Guided Study for Shavuot

By: ALHATORAH.ORG

A Selection of Primary Sources, Questions, and Analyses to Learn on Shavuot
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Revelation: A Face to Face Encounter?

Direct From Hashem or Via Moshe?

https://alhatorah.org/The_Decalogue:_Direct_From_Hashem_or_Via_Moshe

I. Introduction

What was the experience of Revelation like? What was its purpose? Many assume that the entire nation, men, women and children, became prophets for the day and directly heard the word of Hashem. They listened to each of the Ten Commandments as Hashem relayed it, thereby coming to believe in Hashem as the source of all of Torah. Interestingly, though, this scene is not necessarily the one that emerges from the verses. The description of Revelation in Shemot, and as recounted by Moshe in Devarim, is much more complex, allowing for different interpretations of the event and its goal.

II. The Verses

In the following verses from Sefer Devarim, Moshe recounts the events of Revelation. How does he describe the experience and his role in the event? What inner contradiction emerges from a comparison of verses 4-5?

| Devarim 5 | דברי ה' (א) וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל כׇּל יִשְרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם שְמַעְתֶּם יִשְרָאֵל אֶת הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת הַמִּשְפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִּי דֹבֵר בְאַזְנֵיכֶם הַיוֹם וּלְמַדְתֶּם אֹתָם וּשְמַרְתֶּם לַעֲשֹתָם. (ב) יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ כָּרַת עִּמָנוּ בְרִּית בְחֹרֵב. (ג) לֹא אֶת אֲבֹתֵינוּ כָּרַת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת הַבְרִית הַזֹּאת כִּי אִתָנוּ אֲנַחְנוּ אֵלֶּה פֹה הַיוֹם כֻּלָנוּ חַיִּים. (ד) פָנִּים בְפָנִּים דִּבֶּר יְהוָה עִמָכֶם בָהָר מִּתוֹךְ הָאֵש. (ה) אָנֹכִּי עֹמֵד בֵין יְהוָה וּבֵיןֹ יָמֹּּלָה בָּהָר לְהַגִּיד לָכֶם אֶת דְבַר יְהוָה כִּי יְרֵאֶם מִפְנֵי הָאֵש וְלֹא עֲלִּיתֶם בָהָר לֵאמֹר.
(1) Moses called to all Israel, and said to them, Hear, Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I speak in your ears this day, that you may learn them, and observe to do them. (2) Hashem our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. (3) Hashem didn’t make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day. (4) Hashem spoke with you face to face on the mountain out of the midst of the fire, (5) I stood between Hashem and you at that time, to show you the word of Hashem: for you were afraid because of the fire, and didn’t go up onto the mountain; saying,

To Think About:

1) What is a “face to face” encounter? Why might Hashem have chosen to speak to the nation in such a manner at Mt. Sinai?
2) According to verse 5, Moshe acted as an intermediary to “tell [the nation] the word of God.” How can this be reconciled with the direct encounter described in verse 4? What would be the point of Hashem speaking via a mediator?

3) What does Moshe mean when he says: “for you were afraid because of the fire and didn’t go up onto the mountain”? How might the experience have been different were the people not overcome by fear?

What can the description of Revelation in Shemot 19 contribute to the discussion?

After scanning the chapter on your own, note the following verses:

(9) Hashem said to Moses, “Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” Moses told the words of the people to Hashem.

(19) When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice.

According to verse 9, who seems to be the intended addressee of Hashem’s words? Why?

According to verse 19, from whom does it sound like the nation heard the Decalogue? How else might the verse be understood?

Note also the verses below, which directly precede the Decalogue.

(24) Hashem said to him, “Go down and you shall bring Aaron up with you, but don’t let the priests and the people break through to come up to Hashem, lest he break forth on them.” (25) So Moses went down to the people, and told them. (1) God spoke all these words saying.

What does Moshe tell the people in verse 25? Who is the object of Hashem’s speech in Shemot 20:1? Note: this is the only case in all of Torah in which Hashem’s addressee is not stated.

One last set of verses is relevant to our discussion. Right after describing how Hashem relayed the Decalogue in Devarim 5, Moshe recounts how the people approached him, filled with fear:
Devarim 5

(20) and you said, “Behold, Hashem our God has shown us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God does speak with man, and he lives. (21) Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us: if we hear the voice of Hashem our God any more, then we shall die. (22) For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? (23) Go near, and hear all that Hashem our God shall say: and tell us all that Hashem our God shall tell you; and we will hear it, and do it.” (24) Hashem heard the voice of your words, when you spoke to me; and Hashem said to me, “I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken to you: they have well said all that they have spoken.

What are the people requesting of Moshe? When does this appear to be taking place?

III. Commentary
Let’s now turn to a selection of commentaries on the chapters to see their very different readings of the experience of Ma’amad Har Sinai and its ultimate objective:

Approach #1
All the Commandments Were Heard Directly from Hashem

A first approach suggests that Hashem spoke directly to the people themselves, and they, not Moshe, were His target audience for the entire Decalogue. This position is taken by Ibn Ezra and Rashbam:

Ibn Ezra Devarim 5:5
It is possible that "I stood between the Lord and you" means I stood between the Lord and you after the revelation at Sinai. Its meaning is, God spoke with you face to face [at Sinai] and from that day on I stood between the Lord and you because you were afraid...
According to these sources, from what point on did Moshe act as an intermediary? What caused this? What was the original plan of Hashem?

How does that affect the common perception of the unique status of the Ten Commandments? Might Am Yisrael have been different if they heard all 613 mitzvot directly from God?

Which verses support this position? Which present a challenge?

**Approach #2**

None of the Commandments Were Heard Directly from Hashem

According to a second position, expressed by Rambam below, the people listened as Hashem communicated the Decalogue to Moshe, but they only heard the Divine voice and could not decipher His words.

**Rambam Moreh Nevuchim 2:33**

It is clear to me that what Moses experienced at the revelation on Mount Sinai was different from that which was experienced by the other Israelites, for Moses alone was addressed by God... Moses then went down to the foot of the mount and told his fellow-men what he had heard. Scripture states: "I stood between the Lord and you at that time to tell you the word of the Lord" (Deut. 5:5). Again, "Moses spake, and God answered him with a loud voice" (Exod. 19:19)... God spoke to Moses, and the people only heard the mighty sound, not distinct words.

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Rambam’s reading of the chapter is motivated by his belief that indiscriminate prophecy is impossible and that the nation was not prepared or qualified to understand Hashem’s words.

As such, what does he suggest that the people heard at Sinai? What, according to him, seems to be the purpose of Ma’amad Har Sinai? Which verses does he bring to support his reading? Which are difficult?

**Approach #3**  
**Moshe Acted as Mediator for Part of Revelation**

A third approach takes a compromise position, suggesting that the nation understood only some commandments directly from Hashem, while the rest were relayed via Moshe:

According to Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi, how many commandments did the people hear directly? How many via Moshe? What happened that led Moshe to act as a mediator? Was this the original plan?

Did Hashem “adjust” to meet the needs of the people? What theological issue might this raise?

Finally, what does the approach suggest about the goal of Revelation?

What textual support does R. Yosef Kara bring for the above approach? What other verses might support this position?

What difficulty does Ibn Ezra, below, bring on the above understanding?

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**Ibn Ezra Second Commentary Shemot 20:1**

Note that the ten statements, as they are written in this parashah, Hashem said them all, for Scripture states, And God spoke all these words, saying...
This question leads Ramban to an alternative understanding of R. Yehoshua b. Levi’s words:

"ויבא רמב"ן יש科學 כ'ו אפשת לך קבלת רבותינו. בודא של שיער המדרשות שמעו כל ישראל מפי אלוהים濮濮י... כתוב, כל יום הדורות המאשנים והשומעים הדיבור מבעבר או אחר ממו נאמרו כעין אمة מדינה... ומוכן ואלי כל דבר הדיבור שמעה קול הדיבור אבל יבין אתו, וצריך משה לתרגם להם כל דבור, וודבר הרחבת שםحمل... וכהנה היתה בזה כדי היו כלם נביאים באמונת ה' ובאיסור ע"ז, כאשר פירשתי (שם ט), לפי שהם העיקר לכל התורה והמצות,... אבל בשאר הדברות יקבלו מפי משה ביאורם עם שמיעתם קול הדברים, ובשאר המצות יאמינו במשה בכל..."

According to Ramban, why did the nation only hear two commandments directly from Hashem? Was this intentional or a change in plan? What does he suggest was the goal of Revelation? How might this be supported by Shemot 19:9?

IV. Summary

The Torah’s contrasting portraits of Hashem’s revelation to the nation lead commentators to varying understandings of what the nation grasped directly from Hashem and what they understood only via Moshe. These, in turn, have important ramifications for how one understands the entire purpose of Ma’amad Har Sinai.

On one end of the spectrum, Ibn Ezra and Rashbam look at the depiction of the episode as a "face to face" encounter. They posit that Hashem conversed directly with the people, relaying to them all ten utterances with the goal of inculcating belief in God. On the other end of the spectrum, Rambam focus on the verses which present Moshe as an intermediary, asserting that the people heard only the voice of Hashem, but could not distinguish His words. Moshe, thus, acted as a mediator or translator for all ten. As such, the main purpose of Revelation was not to instill faith in Hashem, but to teach the nation to believe in Moshe’s prophecy.
A third position charts a middle ground and attempts to harmonize the various verses by positing that there was a split in the commandments. The nation understood only the first two from Hashem, but needed Moshe to explain the final eight. Ramban explains that the goal of Revelation was twofold – to instill belief in both Hashem and in Moshe as His prophet. The fundamentals of faith were thus relayed directly, while the rest was taught via Moshe, who from this point on was to continue in this capacity as teacher of the law.

For a full analysis of this topic and more sources see: https://alhatorah.org/The_Decalogue:_Direct_From_Hashem_or_Via_Moshe
## Decalogue Differences

**https://alhatorah.org/Decalogue_Differences_Between_Shemot_and_Devarim**

### I. Introduction

The Decalogue (עשרת העתרות) appears in both the description of the Revelation at Sinai in Shemot 20 and in Moshe’s recounting of the event in Devarim 5. The two passages, however, are not identical. Why are there two versions of the Decalogue? How should we understand the nature of the differences between them?

### A Comparison

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**The Decalogue Differences Between Shemot and Devarim**

[https://alhatorah.org/Decalogue_Differences_Between_Shemot_and_Devarim](https://alhatorah.org/Decalogue_Differences_Between_Shemot_and_Devarim)
To Think About:
While some of the differences between the accounts are minor and might be deemed insignificant, others affect not just the form but also content and meaning. The reader is, thus, left with several questions:

- How is one to understand the variations? Do all of the differences, even the missing ו"ו conjunctions, have meaning?
- Which of the accounts was communicated by Hashem at Mt. Sinai? Which was written on the tablets?
- Do both versions have equal status, or does only one represent the ideal (and if so, which one)?
- Finally, why are there two differing versions of the Decalogue at all? If Hashem said both, what led Him to make changes from one to another? If Moshe introduced the changes found in Devarim, what motivated him and by what authority did he do so?

II. Commentary
Let's now turn to a selection of commentaries on our topic to see how they understand the differences. Who believes that the variations are fundamental and intentional changes and who views them as insignificant?

Approach #1: Fundamentally Updated

A) Updated in Year 40

This approach suggests that the specific circumstances of the Children of Israel in the fortieth year in the Wilderness necessitated certain adjustments to the Decalogue.

How does R. D"Z Hoffmann understand the addition of "ושוך וחמוך" to the original list of those who must rest on Shabbat? Why, only in Devarim, is the word "שָׂדֵהו" added to the list of things one must not covet? How might this approach be applied to the other differences between the two versions?

Why might the Egyptian bondage given as a reason for keeping Shabbat only in Devarim, when speaking to the generation entering the land, but not in Shemot, when addressing those who left Egypt?
A Point to Ponder

R. D"Z Hoffmann views many of the changes in Devarim as intentional updates introduced by Moshe in the fortieth year and implies that Moshe, on his own, took the liberty to change Hashem's words, clarifying and applying them to a new generation.

What gave Moshe the right to do so? Is this comparable to other places in Devarim where Moshe similarly recasts past events, adding or omitting details in his retelling so as to relay a certain message to the nation, or is veering from the exact wording of the Decalogue fundamentally different? In general, how much authority does a prophet have to speak or act on his own, in particular when he invokes Hashem's name as he does so?

B) Updated Already in Year 1

A variation of the above approach agrees that the variations are fundamental updates but maintains that Hashem Himself made changes to the commandments following the Sin of the Golden Calf and already prior to His giving of the second set of tablets.

**How might we understand Resh Lakish's analogy? What does he imply is the reason that two versions of the Decalogue were necessary? According to his reading, who introduced the changes?**

**Assuming that Reshi Lakish is referring to the Sin of the Golden Calf, and that it nullified the first set of tablets, which of the variations in the second set can be explained as being a reaction to the sin?**

**How might this approach explain why Hashem decided to set commemoration of the Exodus rather than Creation as the reason for Shabbat observance? Why might it have been a better motivator for a nation who had been questioning Hashem?**

**Approach #2: No Fundamental Difference**

A second approach dismisses most of the discrepancies between the two versions as being insignificant. When Moshe repeated the Decalogue in Devarim, he preserved its original meaning and made only minor variations to its wording.
How does Ibn Ezra understand the differences between the two versions of the Decalogue? Which is the one written on the tablets? What accounts for the changes in Devarim?

According to Ibn Ezra, why was it not problematic for Moshe to veer from Hashem’s words? What is the meaning of Ibn Ezra’s explanation, “יכ יטעמים ואשרים למלות א’?”

Though this approach easily accounts for many of the smaller differences, how might it explain the different reasoning provided for observing Shabbat in the two versions? How can Moshe’s mention of the Egyptian bondage be preserving the intent of the original Decalogue in Shemot which spoke of Creation? What does Ramban suggest in his comments to Devarim 5:14, below?

And it is more fitting to say that because the exodus from Egypt is evidence of the existence of an Eternal God, Who caused everything to come into existence through His will and Who has supreme power, as I have explained in the first commandment — therefore he stated here: “If there ever arises a doubt in your heart concerning the Sabbath that evidences the creation of the world by the will and power of God, you should remember what your eyes saw at the exodus from Egypt which is, to you, the evidence [of His infinite power] and the remembrance [of His deeds].” Thus the Sabbath is a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt, and the exodus is a remembrance of the Sabbath, for on it [the Sabbath] they remember and say that it is God Who makes new signs and wonders in everything and does with everything according to His will since it is He Who created everything at the beginning of creation.
According to Ramban, about what do both Shabbat and the Exodus testify? How is "הליצאת מצרים, והשבת זכר ליציאת מצרים, ויציאת מצרים זכר לשבה"?

**Approach #3: Dual Divine Communication**

A final approach rejects the idea that variations in the text might be insignificant and suggests that both versions of the Decalogue were actually transmitted by Hashem simultaneously on Mt. Sinai. They are written separately only since it was impossible to record them together.

| Bavli Rosh HaShanah 27a | רבלי ראש השנה כז
But is it really possible to properly discern two different sounds? Isn’t it taught: “Remember the Shabbat day” and “Keep the Shabbat day” were spoken by God simultaneously in a single utterance, something that the human mouth cannot speak and the human ear cannot hear? | והטור כל ממשתמש ומציאת תמצירו. בידור אחד נאמרו ושמורה תיודו לכרב. ואין האוזן قولת לשמע. |

| Rashi Devarim 5:11 | רש"י דברים ה':י"א
But in the former Ten Commandments, it states, "Remember [the Sabbath day]"! The explanation is: Both of them (זכור and שמור) were spoken in one utterance and as one word, and were heard in one hearing (i.e. were heard simultaneously) | שמור את יום השבת – ובראשונה הוא אמר: תוכו (שמעת כל?). שמעת בברויס אחרبوتת ואחד נאמרו, ובשמעת אחר נאמרה |

Rashi and the Bavli appear to take the statement "זכור ושמור בדיבור אחד נאמרו" literally, suggesting that Hashem said the two versions of the Decalogue simultaneously since He wanted to convey dual messages to the nation, one through each formulation.

Which of the changes are easily explained using this approach? Which are somewhat difficult to explain using this logic? According to this position, what might have been written on each slab of the tablets?

**III. Summary**

The commentators’ disagreement on how to account for the differences between the two versions of the Decalogue results from a confluence of two types of factors. On the one hand, it depends on differing exegetical methods in explaining repetitions and variations. Does one view the text as omnisignificant and attempt to derive laws or new ideas from every detail of the text or does one posit that variations result from literary and realia considerations? On the other hand, it relates to theological controversies over the issues of the immutability of Divine plans or commands and the
extent of prophetic autonomy (whether Moshe had the authority and flexibility to make adjustments to Hashem’s dictates).

A first approach suggests that the Devarim rendition of the commandments constituted an intentional updating of the original Shemot version. R. D"Z Hoffmann suggests that the changes were introduced by Moshe as he applied Hashem's words to the new generation on the eve of their entry into the Land of Israel. Pesikta Rabbati, in contrast, implies that the changes were introduced by Hashem Himself in the aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf.

A second approach, taken by Ibn Ezra, maintains that the discrepancies are insignificant and simply a natural outcome of Moshe's paraphrasing of Hashem's words. Moshe preserved Hashem's meaning but not His language. On the other end of the spectrum, many Midrashic sources, understanding the text to be omnisignificant, assume that the two versions of the Decalogue were both given simultaneously in the first year, and that both have legal relevance for all generations.

For further discussion and analysis see:
https://alhatorah.org/Decalogue_Differences_Between_Shemot_and_Devarim

לוחות הברית בבית כנסת בוינ

Photograph by: Gryffindor  CC BY 2.5
Can Belief be Commanded?

"אנכי י' אלהיך"  

I. Introduction

The Decalogue opens with the statement, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt", commonly understood to be the source for the obligation to believe in Hashem. However, not all agree. The sources below debate both how to understand this verse and whether or not there is any law that obligates belief at all.

II. Commentaries

Rambam points to Bavli Makkot as support that belief in Hashem is indeed counted as a mitzvah and that the source for the obligation is the verse "אנכי".

What conceptual arguments do the following sources make against counting it as a mitzvah?

| Ibn Ezra Devarim 5:17 | אבב טערא דבירה ת"ה |  
| Know that all the early sages are of the opinion that I am (v. 6) is the first statement... However, I believe that the statement I am is not part of the Ten Statements, for the meaning of I am is, I am the one who commands. [I am is the basis of the commandments.] |ój, כ ידעת כל הקדמונים כי הבדיר הראושון הווא אונכט... רק נשר בטייני שלמה אונכט אינט מון ושתנה, כ אונכט הווא הקדוה. |
There shall not be unto you any other gods before My presence": What is the intent of this? An analogy: A king of flesh and blood enters a province and his servants say to him: Make decrees for them. He: When they accept my rule, I will make decrees for them. For if they do not accept my rule, they will not accept my decrees. Thus did the Lord say to Israel: "I am the Lord your God. There shall not be unto you, etc." Am I He whose rule you have accepted? They: Yes. He: Just as you have accepted My rule, accept My decrees — There shall not be unto you any other gods before My presence. R. Shimon b. Yochai says: As stated elsewhere (Leviticus 18:2) "Am I the Lord (whose rule you accepted on Sinai)? They: Yes. He: You accepted My rule? Accept My decrees — (Ibid. 3) "As the deeds of the land of Egypt in which you dwelt you shall not do, etc." And so here: Am I the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt whose rule you accepted? — Accept My decrees.

Abarbanel, below, brings another argument, this time from the language of the verse, to prove that maybe "אלהיך" is not a command:

According to Abarbanel, if our verse was indeed a command, how should it have read?

Let’s now turn to R. Chasdai Crescas who also argues against counting belief as a mitzvah, but on philosophical grounds:
Do you agree with R. Crescas? Do what extent do we have control over our emotions or beliefs?

Does the Torah command emotions elsewhere? How do you understand the following mitzvot? Are they any different than our verse?

III. Two Models of Faith

Whether or not one maintains that belief in God is counted as a mitzvah, no one disputes its importance. So, practically, how does one go about attaining it?

In the following two sources, Rambam speaks of the obligation to love Hashem. How might his advice there be applied to obtaining belief as well?

Below, Rambam points to Avraham as a model to emulate. How does he think that Avraham attained recognition of Hashem?
Let's now contrast the above with R. Yehuda HaLevi's understanding of the obligation to believe in Hashem:

According to R. Yehuda HaLevi, what is the danger of attaining belief through philosophical inquiry?

What, instead, should someone do?

What alternative route to faith is implied in the above source? How does transmission of tradition from one generation to the next help inculcate belief?

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