

In today's world, the claim of Divine communication would probably raise eyebrows amongst most people. However, the very foundation of belief in Torah begins with the event at Sinai, a moment of Divine Revelation unlike any other. The Jewish people received the Torah not just as a book of law, but through an event whose mechanism of communication made it the indisputable word of God. It is quite difficult to ever understand what the Jewish people themselves experienced. However, through an important set of explanations offered by Rashi, the veracity of the Torah's origin as from God is reiterated and consecrated into our entire ideology.

Immediately after the recording of the event at Sinai, God directs Moshe to command the Jews concerning the prohibition of building idols. The introduction to this section begins with a transitional verse (Shemot 20:19):

*"The Lord said to Moses, "So shall you say to the children of Israel, **You have seen that from the heavens I have spoken with you.**"*

Then God instructs the Jews as follows (ibid 20):

"You shall not make [images of anything that is] with Me. Gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves."

The remaining verses in this section deal with further laws concerning the building of altars. It would appear, then, that the rejection of idolatry directly follows from the statement regarding God's transmission to the Jewish people.

Rashi raises an important question on the first cited verse. There, we see that the Torah isolates the idea that God "spoke" to the Jews from the heavens. However, prior to the recording of the episode, the Torah states that God "descended to Har Sinai" (Shemot 19:20). The question is which of these actually took place – was there a "voice" or a "descent". Rashi answers these competing claims as follows:

*"The third verse comes and harmonizes them: "From the heavens He let you hear His voice in order to discipline you, and on earth He showed you His great fire" (Deut. 4:36). **His glory was in heaven, His fire and His power were on the earth.**"*

Rashi indicates here that in fact there was both the "voice" and the "descent."

Rashi then offers a second possibility for explaining the idea of God speaking from the heavens:

"Alternatively, He bent down the [lower] heavens and the highest heavens and spread them out upon the mountain. So [Scripture] says: "And He bent the heavens, and He came down" (Ps. 18:10)."

This concept is based on a greater debate found in the Sifra. According to Rabbi Akiva, the heavens came down to Mount Sinai. According to Rebbe, Mount Sinai was elevated to the heavens. Rashi, therefore, would appear to be lining himself up with Rabbi Akiva's position. Of course, we must question what ideas are being presented here. For example, the idea of proximity as applied to God is extremely problematic. God is non-physical, thereby lacking a location. To say that God "descended" somewhere, if taken literally, would challenge this fundamental tenet of Judaism. As well, what exactly do we learn from the concept of God "bending the heavens"? What is this additional possibility teaching us?

The first verse, cited above, focuses our attention on the uniqueness of the event at Sinai. This Divine Revelation was a solitary moment in history, expressed in the very nature of the communication between God and the Jewish people. Rashi's commentary is focused on this

communication, which serves as the clearest proof of the singular reality of God. As noted, there is an apparent disharmony in the historicity of Sinai – was it the “voice” of God or was it His “descent” to Sinai. Rashi’s answer seems to be simple: it was both. How do we understand this? Clearly, neither of these descriptions can be taken literally, as they ascribe physicality to God. Rather, there is a critical idea regarding the event at Sinai that is being brought to the forefront. The concept of God’s voice is referencing the idea of a metaphysical revelation, a comprehension of God that the Jewish people received through this communication. Hearing this voice was God’s method of establishing His metaphysical “source”, that He was qualitatively removed from all existence. The only conclusion the Jewish people arrive at after hearing this voice was the truth of God’s existence. At the same time, the event at Sinai was punctuated with clear breaches in the laws of nature. The presence of so many miracles (His fire) as well as the clear demonstration of God’s complete dominion over the universe (His glory) could only be understood as the actions of the Creator. What Rashi is telling us is that the event at Sinai was the “most” complete manifestation of God that man was every privy to. He came to understand the reality of God as the supreme metaphysical existence as well as the reality of His complete control of the universe. It is quite difficult for us to understand the exact mechanism that allowed for these certainties to be reached. But this certitude of the existence of God served as the springboard to the next set of prohibitions.

Rashi’s second interpretation picks up on a similar theme. The debate as to whether the heavens came to Sinai or vice versa again cannot be understood plainly. As has been stressed to this point, the event at Sinai was extraordinary. With that said, the very suggestion that communication on such a vast scale between the Jewish people and God could be a “natural” phenomenon is the focal point of this debate. Both Rabbi Akiva and Rebbe agree that there had to be some type of significant alteration in the norm to allow for this clear communication to take place. The question then is the nature of this transformation. According to Rabbi Akiva, the idea of the mountain rising up to the heavens refers to a change in the Jewish people. They did not have the natural means of attaining this level of knowledge; thus, God ensured there was a raising of their overall level of thinking to allow them to perceive this reality. Rebbe, though, maintains that God altered the normal mechanism of prophetic communication to reach the level of the people as they were. This type of prophecy took on a different quality than other communications, allowing for the Jewish people to receive the ideas in a clear manner. Either way, the point that emerges from this debate is that God deemed it necessary to ensure there was the clearest possible comprehension of His truth.

It is difficult to imagine what the event at Sinai was like, let alone to internalize the level of clarity the Jewish people experienced during that seminal period of history. The Divine Revelation had a profound effect on those who witnessed it, setting in stone the exclusive existence of God. While we ourselves today did not physically experience it, the reality of the moment has been passed down from generation to generation, an unbroken chain of history. As we read about the giving of the Torah this week, we should reflect on how truly unique the moment was in God’s relationship with mankind.