fYESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT BEHAALOTEKHA**

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**Dedicated in memory of**

**Rabbanit Yocheved bat Todros Menos Eliyahu z"l**

**whose yahrzeit is the 14th of Sivan,**

**by her granddaughter Vivian Singer**

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**"There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe"**

**I. Moshe’s Uniqueness**

In response to the accusations that Miriam directs against Moshe at the beginning of chapter 12, God describes at the end of our *parasha* the great difference between the prophecy of Moshe and that of other prophets:

And He said: Hear now My words: if there be a prophet among you, I the Lord do make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. My servant Moshe is not so; he is trusted in all My house; with him do I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly, and not in dark speeches; and the ‘picture (*temuna*)’ of the Lord does he behold. (*Bamidbar* 12:6-8)

The Rambam established Moshe’s unique prophecy as one of the thirteen principles of faith:

I believe with complete faith that the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu was true; and that he was the father of the prophets, both those who preceded and those who followed him. (from the *siddur*; see Rambam’s commentary to the Mishna, introduction to *Perek Chelek*)

However, this requires explanation. On the face of it, the uniqueness of Moshe’s prophecy would seem to be a side point regarding his greatness. How does this fact become a cornerstone of our faith?[[1]](#footnote-1)

To answer this question, let us take a look at the difference between the prophecy of Moshe and that of the other prophets. We will start with the differences between the types of prophecies and try to understand what is behind them, and from there, we will also understand the significance of Moshe’s prophecy as a foundation of Jewish faith.

**II. The Difference Between Moshe and Other Prophets**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* notes that there are three differences between the prophecy of Moshe and that of other prophets, all of which are found in our *parasha*:

"I, the Lord, make Myself known to him through a vision." This comes to inform us of the difference between the level of the other prophets and the level of Moshe. There are three elements to prophecy:

1. The attainment of a vision.
2. The time of its attainment – i.e., is he able to prophesize whenever he wants, or is it dependent on when God so desires, rather than on [the prophet’s] will?
3. Attaining a verbal communication – as I will explain. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bamidbar* 12:6)

**1. The Attainment of a Vision**

The first point relates to the quality of the prophecy, and is based on the words of the Gemara:

All the prophets looked into a dim glass, but Moshe looked through a clear glass. (*Yevamot* 49b)

On a superficial level, it may be said that while other prophets saw visions in an insufficiently clear manner, Moshe would see a much clearer vision. Of course, this requires explanation; surely no one has ever seen an image of God, so what does it mean to say that Moshe saw things in a clearer manner? The *Or Ha-Chaim* uses a parable to explain this:

A second level of communication from God is one in which God radiates light such that the recipient "receives" a picture (*temuna*). This "picture" has nothing in common with the way we normally understand the term "picture," for God has no picture. Rather, it is a hidden type of "picture," which no living being other than Moshe can perceive with his mind's eye**.** This is why Moshe is described with the words: "and the ‘picture (*temuna*)’ of the Lord does he behold."

A third level is one in which the recipient perceives a light which emanates from God and the source of which seems to be very distant. This may be likened to a candle whose light travels a great distance, and a person sees that light. This is what the Torah referred to here as a "vision," and this is what prophets other than Moshe perceived. (*Or Ha-Chaim,* ibid.)

Unlike the other prophets, who saw a general light from a distance, Moshe saw a light that was much brighter and greater.

The Rambam in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* notes this difference between the prophecy of Moshe and that of the rest of the prophets, but explains it differently:

[Divine insight is bestowed upon] all the [other] prophets in a dream or vision, while Moshe Rabbeinu would prophesy while standing awake, as is it stated: "When Moshe would come into the Tent of Meeting to speak to Him, he would hear the Voice speaking to him" (*Bamidbar* 7:89). (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:6)

While the *Or Ha-Chaim* speaks of one vision that is clearer and another that is less clear, the Rambam formulates a sharper and more significant difference – prophecy in sleep versus prophecy while awake. This difference can be understood within the Rambam's general approach to prophecy, presented in his *Guide for the Perplexed.* The Rambam explains that *all* prophecies, including prophetic visions, were spoken only within a dream and did not take place in the physical world:

We have already explained [in the previous chapter] that any appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in Scripture took place in a vision or dream; it makes no difference whether this is expressly stated or not… In such visions, a prophet sometimes sees God speaking to him, as we will explain [II, 45], and sometimes sees an angel speaking to him, and sometimes hears someone speaking to him without seeing the speaker, and sometimes sees a man who speaks to him, and learns afterwards that the speaker was an angel. In this latter kind of prophecy, the prophet will relate that he saw a man who was doing or saying something, and that he learned afterwards that it was an angel. (Rambam, *Guide*, II, 42)

Thus, later in the chapter, the Rambam explains that the entire story of Avraham and the three angels who visited him in Elonei Mamre was a vision received in a dream. In light of this general understanding of prophecy, we can say that Moshe received his prophecies even while awake, unlike other prophets.

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, however,understands prophecy in its plain sense and acknowledges a possibility of receiving prophecy while awake, but in a different manner, as explained above.

**2. The Timing of a Vision**

The second difference relates to *when* a prophet is granted visions:

Regarding the time of attaining prophecy, the Torah says: "I make Myself known to him." That is, even this low level is not with the prophet at all times, whenever he wants, but rather “when *I* want, I make Myself known to him.” When he wishes to attain it, he is not guaranteed that he will attain it at all times, in the way that Moshe was promised to achieve it whenever he wants, as it is written: "Stand, that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you" (*Bamidbar* 9:8), without any doubt about the matter. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

This difference is very significant in the context of what Miriam had said, as a *midrash* explains it (*Tanchuma Tzav* 13, cited by Rashi, ad loc.), against Moshe's separation from his wife. God responds to her complaint by explaining that Moshe’s prophecy imposes demands that are different from those made of other prophets. While with other prophets, prophecy is something temporary and restricted to the moment, with Moshe, it is permanent. This is evident in the verses that refer to Moshe as a fixture of God's household: "He is trusted in all my house" (*Bamidbar* 12:7).

This connection does not appear explicitly in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim*, but it is alluded to in the words of the Rambam:

All the [other] prophets cannot prophesy whenever they desire. Moshe Rabbeinu was different. Whenever he desired, *ruach ha-kodesh* (holy spirit) would envelop him and prophecy would rest upon him. He did not have to concentrate his mind and prepare himself [for prophecy], because it was always concentrated, prepared, and ready [to appreciate spiritual truth] as the angels [are]. Therefore, he would prophesy at any time, as it is stated: "Stand that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you" (*Bamidbar* 9:8). He was promised this by God, as it is stated: "Go and tell them: Return to your tents, but you stand here together with Me" (*Devarim* 5:27-28). (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:6)

The commandment to Moshe at the end of the assembly at Mount Sinai, "but you stand here together with Me," indicates that while the rest of the men of Israel were permitted to return to their wives, Moshe remained bound by a prohibition, due to the need to be ready for prophecy at every moment.

**3. Attaining a Verbal Communication**

The third difference mentioned by the *Or Ha-Chaim[[2]](#footnote-2)* relates to the quality of the communication: while other prophets received their prophecy in riddles and hints, Moshe received his prophecy in a simple, direct, and clear way.

This is what God means when He says: "I speak with him mouth to mouth." That is to say, all the Israelites saw all 53 times that God spoke to Moshe, that the message was crystal clear and could be understood by anyone with a command of the Hebrew language. The same applies to all the wealth of wisdom that God gathered in [the written Torah], all of it laid out for anyone who immerses himself in the text to comprehend the meaning God intended. This contrasts with the messages God conveyed through the prophets Yeshayahu and Yirmeyahu, which are full of parables and enigmas. What did Yechezkel mean by the "great eagle" in chapter 17, for instance? The prophecies of the so-called minor prophets such as Zekharia are even harder to unravel, so that none of us can be certain of the intent of his prophecy. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* notes something every student of the Bible knows: While the Torah handed down to us by Moshe is written in simple and clear Hebrew, later prophecies are written in much more complicated Hebrew. The language of the prophecies requires extensive and comprehensive knowledge of the affairs of the period and of the natural sciences in order to understand it. This difference stems from two differences in the experience of prophecy between Moshe and the other prophets:

Concerning verbal communication, God said: "I speak with him [i.e., other prophets] in a dream." Know that there are two elements to a dream. First, when one hears the words, his mind is confused, and his ear does not discern the words to fully understand what was said because his mind is confused. Second, anything stated in a dream, the matter is not to be understood in its plain sense, but rather as a parable or metaphor. Go out and learn from the dreams written in the Torah and their interpretations. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

A dream does not take place with the full awareness of the dreamer, nor is it always clear and coherent. The prophecies of other prophets is compared to a dream[[3]](#footnote-3) in these two respects: they underwent a shocking physical experience that made it difficult to understand the content of their prophecies, and the content itself was also vague and unclear. In contrast, the prophecy of Moshe was clear and lucid – both his mind when he received it, and the content.

**III. The Root of These Differences**

After laying out the various differences between Moshe and the other prophets, the *Or Ha-Chaim* asks an important question:

One must investigate this: since the one granting prophecy is the same, i.e., God, why does He speak clearly to one prophet and obscurely to another? (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

In other words, one can ask: What made Moshe different, such that he merited such unique prophecy? After all, the prophecies all come from the same source, from the Master of the Universe; why then is there such a difference between them?

Before we answer this question, let us consider for a moment what makes a person fit to receive prophecy, a topic that arises in the Gemara in the course of discussion about the prohibition of carrying from one domain to another on Shabbat. When discussing how people typically transfer objects from one domain to another, the Gemara considers how the Levites carried the vessels of the *Mishkan* – including the height of the poles on their shoulders, which raises the question of how tall the Levites were. The Gemara suggests inferring their height from a source indicating that Moshe was unusually tall, but then questions the assumption that they were of similar heights:

Perhaps Moshe was different, because it was stated: The *Shekhina* rests only on one who is wise, strong, wealthy, and tall. (*Shabbat* 92a)

These qualities are seen as requirements for the resting of the *Shekhina*, i.e., for prophecy, thus it is possible that Moshe was exceptional in relation to the rest of the Levites.

This Gemara is fundamental for our understanding of prophecy, for it teaches that prophecy rests on a person in accordance with his personal attributes. The Rambam explains further that the foundation of prophecy rests in the perfection of one's attributes:

Prophecy falls only upon a very wise sage of strong character, who is never overcome by his natural inclinations in any regard. Instead, with his mind, he always overcomes his natural inclinations. He must [also] possess a very broad and accurate mental capacity. (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:1; see also *Shemoneh Perakim*,chapter 7)[[4]](#footnote-4)

It follows that the more a person works on his personal attributes, the greater his capacity for prophecy. Based on this, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the difference between Moshe and other prophets, such that all of the differences noted above stem from one fundamental distinction:

The Kabbalists explain… that the composite nature of the human species [being of body and spirit] detracts from its sensitivity to spiritual input and it is unable to bear anything that is not a composite… Therefore, the only human being able to retain his composure when addressed by God is one who has succeeded in transforming the material part of himself into [perfect, nonphysical] “form,” as we have described in other places – for such a person, his body is no longer a hindrance and he will be able to bear communications from the King. Therefore, when God transmits prophecy to one whose body is *not* sufficiently like his “form,” He does so wisely, in a manner that the word of the King goes out from on high, is enveloped in thin air, and *then* arrives at the ear of the prophet, and in this way, the prophet can bear it, though even this causes upset to the prophets, and this brings about that the words come by way of parables and metaphors, in the manner of a dream. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains here *why* a prophet's ability to receive prophecy depends on the refining of his qualities: Prophecy is the word of God, while man is composed of both spirit and matter, of the image of God and the dust of the earth. Man’s materiality prevents him from receiving and understanding the word of God – but he was given the ability to liken himself to God by refining his qualities and succeeding in overcoming his desires. In light of this, the more man resembles his Creator, the less “processing” and preparation the word of God needs to undergo before it reaches the human ear:

Therefore, all of the prophets, with the exception of Moshe, had to convey their messages in the form of parables and riddles [so that the equilibrium of their bodies and minds would not be permanently upset]. And more than the others, Zekharya, for he was the last of the prophets – the word came to him and was moved and manifested even more than other prophecies, in order to make it bearable. And therefore, it is filled with metaphors and the deepest similitude, to the point that later generations don’t know his words! And that is what God made known here, regarding the aspect attained by Moshe, and He said “mouth to mouth,” meaning that the word was not cut off from God’s mouth to pass through the atmosphere of the world and be changed along the way and lead to speaking in parables and riddles. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Moshe refined his attributes more than other prophets did, and therefore merited to receive God's word with few barriers or mediators. This principle is alluded to in God's testimony about Moshe in our *parasha*: "Now the man Moshe was very humble, more than all the men that were upon the face of the earth" (*Bamidbar* 12:3).

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin in his *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* mentions two other places where this idea appears:

And the essence of the difference between his level and theirs was as He Himself explained, stating: "I am the Lord, and I appeared to Avraham… as God Almighty, but by My name YHV-H I made Me not known to them" (*Shemot* 6:2-3). The idea is the very essence of the difference explained above between the name *Elo-him* and the Tetragrammaton. For in most cases, regarding the [prophetic] attainments of the forefathers, we find the name *Elo-him*…as I described above regarding the holiness of their level, that they gave no credence to any other power in the world at all. But their achievement of prophecy was not by totally nullifying the powers from their existence. That is what is stated: "And I appeared to Avraham… as God Almighty [*Shad-dai*]," which conveys the same idea as the name *Elo-him*, namely, that I am the Master of all powers, and if I so will it, each instant, I change the system of nature and the powers from how I fixed them at the time of creation… But Moshe Rabbeinu, his prophetic ability was in the context of the quality of the essential name, the Tetragrammaton, and therefore, there was no power obstructing the light of his prophetic ability… (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, gate 3, chap. 13)[[5]](#footnote-5)

And this is also the idea of their statement at the end of chapter *Kisui ha-dam* (*Chullin* 89a): "What is said in relation to Moshe and Aharon is greater than what was said in relation to Avraham. For regarding Avraham, it is written: 'although I am but dirt and ash' (*Bereishit* 18:27), whereas regarding Moshe and Aharon, it is written: 'and we, what are we?' (*Shemot* 16:5)." For dirt and ash, nevertheless, still appear to have the existence of dirt. But Moshe Rabbeinu said: "and we, what are we," as if they have no existence in the universe at all. (And although he included Aharon…because Israel’s complaint had been against both of them…nevertheless, the essence of this awesome level was [Moshe] alone.) (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

**IV. Moshe's Prophecy as a Foundation of Faith**

Now that we have delved into the difference between the prophecy of Moshe and that of other prophets, we can return to the above question: Why does the uniqueness of Moshe’s prophecy become such a great foundation of faith? In order to understand this, let us be precise in our reading of the Rambam's words in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*. At the beginning of chapter 8, the Rambam points out another difference between Moshe and other prophets, a difference concerning the source of the prophecy's authority:

The Jews did not believe in Moshe Rabbeinu because of the wonders that he performed. Whenever anyone's belief is based on wonders, [the commitment of] his heart has shortcomings, because it is possible to perform a wonder through magic or sorcery… What is the source of our belief in him? The [revelation] at Mount Sinai. Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's. There was fire, thunder, and lightning. He entered the thick clouds; the Voice spoke to him and we heard: "Moshe, Moshe, go tell them the following." (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 8:1)

Belief in other prophets depends on signs and wonders, and is always subject to a nagging question mark: Was it a real sign? The prophecy of Moshe, on the other hand, is not subject to doubt, and receives its authority from the very revelation at Mount Sinai.

This point opens the door to understanding the fundamental and important difference between the prophecy of Moshe and that of the other prophets: **the prophecy of Moshe is Torah, whereas the prophecy of other prophets is prophecy.** Moshe Rabbeinu brings the word of God to Israel, while other prophets bring vague hints and words – which are also, of course, the word of God, but with barriers and screens.

From this we come to the force of the words of the Torah, which cannot be changed by a prophet, as the Rambam writes:

Therefore, if a prophet arises and attempts to dispute Moshe's prophecy by performing great signs and wonders, we should not listen to him; we know with certainty that he performed those signs through magic or sorcery. [This conclusion is reached] because the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu is not dependent on wonders, so that we could compare these wonders, one against the other. Rather, we saw and heard with our own eyes and ears, just as he did. (Ibid., *halakha* 3)

In chapter 9 as well, the Rambam emphasizes that Moshe Rabbeinu is the sole transmitter of the Torah and there is no one else like him:

Therefore, if a person will arise, whether Jew or gentile, and perform a sign or wonder and say that God sent him to add a mitzva, withdraw a [*mitzva*](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1438516/jewish/Mitzvah.htm), or explain a mitzva in a manner which differs from the tradition received from Moshe, or if he says that the *mitzvot* commanded to the Jews are not forever, but rather were given for a limited time – he is a false prophet. He comes to deny the prophecy of Moshe and should be executed by strangulation, because he dared to make statements in God's name which God never made. God commanded Moshe that this commandment is for us and our children forever, “and God is not man, that He speak falsely” (*Bamidbar* 23:19). (Ibid. 9:1)

Thus, faith in the prophecy of Moshe, with the understanding that it is fundamentally different from that of all other prophets, is what establishes the Torah's place as unassailable.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This principle appears to be exceedingly important for the Rambam, for in the introduction to his commentary to *Perek Chelek*, he notes that he even plans to write a book on the topic. In his introduction to the *Guide for the Perplexed*, he explains why in the end he did not write that book, but it seems that the issue remained very important in his view. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is possible that, according to the Rambam, this difference is divided into two. See *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, as opposed to the Rambam, other prophets prophesied while awake but their prophecies were marked by characteristics generally associated with dreams. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Why did the Rambam omit the requirement of strength? See *Kesef Mishneh* and the rest of the Rambam's commentators, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Translation by Leonard Moskowitz, available on Sefaria.org, with some changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)