



Parashat Ki Tisa

"The Lord Would Speak to Moshe Face to Face":

Maimonides' Seventh Principle of Faith

by Rabbi David Silverberg

The story of the golden calf and its aftermath, narrated in Parashat Ki-Tisa, elaborates not only on the experience of the Israelite people, but also on the personal experiences of its leader, Moshe. Upon his descent from Mount Sinai, Moshe pitches his tent outside the Israelite camp, where God would speak with him (33:7). In this context, the Torah describes the nature of this communion: "The Lord would speak to Moshe face to face, as one man speaks to another" (33:11). Whereas Moshe's inaugural prophecy required the medium of an "angel" speaking from inside a burning bush (3:2), Moshe has now reached the point of direct communication, to whatever extent possible, with the Almighty.

Later in the Torah, we find that this direct communication marked a fundamental point of distinction between Moshe and all other prophets. In response to the slurs against Moshe muttered by his siblings, Aharon and Miriam, God appears to them and emphasizes their brother's singularity:

If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moshe; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. (Bamidbar 12:6-8)

In the final verses of the Torah, we discover that not only had Moshe exceeded the prophetic stature of all prophets before him, but also this stature would never be matched in the future: "Never again did there arise a prophet like Moshe – whom the Lord singled out, face-to-face" (Devarim 34:10).

Maimonides' Seventh Principle of Faith

The verses cited above form the Scriptural basis for the seventh of Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith, which he lists in this commentary to the Mishna (Sanhedrin, chapter 10) and demands that every believing Jew accept as axiomatic. Maimonides formulates this principle as follows:

The seventh fundamental principle is the prophecy of Moshe our teacher. We are to believe that he was the chief of all other prophets before and after him, all of whom were his inferiors. He was the chosen one of all mankind, superior in attaining knowledge of God to any other person who ever lived or ever will live. He surpassed the normal human condition and attained the angelic. There remained no veil he did not rend and penetrate behind, nothing physical to hold him back, no deficiency, great or small, to confuse him. All his powers of sense of fantasy were repressed, and pure reason alone remained. This is what is meant by saying that he spoke to God without angelic mediation.

Later we will elaborate further on the basic points of distinction between Moshe's prophecy and that of other prophets, and on the unique prophetic experience Maimonides describes in this passage. First, however, let us focus our attention on a much simpler and more fundamental question: why must this belief be included in the faith consciousness of every believing Jew?

Why does the qualitative and eternal superiority of Moshe's prophecy constitute an essential tenet of the Jewish belief system?

The answer flows naturally from Moshe's unique role as lawgiver. As Maimonides emphasizes in his *Guide* (2:39), no other prophet received from God laws to convey to others. The prophets before Moshe were not ordered to charge their contemporaries with any laws or restrictions, and the prophets who arose after Moshe's death merely admonished the people to abide by the commandments transmitted through Moshe. It emerges, then, that the qualitative and eternal superiority of Moshe's prophecy guarantees the immutability and eternity of the laws he conveyed. Once a Jew believes that no prophet has or will ever experience prophecy at a level comparable with Moshe's, he must necessarily reject any claims of subsequent, alleged prophetic insight that opposes the Mosaic doctrine.

Maimonides himself expresses this critical ramification of this tenet. In his *Guide* (ibid.), Maimonides demonstrates how Moshe's superior prophetic stature necessarily indicates the perfection of the laws he transmitted: "For if one individual of a class has reached the highest perfection possible in that class, every other individual must necessarily be less perfect, and deviate from the perfect measure either by surplus or deficiency." In other words, any attempt to add to or subtract from the Mosaic law ipso facto undermines its perfection. Once we have established Moshe's everlasting preeminence, any alleged prophecy that opposes the creed he conveyed is, by definition, inferior. Belief in Moshe's supremacy thus negates the possibility of the Torah's abrogation or modification. Since no one can ever hear and understand the word of God with the same degree of clarity as Moshe, no one can challenge the accuracy of his prophecy and the laws he prophetically conveyed.

An eloquent expression of the importance of this tenet appears in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate), who describes the singularity of Moshe's prophecy as a "fortified wall" protecting us from heresy. In his commentary to the siddur (*Olat Re'iya*, vol. 1, p. 334), Rabbi Kook points to this principle as the basis for the practice observed by many to verbally recount each day the incident of Miriam. As mentioned earlier, Miriam and Aharon are admonished for speaking inappropriately about their brother and questioning his unparalleled stature, and Miriam is punished for her impropriety with leprosy (see Bamidbar, chapter 12). Later in the Torah, Moshe urges Benei Yisrael to preserve the memory of this unfortunate incident: "Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt" (Devarim 24:9). Nachmanides interprets this verse as introducing an eternal obligation to verbally recount this incident, and indeed many have the practice of reciting this verse each day to remind themselves of Miriam's misdeed and punishment. Rabbi Kook suggested that (according to Nachmanides) the Torah demanded this constant reminder to impress upon us the singular nature of Moshe's prophecy. Miriam was punished for failing to recognize this singularity, and we therefore recall this event each day to reinforce our belief in this fundamental tenet.

Nevertheless, one might still question the need for this article of faith in light of Maimonides' tenth principle, which establishes that the Torah will never be modified. Does this affirmation of the Torah's immutability not by definition affirm the singular prophetic stature of Moshe, who presented that Torah? Why must Maimonides single out both Moshe's preeminence and the immutability of the laws he transmitted?

The answer, of course, is that the unparalleled clarity with which Moshe perceived the divine will does not in itself preclude the possibility of a change in the divine will. The seventh principle establishes that no prophet can ever claim greater access to God's will than Moshe; the tenth, by contrast, establishes the permanence of God's will, that at no point will He ever decide to change the laws initially transmitted to us through Moshe.

Four Points of Distinction

In the aforementioned passage in Maimonides' commentary to the Mishna, where he presents the thirteen principles of faith, as well as in his *Code* (Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 7:6-7), he delineates the four fundamental differences between Mosaic and standard prophecy. His

inclusion of the specific differences in his commentary to the Mishna, where he delineates the fundamental articles of faith, would suggest that he demands belief in all these four points of distinction. It appears that in Maimonides' view, a general belief in Moshe's prophetic supremacy does not suffice; one must acknowledge all four specific points that set his prophecy apart from that of standard prophets. We should therefore expect that these four points are all indispensable to affirming the authority and immutability of the Mosaic law. As we discuss the four differences, we will consider how each unique feature of Moshe's prophecy is necessary to preclude any challenge to the accuracy or perfection of the laws he transmitted.

The first point of distinction involves directness. Whereas other prophets received the divine word through intermediaries of one sort or another, Moshe was addressed by God directly. As Maimonides notes, God Himself made explicit reference to this distinction in his admonition to Miriam and Aharon, cited earlier: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord." The image of God speaking to Moshe "mouth to mouth" implies the absence of any intermediary, the direct communication that characterized Moshe's communion with God. This point also emerges clearly from the verse in Parashat Ki-Tisa, which describes God speaking to Moshe "face to face."

Maimonides deliberately chose not to elaborate on the full meaning of "direct communication" with God:

I should have wished to explicate this mystery from Biblical sources, explaining such verses as "God spoke to Moshe mouth to mouth," but I see they would require a great many preparatory comments about the remarkable existence of angels... And the discussion would have to be widened to include the prophetic descriptions of God and angels, including the Divine Dimension of which even the briefest description would require a hundred pages.

But although we obviously cannot fully comprehend the distinction between direct and indirect communication with God, we can easily appreciate the importance and significance of this unique feature of Moshe's prophecy. The more direct the communication, the clearer the parties understand one another. Communication through an intermediary invariably results in a loss of clarity and some degree of ambiguity. Thus, the singular "directness" of Moshe's prophecy resulted in unparalleled clarity; no prophet can thus ever claim to have heard a divine message clearer than Moshe.

Maimonides briefly discusses the unique clarity of Moshe's prophecy in the introduction to his *Guide*, where he confesses his limited understanding of the difficult and complex theological concepts he sets out to address in this seminal work. He writes:

We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightening, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night. On some the lightening flashes in rapid succession, and they seem to be in continuous light, and their night is clear as the day. This was the degree of prophetic excellence attained by the greatest of prophets (Moshe).

Moshe perceived the divine will with near perfect clarity, as one can see a building in broad daylight. Other prophets, by contrast, were given occasional flashes of insight into God's will, but still groped in the dark.

The concept of the unique directness that characterized Moshe's prophecy appears in the Talmud, as well. In Masekhet Yevamot (49b), the Talmud describes Moshe's exposure to God as "aspaklaria ha-me'ira" – "clear glass," whereas other prophets beheld the Almighty through "aspaklaria she-eina me-ira," or "dim glass." In this manner the Talmud seeks to reconcile God's comment in Parashat Ki-Tisa, "for man cannot see Me and live" (33:20), with the testimony of the prophet Yeshayahu, "I saw God" (Yeshayahu 6:1). Man cannot see God directly, but prophets can see Him indirectly: Moshe through "clear glass," and others, through "dim glass."

Likewise, the Sifrei (a compendium on the books of Bamidbar and Devarim from the Mishnaic period) observes a difference in formulation between Moshe's prophetic dissertations

and those of other prophets. Moshe often introduces his prophecies with the words, "*zeh ha-davar asher tziva Hashem*" – "This is the matter that the Lord has commanded." Other prophets, by contrast, employed a different expression: "*Ko amar Hashem*" – "So says the Lord." The Sifrei likely has in mind the Midrashic reading of the Hebrew word "*zeh*" ("this"), which Rashi cites numerous times in his commentary to the Torah (e.g. Shemot 15:2 & 30:13; Bamidbar 8:4), as a reference to something clearly visible. By introducing his prophecy with this term, Moshe attests to having "visualized," to whatever extent possible, the divine word he now proceeds to convey. Other prophets did not perceive their messages with this same degree of clarity, and therefore did not employ the term "*zeh*" in reference to their prophecies.

The second and third differences between Mosaic and standard prophecy described by Maimonides relate to the prophet's physical and mental condition during his prophetic encounter. Other prophets, Maimonides asserts, experienced prophecy only while sleeping, or in a trance "so that his senses and intellect would be as useless as in a dream." Moshe, by contrast, was fully awake, conscious and in control of his senses when God spoke to him. What more, a prophet would experience dread and "nearly lose his mind" upon receiving a divine vision, whereas to Moshe, as described in Parashat Ki-Tisa, God spoke "as one man speaks to another." Moshe remained relaxed and at ease during his prophetic encounters, as if speaking to another human being.

These distinctions, too, are clearly necessary to negate the possibility of a later prophet abrogating or altering Moshe's prophecies. Since Moshe heard the divine word while in a state of complete consciousness and in full control of all his faculties, no one can dismiss his prophecies as results of imagination or misinterpretation. Moshe heard God's word as one listens to his friend in casual conversation, with his cognitive faculties fully intact, and with complete accuracy.

Finally, Maimonides writes, Moshe enjoyed unlimited and incessant access to prophecy. Other prophets were never guaranteed the ability to experience prophecy, regardless of their preparations and impassioned pleas to the Almighty to speak with them. But Moshe, as we see in several instances in the Torah, could consult with God and receive a response at all times. In his *Code* (Hilkhos Yesodei Ha-Torah 7:6), Maimonides explains that this constant access to prophecy affected Moshe's entire lifestyle and mode of conduct:

The other prophets did not prophesy whenever they wished; this was not so regarding our teacher Moshe. Rather, whenever he wished, the divine spirit overcame him and prophecy descended upon him, and he did not need to focus his mind and prepare for it, for he was already focused and prepared, like the ministering angels... You thus see that all prophets return to their "tent," meaning, all bodily needs, when prophecy departs from them, like the rest of the people. They therefore do not separate from their wives. But our teacher Moshe never returned to his original "tent," and he therefore separated from his wife forever.

The possibility of a prophetic encounter at any moment necessitated Moshe's constant preparedness for such an event. He was thus required to retain his spiritual focus at all times, which necessarily entailed withdrawal from physical life.

This distinction between Moshe and other prophets led to confusion on the part of his siblings. Earlier we referred to the incident when Miriam and Aharon spoke derisively about their brother, and the Rabbis explain that they ridiculed Moshe's decision to separate from his wife. They argued, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moshe? Has He not spoken through us, as well?" (Bamidbar 12:2). They failed to recognize their brother's singular prophetic stature, which necessitated a constant state of spiritual focus. As we cited earlier, God responds to their criticism by emphasizing the fundamental distinction between Moshe and other prophets.

Why does this unique feature constitute a tenet of Jewish faith? How does Moshe's constant access to prophecy preclude the possibility of challenges to the authority and veracity of his prophecies?

We might suggest that without this belief, one could argue that Moshe's teachings are incomplete. Conceivably, had Moshe's access to prophecy been limited, God could have been compelled to withhold from the prophet important information concerning His laws. Our belief in the Torah's authority must include a belief in the comprehensive manifestation of the divine creed that it embodies. As such, Maimonides found it necessary to emphasize Moshe's unending access to prophecy, on the basis of which we must conclude that any law or stipulation that God did not convey to Moshe is not to be included in His creed.

A Fifth Distinction?

In at least two contexts, Maimonides emphasizes yet another distinction between Moshe and other prophets, which we mustn't confuse with the seventh principle of faith. This "fifth distinction" relates not to prophetic stature, but rather to the nature and basis of the people's belief in the prophet. In the eighth chapter of *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, Maimonides posits that "Israel did not believe in our teacher Moshe merely on account of the signs he performed." It was only at the Revelation at Mount Sinai, when "we ourselves witnessed the fire, the thunder, the lightening and Moshe entering the thick cloud after which the divine voice spoke to him" that the Israelite nation fully believed in Moshe as God's prophet. All later prophets earned the trust of their intended audience through the performance of wonders and miracles, as Moshe himself instructed (*Devarim* 18:22). Moshe's designation, by contrast, was witnessed by the entire nation, thus obviating the need for any verification of his status as prophet through questionable miracles and supernatural signs.

Maimonides explains that in this respect, the people's belief in Moshe differed qualitatively from their faith in other prophets. He writes, "For when one's faith is founded on signs, a lurking doubt always remains in the mind that these signs may have been performed with magic." No such doubts could have been entertained with respect to Moshe's status, the Almighty's proclamation of which was witnessed by the entire Israelite nation. As such, Maimonides establishes, all future prophets receive their authority solely from Moshe. Given the insufficiency of miracles and wonders to confirm the status of a purported prophet, a prophet earns the trust of the people only because Moshe himself, in God's name, dictated that we accept the prophetic claims of one who performs wonders. By extension, then, no prophet can ever oppose Moshe's teachings. As Maimonides writes, "Since we accept a man as a prophet on the basis of signs only because we are commanded to do so by Moshe, how can we validate on this basis a man who seeks to repudiate Moshe's prophecy, which we saw and heard?" This argument emerges as a central theme in Maimonides' celebrated *Epistle to Yemen*, in which he seeks to bolster the faith of the Yemenite Jewish community and enable them to resist the pressure to convert out of the faith. There he emphasizes Moshe's own unequivocal affirmations of the Torah's eternal immutability and relevance. Thus, given our nationwide, unquestioning acceptance of Moshe as prophet, we must steadfastly reject any subsequent claims of the Torah's abrogation or revision.

As mentioned, this distinction must not be confused with Maimonides' seventh principle regarding the singular nature of Moshe's prophecy. This logical argument for dismissing alleged prophets who seek to repudiate the Torah does not protect against a claim of supremacy over Moshe's prophecy. Although, indeed, the entire nation witnessed Moshe's designation as prophet, and he himself established the eternity and immutability of the Torah, nevertheless, conceivably, a false prophet could still undermine Moshe's authority by professing a clearer understanding of the divine will. Only the belief in Moshe's eternal singularity, that "never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moshe," protects the Torah's immutability and eternal application from those who seek to undermine its authority and deny its everlasting status as the unalterable creed of the Jewish people.