

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter LIV: Vezot haBracha (Deut. 33:1–34:12)

### Essay 2. Hearing the Commandments from Moses

Makkot 24a teaches that G-d directly spoke the first two commandments to the Jewish people, and then they petition Moses that he relate the remaining commandments to them.

"הוֹרָאנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת־כְּבוֹדוֹ וְאֶת־גְּדֻלוֹ" וכו' "היום הנה ראינו כִּי־יְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וְחַי", "וְעַתָּה לְמָה נָמוּת" וכו' "אִם־יִסְפָּיִם אֲנַחְנוּ" וכו' "הִיטִיבוּ כָּל־אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרוּ", "מִי־יִתֵּן וְהָיָה לְכַבֶּם" וכו'.

**“The L-rd, our G-d has just shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard G-d’s voice out of the fire; we have seen this day that humankind may live though addressed by G-d. Why should we die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; if we continue to hear the voice of the L-rd, our G-d, we will die. For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living G-d speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived? You go closer and hear all that the L-rd, our G-d, says, and then you tell us everything that the L-rd, our G-d tells you, and we will willingly do it.”** The L-rd heard the plea that you made to me, and the L-rd said to me, “I have heard the plea that this people made to you; **they did well to speak thus. May they always have a heart such as this**, to revere Me and follow all My commandments, that it may go well with them and with their children forever!

- Deut. 5:21–26

קִשָּׁה שָׂאם הַיּוֹם הִנֵּה רָאוּ "כִּי־יְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וְחַי" מֵהוּ שָׂאֵמֶר אִסֵּר כָּךְ "וְעַתָּה לְמָה נָמוּת", וְדַאי שְׂלֵא יָמוּתוּ כְּמוֹ שְׂלֵא מֵתוּ קוֹדֵם לָכֵן. וּמֵהוּ "אֶת־כְּבוֹדוֹ וְאֶת־גְּדֻלוֹ"? וְעוֹד "כִּי מִי כָּל־בְּשָׂר" וכו' "כְּמִנּוּ נִיחִי" וְהֵלֵא אִף הֵם הָיוּ יְרֵאִים לְמוֹת. וְעוֹד מָה זֶה שָׂאֵמְרוּ שְׂהִטִּיבוּ כָּל כָּךְ עַד שֶׁהִכְתוּב מְשַׁבְּחֵם "הִיטִיבוּ כָּל־אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרוּ" וכו', אֲדַרְבָּא הֵם בְּחָרוּ לָהֶם לְשִׁמּוּעַ מִפִּי שְׁלִיחַ וְאֵינּוּ דוֹמֵה לְשִׁמּוּעַ מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ.

**A difficulty is that if this day they saw “that humankind may live though addressed by G-d,” what is this that they said afterward, “Why should we die,” for certainly they wouldn’t die just as they didn’t die before this.**

**Also, what is this “His glory and His greatness”?** How is this related to their request to hear the commandments from Moses and not directly from G-d?

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**Also, “For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living G-d speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived?”—They were also afraid to die.**

**Also, what is it that they said that was so good that their praise was written, “May they always have a heart such as this”? To the contrary, they chose to hear from the mouth of a messenger, and this is not similar to hearing from the mouth of the King!**

וַיֵּשׁ לֹאמְרוֹ שְׂאֲמָרוּ ז' ל' שְׂאֵם יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיוּ שׁוֹמְעִים כָּל הַתּוֹרָה מִפִּי הַקֵּב"ה לֹא הֵיטָה שְׂכָחָה בְּעוֹלָם אֶבֶל מִפְּנֵי שִׁשְׁמְעוּהָ מִפִּי מִשֶּׁהָ גַם הַשְׂכָּחָה, וּבִהְדָּיָא תָּנִן בְּמִסְכַּת אֲבוֹת כָּל הַשׁוֹכֵחַ דְּבָר אֶחָד מִמִּשְׁנֵתוֹ מֵעֲלָה עָלָיו הַפְּתוּב כְּאִילוּ מִתְחַיֵּיב בְּנִפְשׁוֹ וְכוּ'.

**It can be said that [the rabbis] of blessed memory said that if Israel had heard the entire Torah from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, there would not have been forgetfulness in the world. But since they heard it from the mouth of Moses, it caused forgetfulness.<sup>1</sup>**

**It is explicitly taught in tractate Pirkei Avot, “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.”<sup>2</sup> So by asking Moses to relate the commandments, the Jewish people allowed themselves to become forgetful, which is akin to being liable for death!**

וְלִכֵּן אָמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל "הֵן הִרְאָנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת־כְּבוֹדוֹ וְאֶת־גְּדֻלּוֹ", דֵּהֵינִי שְׂדֵדְבָרָיו אֵינָם נִשְׁכָּחִים, וְגַם רָאִינוּ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הַתּוֹעֲלָת שְׂבָא לָנוּ מִזֶּה שְׂאֵם וְדִבְרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרוֹת אֵל הָאָדָם וְחִי, שְׂלֹא יִשְׁכַּח עוֹד וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מִתְחַיֵּיב בְּנִפְשׁוֹ. אֶבֶל "עֲתָה לָמָּה נִמּוּת פִּי תֹאכְלֵנוּ הָאֵשׁ הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת", דְּבִנְדָאֵי אֵי אֶפְשָׁר לָנוּ בְּלֹא יֵצֵר הָרַע שְׂלִפְדָּ גִיתָנָה הַתּוֹרָה לָנוּ וְלֹא לְמַלְאָכִים לְפִי שְׂאִין יֵצֵר הָרַע שׁוֹלֵט בָּהֶם. וּבִשְׂלֵמָא אִם לֹא הָיָה מִשְׁמִיעֵנוּ אֶת קוֹלוֹ בְּאֵשׁ לֹא הָיִינוּ מִקְפִּידִים, שְׂהֵינִי אוֹמְרִים שְׂהֵקֵב"ה יִרְחֵם עָלֵינוּ אִם נִחְטָא שְׂלֹא בְּרִצּוֹנֵנוּ, אֶמְנָם עֲתָה שְׂהִשְׁמִיעֵנוּ אֶת קוֹלוֹ בְּאֵשׁ לְרִמּוֹז שְׂאֵם נִחְטָא שְׂלֹא יִרְחֵם עוֹד עָלֵינוּ.

**Therefore, Israel said, “The L-rd, our G-d has just shown us His glory and His greatness,” which is that His words are not forgotten. Also, we saw today the benefit that came to us from this, that if G-d would say all the commandments to man and he would live, for no longer would he forget and be mortally guilty. So the people acknowledged the benefit that would have been available to them had they heard the commandments directly from G-d.**

**But “why should we die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us,” that certainly it is impossible for us to be without an evil inclination, as it was because of this that the Torah was given to us and not to the angels, because the evil inclination does not rule over them.<sup>3</sup> Granted, if we had not heard His voice out of the fire, we would not have been careful, for we would have said that the Holy One, Blessed be He, would have mercy upon us if we would sin against our will. But now that we have heard His voice out of the fire, it hinted that if we sin, He will not have mercy on us anymore.**

<sup>1</sup> Yalkut Shimoni, Isaiah, remez 479.

<sup>2</sup> Pirkei Avot 3:8.

<sup>3</sup> Shabbat 89a.

וְצָרִיךְ לומר שהואיל ששמענו הדברות מפיו אין לנו עוד טענת אונס שנעשו יותר תמורות, שכן מצינו שבאיסור עבודה זרה ששמענו מפיו "אנכי" ו"לא יהיה לך" מעניש אותנו אף על ההרהור והמחשבה בלבד, כדכתיב "למען תפיש את-בית-ישראל בלבם", ולכן או "קרב אתה ושמע" וכו' או יסלק ממנו היצר הרע שלא נחטא עוד.

**It needs to be said that since we heard the commandments from His mouth, we no longer have a claim of compulsion from the evil inclination, as [a violation] of the commandments will be more severe if heard directly from G-d. Thus we find in the prohibition of idolatry, which we heard from His mouth, "I am the L-rd your G-d,"<sup>4</sup> and, "You shall have no other gods,"<sup>5</sup> for regarding idolatry, He punishes us even for desires and thinking alone, as it is written, "Thus I will hold the House of Israel to account for their thoughts."<sup>6</sup>**

**Therefore, either "You go closer and hear all that the L-rd, our G-d, says, and then you tell us everything that the L-rd, our G-d tells you, and we will willingly do it," or He should separate the evil inclination from us, so that we shouldn't sin anymore.**

ונהו "ועתה למה נמות כי תאכלנו האש הגדלה הזאת אם יספים אנחנו" "כי מי כל-בשר", שהלא "אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא". ואם כן נמצא שפוננת ישראל היתה לטובה שחיו מתיראים מן החטא ובשביל כך אמר הקב"ה "היטיבו כל-אשר דברו: מי יתן והיה ללבם" וכו' "ליראה אתי" וכו', כלומר שלא יחטאו מעולם אלא בשוגג ולא במזיד. ועיין עוד לעיל פרשת ואתחנן. ונהו שאמר הכתוב "תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה", שלפי שצוה לנו משה היא ירושה המתקיימת מדור לדור, דאי לא הכי לא היתה ירושה שהרי הדורות היו מתקיימים תמיד בעולם.

**This is the meaning of "Why should we die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; if we continue to hear the voice of the L-rd, our G-d, we will die. For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living G-d speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived?" For isn't it so that "there is no righteous person on earth who will only do good and who will not sin"?**<sup>7</sup>

**If so, we find that the intent of Israel was for good, that they were afraid of sin, and because of this, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said, "they did well to speak thus. May they always have a heart such as this, to revere Me and follow all My commandments," as if to say that they should only sin accidentally and not intentionally.**

**See further above, parashat Vachanan, Essay 6. This is what the Scripture intended when it said, "Moses commanded us the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob,"<sup>8</sup> that because Moses commanded us, instead of G-d directly commanding it, it is a heritage that exists from generation to generation. For if not so, it would not be a heritage, for the generations would always remain alive in the world. I.e., if the people had heard the commandments directly from G-d, they would not have been liable to lose their lives. They could have shared the Torah with later generations, but it would not have been "a heritage" given over to a replacement generation.**

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<sup>4</sup> Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6.

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7.

<sup>6</sup> Ezek. 14:5.

<sup>7</sup> Eccl. 7:20.

<sup>8</sup> Deut. 33:4.