

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XVII: Yitro (Ex. 18:1–20:23)

Essay 19. Moses's reluctance to descend Mount Sinai to warn the people

"וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי ה' לְהֵרֵד וְעֲלִיתָ אִתָּהּ וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ" וכו'. צָרִיף עֵינָיו מֵאֵי קֶסֶבֶר מִשֶּׁהָ שְׁבַתְחֻלָּה מֵאֵן לְרִדְתָּ. בְּאֵמַת "לֹא־יִיכַל הָעָם" וְאַחֵר כִּף כְּשֶׁחֲזַר לֹמֵר לוֹ "לְהֵרֵד" מִיֵּד יֵרֵד. וְלִכְאוּרָה יֵשׁ לֹמֵר שְׁכַשְׁרָאָה שְׁהִקֵּב"ה עַל כָּל פְּנִיִם רוֹצֵה בְּכָף לֹא רָצָה לְמֵאֵן יוֹתֵר. אֲלָא דְקִשְׁיָה דְאֵי הָכִי בְּתַחֲלָה נִמְי הָיָה לוֹ לְהִבִּין שְׁהִקֵּב"ה יוֹדֵעַ שְׁכַבֵּר הַגְּבִיל אֶת הָעָם וְאֶפְּלוּ הָכִי אָמַר לוֹ "רֵד הָעֵד בְּעָם", וְלֹא הָיָה לוֹ לְסַרְב. וְעוֹד לְמָה הִקֵּב"ה בְּפַעַם הַזֹּאת אָמַר לוֹ "וְעֲלִיתָ אִתָּהּ וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ", שְׁנִרְאָה שְׁמִשְׁהָ הָיָה מִתְיָרָא פֶּן לֹא יִרְצָה שְׁיַעֲלָה עוֹד אֲבָל עֲתָה שְׁהִבְטִיחוּ שְׁיַעֲלָה לֹא מֵאֵן וְיֵרֵד?

There is a curious exchange that needs some investigation:

You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, “Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.” . . . The L-rd came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the L-rd called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. The L-rd said to Moses, “*Go down*, warn the people not to break through to the L-rd to gaze, lest many of them perish; the priests also, who come near the L-rd, must stay pure, lest the L-rd attack them.” *But Moses said* to the L-rd, “*The people cannot* come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.’ ” **So the L-rd said to him, “Go, go down, and you shall come up, and Aaron with you;** but don’t let the priests or the people break through to come up to the L-rd, lest He attack them.”

– Ex. 19:12, 19:20–24.

It is necessary to study what Moses thought, that at the beginning, in Ex. 19:21, G-d instructed him to “Go down,” but **he refused to descend. In truth, his concern was that, “the people cannot come up,” and afterward when [G-d] responded to him, “Go, go down,” he immediately descended. Apparently one can say that when he saw that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted this from him regardless of his concerns, he didn’t want to refuse any more. But it is difficult, that if so, then at the beginning too**, even before G-d repeated himself, saying “Go, go down,” [Moses] should have understood that the Holy One, Blessed be He, knew that **He had already set bounds for the people**, telling Moses in Ex. 19:12 to warn the people not to

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ascend the mountain, and even with that, He said to him, “Go down, warn the people,” and thus there was no reason for [Moses] to refuse. Furthermore, why did the Holy One, Blessed be He, this time say to him, “and you shall come up, and Aaron with you,” such that it appears that Moses was afraid lest [G-d] not want him to ascend again, but now that He promised him that he would ascend again, he did not refuse and descended?

וַיִּוְבֹן בְּמַאי דְאַמְרִינָן בְּפִרְקָא קַמָּא דְבִרְכוּת הַיּוֹצֵא מִבֵּית הַכְּנֻסֶת אֶל יַפְסִיעַ פְּסִיעָה גְּסָה. וְלֹא אָמְרָן אֱלֹא לְמִיפְקָא, אֲבָל לְמִיעַל כָּל שְׂכֹן דְרַהֲיִטְנָא. וְלַחֲד פִּירוּשָׁא פִּירֵשׁ הַרִי"ף, לֹא אָמְרָן אֱלֹא שְׂכֻנוֹנְתָּו לְצִאת לְגַמְרִי, אִזְּ אֶל יַפְסִיעַ פְּסִיעָה גְּסָה, אֲבָל אִם כְּנוֹנְתָּו לְחֻזֹר לְבֵית הַכְּנֻסֶת, כָּל שְׂכֹן דְרַהֲיִטְנָא פְּדִי לְחֻזֹר יוֹתֵר מֵהֵרָ.

This will be understood by what was said in the first chapter of Berachot (6b). “Rabbi Chelbo said that Rav Huna said: ‘One who leaves the synagogue should not take large strides [because it makes him look eager to leave].’ Abaye said: ‘This was only said [with regard] to leaving [the synagogue], but [with regard] to entering, it’s better that he runs!’ ” According to one interpretation, the Rif¹ explained, that this was only said when his intent is to completely leave the synagogue, i.e., until the time for the next prayer service, in which case “do not take large strides,” but if his intent is to return soon to the synagogue, then it’s better that he runs in order to return more quickly.

וְאִם כָּאֵן מְשָׁה מִתְחַלְלָה לֹא הִיא רוֹצֵה לִירֵד, לְפִי שְׁהִיא נוֹסֵעַ מִלְּפָנֵי הַקַּב"ה וְצָרִיף לֹו לִירֵד בְּנִחָה וַיִּשְׁהֵא זְמַן הַרְבֵּה, וְהִיא מִתְיַרָא פֶן בֵּין כְּדָ וּבֵין כְּדָ הַקַּב"ה יִתֵּן הַתּוֹרָה. וּמִשּׁוֹם הַכִּי לֹא הִיא רוֹצֵה לְרִדָת, וְהַקַּב"ה שְׁהִבִין שְׂוֹ הִימָה יִרְאֵת מְשָׁה, בְּפִעַם הַשְּׁנִית אָמַר לֹו "וְעֲלִיתְ אִתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן" וְכו', כְּלוּמַר הוֹאִיל שְׂכֻנוֹנְתָּה לְחֻזֹר תּוּכַל לְרִדָת בְּפִסִיעָה גְּסָה וּבְמַרוֹצָה, וְלִימַד לֹו אִזְּ פִּירוּשׁ זֶה.

Even here, from the start Moses did not want to descend, for he would be traveling away from the presence of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and he would need to descend quietly and with a delay of a long time, as he would not want to appear eager to leave G-d’s presence, and he was afraid lest between [leaving and returning, he would miss the time in which] the Holy One, Blessed be He, would give the Torah. Because of this, he didn’t want to descend, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who understood that this was the fear of Moses, for the second time told him to descend and added, “and you shall come up, and Aaron with you,” as if to say, “Since your intention is to return, you will be able to descend with large strides and running,” and He taught him this interpretation of the law regarding how one leaves a synagogue.

¹ This is not the earlier and more famous “Rif” [Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103)], but rather Rabbi Josiah ben Joseph Pinto (c. 1565–c. 1648), Syrian rabbi and preacher, a disciple of Rabbi Chaim Vital. His sefer, Me’or Enayim (Part One: Venice 1643; Part Two: Mantua 1743) was a commentary on Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib’s “Ein Yaakov,” a compilation of Aggadic material from the Talmud, and both parts are now commonly printed together with the Ein Yaakov. See Me’or Enayim (Venice 1643), page 9b.

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