



Shavuoth

Maimonides on the Experience at Sinai

By Rabbi David Silverberg

In the Torah reading for Shavuot, we read the account in the Book of Shemot of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, the divine revelation at Sinai. After God's revelation and the proclamation of the Ten Commandments, the people, who were frightened by the spectacle, approached Moshe and begged that he alone hear from God the remaining commandments. Moshe responded, "Do not fear, for it was for the purpose of testing you that God came, and so that His fear shall be upon you" (Shemot 20:17).

It seems, at first glance, difficult to understand how this event of the Revelation served to "test" *Benei Yisrael*. Normally, a "test" is given to determine the response of the tested individual or individuals, which will determine their level of knowledge, faithfulness, character or skill. What exactly was being "tested" when God revealed Himself to *Benei Yisrael*?

Maimonides addresses this question in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:24), and offers a particularly novel interpretation of this verse. He reads Moshe's response as, "for it was for the purpose of the test that God came." The event of the Decalogue served not as a test, but rather to prepare *Benei Yisrael* for the test they will confront numerous times over the course of their history. According to Maimonides, Moshe refers here to the kind of test described in the Book of Devarim (13:4) regarding a false prophet, who seeks to lure the people to idolatry. Moshe warns the people there in Devarim, "Do not listen to the words of that prophet...for the Lord your God is testing you to determine whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." God foresaw that *Benei Yisrael* would be confronted by prophets and ideologues who argue against the authority of the Torah they received at Sinai, and call for the modification or abrogation of the law taught by Moshe. The event of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* was intended to fortify *Benei Yisrael* with the confident, unwavering belief in the eternity and immutability of the Torah, so that they could withstand such trials. Maimonides thus explains Moshe's response to *Benei Yisrael* as follows:

"...the object of this great sight which you perceived is that you should see the truth with your own eyes. When the Lord your God, in order to show your faithfulness to Him, will prove you by a false prophet, who will tell you the reverse of what you have heard, you will remain firm and your steps will not slide. If I had come as a messenger as you desired, and had told you that which had been said unto me and which you had not heard, you would perhaps consider as true what another might tell you in opposition to that which you heard from me. But it is different now, as you have heard it in the midst of the great sight."

According to Maimonides, then, this verse establishes that the purpose of the Revelation was to prepare *Benei Yisrael* for the tests to their faith that would arise in the subsequent centuries and millennia, reinforcing their belief in the eternity of the Torah.

Maimonides elaborates on this role of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (chapters 8-9), where he emphasizes that the acceptance of Moshe as a prophet and lawgiver was grounded not in the miracles he performed, but in the Revelation at Sinai. It was there, Maimonides writes, that *Benei Yisrael* – the entire nation – heard God's voice summon Moshe and instruct him to convey the commandments to *Benei Yisrael*. Moshe was the only prophet whose prophecy was publicly and explicitly affirmed by God Himself, rather than through the questionable "proof" of a miracle, and his authority is thus unchallenged. Therefore, since Moshe himself informed us that the Torah he gave us will never be modified or abrogated, we must dismiss any prophet who seeks to alter the Torah's laws or claims that they are no longer binding.

Maimonides returns to this theme in his *Epistle to Yemen (Iggeret Teiman)*, in which he attempts to provide encouragement for the Jews of Yemenite suffering from religious persecution. He makes reference to this interpretation to this verse ("for it was for the purpose of testing you that God came"), whereby the purpose of the Revelation was affirming the eternal validity and authority of the Torah. In essence, Maimonides told the Jews of Yemen that the event of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* occurred specifically in anticipation of the kind of conditions they endured, when people or movements (such as Christianity and Islam) would arise and claim that the Torah's laws are no longer binding. This event irrefutably demonstrates the authority of Moshe, who himself negated the possibility of the Torah's abrogation. The Revelation thus serves as the cornerstone of Jewish faith and the basis for our unwavering belief in the continued relevance, authority and significance of the Torah's laws, even in the face of unrelenting pressure imposed upon us by other religions.