

## Unceasing Revelation

### Ramban's Understanding of Ma'amad Har Sinai

#### I.

As Moshe is prepared to review the Aseret Ha-Dibrot with the Jewish people, he issues the following preamble;

“But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children.

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to Me, “Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children.

(Devarim 4:9-10)

Rashi<sup>1</sup> understands Moshe to be elaborating on a previous comment, that the Jewish people will earn the respect and admiration of other nations by meticulously guarding the Torah. Hence, the ‘forgetting’ referenced in this section of the Torah is neglecting to keep the mitzvot, which will, in turn, impact the national standing of the Jewish people.

Ibn Ezra<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, understands the verses in their simplest possible sense, focusing on the words, ‘the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb’, and concludes that what is under discussion is not the sum total of the commandments, but the experience of receiving the Torah itself. Indeed, Ibn Ezra concluded, even if we are to forget everything, we should be extremely vigilant not to forget the day that the Torah was given.

Ramban concurred with this reading<sup>3</sup>, and indeed, elevated this admonition, contra Rambam, to one of the six hundred thirteen mitzvot of the Torah. We are categorically prohibited from forgetting the experience of Matan Torah, the choreography, all that we saw and heard on that day, “*mi'kol ha'devarim asher ra'u einecha ha'kolot vi'ha'lapidim*”<sup>4</sup>. Rather, Ramban indicates that it is incumbent upon us not only to remember, in the sense of not forgetting, but to constantly reflect on the experience, “*lo nasir oto mida'atenu aval yibiyu eineinu v'libenu sham kol ha'yamim*”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, s.v rak.

<sup>2</sup> ibid, s.v. rak

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, s.v. rak; Hasagot Ha-Ramban L'Sefer HaMitzvot shel ha-Rambam, Shikhichat Ha'Lavin, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ramban Devarim (ibid).

<sup>5</sup> Hasagot Ha-Ramban (ibid).

## II.

Ramban's doctrine does not come altogether as a surprise. Indeed, Ramban understood that the glory of Hashem which rested on Sinai during revelation merely transferred over to the Mishkan, after its construction was complete. If the very sanctity of Sinai was perpetuated in this fashion, it seems fitting that the experience was meant to be perpetuated as well<sup>6</sup>.

Ramban asserts that the rationale for this mitzvah is exceedingly important, "*vi'ha'kavanah ba'zeb gedolah me'od*," as, through perpetuation of the memory of receiving the Torah from the Divine itself, as opposed to any intermediary, national belief in the veracity of the commandments will be ensured. Had we received the Torah from a human, no matter how great, the possibility of subsequent attrition of belief, especially in the context of another charismatic figure, would have been very real. Only through promulgation of Divine revelation can fealty to immutable commandments be sustained.

In this context, it is crucial to note that Ramban asserts that the prohibition of forgetting the Torah is indeed linked to a positive commandment to inform, as the verse indicates, our children and our grandchildren alike, of all that was experienced, '*v'todia kol ha'devarim asher ra'u einekha bi'ma'amad ha'nichbad ha'hu l'vanecha v'livnei vanecha ad olam*'<sup>8</sup>.

It should equally be noted that Ramban's concern regarding the future commitment of the Jewish people to immutable norms of the Torah is not limited to outright denial. Rather, Ramban repeatedly expresses concern that later figures may arise who, quite possibly, may not succeed in convincing the Jewish people outright that the Torah has been abrogated, but will achieve a measure of success in causing a measure of doubt surrounding this issue.

Characteristically, for Ramban, this was concerning enough. One of the most consistent motifs in Ramban's writings is the need for unwavering faith in the Giver of the Torah and in the authenticity of its commandments<sup>9</sup>. As such, the very possibility that anyone might succeed in introducing a measure of doubt in this reality was of deep and particular concern for Ramban.

Beyond the novelty of classifying this admonition as in fact a prohibition, there are at least three additional implications of Ramban's doctrine concerning forgetting, and failing to transmit, the experience of revelation per se.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for just example of this notion, Ramban's introduction to Sefer BeMidbar.

<sup>7</sup> Hasagot Ha-Ramban (ibid).

<sup>8</sup> Ramban Devarim (ibid).

<sup>9</sup> For just a few examples of this, see Ramban's presentation of the obligation of belief in the Almighty (Shemot 20:2), which Ramban elevated to the level of knowledge; Ramban's understanding of the verse *uli'ovdo b'chol levavchem* (Hasagot HaRamban to Sefer Ha-Mitzvot 5); Ramban's interpretation of what he deemed a mitzvah, *tamim tihiyeh im Hashem Elokecha* (Devarim 18:13).

### III.

Given that Ramban sets the bar, as far as this dual mitzvah is concerned, at absolute certitude, it is striking that Ramban is convinced that intergenerational transmission will meet this high bar.

Indeed, Ramban himself is deeply aware of the position that he has staked out, but he does not shy away from its implications. On the contrary, Ramban asserts, “when we transmit this matter to our children, they will know that this matter is true without any doubt whatsoever as if they saw it themselves, in every generation, for we would not testify falsely to our children, nor would we bequeath them falsehoods...”<sup>10</sup>

It is nothing short of striking to note the faith Ramban placed in the parent child relationship so as to meet his own self-imposed standard of unwavering certitude concerning the mitzvot. If the Talmudic dictum would indicate that bearing direct witness transcends receiving testimony, *she’lo tebe shemiyah gedolah me’reiyah*, Ramban, at least in this context, was prepared to equate them, “*k’ilu ra’ubu kol ha’dorot*”.

### IV.

The second implication of Ramban’s doctrine flows naturally from the first. If indeed the Torah is mandating intergenerational transmission of the experience of Sinai, the Torah, apparently, requires this not only of parents, but of grandparents as well, “*v’hodatam l’vanech v’livnei vanecha*.”

In this instance, too, Ramban is well aware of the implications of his doctrine, and subsequent complexities. Indeed, while there is an opinion recorded in the Talmud<sup>11</sup> that the verse in question mandates teaching Torah not only to our children, but to grandchildren as well, *prima facie*, this would not appear to support Ramban’s assertion that one is obliged to tell one’s grandchildren about the experience at Sinai. In point of fact, Rambam rules<sup>12</sup>, based on this verse, that qualitatively, the same obligation that exists to teach one’s son extends to one’s grandson, with the only distinction being one of priority.

Ramban addresses this issue head on, and argues that the Talmudic position supporting an obligation to teach grandchildren Torah is in fact consistent with his position, for “the study of faith in the veracity of Torah is the study of Torah itself<sup>13</sup>.”

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<sup>10</sup> Ramban Devarim 4:9.

<sup>11</sup> Kiddushin 30a.

<sup>12</sup> See Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Talmud Torah 1:2.

<sup>13</sup> Hasagot Ha-Ramban (ibid).

Apparently, Ramban understood the obligation that a grandparent had to teach grandchildren Torah in a fundamentally different way than Rambam. While Rambam unmistakably equated the obligation to children and grandchildren<sup>14</sup>, Ramban understood that the grandparent-grandchild relationship in Torah was one of promoting faith in the veracity and authenticity of Torah.

For its novelty, one can appreciate Ramban's position. While the spacing of two generations may lead, in some cases, to a certain natural distance in the relationship, it is precisely this gap which enables the grandchild to sense, in the grandparent's transmission, something of deep authenticity.

## V.

The third implication of Ramban's doctrine, unlike the first two, is not addressed directly by Ramban. The mishnah in the third perek of Pirkei Avot utilizes the verse in question for what appears to be a completely different purpose:

Rabbi Dostai ben Rabbi Yannai said in the name of Rabbi Meir: whoever forgets one word of his study, scripture accounts it to him as if he were mortally guilty, as it is said, "But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes" (Deuteronomy 4:9). One could [have inferred that this is the case] even when his study proved [too] hard for him, therefore scripture says, "that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live" (ibid.). Thus, he is not mortally guilty unless he deliberately removes them from his heart. (Avot 3:8)

It would appear that R. Meir understood the verse in question to concern not revelation, but the substance of Torah itself. One is prohibited to deliberately forget even the most minute amount of Torah, and is considered to have violated a grave offense if one does.

And yet, we might suggest that R. Meir's view may not only be reconciled, or even synthesized, with Ramban's, but is actually a direct outgrowth of it. If one is suffused, as Ramban would have it, with an uncompromising sense of the veracity of the Torah, and, in particular, of its Divine origins, it is literally inconceivable that one might deliberately dissociate himself from its contents.

On the contrary, from Ramban's perspective, what emerges from an uncompromising belief in the veracity of Torah, rooted in its Divine origins, is a deep and visceral attachment to the study and practice of the entire substance of revelation. Indeed, for Ramban, to study Torah is nothing short of promulgating the

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<sup>14</sup> The telling use of the *k'shem* and *kach* in Rambam signals a qualitative equivalence: *k'shem she'chayav adam li'lamed et bino, kach hu chayav l'lamed et ben beno*. This reading is reinforced by Rambam's immediate pivot to questioning why the Torah indeed placed the son before the grandson, *v'hodatam l'vanekha uli'vnei vanekha*. The question itself only makes sense if one understands Rambam as developing a qualitative equivalence between the two obligations.

experience of revelation itself. The logical outcome of such an experience is intensive cleaving both to the Giver of the Torah, and to the Torah itself.