

The Chain of Revelations at Sinai

By Dov Elbaum

The revelation at Mount Sinai is the most formative event of Jewish culture. It may have been a historical event. It may have taken place otherwise than described. It may not have even taken place at all. But in our collective awareness, Mount Sinai is a beginning of Jewish culture. Upon coming out of Egypt, the People of Israel separates from the Egyptian body politic and becomes something else: a new nation. And the substance of which the young nation, born at the Exodus, was to be made. The meaning, the profound, manifold message that Jewish culture brings along with it, begins to take shape in what we call the revelation at Sinai – *ma'amad Har-Sinai*.

But not only substance was introduced at Sinai. In addition to the Ten Commandments, this scene invokes a unique perception, or sense, on which the Commandments rest. The account in Exodus 20 requires a careful reading: the Israelites' arrival at Sinai three months after leaving Egypt; Moses ascending the blazing mount as all the people are seeing the thundering. When in Exodus 19 God calls Moses to tell him about the revelatory spectacle that He has planned, He also explains to him why this is necessary – "you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."

The account of the revelation at Sinai is underlain by God's wish to turn a whole nation into the vanguard of all other nations. He is to bestow upon its members the essence of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But what does this mean? The Israelites were to become an elite unit, an advance guard that surveys the ground in search for new frontiers. In Genesis God chose individuals – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Josef. Empowering them and placing them at the forefront, He drove them to *lech-lecha* – to "Go forth" and march toward unknown territory. These hand-picked men were to be the trailblazers of human culture, by setting a personal example for all else to follow. But upon reaching Mount Sinai, we encounter a divine wish to take an entire nation and turn all of its members into the vanguard of humanity. The members of this nation are chosen to be the harbingers of holiness. Their task, however, will not be performed by the hands of reclusive saints from monasteries, churches and mountaintops, preaching for sacred seclusion. At Mount Sinai God chooses to place holiness amid life. This is to be attained with His holy nation – a social group in

which all members are holy, where the option of becoming holy is open to all. This is why this story merits a new reading with a fresh perspective.

The centrality of the revelation at Sinai is well recognized. Yet, I would like to consider it from a less familiar angle. After all, how could one hope to offer new insights about the scene at Sinai? Despite many years of studying this story, only recently I came to realize that all this time I've failed to notice something very important about it: the physical location called Mount Sinai serves as the setting for a series of revelations. That is, another revelation occurs at the very same place, serving as a prelude to the Ten Commandments. This angle may provide access to the hidden and enigmatic aspects of the Sinai story, to a secret that the Bible would like to tell us about the Ten Commandments.

First Revelation – the Burning Bush

The first revelation is the famous vision of the burning bush that was not consumed. The Bible stages this scene as a prelude to the revelatory set at Sinai. Therefore, we may read the Sinai revelation and this story as a single unit.

In Exodus 3, Moses encounters for the first time a god who wants to take the Israelites out of Egypt. We have all studied this text many times. I will try, however, to present it in a different context, and to encounter it in a new, different garb: "Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God." (Ex. 3:1) Moses is a shepherd. He wanders to a familiar location, the mountain of God at Horeb. Moses is literally approaching revelation. He did not stray in the desert and came across God, who revealed Himself unexpectedly. Rather, he went to a familiar site called the mountain of God at Horeb. And indeed, a revelation takes place before him: "An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed."

Judaism is a verbal culture. Our love for words makes us forget what is right next to them. I read this portion so often, yet I'm always attracted to the words, to the content of the revelation in the burning bush. And though I know that it is important to consider the scenery and not just the stage, I never break free from the words' captivating charm. Interestingly, the biblical text does not necessarily focus on the words of which it is made. Its heart is open much wider. When reading a biblical account of a given scene, it would be a mistake to focus only on its verbal

components. We should also remain attuned to the visual images that it conjures. Here, the Bible paints a beautiful picture: a bush all aflame yet not consumed. What is this image? Trying to capture it in my mind, I might consider the burning bush as something more than a device used to pique Moses' curiosity and lead him to the verbal revelation. This is not a mere display window for attracting Moses' attention. This is an integral part of the revelation. It is an image that requires decipherment, because it forms part of the message conveyed to Moses by combining the visual and the verbal. But if the burning bush forms part of the revelation proper, what does this revelation express? What does it tell us? It is obviously an expression of eternity. The stuff of which the bush is made is not consumed and it can burn forever. But moreover, it is made up of constant change while remaining its true self.

What is fire? It is power, light and heat. It is energy. It provides us with the things that are essential to our existence. But it is also dangerous. It may consume. Fire is a wonderful image. It has a generous, loving, life-giving aspect, yet it also burns. Visually, the sight of fire captures our gaze. What is so hypnotizing about it? It is always in a flux. And this endless flux is chaotic, its movement and shape are unpredictable. Fire is a classic chaotic structure; even if we had all the data regarding its behavior we still wouldn't be able to predict its shape.

In our vision, God is in fact telling Moses with this image – I am about to talk to you about something that is utterly essential, powerful and significant. But it is also extremely dangerous. It is in perpetual motion, and this motion is chaotic and may advance in any direction unpredictably. He is giving Moses a visual calling card before any words are uttered in the scene.

After this visual calling card is pulled out, Moses speaks out: **"Moses said: 'I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?' When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: 'Moses! Moses!' He answered: 'Here I am.' And He said: 'Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.' 'I am,' He said, 'the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.**

And the LORD continued: 'I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to

bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now, the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.' But Moses said to God: **'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?'** And He said: **'I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.'** (Ex.3:3-15) In this last verse, the Bible is in fact telling us that this revelation is a prelude to a future event soon to occur at the very same place. That it is only one of a series of events.

God is sending Moses on a mission: to release the People of Israel. But Moses, who is not keen to carry it out, asks God a question:

Moses said to God: 'When I come to the Israelites and say to them: 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me: 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?' God and the Israelites are strangers to one another. They have lived in Egypt for decades and no longer remember who the God of their fathers is. The Israelites had lost their identity. The expression "the God of your fathers" doesn't mean anything to them. At this very point, the verbal content that is key to our reading of the revelation comes into play. **"And God said to Moses: 'Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh.'"** Moses asks God for His name. In the Bible, a person's name is not an external feature; rather, it expresses the person's essence. Jacob, for example, is given a new name during his personal transformation, and becomes Israel. One's name is a matter of essence. Therefore, when Moses asks God for His name, he is asking in effect – "Who are you? What's your story?" And God, in a moment of candor that is clear of any pretense, answers *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* – "I will be whatever I will be."

In the context of the visual image that we discussed earlier, it is easy to understand the meaning of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. The divinity may assume any form. It will be whatever it will be. It cannot say what it will be, lest it betray what it is, its essence. *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is a god that self-identifies itself as an ever-forming being. It is a being that is perpetually dynamic and evolving. A being whose very core is defined by constant development. The divinity changes ceaselessly, it evolves relentlessly. It may appear in an infinite number of forms. God's proper name – YHWE, is a name of becoming that encompasses all tenses. The consonants that make up its name denote

past, present and future in the Hebrew language. In the same sense, it is not governed by our standard inflections and linguistic forms. The vision of the burning bush is a statement: the divinity is possibility incarnate.

And yet, God immediately regrets His sincerity:

"He continued: 'Thus shall you say to the Israelites: 'Ehyeh sent me to you.' And God said further to Moses: 'Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever. This is My appellation for all eternity.'" While speaking, God realizes that this message cannot be delivered to the masses. The descendants of slaves would not accept the complexity of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. It is clear that in the course of His speech, God is constructing and branding Himself. He establishes a more accessible image that is easier to digest, that may be readily held on to. But this is just the first revelation at Sinai.

Second Revelation – The Ten Commandments

We now reach the Ten Commandments. The scene that takes place before the entire people upon their departure from Egypt, in which the Torah and the Ten Commandments are given to them, is the second revelation at Mount Sinai. Public interest is crucial here. God is offering the People of Israel a complex relationship.

At the first revelation, God is sending Moses to stand up to Pharaoh, king of the Egyptian empire. Their titanic struggle will clearly be daunting. This is why it is important to Him to offer an unambiguous contract. The agreement is simple – I'm taking you out of Egypt and you will be my subjects. That is why Moses is trying to understand God's offer, and who is offering the nation His domination. God replies in two ways – with a vision – a burning bush that is not consumed, and with words – *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*.

If we read this revelation as a prelude to the revelation at Mount Sinai, we would expect to see again, at the very same place, a revelation that is based on a dual image, which is both visual and textual. What is the visual revelation at Mount Sinai? Here, too, the main image is fire, as the entire mount is ablaze. But this is a bush of a different caliber. Instead of a mere plant, the flames engulf a massive geological formation. An additional description is introduced: **"And all the people see the**

thundering." (Ex. 20:15) The sound is so powerful that it becomes a visual image in and of itself.

Many of us, me included, are used to reading the Ten Commandments as basic laws. But in light of the context in which the Bible presents them, this reading doesn't work. If we are to remain true to the biblical text, we must admit that the story of the Ten Commandments does the exact opposite. The Ten Commandments were devised as mechanisms for protecting the eternal fire of the bush. In the same way that an electrical appliance comes with instructions, the Ten Commandments instruct us how to avoid stagnation. The commandments teach us how to circumvent a frozen standstill, deadlock and fixity. They inform us how the people that is expected to be the kingdom of priests and a holy nation, a people whose purpose is to be the vanguard of the international community, is the right people for the job. They teach this nation how to ensure that its culture never stops developing and enriching itself. They guide how to preserve the power and vitality of fire. In order to create such a culture, one must beware of ten things, which are not laws, but mechanisms. In effect God is saying: "These would help you – as individuals and as the Hebrews – to protect freedom and retain development, change, and variety as your key to eternal vitality."

An additional step is made in this revelation. In the earlier scene, Moses asked God – "What are you?" And God replied – a burning bush. Now He is telling the Israelites – "I want you to be a burning bush too." Maintaining a relationship with God entails being a burning bush that is not consumed. And how is it done? With the Ten Commandments.

"I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage": The first commandment opens with an unequivocal declaration of freedom. It is the story of the Ten Commandments in a single sentence. The Ten Commandments are guiding principles on how to be free. Though the event is public, the address is in the singular, the commandments are addressed to both the individual and society as a whole. **"You shall have no other gods before Me":** This commandment emphasizes the fact that this encounter is made face-to-face – "before Me." In the portions that follow, Moses says "Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mount out of the fire" (Deut. 5:4). The face is a crucial element here. It appears

repeatedly in the context of the Ten Commandments. When one reveals one's face to one's fellow, a most personal thing is disclosed. The other discovers who the person standing before him or her is. But contrary to a painting or a picture, the face is alive, and changes constantly. It has an endless wealth of expressions at any given moment, as life engraves upon it the passage of time. The face also changes in our interaction with the face of the other. The same applies to God – His face depends on the face one turns at Him.

We may now see that the Ten Commandments are an individual's turn to another, calling upon him: "Avoid placing other gods as a partition between my face and yours." That is why the next commandment is, "**You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image or any likeness.**" The opposite of a face is a mask. When you make gods of a sculptured image you prevent the face from revealing itself at any given moment. This commandment does not deny that God is corporeal. It does not object to the notion that God is beyond reckoning. You can imagine God any way you like, as long as you don't turn Him into a mask – a fixed object. An object cannot change. You've tried to cage-in the infinite within the finite. You froze God, and you froze yourself, too. The idea is to protect *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. Freezing the figure by capturing it in a statue or an image entails the loss of some of the flexibility that is inherent to the notion of God.

We are beginning to see that this charter displays great profundity. It is exceptional, without parallel in the world of the ancient Near East. I do not know of another society in those times that chose for itself a charter that is grounded in God's dynamic change. It is a charter that outlines how to be charter-less. I set rules that would protect me from becoming subjected to rules. I am set free from the tyranny of an image that shapes me without allowing me to enter into dialogue with it.

"You shall not take in vain the name of the LORD your God": What is the meaning of this commandment? People perform the greatest wrongs in God's name – Jihad, the crusades and many other atrocities. Up to this point, the Commandments have instructed one how to avoid subjugating one's self. Now, God says, do not subject me to your own purposes. When you want to be atrocious do not do it in my name. This has nothing to do with oath; this is about the profound sense of the expression *naval bi-reshut ha-Torah*: a villain in the guise of a pious man.

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy": the imperative mode in the Book of Exodus is applied mostly to mental acts, not to practical commandments. The social

explanation for the need to observe the Sabbath is also related to God's model of liberty: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger, may be refreshed." (Ex. 23:12) This injunction should not be read as a **halakhic** requirement to rest (which yields halakhic queries on "how one should rest"). Rather, it is a principle whereby slave, stranger and livestock also deserve rest and freedom. The fourth commandment calls upon us not to turn others into slaves. In the same way that one should be careful not to become a slave, one's employees should not be made into slaves. One day of the week when everyone is free. A day when sabbatical human freedom is expressed in the elimination of social hierarchies. The Sabbath creates a fixed realm in which all subjugating relationships are neutralized – personal, community-related and social. On the Sabbath, man ceases from being master, landlord or boss, and becomes like one of his workers or employees. The business aspect of life is suspended, and so the hierarchies of buyer-seller, employer-employee, consumer-service provider, disappear. On the Sabbath all is equal (animals, too), before freedom.

"Honor your father and mother so that you may long endure on the land that the LORD your God is assigning to you": What's that got to do with liberty? Moreover, how is honoring one's parents related to longevity? In the verse, longevity is attached to the land that God assigns to you, that is, the Land of Israel. This is not only a concrete imperative, to care for your ageing parents and support them. This is a call upon the members of this nation: if you wish to be a free nation and survive as an enduring culture on this land, you had better remain connected to your parents' legacy. You are not obligated to follow the same path as theirs. There is no requirement to behave in the same way as them. This is about how to live, change, and develop. There is no direct reward, a return for honoring one's parents, in the form of longevity. When a society is heedful of its parents, that is, of its history, of the people who bore its past undertakings – then it will indeed endure on its land. Its underlying message is that when a society does not appreciate its ancestry, it fails in essence to establish any connection with or continuity on its land. What is respect? Respect means to acknowledge the presence of another. When a guest comes over to my house and I want to pay him respect, I consider his presence in my home to be important. I make room for him, serve him refreshments, I appreciate his being there. Respect for one's parents doesn't mean speaking with them politely. It means accommodating them,

heeding their presence not only personally, but also metaphysically. "So that you may long endure on the land," is not a system of punishment and reward, but a statement – if you would like to survive and remain in this place in a meaningful way, you must give meaning to the presence of your parents – to those who carry the burden of the past. When inverted, this commandment becomes the expression according to which God "visits the iniquity of parents upon children." (Ex. 34:7) When a society establishes a culture, that culture is imbued upon the next generation. Not as punishment, but in consequence. This applies all the more to sculptures and graven images: when such objects are cast, they impact future generations. The descendants are unaware of their subjection to a pattern, which robs them of the prerogative to exercise their free will. This is where it all begins: when the divinity is frozen, when it is made into a still image, the catastrophes are inevitable.

We now reach the second half of the Ten Commandments: **"You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor; You shall not covet..."** The purpose of these commandments is to guarantee the liberty of the other, of the fellow. If you steal, commit adultery, covet, your actions impinge on the living space of your fellow. If you wish to be free, you had better allow your fellow to be equally free.

"You shall not murder"- murder is, after all, the worst crime there is: taking away another person's life and liberty. In this sense, **"You shall not commit adultery"** – a person who is in a relationship, who is supposed to preserve its intimacy, and replaces his or her partner with someone else, is unfaithful to the same "I am the LORD your God," that we talked about; either in interpersonal relationships or in the relationship between man and God. **"You shall not steal"** – this is not yours, you did not create or develop it. You did not earn it. Don't take from others. The moment you take from someone else you opt for the mask. You lose the opportunity to be creative and independent.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" - concerns the defacement of speech, one of the most important human creations; perhaps humanity's greatest creation of all. Do not destroy the tool with which you create reality. Falsehood is terrible not only because it deceives; it destroys language, the way in which humans communicate and think.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife and male or female slave, or his ox or his ass or anything that is your neighbor's." Covetousness runs deeper than jealousy. It means that I want somebody else's house, someone else's wife. I don't project my own wishes, my inner self and the relationships that I have created by following my own path. It means that I prefer to copy from someone else. It derives from the perception that what is good for my fellow is also good for me. Such a perception does not recognize the singularity of each and every individual, that each of us has his or her own story.

We have come to see that the two revelations at Sinai deal with the same central themes. They deal with liberty. They deal with change. These revelations complement one another: the first discloses to Moses the essence of the God with Whom he is about to be married; the second describes God's expectations from His people. He expects the Israelites to be free.

Is it surprising that they immediately went on to worship the golden calf? Such liberty is an enormous responsibility. Humans are granted a mandate to shape the face of their God. God changes each time the person changes; the person changes each time that God changes. This is a dialogical relationship in which each party affects its counterpart. This situation resembles a wedding, and not incidentally, Jeremiah the Prophet uses the following images in his description of the journey through the desert: "I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed Me in the wilderness." (Jer. 2:2) Jeremiah also views the scene at Sinai as a wedding. The rabbis develop this image even more elaborately. The scene at Sinai is likened to a wedding because it promotes intimacy, a relationship of reciprocal influence by both partners. This is a relationship that demands from both sides to be free in the deepest sense of the word.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orr Scharf