



# GUIDED LEARNING



## Ma'amad Har Sinai (Shemot chapters 19 and 20)

Rabbi Menachem  
Leibtag

In this guided learning, we will explore Maamad Har Sinai through the text of the Chumash with the help of Rashi and other commentaries

Before you begin this guided learning, be sure to have a Chumash with Rashi handy, as the following battery of questions will help guide your study of the Torah reading for Shavuot morning – the story of *Matan Torah* in Shemot 19 and 20. We will ask lots of questions – don't worry if you don't have an answer for all of them! Use these questions to launch discussions or as food for thought.

**1. Study Shemot** 19:1-8, paying careful attention to the flow of topic. (Don't skip to the next question, until you have completed it!)

Verses 19:1-2 'set the stage,' while the primary topic of this section unfolds in 19:3-6 – when G-d speaks to Moshe, instructing him to deliver a message to the nation. Note the formality of this message (i.e. its 'double introduction' in 19:3, and its 'superfluous conclusion' in 19:6).

**2. In your opinion**, what is the purpose and essence of this message, and why must it be ratified by the people in 19:7-8? Could this 'message' be understood as a 'proposal' to *Am Yisrael*, or some type of a 'deal'? Be sure you understand the 'two sides' of this proposal as detailed in 19:5-6 (i.e. what is the IF, and what is the THEN?).

**3. Would you consider** 19:4 part of the message or a 'motivating reason' to accept what follows? Relate your answer to the need for what transpires in 19:7-8.

**4. Note the word** ברית in 19:5. In your opinion, does it refer to something 'old' or something 'new'? According to each possibility, what covenant is being referred to? How does this *brit* relate to the proposal? Relate your answer to Shemot 24:7-8 and 6:7, as well as to Devarim 4:9-13 and Devarim 5:2. See also Bereishit 17:7 and its context. (Bonus: see the commentaries of Rashi and Ramban.)

**5. Note the phrases** ממלכת כהנים and גוי קדוש in 19:6. How did you translate these phrases? Do they describe two different concepts or the same concept? Relate your answer to the concept of a גוי גדול as promised to Avraham Avinu in Bereishit 12:1-3, as well as to the purpose for why Avraham was chosen in 18:17-19.

**6. Review this proposal** once again in 19:3-8, noting how *Bnei Yisrael* may have had the option to reject it. In your opinion, what would have happened had they answered 'no'? In light of your answer, consider the following Midrash:

Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.  
(Mechilta, quoted in Shabbat 88a)

**7. In 19:7-8**, *Bnei Yisrael* answered 'yes' to this proposal. In your opinion, what should happen next? In other words, how will *Bnei Yisrael* find out the more specific details of this covenant? Relate your answer to what does happen in chapters 19 and 20 and in chapters 21 through 24, and the rest of Chumash.

**8. Carefully read 19:9**, and try your best to translate every phrase in this *pasuk*. Is there anything that doesn't make sense?

The first half of verse 19:9 relates to the 'proposition' discussed in 19:5-6 and agreed upon in 19:7-8.

**9. What is the purpose** of the 'cloud'? What will G-d be telling Moshe while he is in this cloud, and what are the people supposed to 'overhear'? Relate your answer to what will take place in chapter 20.

**10. How did you understand** the phrase 'so that they will believe in you [Moshe] forever'? Is there a *mitzvah* to believe in Moshe? In general, whenever Moshe relays the words of G-d to the nation, how does the nation know that Moshe is 'telling the truth'?

**11. Now review** the final phrase of 19:9: "and Moshe told the people's answer to G-d." How does this final phrase relate to the first half of the *pasuk*? What 'answer of the people' is this verse referring to?

Verses 19:10-11 appear to be G-d's response to what the people said in 19:9.

12. Based on this response, what seems to have been the people's request?

Rashi on Shemot 19:9 says the following:

*The words of the people, etc.* — He said to G-d: "I have heard from them a reply to this statement — that their desire is to hear the commandments from You and not from me. One who hears from the mouth of a messenger is not the same (in the same position) as one who hears directly from the mouth of the King himself. It is our wish to see our King.

Based on this Rashi, it appears that G-d's original plan was to speak the Ten Commandments to Moshe in the cloud in a manner in which the people would 'overhear', but Moshe would later need to relay their precise content. However, due to the people's request for a more direct encounter, the new plan would be for G-d to speak the Ten Commandments directly to the people; hence the necessity for three days of preparation.

13. Next, review the Ten Commandments in chapter 20.

Note the difference in 'person' between the first two *dibrot* and the last eight: there is a grammatical change from 'first person' (in 20:2-5) to 'third person' (in 20:6-13). The following Midrash addresses this difference:

Rav Hamnuna said: What is the verse that alludes to this? It is written: "Moses commanded to us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Devarim 34:4). The word Torah, in terms of its numerical value [*gematriya*], is 611, the number of *mitzvot* that were received and taught by Moses our teacher. In addition, there are two *mitzvot*: "I am the L-rd your G-d" and: "You shall have no other gods" (Shemot 20:2, 3), the first two of the Ten Commandments, that we heard from the mouth of the Almighty, for a total of 613.

(Makkot 23b)

14. Return now to Shemot 20:1 – the opening line of the Ten Commandments. Based on that verse, who is G-d speaking to? (May there be a word missing in that verse?)

15. Now carefully read the story in Shemot 20:15-16, the narrative describing how the people beg Moshe rather than G-d to speak to them – and relate this story to the above questions.

Did these verses take place after the *Dibrot* – or in the middle? If the latter, why then would the story be told only afterward?

16. Return now to review 19:10-15, noting the need for the three-day preparation. In your opinion, why was this necessary, and what was supposed to happen on day three? Where should the people have been on the third day in the morning – at *Har Sinai*, or in the camp? Relate this to what transpires in 19:16-17, and to why Moshe needed to 'take them out from the camp' and bring them to the 'foot of the mountain.'

17. Next, study 19:18-19; how did you understand the phrase: משה ידבר והאלוקים יענו בקול Who is Moshe speaking to – the people, or G-d? According to either possibility, what was Moshe 'saying'?

Rashi on 19:19 answers the above question:

*Moshe spoke* — When Moshe was speaking and proclaiming the Commandments to Israel — for they heard from the Almighty's mouth only the Commandments לא יהיה לך and אנכי ולא יהיה לך, whilst the others were promulgated by Moshe — then the Holy One, blessed be He, assisted him by giving him strength so that his voice might be powerful and so become audible.

According to Rashi, the second half of verse 19 is describing how G-d amplifies Moshe's voice when he is relaying the last eight commandments! According to Rashi's interpretation, both the nation's request to hear G-d directly in 19:9, and their actual hearing of G-d's voice directly in 19:19 is mysteriously 'missing' in this narrative.

18. Can you explain why?

Verses 19:20-25 form a distinct unit and are quite difficult to understand.

19. Try your best to relate what transpires in these verses to the 'two plans' discussed in the questions above.

20. Who are the *kohanim* described in 19:21-24? How are they 'different' than the rest of the nation, and where are they standing? Relate your answer to Shemot 24:1-11, noting especially 24:1 & 24:9-11. (Can 19:22 be understood without 24:1? Bonus: Might this explain Rashi's comment on 24:1 in regard to when these events transpired?).

## CONCLUSION

The Torah seems to be intentionally ambiguous in regard to how close we stood before G-d during this momentous event, possibly causing the reader to ponder this very question in regard to one's own search for G-d in his or her daily life. Hopefully these thoughts will make our own Shavuot experience a little more meaningful.