He did so, as it says, “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand does embrace me” (Song of Songs 2).

According to this source, every statement of God causes Israel to retreat and flee from the place, but God does not let them do so, and His angels escort them back each time.

If so, the great fear of the power of God’s revelation causes the Israelites to distance themselves at the time of the convocation itself; according to R. Joshua ben Levi, at the time of the convocation, God gives Israel a pass, giving the final eight Commandments through Moses, indirectly.⁵

5 Maimonides (*Guide of the Perplexed* II, 33, translated by Michael Schwarz), explains that the Ten Commandments were given in one long sound, all of which was heard by Israel. However, they succeeded in understanding the first two commandments alone, and the other commandments required Moses to translate them. This great sound scared the Israelites, and they asked Moses to be their intermediary.

ברור לי שבמעמד הר סיני לא כל מה שהגיע אל משה הגיע אל כלל ישראל, אלא הפנייה היתה אל משה לבדו, לכן היתה הפנייה בעשור הדיברות כולה בלשון יחיד נוכח. והוא, עליו השלום, יורד אל תחתית ההר ומודיע לאנשים את אשר שמעו. לשון התורה: אנכי עמד בין ה' וביניכם בעת ההיא להגיד לכם את דבר ה' (דברים ה', ה). ...שהפנייה היתה אליו, בעוד הם שומעים את הקול הגדול, אך לא את פירוט הדיבור. ...ומשה הוא אשר היה שומע את הדיבור ומוסרו להם. ...אולם לחכמים גם דברים מפורשים בכמה מקומות במדרשות וגם בתלמוד והוא אומרם: “אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמעום”. הכוונה שהם הגיעו אליהם כשם שהגיעו אל משה רבנו, ולא משה רבנו הביאם להם. כי שני העיקרים האלה, כלומר, מציאות האלוה והיותו אחד, מושגים בעיון האנושי. כל מה שידוע בהוכחה מופתית – דין הנביא ודין כל מי שידוע זאת שווה לגביו, ללא יתרון של זה על זה, כי שני עיקרים אלה לא מצד הנבואה בלבד נודעו... היוצא מן הכתובים ומדברי החכמים הוא שפל ישראל לא שמעו במעמד הזה אלא קול אחד בלבד פעם אחת והוא הקול אשר ממנו השיגו משה וכל ישראל:

C. What Concerned the Israelites?

Why is there a difference between the first set and the second set of Ten Commandments? Why, according to R. Joshua b. Levi's view, did the people suddenly

...
"אנכי" ו"לא יהיה לך".
משה השמיע להם זאת בדבריו בפירוט הגאים נשמעים...
ולאחר שמיעת אותו קול ראשון אירע מה שהוזכר, שהם נבהלו מן הדבר ופחדו מאוד... אז
יצא הוא – המרומם מכל ילוד – בשנית וקיבל את יתר הדיברות אחד אחד, ירד לתחתית ההר
והשמיעם להם באותו מעמד גדול...

IT is clear to me that what Moses experienced at the revelation on Mount Sinai was different from that which was experienced by all the other Israelites, for Moses alone was addressed by God, and for this reason the second person singular is used in the Ten Commandments; Moses then went down to the foot of the mount and told his fellow-men what he had heard. Comp., "I stood between the Lord and you at that time to tell you the word of the Lord" (Deut. v. 5)... God spoke to Moses, and the people only heard the mighty sound, not distinct words... It was only Moses that heard the words, and he reported them to the people... There is, however, an opinion of our Sages frequently expressed in the Midrashim, and found also in the Talmud, to this effect: The Israelites heard the first and the second commandments from God, i.e., they learnt the truth of the principles contained in these two commandments in the same manner as Moses, and not through Moses. For these two principles, the existence of God and His Unity, can be arrived at by means of reasoning, and whatever can be established by proof is known by the prophet in the same way as by any other person; he has no advantage in this respect. These two principles were not known through prophecy alone... We infer from Scripture as well as from the words of our Sages that the Israelites heard on that occasion a certain sound which Moses understood to proclaim the first two commandments, and through Moses all other Israelites learnt them when he in intelligible sounds repeated them to the people...

Then Moses, the most distinguished of all mankind, came the second time, received successively the other commandments, and came down to the foot of the mountain to proclaim them to the people at that great convocation...

request after the first two Commandments not to hear the rest? They had just witnessed that they could withstand the experience, as they themselves say (Deuteronomy 5): “We have seen this day that God does talk with man, and he lives.”

**Their souls
flew away.**

The *Midrash Rabba (Shemot [Vilna] 29:4)* states:

R. Levi said: “Two things Israel asked from the Holy One, Blessed be He: to see His glory and to hear His voice. They saw His glory and heard His voice, as it says, ‘Behold, the LORD our God has showed us his glory and his greatness,’ and it says, ‘and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire.’ They had no power to stand, because when they arrived at Sinai and He was revealed to them, **their souls flew away** due to His speech, as it says (Song of Songs 5), ‘My soul departed when he spoke.’ However, **the Torah asked compassion for them** from the Holy One, Blessed be He: ‘Is there a king who marries off his daughter while executing the members of his household?! Shall all the world rejoice while your children lie dead?!’

א”ר לוי: שני דברים שאלו ישראל מלפני הקב”ה: שיראו כבודו, וישמעו קולו. והיו רואין את כבודו ושומעין את קולו, שנאמר: “ותאמרו הן הראנו ה’ א-להינו את כבודו ואת גדלו” (דברים ה’, כא), וכתוב “ואת קולו שמענו מתוך האש” (שם). ולא היה בהם כח לעמוד, שכיון שבאו לסיני ונגלה להם פרחו נשמתם על שדבר עמהם שנאמר “נפשי יצאה בדברו” (שיר השירים ה’). אבל התורה בקשה עליהם רחמים מלפני הקב”ה: יש מלך משיא בתו והורג אנשי ביתו?! כל העולם כולו שמחים ובניך מתים?!

Immediately, **their souls returned**, as it says, “The law of God is perfect; it restores the soul’ (Psalms 19).”

According to this, Israel experienced not only revelation, but the death associated with intimacy with the Divine.⁶ In other words, their fear of death is not imaginary, but real – they have already experienced it personally. The Jewish people know that there is no possibility of remaining alive amidst such an intimate divine revelation, and they are concerned that the miracle which resuscitated them will not recur.

What was so special about the Convocation at Sinai that the Jewish people merited to survive it?

In the merit of receiving the Torah

According to the Midrash, it indeed appears that a human being cannot remain alive after such a powerful encounter as this, and the reason that Israel survived was a special act of compassion. This was in the merit of the Torah that the Jewish people received and in order to prevent the universal joy from being spoiled.

In the merit of their segregation

The Vilna Gaon⁷ explains that the Israelites were all

- 6 Drawing too close to the Divine Presence, without proper preparation, can cause death, as in the case of Nadab and Abihu who “drew close to the LORD and they died” (Lev. 16:1). Similarly, Uzzah dies (II Samuel, ch. 6) because he sends his hand towards the Ark of the Covenant.

- 7 His words are cited in *Beur La-talmid*:

יש חמש מדרגות באדם: אדם, בן אדם, איש, גבר, אנוש. והחשוב שבמעלות הוא אדם. על כן אמרו: “היום הזה ראינו כי ידבר א-להים את האדם וחי”, שבמדרגת האדם יכול להיות שידבר הקדוש ברוך הוא עמו וחי, כמו שאנו היום במדרגת האדם, שעשינו שלושה ימים פרישה

on a unique level, due to the merit of the segregation and separation which preceded the convocation, and therefore they were able to withstand it. However, they understand that according to the regular ways, they would not be capable of being constantly secluded in order to experience such a revelation.

God brought them to a unique level.

The Meshekh Chokhma (Deuteronomy 5) believes that at the time of the Convocation at Sinai they were at a unique level, but this was a level to which God brought them, and they did not arrive at it themselves:

Our physical substance is a barrier, covering the soul... But when they stood at Horeb and heard God's voice, the veil of physicality was removed and they became spiritual, and this is what the Sages mean when they say that their souls departed... The point of human

החומר הוא מחיצה המבדלת הסוכך על הנפש... אבל בעמידתם בחורב ובשמעם קול ה' הוסר מסווה החומר ונעשו רוחניים, וזה מה שאמרו חז"ל שיצאה נשמתם... והנה התכלית האנושי

מכל העניינים, אבל "כי מי כל בשר..." מי יכול להיות פרוש כל ימיו? וכשהוא "בשר", איך יוכל לסבול שידבר עמו הקדוש ברוך הוא וחי? על כן אמרו: "קרב אתה..." שאתה נשאר בפרישות כל ימך, כמו שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא עליו: "ואתה פה עמוד עמדי".

There are five terms for man: "man" "son of man," "person," "human" and "mortal." "Man" (*adam*) is the most distinguished of these. Therefore when they said, "We have seen this day that God does talk with man, and he lives," that when one reaches the level of *adam*, God may speak with him and he may live, as we are today at the level of *adam*, after three days of separation from all matters, but "who is there of all flesh"—who can be separated for all his days? As he is flesh, how can he stand for God to speak with him and live? Therefore, they said, "Go you near," for you remain separated all your days, as God said about him, "But as for you, stand you here by me."

experience is that the soul, though covered by physical substance, flies like an eagle to the goal of perfection and the true purpose. This is true as long as Israel believes in God... Therefore, He showed them that God may speak with man, and that Moses' prophecy is true...

כי הנפש תהיה סכוכה בחומר, ובכל זאת תעוף כנשר אל מטרת השלמות והתכלית האמיתית. אך שיאמינו ישראל בה'... לכן הראה להם כי ידבר א-להים את האדם ונבואת משה אמת...

The Meshekh Chokhma indicates that the true level of the nation at that time was insufficient for such a revelation, but He wanted to strengthen their faith via this unique revelation in order to strengthen their faith and confirm for them the veracity of prophecy. Therefore, God raised them up to a unique level for this, a level at which the physical veil was lifted and they became wholly spiritual.⁸ This, in his view, is the meaning of their souls' flight in Midrashic terminology; they did not truly die, but rather they became fully spiritual. This is not normal existence in the physical world, and it may be described as a sort of death. The Israelites knew that they could not experience this revelation when they were still living in the physical world, and that is why they were concerned.

8 R. Moses Albelda (16th c.) in *Olat Tamid* (144b) writes this, but he adds the explanation that revelation can also happen naturally, see *ibid*. It may be that this also arises from the words of the Talmud (*Shabbat* 146a), which states that “the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness departed.” According to the Zohar (III, 97b) their lustfulness departed with the dew; see *Yad Yosef* (Rabbi Joseph Zarfati) 137b.

They knew that they were not on the appropriate level.

In his commentary to Exodus 20, the Meshekh Chokhma cites an additional idea.

Had they been without any envy or any division in their hearts from each other; had the entire congregation been tied together with one heart and one soul, so that they were all like one person, they would have been fit to receive the whole Torah as was Moses. However, since they were not all tied together with one heart, each one individually had not reached the perfection necessary to receive the Torah. What they saw and heard of the Commandments was in order to confirm their faith, being a temporary measure. Now, spiritual fire produces no smoke... And Rabbi Chanina says (*Bava Batra 75a*) that anyone who is envious towards scholars, i.e., that he begrudges them their high status, his eyes will be filled with smoke in the World to Come. Thus, once they saw “the mountain smoking,”

אם היה בלא שום קנאה ושום פירוד לבבות זה מזה, רק כל העדה כולם קשורים בלב ונפש אחד, הלא היו כולם איש אחד, והיו ראויים לקבל כל התורה כמשה. אבל כיוון שלא היו קשורים בלבב אחד, אם כן כל אחד בפרט לא הגיע לשלמות כזה לקבל התורה. ומה שראו ושמעו בדברות היה כדי לאמת האמונה בלבם, וכמו הוראת שעה. והנה האש הרוחני אין אצלו שום עשן... ואמר ר' חנינא שכל מי שעניו צרות בעולם הזה בתלמידי חכמים שיש בו קנאה על מעלתם מתמלאות עיניו עשן לעולם הבא. וכיוון שראו “את ההר עשן”, התבוננו כי לבם לא טהרה מקנאה ואינם ראויים לראות כבוד א-להי באור

they understood that their hearts were not pure of envy and they were not fit to see the glory of God clearly and brightly, but only in smoke. Therefore “they moved, and stood far off,” because they understood that they were far off from the sublime perfection of all being like one person to receive the Commandments from God, Blessed be He, and therefore they said to Moses, “Speak you with us...”

בהיר, רק יש עשן, לכן –
“וינועו ויעמדו מרחוק”,
שהתבוננו שהם רחוקים
מהשלמות המופלגת
להיות כולם בכללות
איש אחד פרטי ולקבל
הדברות מה’ יתברך, לכן
אמרו למשה “דבר אתה
עמנו”...

According to what the Meshekh Chokhma says here, the Jews understood that this was a unique encounter, for the sake of which God let them live and experience this revelation. **On their own merits, they were not worthy, since they were not sufficiently united and pure of heart. They were still far from the perfection required for an encounter such as this. Therefore, they knew that if they would experience such a revelation, they would likely die.**

According to the Meshekh Chokhma in both passages, the request of the people is not only an expression of fear, but **recognition of the power of God’s revelation and their own low level, which was insufficient to survive such a potent experience.**⁹

9 Why should Israel have to tell this to God, when He knows this? Apparently, God in all cases did not intend to consistently and

“They
have said
well all
that they
have
spoken.”

The Israelites’ realization of the gap between their current level and the level of perfection appropriate for the revelation of God’s glory was proper and fitting, and perhaps this is the conclusion God wanted them to reach as a result of the revelation itself. Therefore, God responds in a very positive manner (in the end of Deuteronomy 5):

And the LORD heard the voice of your words, when you spoke unto me; and the LORD said unto me, I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto you: they have well said all that they have spoken. O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever! Go say to them, Get you into your tents again. But as for you, stand you here by me, and I will speak unto you all the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which you shall teach them...

וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קוֹל דְּבָרֵיכֶם
בְּדַבְרְכֶם אֵלַי וַיֹּאמֶר ה'
אֵלַי שְׁמַעְתִּי אֶת קוֹל דְּבָרֵי
הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרוּ אֵלַיךְ
הִיטִיבוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרוּ:
מִי יִתֵּן וְהָיָה לְכִבְּכֶם זֶה
לְהֶם לִירְאָה אֹתִי וְלִשְׁמֹר
אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי כָּל הַיָּמִים
לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לָהֶם וְלְבָנֵיהֶם
לְעֹלָם: לָךְ אָמַר לָהֶם שׁוּבוּ
לְכֶם לְאֹהֲלֵיכֶם: וְאֵתָה
פֹּה עֹמֵד עִמּוֹדֵי וְאֵדְבָרָה
אֵלַיךְ אֵת כָּל הַמִּצְוָה
וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר
תְּלַמְּדוּם...

permanently appear to them, but Israel did not know God’s intent. Their words express the internal recognition that they are not fit for such revelation, because of their low level.

D. The People's Request, in Exodus and Deuteronomy

The Convocation at Sinai, which follows the Exodus from Egypt, appears twice in the Torah: in *Parashat Yitro* (Exodus 20) and in *Parashat Vaetchanan* (Deuteronomy 5). In the latter, Moses gives his version of the events, including the people's request for him to be their intermediary.

Ostensibly, the request should be the same, but we can clearly see differences between the two passages. In Exodus, the atmosphere is one of distance and terror, while in Deuteronomy, the atmosphere is positive, a scene of love.

Let us consider the differences.

Closeness
and dis-
tance

A. According to *Parashat Yitro*, when the people see the thunder and lightning, before God begins speaking, they start to distance themselves: "then the nation saw and moved back and stood at a **distance**." On the other hand, in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, the passage opens with the people's request of Moses: "Go you near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say."

Putting
the reason
first

B. In *Parashat Yitro*, the request "Speak you with us" comes first, and only then do we have the reason: "lest we die." On the other hand, in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, the Torah starts with the description of the experience, "Behold, the LORD our God has showed us his glory and his greatness," afterwards,

we find the reason for the request, “Now therefore why should we die?” Only then do we have the actual appeal: “Go you near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say.”

Hearing or
seeing

C. In *Parashat Yitro*, the Torah stresses the visual dimension, referring to sight three times and hearing only once. On the other hand, in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, the Torah stresses specifically the sounds, referring to hearing eight times, speaking six times and sound six times! The speaking and listening are not one-way: Israel both hears and speaks to God, and vice versa.

The name
of God

D. In *Parashat Yitro*, we speak of “God,” while in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, He is “the LORD our God,” which indicates unique intimacy.

Hearing
and doing

E. In *Parashat Yitro*, the Jews approach in order to hear God, but in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, this is only an intermediate step: “and we will hear it, and do it.”

The
response

F. In *Parashat Yitro*, the Torah stresses how Moses initially rejects Israel’s request and tries to convince them not to be afraid and to withstand the test: “Fear not: for God has come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that you sin not.” However, the people do not accept this. On the other hand, in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, the Torah stresses that God accepts this good idea of the people.

The
initiator

G. In *Parashat Yitro*, the request to stand at a distance

is the people's initiative; on the other hand, in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, it is God's initiative: "Go say to them, Get you into your tents again."

**The
purpose of
the fear**

H. Finally, in *Parashat Yitro*, the stress is on the great awe and terror of the people: "and that his fear may be before your faces, that you sin not;" in *Parashat Vaetchanan*, on the other hand, there is a positive aspect: "that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever!"

The common denominator for all of these distinctions is stressing the atmosphere of fear in Parashat Yitro, as opposed to the atmosphere of uplifting love in Parashat Vaetchanan.

**Fear out of
love**

According to the description in Deuteronomy, the Israelites retreated from the power of the experience of God's revelation and closeness, and they do not want to experience it a second time, due to the concern that they cannot survive it, but there was no retreat from the actual desire to draw close to God. Similarly, it is clear that the nation had already experienced God's speech to them, because the verse which opens it is "And it came to pass, when you heard the voice" – hearing the voice is what brings them to this request. They describe in their words the voice of God, the experience of hearing and the divine speech as an amazing experience, relating to God as "the LORD our God," a term of closeness. Their request is only not to continue to hear God's

voice, out of the worry that they will not survive it a second time (from the reasons mentioned at this lesson's beginning).

Fear out of distance

On the other hand, in Exodus, the entreaty is born out of the fear which befalls them when they see this prophetic experience, and the fear causes them to recoil from the desire to experience such awesome visions. Because of this, they request that God not speak with them – at all. They prefer to stand far off. Due to this, Moses' attempt to bring them close does not succeed, and they remain distant. The essential impression is one of fear.

E. Fear and Love

What is the meaning of the distinction between the two descriptions?

According to the Nahmanides, these are different stories: the description in Exodus reflects the fear of the people before the convocation, before God speaks; and the description in Deuteronomy reflects the request of the people afterwards.¹⁰

10 Indeed, Nahmanides writes this, in his commentary to Exodus 20:

...והסדר בדברים, כי בבקר היו קולות וברקים וקול שופר חזק (לעיל י"ט, טז) ועדין לא ירדה שכינה... וחרדו העם במחנה במקום תחנונם (לעיל י"ט טז), ומשה חזק לבם והוציאם לקראת האלהים ויניצבו בתחתית ההר (שם יז), ובהיותם שם בתחתית ההר מצפים ומניצבים ירד ה' על ההר באש (שם יח), ויעל עשנו עד לב השמים חשך ענן וערפל (דברים ד', יא), וחרד ההר עצמו ונודעו (לעיל י"ט, יח)... אז ראו העם וינועו לאחור ויעמדו מרחוק (כאן) יותר מן הגבול, ואז אמרו אליו כלם שלא ידבר עמהם האלהים כלל פן ימותו, כי במראה נהפכו ציריהם עליהם ולא עצרו כח (דניאל י', טז), ואם ישמעו הדבור ימותו, ומשה חזקם ואמר להם אל תיראו (פס' כ), ושמעו אליו ויעמוד העם מרחוק במעמדם (פס' כא), כי לא

Fear before hearing God's voice

According to the words of the Nahmanides, the great fear of God's revelation, described in Exodus, is the fear before hearing God's voice. The vision of God's

רצו בכל דבריו להתקרב אל הגבול... ואז דבר א-להים עשרת הדיברות...
...במשנה תורה (דברים ה', יט) הזכיר משה כי אחרי הדיברות קרבו אליו כל ראשי שבטיהם
וזקניהם ואמרו לו אם יוספים אנחנו לשמוע את קול ה' א-להינו עוד ומתנו, כי שערנו
בנפשותינו שלא נוכל עוד לסבול משיא דבר ה' א-להים, כי חשבו שירצה הא-להים לדבר
אליהם כל המצוות, ולכך אמרו קרב אתה ושמע את כל אשר יאמר ה' א-להינו ואת תדבר
אלינו ושמענו ועשינו (שם כד), והקב"ה הודה לדבריהם ואמר הטיבו כל אשר דברו, כי כן היה
החפץ לפניו שלא ישמיעם רק עשרת הדיברות, והיראה ישרה לפניו.

The explanation of the matters is that in the morning there was thunder and lightning and a strong sound of the trumpet (19:16) and still the Presence did not descend... and the nation in the camp trembled in the place of their stations. But Moses was strong in heart and brought them out to greet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain (v. 17). When they were at the foot of the mountain assembled and watching, God descended on the mountain in flames (v. 18) and its smoke ascended to the heart of heavens, darkness, cloud and mist (Deut. 4:11), and the mountain trembled and shook (Ex. 19:18)... then the nation saw and moved back and stood at a distance behind the boundary, and then they all said to him that God should not speak to them lest they die. Because of the vision, their sorrows were turned upon them, and they had retained no strength (cf. Daniel 10:16), and if they would hear the speech they would die. But Moses strengthened them and told them not to fear (v. 20), and they listened to him and the nation stood at a distance in their place (v. 21), for they did not want to draw close to the boundary.... And then God spoke the Ten Commandments...

In Deuteronomy, Moses mentions that after the Commandments, all of the tribal heads and elders drew close and they said "If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, then we shall die," for they measured their souls that they could not bear the burden of the word of the LORD our God, because they thought that God wanted to state all the commandments to them, and therefore they said, "Go you near, and hear all the LORD our God shall say, and speak you unto us all the LORD our God shall speak unto you; and we will hear it, and do it." God conceded this point and said "they have well said," because His desire was to tell them only the Ten Commandments and nothing more, and this fear is appropriate before Him.

glory descending to the earth causes the entire world to shake. Therefore, the people were very terrified, and they were worried that hearing God's voice would cause an even greater quake, which they would not be able to withstand. However, God did not remit: they had to hear His voice and experience the divine revelation in all its power. They might stand far off, but they had to hear God's voice.

**Closeness
and love
after hear-
ing God's
voice**

After hearing God's voice, as described in Deuteronomy, they indeed felt the great fear and worry that if they would again hear God's voice, they would die. Nevertheless, their relationship to revelation had become totally different. They no longer were fearful; they felt close to God. They were stunned to realize that they had heard God's voice and were still alive. Therefore, they described this twice, with great emotion. They felt close to "our God" and declared that they would put into practice what they had heard. Consequently, God's relationship to them was loving and positive, expressing hope that their relationship would stay this way: "O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them..."

**Fear of
spiritual
heights**

If so, according to Nahmanides, before God spoke to them, the Israelites felt mainly fear, so much so that they were ready to give up the experience and not hear God's words at all. After they heard God's voice, on the other hand, they felt the awe of this great closeness, the great privilege of hearing God's

voice and remaining alive, something which bound them to God with cords of love.

Sometimes, a person may flee the “voice of God” out of terror and fright. The Convocation at Mount Sinai teaches us that even though coming close to God is inevitably terrifying, the desire to flee and to retreat is a shallow initial response displayed by one unaware of the significance and poignancy of that trepidation. However, after hearing God’s voice, there is a great desire which is aroused to come close to God, despite the apprehension and anxiety of the encounter. The element of fear does not disappear, but it is transmuted into. It is no longer the fear of punishment, but awe of loftiness, the natural response to such powerful intimacy with the Divine.¹¹

¹¹ This tension is found also within Exodus, between the description of the convocation in chapters 19-20 and the covenant of the basins in chapter 24. In this context, see Rabbi Chanoch Waxman’s “The Covenant at Sinai” on Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Virtual Beit Midrash website.