



Parashat Va'etchanan  
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In Parashat Vaetchanan Moshe recalls the events of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, the Revelation at Sinai, and the fear *Benei Yisrael* experienced upon witnessing the awesome spectacle. Convinced that they would die if they would continue beholding the divine revelation, the people approached Moshe and asked to learn the Torah from him, rather than from God. They preferred that only Moshe would hear God present the law, and he would then convey the information to them. Moshe recounts:

You said: Behold, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and greatness... This day we have seen that God will speak with a human – and he will live. But now, why shall we die when this great fire consumes us? If we continue hearing the voice of the Lord our God anymore, we will die! For is there any flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from amidst the fire, as we have, and lived?

(Devarim 5:21-23)

A number of commentators have noted the obvious difficulty in the people's remarks. Immediately after proclaiming that the Revelation at Sinai proved that "God will speak with a human – and he will live," they ask, "why shall we die...?" Once they personally experienced the possibility of hearing the divine voice and surviving, why did they assume they would die if they would continue doing so? Now that God has shown them how they could endure such a revelation, why did they fear the consequences of further exposure to the manifestation of the divine glory?

Rabbi Yosef Shaul Nathanson (1810-1875), in his *Divrei Shaul*, commented that the answer to this question emerges from Maimonides' remarks in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:29) concerning the intrinsically temporary nature of miracles:

For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, the pure and noble hand into a leprous one, without the existence of any natural cause that could effect these or similar phenomena, these changes were not *permanent*, they have not become a physical property. On the contrary, the Universe since continues its regular course. This is my opinion; this should be our belief.

Maimonides asserts that although God is undoubtedly capable of permanently altering the laws of nature and even abolishing the universe altogether, He would never do so. All deviations from nature that He caused were therefore temporary, and never signified a permanent change in natural law. Maimonides writes in the subsequent paragraph:

For we believe that this Universe remains perpetually with the same properties with which the Creator has endowed it, and that none of these will ever be changed except by way of miracle in some individual instances, although the Creator has the power to change the whole Universe, to annihilate it, or to remove any of its properties.

Hence, any suspension of natural law occurs only temporarily, as no permanent change in natural properties will ever take place.

Accordingly, the *Divrei Shaul* suggests that *Benei Yisrael* indeed had reason to fear their ongoing exposure to the spectacle of Revelation. They understood that their ability to withstand such a sight was miraculous; this kind of direct encounter between the Almighty and mortal human beings occurred outside the confines of natural law. Necessarily, then, the ability they were given to survive his experience must have been only temporary, and they did not know at what point the natural state of affairs would be restored.

Moshe tells that God looked approvingly upon the people's request, responding to Moshe, "They did well in all that they said" (5:25). It is indeed a sign of great integrity and humility that *Benei Yisrael* remained aware of their human limitations even after having been shown the awesome sight of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*. They understood that despite having witnessed God's revelation, they were, in the end, mere "flesh" who at some point would be unable to withstand such an experience. *Benei Yisrael* were shown the heavens, but they remembered that they still lived on earth, and were still bound by the natural constraints of earthly existence.