




CHUMASH THEMES

CLASS #12



EXPLORING THE EARTH-SHATTERING EVENTS AT MOUNT SINAI.

 **READ** EXODUS – CHAPTERS 19-20

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Introduction

Perhaps the quintessential section of Torah is the giving of the Ten Commandments. No other event so clearly defines the relationship between God and humanity. In order to fully grasp the depth of what took place, however, we need to go beyond the movie and analyze the text. Let's begin by reviewing the events leading up to Mount Sinai:¹

The Jews leave Egypt, and a week later cross the Red Sea. They then travel through the desert toward Mount Sinai. During this period, the manna begins to fall, Moses transmits various laws (e.g. Shabbat), and the Jews beat off an attack by Amalek. Six weeks after the Exodus they arrive at Mount Sinai. There the entire nation spends a week preparing for the receiving of the Torah, which takes place 50 days after the Exodus, on the sixth of Sivan.

When the Jews are offered the Torah, their response is *Na'aseh V'nishma* – "We will do and we will listen." Then the mountain lifts into the air and is suspended over their heads.² God then proclaims the Ten Commandments, whereby the entire Jewish nation – men, women and children – participates with Moses in this unique prophetic experience.

The next day Moses goes up the mountain, and studies the rest of the Torah with God for 40 days and 40 nights. When Moses descends, he is met by the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf.³

The purpose of the Exodus was for the Jews to receive the Torah, as Moses was told at his first conversation with God at the Burning Bush.⁴ Everything that took place till now was in preparation for this event. In order to fully appreciate this monumental event, we need to answer the following:

¹ This is the chronology as it appears in the plain reading of the text, without Midrashic input.

² Talmud - Shabbat 88a

³ the topic of our next essay

⁴ Rashi (Exodus 3:12)

- What was the function of the week of preparations?
- What actually took place on Mount Sinai?
- What was special about these Ten Commandments?
- Why did God suspend the mountain over the people's head?

The Preparations

The first prerequisite for receiving Torah is unity of the Jewish people. On the first day of Sivan, the Jews arrived at the mountain. The verse⁵ uses an unusual conjugation to describe their encampment. Rather than the plural form, here the entire camp is described in the singular. This emphasizes the need for unity at the giving of the Torah.⁶

This is not simply a beautiful sentiment, but something crucial to the understanding of these events. In the Zohar, we are taught that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah, which parallel the number of “root souls” of Jews who accepted the Torah.⁷ The obvious conclusion is that each Jew has a corresponding letter in the Torah.

There is a deeper meaning, however. A Torah scroll that is missing one letter is unfit, no matter how unimportant that letter might seem to the naked eye. That is because the Torah is greater than the sum of its parts. So too, if the Jewish people are missing one person they are unfit. Every Jew has a unique function in the makeup of the nation. The Jewish people and the Torah reflect one another. So without Jewish unity, the Torah would not start.

The preparations continue on the second day of Sivan. Moses goes up to the mountain and God commands him to “Speak to the **house** of Jacob, and instruct the **children** of Israel.”⁸ The Midrash points out the double usage of “house” and “children”: “house” refers to the women,

⁵ Exodus 19:2

⁶ Rashi (Exodus 19:2)

⁷ Zohar Chadash; *BaMidbar Kedemot* of the Chida (10:6); see Chatam Sofer (Kovetz Teshuvot 52)

⁸ Exodus 19:3

and “children” refers to the men.⁹ This highlights another important aspect of the importance of Jewish unity: If any one member of the nation – man, woman or child – would have been absent from Mount Sinai, the Torah could not have been given.¹⁰

The Humble Mountain

God commands Moses to sanctify Mount Sinai, and to prohibit anyone from touching the mountain. From here, we would assume that Mount Sinai is one of the holiest sites of Judaism. However, Moses is told that after the giving of the Torah, this ban will be lifted, and the mountain can even be used for grazing cattle.¹¹ That is curious enough, but there is even a deeper question about the chosen location: Why is the Torah given in the desert and not in the Land of Israel?

The answer to both questions is the same: The Torah is eternal and relevant anywhere in the world. In addition, the relationship between God and Israel is inherent and not limited to any specific location. Therefore, once the mountain has served its function, it reverts to its previous state.¹²

Even though the mountain does not have an eternal holiness, there is a beautiful Midrash which explains why Mount Sinai was chosen. All the mountains desired to fulfill God's purpose by being used for the giving of the Torah. All except Mount Sinai, which felt that it was not great enough for this exalted task. When God perceived the humility of Mount Sinai, He specifically chose it as the venue for this event, to emphasize the importance of this character trait.¹³

Why is this crucial to receiving Torah?

⁹ Midrash Rabba (Exodus 28:2)

¹⁰ Brisker Rav

¹¹ Rashi (Exodus 19:13) quoting Mechilta

¹² Rashi (Exodus 19:13) quoting Mechilta.

¹³ Midrash Rabba (Numbers 13:3)

We can answer this by posing another question. The Torah says: "And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert."¹⁴ Why was the Torah given in a desert? Because a desert is empty.¹⁵ What this means is that to acquire Torah – to receive God's wisdom – we must first be willing to put our own self-assuredness aside, to realize we still have a lot to learn, and to open up space inside. A desert, empty and void, symbolizes this process.

Na'aseh V'nishma

A key aspect of the Sinai event is the resounding avowal by the Jews, "We will do and we will listen." This statement of complete acceptance of the will of God is the paradigm of the Jewish approach to mitzvot.

There are two possible approaches to the relationship between God and man. One is that God's will is so far beyond human reason that there is no possibility of understanding, and thus we follow His commands without any attempt to understand at all. The other is that if God commanded us, then our intellect must be sufficient to understand what we are commanded; therefore, if we do not comprehend, we are not obligated.

Each of these is true, but each one alone is incorrect.

God granted man powers of intellect that enable us to grasp some of God's will. However, so that man's hubris should not permit him to think that his understanding of God is complete, God also expects us to follow His commands even without understanding. This is the uniqueness of *Na'aseh V'nishma*. The statement 'We will listen' says that we must try to comprehend God's will. But it is preceded by 'We will do' – i.e. that our first obligation is to bow to God's will even when we do not comprehend.

¹⁴ Numbers 1:1

¹⁵ Talmud - Eruvin 54a

This is the fine balance: recognizing the great intellect that God granted to man, while understanding its limits in its perception of God.

The Day of the Giving of the Torah

Moses gathers the people together at the foot of Mount Sinai. A great pillar of fire and smoke are seen emanating from the cloud atop the mountain. Moses then ascends into the cloud, and the entire nation awaits the word of God. At that moment, God's voice and presence fills the world; all of nature is still, as the entire Jewish nation hears and sees God's voice proclaiming the Ten Commandments. Moses then informs the people that he will be ascending the mountain for 40 days and nights to receive the rest of the Torah, and to bring down the Tablets of Law inscribed with the Ten Commandments.¹⁶

Each of the particulars of that day is of great significance. We will delve into just a few aspects.

Maimonides writes:¹⁷

The Jews did not believe in Moses because of miracles that he performed. Any belief which is only a result of miracles remains subject to doubt, since perhaps it is being done with magic. At Mount Sinai, the Jewish people heard God call to Moses and participated with him in this prophetic experience. From then on, our belief in Moses was established.

It would seem that the main purpose of the giving of the Torah, beyond the specific commands, was to concretize the knowledge that God had actually spoken to Moses, and to be certain that the rest of the Torah was truthfully transmitted from God to Moses. Indeed, no other religion is founded on a national experience of prophecy.¹⁸ This

¹⁶ Exodus 24:1 with Rashi and Ramban

¹⁷ Fundamentals of Torah 8:1

¹⁸ see Kuzari 1:87

creates a unique Jewish relationship with God and Torah that is based on knowledge rather than faith.

This begins to explain the conundrum that we posed concerning the Ten Commandments. Altogether, the Torah contains 613 commandments, transmitted over the course of many years:

- the first commandments were given in Egypt¹⁹
- more were given during the 49-day period between the Exodus and Mount Sinai²⁰
- the majority were given throughout the 40 years in the desert
- the final command was given only days before Moses' passing²¹

So why were these 10 specifically chosen to be given on Mount Sinai? Are they are in some way greater than the other 603?

In fact, there is no difference between one of the Ten Commandments or any other law in the Torah. The requirement to observe them is equal. So that strengthens our question: Why these 10?

The Ten Commandments are meant to be the fundamental principles of all 613 mitzvot. Rav Sa'adya Gaon, a 10th century scholar, delineated all the commandments into ten families, based on the Ten Commandments.²² It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this in detail, but a cursory examination will show the fundamentals of this idea:

As is well known, the commandments were given on two tablets. From the chart, we see that the commandments seem to be clearly divided into two groups: those that apply between man and God, and those between man and man.

¹⁹ Exodus chapter 12

²⁰ Talmud - Sanhedrin 56b; Rashi - Exodus 15:25

²¹ Deut. 31:19

²² "Azharot" by Rav Sa'adya Gaon; see Rashi (Exodus 24:12)

Tablet #1 <i>between man and <u>God</u></i>	Tablet #2 <i>between man and <u>man</u></i>
1. I am the Lord your God	6. Do not kill
2. You shall have no other gods	7. Do not commit adultery
3. Do not make idols	8. Do not steal
4. Observe Shabbat	9. Do not bear false witness
5. Honor your parents	10. Do not desire other's possessions

Look closely. One of the commands seems to be misplaced: the fifth commandment, "Honor your parents." The common explanation is that the parent-child relationship is a metaphor for the human relationship to God. From the moment of infancy and beyond, the way a parent acts toward their child forms in the child's consciousness a paradigm for how God relates to us.

But we can also use this as a means to illustrate the way each of the commandments is expanded to include significant portions of the Torah. The principle of honoring parents is to teach us gratitude. This would seem to be a simple act, but it is fraught with difficulty. In order to be grateful, one needs to recognize that they are lacking, and need other people. Someone who thinks they do not need others, even when "accidentally" someone else may help them, does not feel grateful. This recognition of our innate deficiency – that I come from somewhere (i.e. my parents), and am dependent – is the beginning of accepting God.

Therefore honoring parents is the basis of all the mitzvot which mandate our submission to a higher authority, and that is why it is part of the first tablet. This is but one illustration of how to approach each of the Ten Commandments as a principle for the rest of Torah.

Suspended Mountain

Before speaking the Ten Commandments, God suspended the mountain over the people's heads and said, "If you will accept the Torah – good. And if not, the mountain will bury you."²³

As described earlier, the Jewish people eagerly accepted the Torah, declaring "We will do and we will listen." If so, why the need for coercion?

The simple answer is that although the people volunteered to fulfill the Torah, God wanted to make sure they understood that it is really an obligation.²⁴

In a deeper sense, the mountain being suspended over the nation is to reinforce the inevitability of the Torah. The Torah has two levels. On one level, Torah is the individual choice of each person, and there is free will as to its observance. However, there is another reality: The world requires Torah. A world without the revelation of God, without an absolute standard of morality to guide humanity, is a world devoid of its ultimate purpose. Therefore, once the Torah was willingly accepted, God emphasized the inescapable truth that without the existence of the Torah, the world cannot exist. Without the guiding light of Torah, the world would ultimately revert to its pre-creation state of "void and nothingness."²⁵

²³ Talmud - Shabbat 88a

²⁴ Tosfot (Shabbat 88a, s.v. "Kafa")

²⁵ Genesis 1:2; Talmud - Shabbat 88a; Midrash Rabba (Exodus 47:4)