**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT YITRO**

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**Two Aggadot Concerning the Giving of the Torah**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The (Relative) Height of Mount Sinai**

"A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan" (*Tehillim* 68:16). R. Natan said: Since the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Torah to Israel, Carmel came from Aspamia and Tavor from Beit Eilim… This one said: I was called Mount Tavor. It would be fitting for the *Shekhina* to rest upon me, for I am higher than all the other mountains, and the waters of the flood did not come down on me. And this one said: I was called Mount Carmel. It would be fitting for the *Shekhina* to rest upon me, because I was placed in the middle, and they crossed the sea over me. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: You have already been disqualified before Me because of your haughtiness! You are all disqualified before Me… All of the mountains began to thunder and to collapse, as it is stated: "The mountains quaked at the presence of the Lord" (*Shoftim* 5:5). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: "Why look you askance [*tirtzedun*]" (*Tehillim* 68:17)? Why do you wish to be judged [*tirtzu ladun*] with Sinai? You are all "mountains of peaks [*gavnunim*]" (ibid.). As it is stated: "Or crook-backed [*gibben*], or a dwarf" (*Vayikra* 21:20). "At the mountain which God has desired for His abode" (*Tehillim* 68:17) – I desire nothing but Sinai, which is lower than all of you, as it is stated: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit" (*Yeshayahu* 57:15). And it is written: "For though the Lord be high, yet he regards the lowly" (*Tehillim* 138:6). (*Midrash Tehillim* 68)

This *aggada* describes various mountains – Tavor and Carmel – and the verse with which the exposition opens mentions also the Bashan (perhaps a reference to Mount Chermon). All of these mountains saw themselves as worthy candidates to be the mountain upon which the Torah would be given, but God chose Mount Sinai, the lowest of the mountains, precisely because of it lowliness and humility.

*Chazal* apparently derived this from the comparison between Mount Sinai and Mount Moriya, as we see in the continuation of the *midrash*:

And where did Sinai come from? R. Yose said: It was detached from Mount Moriya, like *challa* from dough, from the place where Yitzchak our forefather was bound.

It is possible that the connection between Mount Sinai and Mount Moriya derives from Yeshayahu's vision of the end of days:

And it shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established at the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say: Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Yaakov; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (*Yeshayahu* 2:2-3)

Yeshayahu speaks of the giving of the Torah that will take place at the end of days to all of the nations of the world. *Chazal* believed that this was in fact the original plan; the Torah should have been given in the wilderness even to the nations of the world, but they refused to accept it. The giving of the Torah of which Yeshayahu speaks will take place at Mount Moriya. It is possible, then, that the "partial" giving of the Torah that Israel alone experienced at Mount Sinai took place on a piece of mountain that was detached from Mount Moriya.

A view of Mount Moriya from all sides gives a picture similar to *Chazal'*sdescription of the low and humble Mount Sinai, standing between tall and beautiful mountains. The mountains that face Mount Moriya are not the Tavor and the Carmel, but rather the upper city (today's Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem), Mount Scopus, the Mount of Olives, and the mountain of Armon Ha-Netziv. One who looks out from these mountains towards Mount Moriya looks down upon the lowest mountain among them – which was precisely the mountain chosen by God.

The message that the *midrash* attaches to God's choosing of the lowly Mount Sinai is lowliness and humility. The meaning that the prophets attribute to the choice of the lowly Mount Moriya is similar to this, but broader. The prophets see a deficiency in the mountain's lowliness; because it is low, it cannot be seen from afar. The people of Israel who were familiar with it came to it, but because it is hidden among the mountains, its name did not become famous among the nations, and so they did not come to seek the Torah on the mountain of God. In this way, the geographical reality accords with and reflects the general attitude of the nations to the site of the *Shekhina*.

Therefore, in the end of days, when all the nations will come to receive the Torah in the mountain of the Lord, it will be established at the top of the mountains and exalted above the hills, as in the prophecy of Yeshayahu cited earlier, and not like Mount Sinai, which remained lowly and where only the people of Israel received the Torah. (Below we will deal with the question of how the lowly mountain will grow taller than the mountains surrounding it.)

Like Yeshayahu, and Mikha (chap. 4) in his wake, other prophets prophesized about the mountain of the Lord. This is how Yechezkel saw the mountain of the house of the Lord, on which the Temple would be built:

In the visions of God brought He me into the Land of Israel and set me down upon **a** **very high mountain**, whereon was as it were the frame of a city on the south. (*Yechezkel* 40:2)

The mountain upon which the Temple stands is a very high mountain. This description does not accord with the form and the height of the Temple Mount today. Similarly, the measurements of the Temple in *Yechezkel* correspond to a mountain that is bigger than the Temple Mount as it is today. Thus, it follows that Mount Moriya will in the future become higher and broader.

This is how Zecharya the prophet, who lived in the first generation of the Second Temple period, describes the mountain:

All the land shall be turned as the Arava, from Geva to Rimon south of Jerusalem; and she shall be lifted up and inhabited in her place, from Binyamin's gate to the place of the first gate, to the corner gate, and from the tower of Chananel to the king's winepresses.

The entire country will turn into a plain, and only Jerusalem will be lifted up and become a prominent mountain facing its surroundings.

That which was only alluded to by the other prophets cited above is spelled out by Zekharya in that same prophecy:

And His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall cleft in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, so that there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south. And you shall flee to the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel; yes, you shall flee, like as you fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uziya king of Yehuda; and the Lord my God shall come, and all the holy ones with You… And the Lord shall be King over all the earth; in that day shall the Lord be One, and His name one. (*Zekharya* 14:4-5, 9)

An earthquake will one day create these changes.

**II. The Mountains Surrounding Mount Sinai**

As noted above, the *midrash* mentions three mountains that viewed themselves as candidates for the mountain upon which the Torah would be given: Tavor, Mount Bashan,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the Carmel. Let us examine what is unique about these mountains.

The assembly at Mount Carmel involving Eliyahu was similar to the assembly at Mount Sinai in many ways. We will suffice with the main similarities:

Then **the fire of the Lord** fell and **consumed** the burnt-offering… And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces **and they said,** “The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!”  (I *Melakhim* 18:38-39)

**And they said,** “All that the Lord has spoken will we do, and obey”… And the appearance of **the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire** on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. (*Shemot* 26:7, 17)

Devora the prophetess describes in her song the great miracle that took place on Har Tavor when the Kishon, which flowed at the foot of the mountain, washed away Sisera's army before the army of Barak. She sees this miracle as a revelation of the *Shekhina*, similar to the revelation at Mount Sinai, where "book and sword" also came down clinging together.[[2]](#footnote-2)The sword came down on the enemies of Israel at Mount Tavor:

Lord, when You went forth out of Seir, when You marched out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens also dropped, yea, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked at the presence of the Lord, even you Sinai at the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel. (*Shoftim* 5:4-5)

The revelation at Mount Bashan (Chermon) was also a victory in battle. Mount Bashan is mentioned in *Tehillim* as a mountain upon which a great war was waged. We assume that this is the war that took place in Chelam in the Golan between David's army and the armies of the kings of Aram. In the wake of David's victory in the campaign, he reached the Tigris river (II *Shmuel* 8 and 10), and he sang a song of thanksgiving and praise to God over that victory. Many verses in that song were expounded by *Chazal* as relating to the revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah. Once again, the revelation of God in Israel's war against its enemies is a continuation of the revelation at Mount Sinai, where God made an eternal covenant with His people:

O God, when You went forth before Your people, when You marched through the wilderness; selah. The earth trembled, the heavens also dropped at the presence of God; even you Sinai trembled at the presence of God, the God of Israel… When the Almighty scatters kings therein, it snows in Tzalmon. A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan; a mountain of peaks is the mountain of Bashan. Why look you askance, you mountains of peaks, at the mountain which God has desired for His abode? Yea, the Lord will dwell therein forever.The chariots of God are myriads, even thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in holiness. You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts among men, yea, among the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell there… God is to us a God of deliverances. (*Tehillim* 68:8-21)

Thus, we see that on all three of these mountains there was a revelation of the *Shekhina* – whether a direct revelation of fire falling down from heaven or a miraculous victory on the battlefield.

**III. He Overturned the Mountain Upon Them Like an Inverted Cask**

"And they stood under the mount" (*Shemot* 19:17). R. Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask and said to them: If you accept the Torah, all will be well; if not, there shall be your burial. R. Acha bar Yaakov said: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Rava said: Even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Achashverosh, as it is written: “The Jews confirmed and took upon them" (*Esther* 9:27) – they confirmed what they had already taken upon them. (*Shabbat* 88a)

R. Avdimi understands the verse, "And they stood under the mount," in its literal sense. The people of Israel were literally under the mountain; the mountain was overturned upon them and threatened to bury them under it – if they did not accept the Torah.

The main discussion among the commentators on this *aggada* deals with the relationship between the overturning of the mountain and the forcing of the Torah upon them and the freely-uttered words of the people of Israel, "We will do, and obey." We will deal with this question below. Now we will deal with the underlying source of this *midrash*, since it is certainly not built only on the words, "And they stood under the mount,” which can easily be interpreted as meaning that they stood at the foot of the mountain, next to it.

Let us go back to Yeshaya's prophecy about the giving of the Torah to all nations on Mount Moriya. We have already noted that according to Yeshayahu's vision, the mountain will grow higher than all of the mountains around it, and we added that this might happen due to an earthquake. We will not elaborate now with proofs regarding the timing of this prophecy – on the eve of the earthquake that occurred in the days of Uziya king of Yehuda in Jerusalem – but rather we will deal with some verses from the continuation of the prophecy:

Enter into the rock, and hide you in the dust, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of His majesty… and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day upon all that is proud and lofty, and upon all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low; and upon all the cedars of Lebanon that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan; and upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up; and upon every lofty tower, and upon every fortified wall; and upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all delightful imagery. And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be brought low; and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day… And men shall go into the caves of the rocks, and into the holes of the earth, from before the terror of the Lords and from the glory of His majesty, when He arises to shake mightily the earth… To go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the crevices of the crags, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of His majesty, when he arises to shake mightily the earth. Cease you from man, in whose nostrils is a breath; for how little is he to be accounted! (*Yeshayahu* 2:10-22)

And there shall be a pavilion for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a refuge and for a covert from storm and from rain. (*Yeshayahu* 4:6)

Therefore the netherworld has enlarged her desire and opened her mouth without measure; and down goes their glory, and their tumult, and their uproar, and he that rejoices among them. And man is bowed down, and man is humbled, and the eyes of the lofty are humbled. (*Yeshayahu* 5:14-15)

The verses in *Yeshayahu* relating to the giving of the Torah on Mount Moriya describe an earthquake and a terrible fear of God who will rise to shake the earth. This is also the way that R. Avdimi's *midrash* describes the people of Israel standing at the foot of the mountain, trembling with fear, sensing their own powerlessness and the mighty power of God, and willing to accept the yoke of His kingdom unconditionally. Zekharya in the prophecy cited above, speaks of a reality in which God will be king over the entire earth following the frightening earthquake, when everyone will understand that they have no alternative but to find refuge in God.

This also follows from the description of the giving of the Torah by the prophet Chabakuk:

God comes from Teman, and the Holy One from mount Paran. Selah. His glory covers the heavens, and the earth is full of His praise. And a brightness appears as the light; rays has He at His side; and there is the hiding of His power. Before him goes the pestilence, and fiery bolts go forth at His feet. He stands, and shakes the earth; He beholds, and makes the nations to tremble; and the everlasting mountains are dashed in pieces, the ancient hills do bow; His goings are as of old. (*Chabakuk* 3:3-6)

God appears from Mount Paran, as at the giving of the Torah, and together with Him there is an earthquake and other harsh things. The world receives His appearance in terror and fear and is therefore willing to accept the yoke of His kingdom.

This is the way the giving of the Torah is described in the book of *Devarim*: darkness, fear, and fire. These do not allow a person free thinking:

And you came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. (*Devarim* 4:11)

And it came to pass, when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while 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 shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire; we have seen this day that God speaks 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. (*Devarim* 5:19:21)

**IV. The Cost of the Coercion and its Payment**

Coercion has a price. *Chazal* were aware of this, as R. Acha bar Yaakov responded to R. Avdimi's exposition: "This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah." What does this mean?

The Halakha states that if a person is being coerced into executing a transaction (monetary, betrothal, divorce, or the like), he can write a note before witnesses, known as a *shetar moda'a* (a coercion notification) in which he declares that his agreement to the transaction was coerced. The *shetar moda'a* disqualifies the transaction, and whatever was done under coercion has no legal significance. R. Acha argues that the *midrash* regarding the overturning of the mountain like a cask should be considered like a *shetar moda'a* regarding acceptance of the Torah, and therefore, since we accepted it under coercion, we are not obligated to uphold it.

R. Acha's argument is somewhat puzzling, however. Does God require our consent to obligate us to fulfill the Torah's commandments? He is our King and our Master, and for this purpose He redeemed us from the house of bondage. How, then, can we argue that we are not obligated to His Torah, which was imposed upon us under coercion?

Indeed, the source of the authority regarding what is stated in the Ten Commandments is: "I am the Lord your God, **who brought you out** of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage" (*Shemot* 20:2). In other words, God took us out of Egypt to be His servants, and therefore we must fulfill His commandments:

For to Me the children of Israel are servants; **they are My servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt:** I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 25:55)

There is therefore room to think that we are subject to God's commandments only because He redeemed us from Egypt; once He delivered us once again into the hands of other kings, our "contract" with Him expired because there was coercion and we did not freely accept the Torah. Even though God returned us to His land with Koresh's declaration, we returned to the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the Second Temple. This, according to the *midrash* (which is based on the prophecy in *Yechezkel* 20), is what the elders of Israel in the Babylonian exile said to God who sold them to be slaves to Nevuchadnetzar, king of Bavel:

They said to him: Yechezkel! A slave who was sold by his master, has he not left his possession? He said to them: Indeed. They said to him: Since God has sold us to the nations of the world, we have left his possession. (*Sifrei, Bamidbar* 115)

But Rava replied to R. Acha regarding his challenging the authority of the Torah in the exile, when the people of Israel are subject to the authority of the nations:

Even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Achashverosh, as it is written: "The Jews confirmed and took upon them" (*Esther* 9:27) – they confirmed what they had already taken upon them.

In other words, the people of Israel accepted the Torah freely and without coercion in the days of Mordechai and Esther. Today, therefore, after we have freely accepted it, we are bound to fulfill it.

What did Rava mean? Does an exposition based on a precise reading of a few words have the power to obligate us forever to fulfill the Torah's commandments?

It is possible that Rava had in mind the covenant that Ezra and Nechemya made with all of Israel when they returned to the land in the days of the kings of Persia – "the days of Achashverosh":

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awful God, who keeps covenant and mercy, let not all the travail seem little before You, that has come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all Your people, since the time of the kings of Ashur to this day. You are just in all that is come upon us; for You have dealt truly, but we have done wickedly; neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers kept Your law, nor hearkened to Your commandments and Your testimonies, wherewith You did testify against them. For they have not served You in their kingdom, and in Your great goodness that You gave them, and in the large and fat land that You gave before them, neither turned they from their wicked works. Behold, we are servants this day, and as for the land that You gave to our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it. And it yields much increase to the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins; also they have power over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

And yet for all this **we make a sure covenant** and subscribe it; and our princes, our Levites, and our priests set their seal unto it… they cleaved to their brethren, their nobles, **and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moshe the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes****.** (*Nechemya* 9:32-10:1 and 30)

Even though God sold them to the rulers of the nations and as servants on the land, they freely and by way of an oath accept upon themselves to follow God's Torah. This covenant is sort of a belated, "We will do, and obey."

**V. Visions of Consolation at the Time of the Giving of the Torah**

We are not yet satisfied with the vision of the giving of the Torah as we have described it: darkness, fear, and the overturning of the mountain as a cask. Surely the verse explicitly testifies that the people of Israel willingly proclaimed already at Mount Sinai (and not only in the days of the Persians): "We will do and obey" (*Shemot* 24:7).

The verses that we brought from the book of *Devarim* do indeed describe darkness at the time of the giving of the Torah, but the verses in the book of *Shemot* speak of "morning":

And it came to pass on the third day, **when it was morning,** that there were thunders and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a horn exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. (*Shemot* 19:16)

Even though this account also speaks of thunder and lightning and fear, at least the event took place during the daylight hours.

The difference between the two accounts brings to mind the description of the creation of the world:

Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. And God said: Let there be light. And there was light. (*Bereishit* 1:2-3)

The beginning of the account – before God created our world in six days – is not necessarily in absolute nothingness.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the beginning of the creation described here there is already water and a strong wind ("the spirit of God"), but there is no order ("unformed and void"), and the strong wind presumably raises up mighty waves, which crash with a great noise and stir up great dread – all this in total darkness. In such a situation there is a great deal of power and energy, but without purpose or order – only darkness and terror! Suddenly, the voice of God calls out: "Let there be light," and the world begins to take shape and order and becomes a place that is good to live in.

The combination of the accounts of the giving of the Torah points to the terrible and dreadful night followed by the illuminating day, on which the Torah was seen as possible and tolerable and even enlightening. As the *midrash* says:

And the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the dew of resurrection to fall upon them, as it is stated: "The heavens also dropped" (*Tehillim* 68:7)… As it is stated: "And the mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven." When the ministering angels saw that the soul of Israel flew off, they said to the Holy One, blessed be He: To whom do you give the Torah – to the dead or to the living? Immediately the Holy One, blessed be He, waved upon Israel the rain of life, that they should receive the Torah with a generous spirit… Your inheritance that was exhausted by the noise of the thunder and the earthquakes, You established… filling it with Your resurrection. (*Midrash Tehillim* 68)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Mount Bashan, which is apparently the Chermon, is not explicitly mentioned among the mountains, but the aforementioned *midrash* begins its exposition with a verse that deals with Mount Bashan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Devarim Rabba*, *Parashat Re'eh.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is certainly not my intention, God forbid, to question whether God created the world *ex nihilo.* But the Torah does not describe the transition from nothingness to existence. It begins at the stage where there is already water and wind, and beneath the surface of the water there is land. The Torah does not describe the earlier situation of nothingness. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)