Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein 2022 / 5782

## DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## **PARSHAS YISRO**

## Postscript to the Aseres Hadibros -The Final Section of Parshas Yisro -

וַיֹּאמֵר ה' אֵל משֶה כֹּה תאמַר אַל בָּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּם רְאִיתֵם כִּי מָן הַשְּׁמֵיִם דְּבַּרְתִּי עָמֵכֶם

Hashem said to Moshe, "So shall you say to the Children of Israel, 'you have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven."1

Introduction: What Does One Say after the Revelation at Sinai? Our parsha ends with Hashem commanding Moshe to address the people after the Aseres Hadibros, during which he presents them with a number of mitzvos:

- Not to make images of celestial beings, or any graven images of silver and gold.<sup>2</sup>
- Not to use a sword when fashioning the stones for the mizbeyach.<sup>3</sup>
- Not to have steps leading up to the *mizbeyach*; instead, to have a ramp.<sup>4</sup>

This section is somewhat enigmatic. Why are these mitzvos specifically chosen to be communicated immediately following the revelation at Har Sinai? In what way do they form a fitting "post-script" to the epic event of hearing the Aseres Hadibros?

The commentators explain that with these mitzvos, Hashem was indicating to the people the full impact of what it means to receive the Torah. Let us consider, three of the Aseres Hadibros are the three prohibitions against idolatry, murder and adultery. These areas are not only elemental, they are actually already incumbent upon all human beings as three of the seven Noachide mitzvos! Why does Hashem address the His chosen people at Sinai with mitzvos that apply to everyone?

This is the background to the follow-up communication, where Moshe informs the people that part of being Jewish means that even these basic laws assume an infinitely higher level of observance and sensitivity. Not only are those sins themselves forbidden, they cannot exist even in trace form. When we

<sup>1</sup> Shemos 20:19.

<sup>2</sup> Verse 20.

<sup>3</sup> Verse 22.

<sup>4</sup> Verse 23.

consider the mitzvos Moshe presents here, we see that they pertain to the domains of the three cardinal prohibitions:

- Not only is serving idols itself prohibited, even making images of celestial beings or other 4. forms is also forbidden.
- Not only is murder prohibited, but an implement associated with bloodshed is not even allowed to be used in fashioning the mizbeyach.
- Not only is physical immorality prohibited, it is forbidden to ascend to the mizbeyach in a way which is even appears to be immodest, such as would happen if stairs were used, as explained by Rashi.

Through this, Hashem is informing the people that having received the Torah, everything – even basic things – takes on an entirely new level of observance and fulfilment!

## RASHI: A LISTENING EAR FOR MITZVOS

Regarding the final prohibition of having stairs lead up to the mizbeyach, which is considered immodest and degrading, even though the Kohanim are wearing michnasayim (trousers), Rashi adds the following fascinating comment:

והרי דברים קל וחומר, ומה אבנים האלה שאין בהן דעת להקפיד על בזיונן אמרה תורה הואיל ויש בהן צורך לא תנהג בהן מנהג בזיון, חבירך שהוא בדמות יוצרך ומקפיד על בזיונו על אחת כמה וכמה.

Behold, the matter is a kal vachomer:<sup>5</sup> If with regards to these stones, which do not have knowledge to be upset over their degradation, [nevertheless] the Torah says, since there is use for them, do not act toward them in a degrading way - your fellow, who is in the image of your Creator and who cares about his disgrace, how much more so [should you not act in a degrading way toward him]!

What is so interesting about this comment of Rashi is that it appears to have nothing to do with Rashi's stated goal in his commentary, which is: 'לפשוטו של מקרא - to explain the straightforward meaning of the verse." Here, Rashi has already explained to us the pshat, namely, that using stairs appears immodest. Beyond this point, any further comment – however worthy and important – would appear to be extraneous!

It appears that Rashi felt he could not take leave of the parsha of Kabbalas HaTorah (receiving the Torah) without expressing what that concept means in its fullest sense. Beyond the essential requirement to fulfill the mitzvos of the Torah, they also contain concepts and lessons to be absorbed and applied to broader areas of life beyond which they were stated. In this regard, the Torah encourages us not just to perform the mitzvos, but to "listen" to them.<sup>6</sup> If a person takes great care to accord respect to the stones of the Beis Hamikdash but then tramples all over his peers, degrading and besmirching them, he may have fulfilled the mitzvah, but he has not listened to it – and hence he has not "received" it in the full sense of the word.

A classic and thought-provoking illustration of this idea of "listening to mitzvos" can be gleaned from an episode involving a Torah luminary closer to our times. It is told that a student in the Slabodka Yeshiva was in the habit of walking around with a dour countenance. After a while, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter<sup>7</sup> of Slabodka, called him over and said, "It is forbidden for you to be in the beis midrash wearing an expression like that." The student, who was punctilious in the fulfillment of mitzvos and halachah,

<sup>5</sup> An a fortiori argument.

<sup>6</sup> See Shemos 15:26: "אָם שׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמֵע לְקוֹל ה' אֲלֹקִיךְ... וְהַאֲזְנָתְ לְמְצוֹתְיוֹ – If you shall surely heed Hashem's voice... and listen to

<sup>7</sup> Lit. "the Elder," the spiritual dean of the Yeshiva.

inquired: "Where, may I ask, does the Torah prohibit such a thing?" The Alter replied: "The Torah forbids a person to dig a pit in the public thoroughfare, because passersby can fall in and be injured. The beis midrash is a public thoroughfare and your face is a pit, since people who look at you scowling instantly feel worse. What difference does it make if you damage someone's arm or leg or you damage his mood?"

And so, Rashi concludes Parshas Yisro with a departure from his general sphere of comment, reminding us that the messages of Torah are communicated not only by the words it uses, but also by the mitzvos it commands.