

Matan Torah:

Singular Event, Two Narratives

Parshas Hageirus / The Conversion Narrative

Tucked away after the lengthy legal discourses of *Parshas Mishpatim* and prior to the launching of the even lengthier detailed description of the Mishkan requirements, Hashem recorded an understated eleven-verse narrative. Woven around the story of the writing and reading of the first sefer Torah, this portion describes Moshe building twelve pillars, one for each tribe, and sprinkling the Jews with blood of their sacrifices. The events climax with a penetrating and puzzling vision that reassures us that Hashem was watching over us even as we were suffering terribly, even during His apparent hiddenness from us.

ד ויכתב משה את כל דברי ה' וישכם בבקר ויבן מזבח פחת החר ושתיים עשרה מצבה לשנים עשר שבטי ישראל: ה וישלח את נערי בני ישראל ויעלו עלת ויזבחו זבחים שלמים לה' פרים: ו ויקח משה חצי הדם וישם באגנות ויזבחו ויקח חצי הדם וישם באגנות ויקרא באזני העם ויאמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע: ח ויקח משה את הדם ויזרק על העם ויאמר הנה דם הברית אשר כרת ה' עמכם על כל הדברים האלה: ט ויעל משה ואהרן ונדב ואביהוא ושבעים מזקני ישראל: י ויראו את אלהי ישראל ותחת רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר וכעצם השמים לטהר: שמות פרק כד

4 Moshe wrote all of the words of Hashem, and he woke in the morning and built an altar under the mountain



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and twelve pillars corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 And he sent the youth of the people of Israel and they brought burnt offerings and offered peace offerings to Hashem using bulls. 6 Moshe took half of the blood and placed it in basins, and the other half, he sprinkled on the altar. 7 He took the Book of the Covenant and he read it to the nation and they said "Everything that Hashem said, we will do and we will follow." 8 Moshe took the blood and sprinkled it on the nation and said "Behold this is the blood of the covenant that Hashem created with you on these matters." 9 Moshe went up with Aharon, Nadav, Avihu and seventy of the elders of Israel. 10 They saw the God of Israel and under His feet was like a work of paved sapphire and the very essence of Heaven in its purity.

Shemot 24

Though this story is understudied as a biblical narrative, the rabbis of later years teased out from these verses all the necessary elements of conversion. That means to say that they saw here a description of the "conversion" of the Sinai generation. Indeed later scholars would entertain whether the laws of conversion were consistently applied to that generation.

When this process took place is debated by Rashi and Ramban. Whereas Ramban understands that the text follows in chronological order and that this covenant took place on the day after *Matan Torah*, Rashi sees it as a flashback to the preparatory days leading up to revelation. This is part of Rashi and Ramban's deliberations on the interpretation and application of the Talmudic principle *ain mukdam ume'uchar baTorah*, passages in the Torah are not necessarily written in chronological order.

Simply put, the rabbis of the Talmud stated that chronology need not be the driving organizer of the Torah narratives. While Rashi applies this principle broadly throughout Torah, the Ramban understands that it refers to a specific parsha in Bamidbar where the recorded dating clearly indicates that the chronological order of the texts was ignored. Beyond that episode, argues Ramban, almost all the narratives of the Torah text follow in their natural sequence.

Thus Ramban explains that this parsha occurred just after the content of the entire *Parshas Mishpatim* was taught. It precedes Moshe's return to the top



of Sinai for the next forty days but it represents a more informed covenant than the one that took place the day before:

והנה משה כתב ביום ההוא בספר כל מה שנצטווה, חקים ומשפטים ותורות, והשכים בבקר ממחרת היום ההוא לכרות להם ברית על הכל, ובנה המזבח (פסוק ד), וזבח הזבחים (פסוק ה), ונתן חצי הדם על מזבח ה' וחצי הדם שם באגנות (פסוק ו), ולקח הספר שכתב מאמש וקראו באזניהם, וקבלו עליהם עוד לבא בברית עמו, ואמרו (פסוק ז) כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע אליך, מכל אשר תצוה מאתו ית'. ואז זרק עליהם חצי הדם (פסוק ח), כי זאת אות הברית לבא השנים בחלקים שוים. ואחרי שהשלים מעשיו עמהם הוצרך למלאת דבר ה', שאמר לו ה' עלה אתה ואהרן וגו'. וזהו שאמר (בפסוק ט) ויעל משה ואהרן נדב ואביהוא וגו'. ועשה עוד מה שצווה (בפסוק ב) ונגש לבדו אל ה', והוא שאמר (בפסוק יח) ויבא משה בתוך הענן וגומר. והנה מעשה הברית ביום המחרת למתן תורה, ובו היתה העליה שעלה משה אל ההר (פסוק יג), וממנה נתעכב שם ארבעים יום. רמב"ן, שמות כד:א

Behold, Moshe wrote in the Book on that day all that he was commanded, statutes, laws and commandments, and he awoke the next morning to create a covenant on all of it. He built an altar and offered sacrifices and placed half the blood on the

altar of Hashem and half in basins. He took the Book that he wrote the day before and read it to them and they accepted to enter the covenant with him. They said: everything that Hashem said, we will do and we will follow you, whatever you command us from Hashem. He then sprinkled the other half of the blood upon them because this covenant required two equal parts. After he completed his actions, he was required to fulfill the word of Hashem who told him to go up with Aharon etc. This is what is stated "Moshe went up with Aharon, Nadav, Avihu etc." He also performed what was commanded, "And he approached Hashem himself," and this is reflected in the verse, "Moshe went into the cloud etc." Behold, this covenant took place the day after the giving of the Torah and that is when Moshe went up the mountain and stayed there for forty days.

Ramban, Shemot 24:1

Here, Ramban is arguing with his much more succinct predecessor, Rashi, who says:

פרשה זו נאמרה קודם עשרת הדברות, ובארבעה בסיון נאמר לו עלה. רש"י, שמות כד:א

This portion took place before the giving

of the Ten Commandments. On the fourth of Sivan, he was told to go up [the mountain].

Rashi, Shemot 24:1

Rashi's View: Two Narratives

Accordingly, Ramban views that our commitment to the life that Hashem wants us to lead coalesced over a multi-step process. That process included the teachings of Mara, the initial verbal commitments to becoming a "mamleches kohanim" (a nation of priests), the Sinai revelation per se, and finally, completing a conversion process complete with sacrifices and accepting the "stone handiwork" of Hashem.

Yet Rashi's view begs interpretation. In Rashi's view, the Torah divided the story of *Matan Torah* into two storylines. How intriguing it is to have two *parshiyos* focus separately on the selfsame episode, each one choosing details so different from each other that they convey vastly different impressions and overtones.

The *Matan Torah* of *Parshas Yisro* welcomes the Shechinah with

supernatural thunder and lightning and shofar sounds that increase in volume. The trembling mountain marks Hashem's presence as it sends up furnace like smoke. The people are prepared through abstinence and are severely cautioned to keep their distance. They are overwhelmed and left shaking, somewhat traumatized and ready to run:

טו וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל הָעָם הֲיוּ נִכְנְיִים לְשִׁלֻּשֵׁת יָמִים אֶל תִּגְשׁוּ אֶל אֲשֶׁה: טז וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּהֵיטֵב הַבִּקְרָה וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבְרָקִים וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל הָהָר וְקֶלֶת שִׁפָּר חֲזֶק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרְד כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה: יז וַיֹּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת הָעָם לְקִרְיַת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְיַצְּבוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הָהָר: יח וְהָרָ סִינֵי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו ה' בְּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עֲשָׂנוּ כְּעֶשֶׂן הַכִּבְשָׁן וַיִּחַרְד כָּל הָהָר מְאֹד: יט וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֲזֶק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יִדְבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל: כ וַיֵּרַד ה' עַל הָרָ סִינֵי אֶל רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא ה' לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה: שְׁמוֹת פָּרָק יט

15 He said to the nation: Be prepared for the next three days, don't approach a woman. 16 It was on the third day in the morning and there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain; the sound of a shofar was very strong and the nation in the camp trembled. 17 Moshe took the nation out of the camp towards Hashem and they stood at the base of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was full of smoke because Hashem descended upon it and the smoke rose like smoke from a furnace and the mountain trembled greatly. 19

The sound of the shofar was growing stronger. Moshe would speak and Hashem would respond with a voice. 20 Hashem descended upon Mount Sinai to the peak of the mountain and Hashem called Moshe to the peak of the mountain and Moshe ascended.

Shemot 19

Not so the *Matan Torah* of *Parshas Mishpatim*. Here, the people stand — presumably quietly — to be crowned by the light sprinkling of blood that marks the new covenant. They have been engaged through Moshe's Torah instruction and have responded with absolute commitment. They have their *korbonos* sprinkled on them. The depiction of a fiery quaking mountain lifted off its core surrounded by bolts of light, sound, and visible thunder is absent.

Why two different stories instead of one complete account? Why are so many details suppressed, seemingly in an effort to paint such distinct pictures?

Perhaps the event that would model the experience of Torah study for all time has to include both the impulsive excitement associated with the high drama that Sinai was, as well as the very measured care and concern that characterizes sacrificial service.

There are times that our study must be charged by an exciting program and fuelled with a flamboyant teacher and

charismatic colleagues. However, as any matter worthy of our energies, it will more often require the careful and even painstaking efforts to successfully pave our path in the labyrinth of Torah. For most of us, we will have to slowly amass knowledge even as we attempt to deepen our understanding of all of Hashem's wisdom.

Certainly, we, who have come to appreciate the results of laborious and thorough research in so many areas of life, can well understand the humbling message of *Parshas Mishpatim*. It is the unassuming ongoing and scheduled Torah study that connects students and teachers, and fathers and sons. Quietly imbibing wisdom, slowly and steadily, molds hearts, souls and minds and plants anchors to our commitment.

Thus, we return to the story of Sinai after learning in great detail about courts and torts, and the concern for the poor and disadvantaged and having been exposed to the breathtaking scope of Torah.

The experience of study modeled in *Parshas Mishpatim*, the one closer to our ongoing efforts to be *kove'a itim la'Torah* (set aside time for Torah study) does not end with a shocked people on the run, rather it culminates with a people riveted on their vision of Hashem as a consuming fire that is visible to all.

Perhaps the event that would model the experience of Torah study for all time has to include both the impulsive excitement associated with the high drama that Sinai was, as well as the very measured care and concern that characterizes sacrificial service.