

Parashat Behar 5771, 2011:

*Revealing the Revelation*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* begins with the following three *pasukim* (verses):

And the L-rd spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them: When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land shall rest a Sabbath to the L-rd. You may sow your field for six years, and for six years you may prune your vineyard, and gather in its produce, But in the seventh year, the land shall have a complete rest, a Sabbath to the L-rd; you shall not sow your field, nor shall you prune your vineyard. (*Sefer Vayikra* 25:1-3, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These verses, in turn, led Rashi (1040-1105) to ask one of the most famous questions in all of Rabbinic literature:

**on Mount Sinai:** What [special relevance] does the subject of Shemittah [the “release” of fields in the seventh year] have with Mount Sinai? Were not all the commandments stated from Sinai? However, [this teaches us that] just as with Shemittah, its general principles and its finer details were all stated from Sinai, likewise, all of them were stated - their general principles [together with] their finer details - from Sinai. This is what is taught in *Torath Kohanim* (25:1). (Ibid.)

Rashi’s summary of this passage from *Midrash Torat Kohanim* is based upon Rabbi

Akiba's opinion, as found in a Mishnaic period discussion that is quoted three times in

*Talmud Bavli*:

R. Ishmael says: General laws were proclaimed at Sinai and particular laws in the Tent of Meeting. R. Akiba says: Both general and particular laws were proclaimed at Sinai, repeated in the Tent of Meeting, and for the third time in the plains of Moab. (*Sotah* 37b, translation, *Soncino Talmud*, see *Hagigah* 6a and *Zevachim* 115b for the two other instances)

The scholarly dispute between Rabbis Ishmael and Akiba leads to two significantly different interpretations of the well-known first Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the

Fathers). When the *Mishnah* states: “*Moshe kibale Torah mi’Sinai*” (“Moshe received Torah at Mount Sinai”), it is not only speaking about the process of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, it is speaking, as well, about the content of the Revelation. According to Rabbi Ishmael, only the general overarching principle of a particular *halacha* (Jewish law) was given to Moshe at Mount Sinai. Thus, by way of illustration, Moshe received the prohibition of consuming blood, in general, during the Revelation (see *Sefer Vayikra* 7:26-27; and 17:10-14). He did not, however, receive a detailed definitional structure as to what constitutes prohibited blood (mammals and birds) and permissible blood (fish). These details, according to Rabbi Ishmael’s approach, were explicated afterwards, in the *Ohel Moed* (the Tent of Meeting, the Portable Desert Sanctuary). Rabbi Akiba, however, maintained that all this halachic data was disseminated to Moshe during the 40 days and nights he spent communing with Hashem on Mount Sinai.

Given the above, and as we discover in so many areas of Jewish thought (*hashkafah*), we find that the question: “What does it mean when the *Mishnah* teaches us ‘*Moshe kibale Torah mi’Sinai*?’” must be answered with a resounding, “it depends.” In my estimation, it is precisely this dynamism and willingness to accept multiple and multifaceted interpretations of the “big questions” in Judaism that has enabled us to not only survive, but to thrive. Judaism, therefore, owes its continued vitality to its anti-dogmatic stance concerning matters of *hashkafah*. This, in turn, has encouraged a never-ending search for *emet* (truth) by the greatest and holiest minds among our people.

We are now ready to ask two questions: “Why does *Pirkei Avot* begin with this introductory statement?” and “Why is it not found as the initial idea at the beginning of

any other *mesechta* (tractate)?“ Rabbeinu Ovadiah Bartenura (known as “the Rav” or “the Bartenura,” d. approximately 1500) indirectly posed these queries in his insightful analysis of our phrase. His comments speak volumes regarding the nature and significance of ethical behavior within the grand scheme of Torah and Mitzvot:

I must state that this tractate is not based upon any particular mitzvah from among the Mitzvot of the Torah; it is, therefore, unlike the rest of the tractates of the *Mishnah*, in that it is entirely composed of moral and ethical exhortations. [In truth,] the wise men of the nations [i.e., Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle] also wrote works [of this nature] according to what they imagined in their hearts to be moral and ethical behaviors and how one ought to act with their fellow man. This is precisely why the Mishnaic Sage (*hatanna*) begins this tractate with the phrase “*Moshe kibale Torah mi'Sinai*,” to teach you that the moral and ethical exhortations in this tractate were not contrived by the Sages of the *Mishnah* based upon their [mere human] intellects. Rather, everything contained herein was said [by G-d] at Mount Sinai, from He who revealed Himself at Sinai. (Translation my own)

The Bartenura is teaching us a crucial lesson for our time: Ethical behavior and moral action are the essence of the Torah way of life; they are not extras or acts that transcend the letter of the Law (*lifnim meshurat hadin*). They are the Law! Moral behaviors toward our fellow Jews, and to all mankind, are no less a mitzvah than any other mitzvah – even though they are “open-ended” rather than detailed in their definition. Moreover, our ethics and morality are G-d-given and absolute, rather than being the creation of our imperfect intellects.

In mankind’s greatest moment, i.e. the Revelation, “*Moshe kibale Torah mi'Sinai*.” May these stirring words ever serve as a reminder and inspiration to us to treat all people with the dignity, respect, and honor they deserve. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).