

## Revelation and the Cloud at Matan Torah

Paul Gelb

When we daven, we tend to think of the silent Shemoneh Esrei as the main part and the public repetition of the Shemoneh Esrei as secondary. But the events of Ma'amad Har Sinai show that, while individual connection with Hashem is important, the public pronouncement of the Amidah – and the awareness of identity with Knesset Yisrael that it reflects – is equally or perhaps even more central to our relationship with Hashem.

The verses at the end of Parashat Mishpatim state (Ex. 24:15-16): “Moshe ascended the mountain, and the cloud covered [*vayechas he-anan*] the mountain. Hashem’s Divine charisma was present on the mountain, and the cloud covered it [*ve-yechaseihu he-anan*] for six days, and He called to Moshe on the seventh day from within the cloud.”

The words “*ve-yechaseihu he-anan*” raise an ambiguity. It is unclear why the reference to the covering of the cloud is repeated in these two verses, and why the first verse uses the term “*vayechas he-anan*” while the second verse uses the term “*ve-yechaseihu he-anan*.” It is also unclear what six day period the verse references.

Rashi addresses this by quoting two opinions of the Gemara in Yoma 4a-b. The first is the opinion of Rabbi Akiva that the word “*ve-yechaseihu*” means that the cloud covered the mountain and that the six days of waiting correspond to the days between Rosh Chodesh Sivan and Matan Torah. The second opinion that Rashi quotes is of Rabbi Yose HaGelili that the word “*ve-yechaseihu*” means that the cloud covered, not the mountain, but Moshe (i.e., the cloud covered “him” / Moshe, rather than “it” / the mountain), and that the time period before Hashem called out to Moshe were the first six of the 40 days when Moshe ascended Har Sinai to receive the Torah. He says that six days are necessary preparation before an act of great religious significance, such as receiving the Torah.

It is striking, according to the second opinion, that six of the 40 days of revelation of the Torah to Moshe were spent in silence. The Shechina of Hashem was present and Moshe was contained within the cloud that covered him. Hashem and Moshe stood silently within the presence of one another, as it were, until the seventh day when Hashem spoke to Moshe.

This is resonant of another time that Moshe had a seven day encounter with Hashem. The verse in Parashat Shemot describing Moshe’s experience at the burning bush states (Ex. 4:10): “Moshe said to Hashem, ‘Please my Lord, I am not articulate; nor was I yesterday nor the day before yesterday nor since You first spoke to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and

heavy of speech.” Rashi comments that the verse implies that by this point Moshe’s encounter with Hashem had lasted six days, and that this was the seventh day.

This was a significant encounter. Indeed, in Parashat VeZot HaBracha (Deut. 33:16), Moshe refers to Hashem, not as the redeemer from Egypt or the giver of the Torah, but as the “*Shochni Sneh*,” because Moshe’s first meaningful encounter with Hashem was at the burning bush. Now, after they had succeeded in the plan they had discussed a year earlier at the *Sneh*, Moshe and Hashem stood together, as it were, again connecting closely for six days in silence. This accentuates the capacity for individual engagement with Hashem.

The other interpretation, asserted by Rabbi Akiva, is that the six days referenced in Parashat Mishpatim occurred prior to Matan Torah, and that these six days presaged Hashem’s revelation to the entire Knesset Yisrael. By understanding the word “*ve-yechaseihu*” to mean that the cloud covered the mountain as a whole and not just Moshe in particular, Rabbi Akiva underscores that the Divine revelation primarily occurred through the engagement with Knesset Yisrael. This fits with the explanation for the singular form of the word “*va-yichan*” in the verse (Ex. 19:2): “and Israel encamped [*va-yichan*] there opposite the mountain,” to mean that the people of Israel stood at Har Sinai like one person with a unified heart. This was a prerequisite to the *gilui HaShechina*, which occurred through the cloud on the mountain, to the entire Knesset Yisrael.

In interpreting the word “*ve-yechaseihu*” at the end of Parashat Mishpatim, Rashi quotes both the opinion of Rabbi Yose HaGelili and the opinion of Rabbi Akiva. In doing so, Rashi conveys that he believes each of these is a potentially correct explanation of the verse. Our engagement with Hashem occurs on a one-on-one, individualized basis, like Moshe at the burning bush and then again for six days at the beginning of his encounter to receive the Torah directly from Hashem. And our ability to encounter the *Shechina* also occurs through our attachment to the Jewish people. We receive the Torah by connecting to Knesset Yisrael.

Thus, Rashi quotes the interpretation of Rabbi Yose HaGelili, implying that the encounter with Hashem at Har Sinai was individualized, as well as the interpretation of Rabbi Akiva expressing that, at the same time, the encounter with Hashem during Matan Torah was accomplished primarily through identity with the people of Israel.