

# V'ZOT HATORAH, THIS IS THE TORAH

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

I

## BACK TO SINAI

As we discussed in last week's shiur, the first third of Sefer D'varim (Chapters 1-11) is essentially a historic retelling of some of the major events which happened to the previous generation - the generation of the Exodus (Dor Yotz'ei Mitzrayim). In the first three chapters (Parashat D'varim), Mosheh Rabbenu recounts some of the military and conquest data, including those which this new generation -the generation of Conquest (Dor Ba'ei ha'Aretz) - had experienced.

Over the course of the next 8 chapters (4-11), Mosheh intersperses a long speech relating to the Stand at Sinai with exhortative and inspirational instruction, commonly called Mussar. Although we would certainly expect the Revelation to play a central role in his retelling, the style and method of that recitation raises several questions.

[The reader is strongly encouraged to have a Tanakh open for the rest of the shiur].

Note that there is not one seamless account here; rather, we have several descriptions of the Stand at Sinai, as follows:

- 1) 4:9-15
- 1') 4:32-36
- 2) 5:2-29
- 3) 9:7-10:11

This division is accurate if we look at the specific verses which are direct explications of the Sinai experience. If, however, we look at each description through a wider lens, we can divide them into larger speeches. In order to do so, we need to note that each description is prefaced with necessary introductions (as will be clarified below) as well as the implications of the Stand at Sinai, which

reverberate through many more verses than those outlined. I would like to suggest that there are three description-sets here, as follows:

- 1) 4:1-40
- 2) 5:1-6:3
- 3) 9:7-10:11

[Again, I suggest that the reader follow each section with a Tanakh in hand; these divisions will become apparent at first inspection. Not only are the Parashiot broken up this way in the text, but the speeches flow rather seamlessly within these divisions. There is yet another "text-clue" which points to this division - but more on that later.]

## II

### 'AREI MIKLAT

#### (CITIES OF REFUGE)

For purposes of our shiur, we will direct our analysis to the two speeches in Parashat Va'Et'hanan - 4:1-40 and 5:1-6:3. Note that these two descriptions are interrupted with a brief narrative about Mosheh's activities - he assigns the three 'Arei Miklat (cities of refuge) on the East Bank of the Jordan. Why are Mosheh's speeches interrupted with this narrative?

In addition, there is a peculiarly significant verse placed in the middle of the 'Arei Miklat narrative. Significant because it is a broad statement about Torah and Mosheh's rule in teaching Torah to the Jewish people. Peculiar because of its location:

Then Mosheh set apart on the east side of the Jordan three cities to which a homicide could flee, someone who unintentionally kills another person, the two not having been at enmity before; the homicide could flee to one of these cities and live: Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland belonging to the B'nei Re'uven, Ramoth in Gilead belonging to the B'nei Gad, and Golan in Bashan belonging to the B'nei Menasheh.

V'Zot haTorah Asher Sam Mosheh liPh'nei V'nei Yisra'el

(And this is the Torah that Mosheh placed before the B'nei Yisra'el)

These are the decrees and the statutes and ordinances that Mosheh spoke to the Israelites when they had come out of Egypt, beyond the Jordan in the valley opposite Beth-P'or, in the land of King

Sihon of the Amorites, who reigned at Heshbon, whom Mosheh and the Israelites defeated when they came out of Egypt. They occupied his land and the land of King Og of Bashan, the two kings of the Amorites on the eastern side of the Jordan: from Aroer, which is on the edge of the Wadi Arnon, as far as Mount Sirion (that is, Hermon), together with all the Arabah on the east side of the Jordan as far as the Sea of the Arabah, under the slopes of Pisgah. (D'varim 4:41-49)

Why is this central verse (which we declare every time the Sefer Torah is raised for us to see) placed in the middle of a Parashah about 'Arei Miklat?

### III

#### SH'MA YISR'AEL

Before responding to our questions - two more are in order. We are all familiar with what is perhaps the most famous and central verse in the Torah - Sh'ma Yisra'el, Hashem Eloheinu, Hashem Echad (6:4) Note that this verse comes immediately after the second "Sinai speech". What is the significance of its placement here? Moreover, what is the meaning of the two introductory words - Sh'ma Yisra'el?

...and one final question. Note that the beginning of each of the "Sinai-speeches" begins with a curiously similar phrase (one which shows up a number of times in D'varim - and only in D'varim):

4:1 - So now, Yisra'el, give heed (Yisra'el Sh'ma) to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that Hashem, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.

5:1 - Mosheh convened all Yisra'el, and said to them: Hear, O Yisra'el (Sh'ma Yisra'el), the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently.

Why does each speech begin with the familiar Sh'ma Yisra'el (albeit in inverted fashion in the first instance)?

#### SUMMARY

In all, we have asked seven questions regarding Mosheh's speeches and the one narrative in our Parashah:

- Why are the two major speeches both about the Stand at Sinai?
- 2. Why is that speech divided into two via the 'Arei-Miklat interruption?
- 3. What is the import of the 'Arei Miklat narrative here?

4. Why is the "banner-verse" v'Zot haTorah... placed in the middle of the 'Arei Miklat narrative?
5. What is the rationale behind the placement of the "famous" Sh'ma Yisra'el... section?
6. What does Sh'ma Yisra'el mean?
7. Why does each of the first two Sinai-speeches begin with Sh'ma Yisra'el?

## IV

### MOSHEH "RABBENU" IN ACTION

In last week's shiur, we discussed the job of a Rebbi and how Mosheh earned his reputation as "Mosheh Rabbenu" (Moses our Teacher), his eternal title, when he brought the past into the present for the second generation. This was, as we described, the first task of a Rebbi - to bridge generational gaps and to bring the students back to Sinai. Mosheh began this mission in Parashat D'varim with his educationally sophisticated history lesson.

The second job of a Rebbi - is to be the "Shadchan" between his students and haKadosh Barukh Hu. He must inspire his charges to seek out their own relationship with God and he must continue to guide them in the development of that relationship.

After Mosheh established the bridge between the Dor Yotz'ei Mitzrayim (generation of the Exodus) and Dor Ba'ei ha'Aretz (generation of the Conquest), he began to instruct the people about their personal (and individual) relationships with God.

This process, however, can never be accomplished in one single lesson. There are various sophisticated steps which must be taken to guide others to the Ribbono shel Olam (Master of the Universe) - and each of them is a lesson in and of itself. This is as true about Mosheh and his students as it is today.

Just like any relationship, the person endeavoring to enter into an interaction with God must learn about two things - the nature of the "Other" (in this case, God) and the medium of that relationship (in this case, Mitzvot).

With one introductory hypothesis, we will see how these lessons are presented by Mosheh in an educationally sequential format.

## V

### SH'MA YISRA'EL: INTRODUCTION OF A LESSON

The hypothesis is as follows: The phrase Sh'ma Yisra'el which introduces each of the three major speeches in our Parashah, is indeed an introduction - of a new lesson. This explains the unique relationship between this phrase and Sefer D'varim, which is (as we explained in last week's shiur), a session in Mosheh Rabbenu's Beit Midrash. This also explains the division of the various lessons in our Parashah, as follows:

#### THE FIRST LESSON: Hashem IS THE ONE TRUE GOD

The first Sinai-speech (4:1-40) is about the Revelation - as an explanation of the Nature of God (as much as can be understood). True to the "negative theology" popularized by Rambam (in which all that we can know about God is what we can negate about Him - e.g. He is not weak etc.), most of this Parashah is a warning that we should not confuse any of the manifestations we experienced at Sinai with God Himself:

Since you saw no form when Hashem spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure - the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that Hashem your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. (D'varim 4:15-19)

Indeed, the end of this speech is a reminder of God's singular and unique existence and that He alone is the one God:

To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that Hashem is God; there is no other besides him...So acknowledge today and take to heart that Hashem is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. (4:35,39)

The focus of this speech is about who God is, as it were, and who He is not. [Note how Rambam, in the beginning of Hilkhos Avodah Zarah (Laws of Idolatry), outlines the "history" of idolatry.]

#### THE SECOND LESSON: THE VALIDITY OF MOSHEH'S PROPHECY

Reading through the second Sinai-speech (5:1-6:3), we see that the implications of the Revelation are not about the essence of God and the dangers of idolatry attendant upon confusion arising from that Revelation; rather, it is a retelling of the people's reaction in response to that great moment:

[Immediately after the "review" of the Decalogue...] These words Hashem spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and He added no more (or He never ceased - see Rashi). He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me. When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you approached me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders; and you said, "Look, Hashem our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of Hashem our God any longer, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? Go near, you yourself, and hear all that Hashem our God will say. Then tell us everything that Hashem our God tells you, and we will listen and do it." Hashem heard your words when you spoke to me, and Hashem said to me: "I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they are right in all that they have spoken. If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever! Go say to them, 'Return to your tents.' But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess." You must therefore be careful to do as Hashem your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left. You must follow exactly the path that Hashem your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess. Now this is the commandment... (D'varim 5:22-6:1)

As is readily seen, the focus of this speech is the people's reaction to the Revelation (fear) and their appointment of Mosheh as their "go-between" to receive the rest of God's commandments.

This established Mosheh as the "Lawgiver" (Mehokek - see D'varim 33:21) - and enabled him to then instruct the B'nei Yisra'el regarding all of the other Mitzvot (besides the Decalogue) which they had not directly heard from God.

In summary, we have two lessons in our Parashah, each based on the experience at Sinai - and each introduced with the Sh'ma Yisra'el formula.

The first lesson is about God - and the second is about Torah. In other words, the first introduces the B'nei Yisra'el to the object of their relationship, while the second describes the vehicle for that relationship.

Why then is the narrative regarding 'Arei Miklat placed between these two speeches?

## VI

### THE "HIDDUSH" (NOVELTY) OF 'AREI MIKLAT

We take it for granted that intention (Kavvanah) plays a central role in religious behavior - that our attitude and focus while performing Mitzvot affects the spiritual impact (and, in some cases, the Halakhic consequences) of those actions. There is, however, very little indication of this central religious component in the first four books of the Torah. The one exception is in relation to the Mishkan - specifically in the world of Korbanot (offerings). Outside of this, we only find out about prohibited actions (e.g. stealing, eating Hametz on Pesach) and obligations (returning a theft, eating Matzah on Pesach) - but we do not hear very much about the role of intent in Halakhah.

The one powerful exception to this is the rule of manslaughter, as outlined in Bamidbar 35 (although it is alluded to in Sh'mot 21:13 - see Rashi ad loc.). In case someone intentionally murders a fellow, he is liable for death. On the other hand, if it is an unintentional act ("manslaughter"), the killer has the benefit of the protection of the city of refuge - and the blood relative may not go there and exact vengeance for his dead relative.

The laws of murder/manslaughter are complex and demand a serious investigation, to understand the various shades of intent and how they apply to the case before the Beit Din.

The reason that, with this exception, the first four books of the Torah do not address the issue of intent is that they are the "instructions" about our relationships with each other and with God. Sefer D'varim, on the other hand, is Mosheh's instruction on HOW to relate to God - not just which actions to take, but which attitudes should accompany them.

Mosheh, therefore, interrupts his lessons about that relationship and does what every great teacher does - he demonstrates (instead of just preaching) how to put this lesson into action.

This is a critical piece of Torah - Mosheh has just taught a philosophical piece about the nature of God. Yet Judaism is not just philosophic speculation and meditation - it demands action. Therefore, Mosheh acts to demonstrate this component. Yet - the Mitzvah he chooses to demonstrate shows us the integration of intent/attitude and action.

And...Zot haTorah - "This is the Torah". In the middle of his lesson, Mosheh stops to perform a Mitzvah which demonstrates, better than any other, the complementary nature of action and attitude - and this is, indeed, the Torah. To borrow from Hillel - all the rest is commentary. In other words, the lesson of 'Arei Miklat is a lesson about the entire Torah.

After teaching this valuable lesson (by example), Mosheh goes on to teach that Torah (the Decalogue) and now, instead of introducing God, he introduces the Mehokek - himself!

Mosheh is now "set up" to teach them how to fully develop their relationship with God.

## VII

### SH'MA YISRA'EL: THE TELOS OF TORAH

Now we come to the third lesson - the "famous" Sh'ma Yisra'el. What is the essence of this lesson?

Sh'ma Yisra'el: Hashem is our God, Hashem is One. You shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

We are commanded to do more than follow a series of actions - and obey restrictions - ordained by God. We are called to be in a relationship with God, a relationship of love, commitment, constancy and much more. The next 6 chapters are replete with Mosheh's reminders to love God, to fear Him, to cleave to Him, to swear by His Name etc. None of this was mentioned anywhere earlier in the Torah - again, Mosheh is acting as the consummate Rabbi, bringing his students into the full sense of the relationship with God.

This is the third lesson - once we have been "introduced" to God and to his lawgiver (who can accurately convey His commands), we are taught about the ultimate goal of these commands - to love God, to fear Him, to walk in His ways etc.

We can now go back to our original questions and answer:

- Why are the two major speeches both about the Stand at Sinai?
  - each teaches us about a different implication of that experience; the first teaches us about WHO God is, the second about the vehicle for entering into a relationship with Him (Torah) and the "Shadchan" (Mosheh Rabbenu).
2. Why is that speech divided into two via the 'Arei-Miklat interruption?
  - as above, each teaches a distinct lesson.
3. What is the import of the 'Arei Miklat narrative here?
  - Mosheh Rabbenu is teaching, by example, the importance of integrating intent/attitude with action in fulfilling Mitzvot..



4. Why is the "banner-verse" v'Zot haTorah... placed in the middle of the 'Arei Miklat narrative?
  - this is a central lesson of Torah - that action alone is not enough and that the consequences of a person's actions depend on the approach with which he acts.
5. What is the rationale behind the placement of the "famous" Sh'ma Yisra'el... section?
  - after teaching us about God and about the vehicle for entering into a relationship with Him, Mosheh teaches us about the ultimate goal of those Mitzvot.
6. What does Sh'ma Yisra'el mean?
  - it is the introduction of a new "lesson"
7. Why does each of the first two Sinai-speeches begin with Sh'ma Yisra'el?
  - as above, each is a lesson in and of itself.

## VIII

### POSTSCRIPT

One question which remains is about the order of these lessons - wouldn't it have been more appropriate to teach about the "love" for God before our commitment via Mitzvot? Aren't we motivated to action because of our feelings for the one (or One) on whose behalf we are acting?

I once heard a beautiful explanation of this - albeit in a slightly different context - from Mori haRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l. The Rov compared the two statements of Hazal regarding "Imitatio Dei":

A) "Just as He is gracious, you should be gracious; just as He is compassionate, so should you be compassionate etc." (BT Shabbat 133b)

B) "Just like He comforted the bereaved, so you comfort the bereaved; just as He visited the sick, so you visit the sick etc." (BT Sotah 14a)

He noted that in the first statement we are called to imitate Divine characteristics, as it were. The second statement, on the other hand, challenges us to imitate Divine actions, so to speak.

Instead of seeing these as either contradictory or parallel (but unrelated) statements, the Rov explained that the two of them are linked in series.

Unlike the way that the "world" thinks, that we act on behalf of someone because we care about them, the Torah is teaching us how to develop that compassion - by acting on their behalf. We do not develop good character by being born with it or waiting for it to come to us - we become compassionate by behaving compassionately. The second statement, imitating Divine actions (which the Torah mandates - see MT Evel 14:1), comes first, as it were. The second mandate, imitating Divine character, is the result of fulfilling the first.

In the same way, we understand why the Torah prefaced the "emotional" connection with God with the "mechanical" one. We come to love and fear God (and desire to cleave to Him) not as a motivation for fulfilling Mitzvot - rather as the result of that fulfillment.

We can also see this in the Parashah of K'riat Sh'ma:

Sh'ma Yisra'el: Hashem is our God, Hashem is One. You shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

(and how do we come to this intense level of commitment and love?)

Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

(See Sifri Va'Et'hanan #8, where the command to study is seen as a method for achieving love for God)

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