



RECEIVING THE TORAH REQUIRES PREPARATION

The Torah reading for the first day of Shavuot describes the events preceding Matan Torah — the giving of the Torah; the scene of Matan Torah itself; and the Aseret Hadibrot — the Ten Commandments. Sefer Shemot, perek 19, begins with Hashem telling Bnei Yisrael that if they heed His commandments and listen to his voice, they will become His “*mamlechet kohanim v’goy kadosh*,” a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Shemot 19:6). Following Bnei Yisrael’s expression of desire to listen to all of Hashem’s commandments and to aim to achieve this status, Hashem provides Moshe with a new set of instructions and messages to

convey to the nation. An in-depth analysis of the instructions given by Hashem not only helps us understand the process of transformation that Bnei Yisrael underwent prior to accepting the Torah, it also can help us understand certain key elements as they relate to encounters we have with Hashem on a daily basis.

Shemot 19:10-13 details Hashem’s commands to Bnei Yisrael about readying themselves for “*yom hashlishi* — the third day.” Verse 11 relates the purpose of these preparations:

וְהָיָוּ נְכֹנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרָד
ה' לְעִינֵי כָל הָעָם עַל הַר סִינַי.
*Be prepared for the third day, because
on the third day, Hashem will descend in
sight of the entire nation.*

At this moment, Bnei Yisrael are instructed to prepare intensively and extensively before they experience Hashem in their midst.¹ Rav Yosef Bechor Shor (Shemot 19:11) explains that Hashem wanted to make sure that Bnei Yisrael had enough time prepare to reach the level of purity He desired from them.

In order to accomplish this goal, Hashem commands Bnei Yisrael (Shemot 19:11) “*vekidashtem ... v’kivsu simloteichem* — become separate and wash your clothes.” Rashi explains that *vekidashtem* is an injunction that husbands and wives should separate for the days preceding Matan Torah. Hashem also commands Moshe to “set boundaries” for Bnei Yisrael,

specifically with regard to their conduct in relation to the mountain that the Torah will be given on, Har Sinai (Shemot 19:12). Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman, in his commentary to that verse, proposes two possible approaches to understanding this command. Perhaps Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to set up a physical boundary around the mountain that would prevent people from physically touching the mountain. Or perhaps it was a command of mindset: prepare yourselves that this is the state of mind that you need to be in, one in which you are not allowed to touch the mountain out of fear of death. Because this would have been new for the people at the time, Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael time to adjust mentally, to reflect on what they had been allowed to do before and to prepare themselves to act in a way that was different from their status quo.

What, exactly, was the larger purpose of these preparations? What were they meant to accomplish, and what messages were they trying to convey?

According to Seforno (Shemot 19:11), these preparations were meant to assist Bnei Yisrael with readying not only their souls, but their bodies as well. The experience of Matan Torah was a prophetic event that all of Bnei Yisrael underwent, and Seforno explains that they were required to prepare both physically and spiritually for their encounter with the Shechina. In a similar manner to Moshe Rabbeinu, who received prophecy on a consistent basis and therefore had to separate from his wife, the steps that were set in place were dictated by Hashem as measures that would help them prepare not only spiritually for the prophetic encounter, but physically as well.

Malbim explains in his commentary to these pesukim, “*she’madreiga zu einu bli hachana* — that this level is unachievable without preparation.” Bnei Yisrael could only reach the level necessary for the divine revelation at Matan Torah through preparation. Rav Soloveitchik eloquently echoes this message when he explains that, “holiness does not arrive suddenly; it comes only by invitation inherent in the act of preparation.”² Through their actions, Bnei Yisrael transformed themselves into a state where they

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were able to experience holiness. Without the precursor of preparation, Bnei Yisrael would have been ill-prepared for the momentous moment.

Rav Naftali Tzvi Berlin believes that the preparation instructed by Hashem was connected to the prophetic element of Matan Torah as well. The Netziv explains that Bnei Yisrael needed to undergo mental preparation in advance of the encounter in order to be able to handle seeing and hearing the miraculous experience. Beyond being unable to achieve the required status as Malbim explains, Netziv adds that Bnei Yisrael would have actually “*yatzu mi’daatam*” — gone out of their minds upon witnessing the miracles that took place at Matan Torah.³ Without the preparation, the revelation would have been detrimental, as opposed to

uplifting.

Interestingly, the Netziv points out that a “one-size-fits-all model” was not proposed for Bnei Yisrael’s mental preparations, but rather “*l’kol ben adam, ish k’fi kocho* — to every person, each person according to their own might.” According to this idea, the preparations that Hashem asked of each individual in Bnei Yisrael were meant to be a personalized, independent process, internalized in a way that met each person’s specific needs. Just as each individual experienced Matan Torah in their own way, the way in which they prepared needed be unique as well.

Two other commentators, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (Shemot 19:11) and Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (*HaKtav V’Hakabbalah*, Shemot 19:11), also propose unique perspectives on the larger purpose of the preparations. According to *HaKtav V’Hakabbalah*, in order to receive the Torah, Bnei Yisrael had to transition from a life that was focused on both the *gashmi* (physical) and *ruchani* (spiritual) elements of their lives, to instead focus primarily on only the *ruchani* elements of their lives. Such a shift, distancing their minds from the *gashmi* elements of the world and focusing instead primarily on Hashem and the spiritual world, was not something that could be accomplished in a single day. By providing them with three days, Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael time to process, reflect and implement the necessary steps as they transitioned from focusing on both physicality and spirituality to being people completely focused on Hashem and His Godliness.

Rav Hirsch contends that Bnei Yisrael’s preparations were intended to assist them in a shift in mindset as

well. According to Rav Hirsch:

שלושה ימים מצפה העם לבואה. ואפילו רק כדי שיורשה לצפות לבואה חייב העם לקדש תחילה את גופו ואת בגדיו, הווה אומר, עליו להיעשות ראוי לקבל את התורה על - ידי שיחדיר לתודעתו באופן סמלי את מאורע ההתחדשות של חייו הפנימיים והחיצוניים, מעין לידה מחדש, שתרחש בו. לא יוכל העם לקבל את התורה במצב שהוא נמצא בו עד לפני השעה הזאת. רק החלטתו, להיות בעתיד כפי שעליו להיות, עושה אותו ראוי לקבל את התורה.

Bnei Yisrael in their present state were not yet ready to receive the Torah. In order to be worthy of even awaiting the Torah, the people [had to] first sanctify their bodies and their garments; that is they must become worthy of receiving the Torah by becoming aware, symbolically, of the rebirth — the renewal of their lives, within and without, that the Torah is to bring about ... only their resolve to ultimately become what they should be will make them worthy of receiving the Torah.

Bnei Yisrael, by undertaking these preparations, were proving to themselves, as well as to Hashem, that they were committed to internalizing the Torah and that they were open to the changes that would occur as a result of receiving it.

When examining all of these perspectives, some key ideas emerge as to the rationale for the instructions that Hashem provides to Bnei Yisrael before Matan Torah. Bnei Yisrael's encounter with Godliness required preparation, but the preparation could not be one-sided. The preparation had to be comprehensive, recognizing the dynamic and complementary relationship between both the mental and physical elements of their existence. However, each person's preparation for such an encounter had to be unique, stemming from

where the person stood vis-a-vis Hashem. And finally, the preparation was meant to create change within a person, to shift their focus away from the insignificant areas of their life toward priorities and values, of spirituality and Godliness. Bnei Yisrael's opportunity to prepare three days before the experience provided them time to reflect, to shift, to adjust and to change, both in mindset and in physical readiness for the ultimate experience of Matan Torah.

As we enter the season of Matan Torah, it is critical that as individuals and as a community we consider the ways in which we prepare for the mini-encounters that we have on a daily basis with Hashem through tefillah and Torah learning. Preparation allows us to capitalize on an experience, providing space to appreciate and ultimately internalize it. The way in which we prepare for experiences with Hashem is essential in creating meaning and growing in our avodat Hashem.

The Gemara *Brachot* proposes some examples of models that people have used to prepare for these experiences. Gemara *Brachot* 30b, describes the practice of the *chassidim rishonim*, pious individuals, who each morning would arrive an hour early to tefillah so that they could focus and prepare their minds for the dialogue that they were about to have with Hashem. Mishna, *Brachot* 4:2 describes the practice of Rabbi Nechunya ben HaKaneh who, upon his arrival to the Beit Midrash to learn each day, would recite a short prayer requesting guidance from Hashem with his Torah learning and teaching. These two models continue the commanded preparations given to Bnei Yisrael before Matan Torah.

Each model provides an idea as to ways in which people can approach these experiences, with reflection, with mind-shifting and with time to prepare for the experience they are about to have.

As a community, in the hustle and bustle of our daily experiences and fast-paced living, we often jump into experiences without taking appropriate time to prepare and reflect. The message expressed prior to Matan Torah is that the way to capitalize on an experience, to experience it wholly and thoroughly, is to prepare. By allowing ourselves the opportunity to slow down, to take time to reflect, we too will hopefully, with Hashem's assistance, be able to utilize each mini-opportunity as a means of connecting with Hashem and as an opportunity for growth.

Endnotes

1. Note that this is not the first time Bnei Yisrael has been asked to prepare for a momentous occasion in their development of a nation. G-d also commands Bnei Yisrael to prepare as they leave Egypt. A similar analysis as well as a comparison between the two elements is beyond the scope of this piece, but would an interesting next step to one's learning.
2. *Divrei Hashkfa*, p.146.
3. *Ha'amek Davar*, Shemot 19:11.