

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Yisro

The Sound of Hashem's Voice

לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פְּנֵי

You shall not have the gods of others in My presence (20:3)

THE NUMBER OF MITZVOS IN THE "TEN COMMANDMENTS"

The second of the *Aseres Hadibros* is the prohibition against *avodah zarah*. In addition to our pasuk which forbids "having", i.e. recognizing any deity other than Hashem, the *pesukim* that follow proceed to enumerate additional prohibitions associated with *avodah zarah*:

1. לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל — Not to make idols.
2. לֹא תִשָּׁתַחֲוֶה לָהֶם — Not to bow down to them.
3. וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם — Not to worship them (in any other way)

The Rambam's position regarding these four prohibitions is that each one constitutes a separate negative mitzvah within *Taryag* – the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos of the Torah.¹ This means that to refer to Hashem's words on this occasion as "The Ten Commandments" is not entirely accurate. For while there were indeed ten *utterances*, they actually comprise in thirteen *mitzvos* in total.

THE RAMBAN'S QUESTION ON THE RAMBAM

In his critical commentary (*Hasagos*) on the *Sefer Hamitzvos*, the Ramban raises a very serious difficulty with the Rambam's position in this matter. The background to the Ramban's question is a well-known statement in the Gemara at the end of *Maseches Makkos*,² which reads as follows:

"Rav Samlai expounded, 'Six hundred and thirteen mitzvot were said to Moshe at Sinai.' What is the pasuk (which indicates this)? תּוֹרַה צְנִיחָה לָנוּ"

¹ See *Sefer Hamitzvos*, negative mitzvos 1,2, 5 and 6.

² 23b.

מִשֶׁה — Moshe commanded us the Torah”.³ But is this the gematriya of ‘תּוֹרָה’? It is six hundred and eleven! (The Gemara responds, the two mitzvot of) ‘אֲנֹכִי’ and ‘לֹא יְהִי לְךָ’ were heard directly from Hashem (מִפִּי הַגְּבוּרָה).”

The Ramban asks: We see from the Gemara that the *Dibros* that we heard directly from Hashem constitute two of the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos, with the other six hundred and eleven (תּוֹרָה) being communicated via Moshe. However, according to the Rambam, the second dibbur contains four mitzvos which, together with the first dibbur – “אֲנֹכִי ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ” (which commands belief in Hashem) – total *five* mitzvos heard directly from Hashem. This means that Moshe commanded us regarding only six hundred and eight mitzvos (תּוֹרָה)!

Rather, concludes the Ramban, from Rav Samlai’s words we see that the second dibbur contains only one mitzvah of *taryag*, with the additional three prohibitions mentioned in the following psukim comprising *details* of that mitzvah.

Now, perhaps we might say that the Rambam does not subscribe to Rav Samlai’s statement. However, the truth is that the Rambam himself uses Rav Samlai in another context earlier in *Sefer Hamitzvos*,⁴ namely, to establish that the first dibbur – “אֲנֹכִי” – is considered a mitzvah!⁵ This, then, is the Ramban’s question: How can the Rambam take note of – and base himself on – Rav Samlai’s statement in one instance while ignoring it in another?⁶

WORDS AND SOUNDS

Many answers have been offered over the centuries to the Ramban’s question. The approach of the Meshech Chochmah to this matter, however, is unique. He refers us to a discussion which takes place within another of the Rambam’s works, the *Moreh Nevuchim*,⁷ describing what exactly it was that Bnei Yisrael heard at Har Sinai.

3 Devarim 33:4. That is, the number of mitzvos can be derived from the gematriya of the word הִרְוֹת.

4 Positive mitzvah 1.

5 The Rambam deems it necessary to take recourse to Rav Samlai’s statement in order to establish “אֲנֹכִי” as a mitzvah, since it is not actually phrased as a command, but rather as a statement of fact: “I am Hashem your God.” The Rambam himself does not, as a rule, include non-imperative statements as mitzvos (Indeed, for this reason, other authorities, such as the Bahag, do not actually list the first *Dibbur* as a mitzvah, seeing it rather as a statement which forms the basis for all of the mitzvos). On this occasion, however, in light of Rav Samlai’s words that we heard two mitzvos directly from Hashem, the Rambam makes an exception and lists “אֲנֹכִי” as a mitzvah of *taryag*. (Rav Yehuda Copperman, *Kedushat Pshuto Shel Mikra, Parshas Yisro*).

6 The Meshech Chochmah notes that the Ramban does not raise a question on the Rambam from the words of the Torah itself in *Sefer Devarim* (10:4) which refers explicitly to us hearing “עֲשׂוּתֶם הַדְּבָרִים” at Sinai! For, as we mentioned, the pasuk may be referring to the ten matters about which we heard, even if they contain more than ten mitzvos. Hence, the Ramban quotes the Gemara, which is explicitly dealing with the number of mitzvos in the *Aseres Hadibros*.

7 Sec. 2, chap. 33.

Rambam writes:

It is clear to me that at Har Sinai, what reached Moshe was different from that which reached the rest of Yisrael. Moshe alone heard words, while they heard that powerful sound. The pasuk says⁸ “נִשְׁמַעְכֶם אֶת הַקּוֹל” — when you heard the sound,” and it says⁹ “קוֹל דְּבָרִים אֲתֶם שֹׁמְעִים” — you heard the sound of words,”¹⁰ while it was Moshe who heard the words, and then related them to them. This is how it appears to me from the Torah, and from most of the statements of Chazal (on the matter).

According to the Rambam, there is a major difference between what Moshe Rabbeinu was capable of hearing at Har Sinai on the one hand, and what Bnei Yisrael were capable of hearing on the other. It is true that they all “heard” Hashem together, nonetheless, they did not hear the same thing. Bnei Yisrael heard the “*kol devarim*,” the sound of the words, that is, their general *content* and message, while Moshe heard the “words” themselves, with all their *details*.

The Rambam then proceeds to explain this idea further, in the course of which he addresses himself directly to Rav Samlai’s words in *Maseches Makkos*:

They (Chazal) have a statement concerning this which is to be found in many places in the Midrash, and also appears in the Gemara, namely, that “אֲנֹכִי ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ” and “לֹא יְהִי לְךָ” were heard directly from Hashem, by which they mean that they (the first two Dibros) reached them (Bnei Yisrael) in the way they reached Moshe Rabbeinu, and it was not Moshe who made them accessible to them...(however) all that Bnei Yisrael heard on that occasion was one single sound, which was the sound from which Moshe and all of Yisrael understood “אֲנֹכִי ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ” and “לֹא יְהִי לְךָ,” and Moshe subsequently communicated to them the words that he heard from within that sound.

In other words, when we say that Bnei Yisrael “heard” the first two Dibros, it means that they heard through nevuah a unique and powerful sound coming from Hashem, the content and message of which was unmistakably: אֲנֹכִי ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ and לֹא יְהִי לְךָ! Even without being able to hear the words within that sound, the sound itself communicated to them clearly and profoundly that Hashem is the only Creator, and there are no other deities. Moshe Rabbeinu — who had heard the words within the Dibros — then informed them that within those two Dibros were contained five mitzvos!

8 *Devarim 5:20.*

9 *Ibid. 4:12.*

10 The Rambam there further elaborates that this “sound” is what is referred to in our Parsha (19:9), when Hashem tells Moshe that “יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עַמּוּד” — *The people will hear when I speak with you.*” The Rambam notes that Hashem emphasizes that he will be talking to *Moshe*, not to the Bnei Yisrael. This is the “sound of words” which they will hear, i.e. they will experience directly through nevuah the sound of Hashem speaking with Moshe, even though they will not hear or understand exactly what it is that Hashem says.

ONE RAMBAM

We can now return to the Ramban's question on the Rambam, namely, that if the first two *Dibros* – which we heard directly from Hashem – actually contain five *mitzvos*, as the Rambam maintains, then we did not hear six hundred and eleven (תור"ה) *mitzvos* from Moshe, but rather six hundred and eight (תר"ח)! To this the *Meshech Chochmah* responds, the Rambam in the *Sefer HaMitzvos* is consistent with his approach in the *Moreh Nevuchim*, that even though there are five of the *Taryag Mitzvos* within the first two *Dibros*, Bnei Yisrael heard only two of them directly from Hashem, that is, what they were able to understand from the “קול דְּבָרִים” which they heard. The other three *mitzvos* within the second *Dibur* were communicated to them by Moshe Rabbeinu, bringing the total up to six hundred and eleven; as Rav Samlai said, “תור"ה צוה לנו משה”!

In the words of the *Meshech Chochmah*:

The Ramban's question has thus rapidly departed from him (the Rambam), for his approach is exalted (beyond criticism). I have stated in the past that the words of Rabbeinu (the Rambam) in all his works, in the Yad (Hachazakah), the Moreh (Nevuchim), and the Peirush on the Mishnayos, are of one and the same spirit!