

The Matan Torah Narrative and Its Leadership Lessons

Much can be learned from the matan Torah narrative. We often focus on what Bnei Yisrael received during matan Torah and how B'nei Yisrael responded to the experience. But there are many leadership lessons that can be gleaned from the experience at matan Torah.

The text states that in preparation for matan Torah, Moshe traveled up and down the mountain numerous times to communicate with G-d and Bnei Yisrael:

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה (פס' ג) ... וַיֵּרֵד מֹשֶׁה מִן-הַהָר (פס' יד) ... וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה (פס' כ) ... וַיֵּרֵד מֹשֶׁה, אֶל-הָעָם; וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲלֵהֶם (פס' כה).
And Moses went up (v. 3) ... And Moses went down from the mountain (v. 14) ... And Moses went up ... So Moses went down unto the people, and told them (v. 25).

Shemot ch. 19

Climbing a mountain, even Mount Sinai, is no small trip. So why did Moshe find it necessary to make multiple trips up and down the mountain? And was Moshe at the top of the mountain with G-d or at the bottom of the mountain with the people for the Aseret Hadibrot?

Perhaps Moshe's frequent trips between G-d and Bnei Yisrael reflect his effective leadership style. Even in the throes of preparing for matan Torah with G-d, Moshe continued to focus on the needs of the people by repeatedly returning to them at the



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bottom of Mount Sinai. But Moshe needed to return to G-d at the top of the mountain to continue focusing on the bigger picture and broader vision for Bnei Yisrael.

R' Shmuel Goldin, in his work *Unlocking the Torah Text: Shmot*, discusses where Moshe was located during the Aseret Hadibrot. He notes that *Midrash Rabba* suggests that Moshe needed to be with the people when the Aseret Hadibrot were given because G-d wanted to make it clear that the Torah was coming from G-d and not from Moshe.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (Shemot 19:25) also believes that Moshe stood with the people during matan Torah. However, the reason Moshe stood with the people was not to emphasize the Divine origin of the Torah, but rather to teach Bnei Yisrael that Moshe was receiving the Torah just like they were. This was an important message for the people to understand and an important reminder for Moshe — the people needed to recognize that Moshe was part of the nation, obligated in the laws like all other members of Bnei Yisrael, and Moshe was reminded of the importance of understanding the

lives of the people. This experience points to the important balance the leader must maintain between leading the people and understanding the people in a thoughtful way.

Immediately following the matan Torah narrative, the Torah pauses in the story and discusses numerous laws in *Parshat Mishpatim*. This is unusual. Why would G-d interrupt the story of making a nation with a long list of laws? Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks suggests that *Mishpatim* interrupts our narrative in order to connect this great vision for our nation that we just heard from G-d — the broad concepts of our purpose, including the Aseret Hadibrot — to the details of how to actualize that vision. *Mishpatim* explains the legal system that guides us toward making this vision a reality. We, as Bnei Yisrael, need not only a shared narrative and broad vision, but also a system to actualize that vision. By structuring the texts this way, G-d is providing a model for successful leadership. A leader must focus on a compelling vision and a detail-oriented plan to execute it.

Once Bnei Yisrael received the laws, the narrative continues with *cheit ha'egel* (the sin of the golden calf), and

again we see a leadership lesson:

ז. וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר כִּי שָׁחַת עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ח. סָרוּ מִהֵרָה מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֲגֹל מִסִּכָּה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהּ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לָהּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ט. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֵת הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עִם קִשָּׁה עֲרִף הוּא: י. וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי וַיִּחַר אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלֵם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גְדוֹל: ... ל.א. וַיֹּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה חָטָא הָעָם הַזֶּה חֲטָאָה גְדוֹלָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהִי זָהָב: ל.ב. וְעַתָּה אִם תִּשָּׂא חֲטָאתָם וְאִם אֵין מַחְנִי נָא מִסַּפְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ: ל.ג. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִי אֲשֶׁר חָטָא לִי אֶמְחֶנּוּ מִסַּפְרִי: ל.ד. וְעַתָּה לָךְ נָחָה אֵת הָעָם אֶל אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ הִנֵּה מִלְאָכֵי יְלֹךְ לִפְנֶיךָ וְיָוִים פְּקֻדֵי וּפְקֻדָתַי עֲלֵיהֶם חֲטָאתָם:

7. And the Lord said to Moses: "Go, descend, for your people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly. 8. They have quickly turned away from the path that I have commanded them; they have made themselves a molten calf! And they have prostrated themselves before it, slaughtered sacrifices to it, and said: 'These are your gods, O Israel, who have brought you up from the land of Egypt.'" 9. And the Lord said to Moses: "I have seen this people and behold! They are a stiff-necked people. 10. Now leave Me alone, and My anger will be kindled against them so that I will annihilate them, and I will make you into a great nation." ... 31. And Moses returned to the Lord and said: "Please! This people has committed a grave sin.

They have made themselves a god of gold. 32. And now, if You forgive their sin [I am satisfied,] But if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written." 33. *And the Lord said to Moses: "Whoever has sinned against Me, him I will erase from My book!"* 34. *And now go, lead the people to [the place] of which I have spoken to you. Behold My angel will go before you. But on the day I make an accounting [of sins upon them], I will bring their sin to account against them."*

Shemot Chapter 32 (Judaica Press Translation)

What do we learn from Moshe's reaction to G-d?

שְׂמוּאֵל אָמַר מְלֻמָּד שְׂמִיטָה עֲצֻמוּ לְמִיתָה עֲלֵיהֶם שְׂנָאָמַר וְאִם אֵין מַחְנֵי נָא מִסַּפְרֶךָ.

Shmuel taught: We can infer that [Moses] was willing to die for [the Jewish people] as it states "But if not, erase me now from Your book."

Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 32a

The Gemara discusses how Moshe was willing to give up his life for Bnei Yisrael. When Moshe came to the defense of Bnei Yisrael, his compassion for the people is obvious. He could have easily given up on Bnei Yisrael but instead, Moshe demonstrated that he is so invested in the people, that he was willing to die for them. He believed that Bnei Yisrael were the key element of G-d's vision.

Absent these people, the larger vision crumbles. Therefore, Moshe did not want any part of it.

The experience at Sinai is a critical moment of the Jewish narrative that teaches us many lessons in leadership. Moshe was a leader who understood that his role as leader included seeing the bigger picture, the vision for the nation, and understanding the perspectives and needs of the people. Ultimately, Moshe set the example for us by emphasizing that you can't forfeit the people for the vision. Moshe's sincerity and true caring for the people motivated him to defend the people with his life. What could be a greater example of a leader completely committed to his people?

I have had the opportunity to watch my father, with the incredible support of my mother, be a thoughtful and compassionate leader in many settings. Motivated by a desire to make the world better and, in particular, to make Jews feel connected to their Judaism in a meaningful way, my father has truly taken to heart the example set by Moshe Rabbeinu. He has consistently prioritized personal relationships with people while also articulating and implementing a vision for Yeshiva University. Both of these aspects of his leadership are truly inspiring.

Moshe continued to focus on the needs of the people by repeatedly returning to them at the bottom of Mount Sinai. But Moshe needed to return to G-d at the top of the mountain to continue focusing on the bigger picture and broader vision for Bnei Yisrael.

