

When it comes to the Ten Commandments we have been so ingrained by popular depictions, interpretations, and midrashim, that we never bother to examine the verses immediately preceding it in Exodus 19.<sup>1</sup> Here is God's plan: God wants to meet Moses in a thick cloud on top of the mountain so that the people would "overhear" and bear witness to the things he was going to say to Moses (i.e. the Commandments) and so that the people will trust Moses forever (19:9). Let's read the text very closely, line by line, to see what happens.

**וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה לֹךְ אֶל הָעָם וְקַדְשֵׁתָם הַיּוֹם וְמִתְּחַרְבֵּנָם וְכַבְּסֵו שְׁמַלְתָּם.**

**God said to Moses: Go to the people, sanctify them, today and tomorrow, let them wash their clothes.** (19:10)

What does *sanctify* mean? Presumably it means to bathe or immerse them in water.<sup>2</sup> After all, if they are supposed to wash their clothes then shouldn't they also wash themselves? In addition to hygiene, bathing and laundering have deep ritual and anthropological significance. They symbolize preparation and newness. God is allowing two days for the sanctification process presumably because that's how long it would take to bathe and launder so many people.

**וְהִיוּ נְבָנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְׁלִישִׁי כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְׁלִישִׁי יָרַד הָאֱלֹהִים בְּכָל הָעָם עַל הַר סִינַי.**

**And they shall be ready for the third day, for on the third day God will come down before the eyes of all the people, upon Mount Sinai.** (19:11)

By Day 3 the entire people needs to be physically and spiritually ready, because that is the day that God will come down from heaven onto Mount Sinai.

**וְהִגְבְּלָת אֶת הָעָם סְבִיב לְאָמֶר  
הַשְׁמְרוּ לִכְמָן עַלּוֹת בַּהַר וְנִגְעַן בְּקָצָחוֹ כֹּל  
הַגָּעַן בַּהַר מוֹת יוֹמָת.**

**Fix-boundaries for the people all around, saying: Take you care against going up the mountain or against touching its border!**

**Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death, yes, death;** (19:12)



The boundary (was it a rope? a set of signs? special stones?) was to make the mountain into a sacred zone for the 3-days. Why would touching the mountain have incurred the death penalty? Because the integrity of the moment, and the future of the people depended on the sanctity of the zone.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, life and death depended on its sanctity.

**לَا תִּגְעַן בּוֹ יְהִי סָקוֹל יִפְקַל אֹו יִרְהָ אֶם בְּמַה אִמְשַׁלְתָּא יְחִי**

**No hand is to touch him (the one who violates the boundary), but he is to be stoned, yes, stoned, or shot, yes, shot; whether beast or man, he is not to live!** (19:13a)

This is extraordinarily strict. Humans or animals that violate the boundary become "contagious," and will defile others by contact, which is why no one is allowed to touch them. Their violation is so severe that they are to be put to death by stoning or shooting arrows. However...

**בְּמַשְׁךְ הַיּוֹלֵד הַמָּה יַעֲלֹו בָּהָר.**

**When the [sound of the] yovel<sup>4</sup>-ram's-horn is drawn out, they may go up on the mountain.** (19:13b)

The blast of the horn functions as a siren signaling to everyone that they can now go up the mountain. **This point is often overlooked: when God reveals himself, everyone is supposed to be on the mountain, in the sacred zone - not at the base of the mountain.** The elaborate days of sanctification through bathing and laundering are preparations for this great moment. Then what happened?

**וַיַּרְדֵּן מֹשֶׁה מִן הַהַר אֶל הָעָם וַיִּקְרַדֵּשׁ אֹתָה קָשָׁם וַיִּכְבְּסֵו שְׁמַלְתָּם.  
וַיַּאֲמַר אֶל הָעָם תְּרוּ נְבָנִים לְשִׁלְשָׁת וְמִים אֶל תְּגַשְׁוּ אֶל אַשָּׁה.**

**Moses went down from the mountain to the people; he made the people holy, and they scrubbed their clothes. Then he said to the people: Be ready for three days; do not approach a woman!** (19:14-15)

When Moses comes down from the mountain he gets the sanctification process going **and adds another instruction!**

**NO SEX!** Why? God never said anything about sex! It's very simple: Because if people engaged in sex they would have had to bathe to "re-sanctify" themselves. By prohibiting sexual activity, Moses tried to ensure that everyone would remain in the proper state of sanctity for the revelation and that the entire people would not be delayed by individuals who were having sex who still needed to re-sanctify.

**וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיאָה  
וַיְהִי קָלָת וּבָרְקִים וְעַזְנוּ בְּפֶד עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְכָל שְׁפֵר חֹזֶק מִאָז**

**Now it was on the third day, when it was daybreak: There were thunder-sounds, and lightning, a heavy cloud on the mountain and an exceedingly strong shofar sound.** (19:16a)

**On the morning of Day 3 all havoc breaks loose.** The thick cloud means that God is coming to the mountain. There is thunder and lightning and finally, the sound of the shofar **signaling that everyone should now go to the mountain to be in the sacred zone when God appears.** But instead, something else happened. **When the shofar sounded:**

**trespasses is put to death** (Num. 1:51, 3:10, 3:38, 18:7). A good analogy would be an operating room where even the slightest contamination can become catastrophic.

<sup>4</sup> The **Yovel-Jubilee** year gets its name from the large ram's horn that is sounded to herald it.

<sup>1</sup> This commentary is based on the insight of Yair Agmon in *Mah Ahavti (Oh, How I Love!) On the Weekly Parasha. Hebrew. Rishon Lezion: Miskal - Yedioth Aharonoth Books, 2017.*

<sup>2</sup> This accords with Ibn Ezra's commentary on this verse.

<sup>3</sup> We see a similar examples of this prohibition elsewhere in the Torah where it says **וְנִזְהָר מִקְרֵב יְהָמָה** the **non-kohen who**

וַיַּחֲרֹד כָּל הַעַם אֲשֶׁר בַּמְחֻנָּה.

All of the people that were in the camp trembled.

(19:16b)

וַיֹּצֶא מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַעַם לְקַרְאָתָה  
הַאֲלֹהִים מִן הַמִּתְהָרָה.

Moses tried to bring the people out toward God, from the camp (19:17a)

וַיִּתְяַבּוּ בְּתַחְתִּית הַהָר.  
but they took their places beneath the mountain. (19:17b)

Nothing is going according to God's plan!

וְהַר סִינְיָה עָשָׂן כְּלֵוֹ מִפְנֵי אֲשֶׁר  
יָרַד עַלְיוֹן הַר בָּאֵשׁ  
וַיַּעֲלֵל עַשְׂנוּ בְּעַשְׂנוּ הַכְּבָשָׁן.  
וַיַּחֲרֹד כָּל הַהָר מְאֹד.

Mount Sinai was all smoke, since God had come down upon it in fire; its smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled exceedingly. (19:18)

וַיְהִי קֹל הַשּׁוֹפֵר הַזָּהָר וְזָהָב  
מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהַאֲלִילִים  
יַעֲנָנוּ בְּקוֹל.

Now the shofar sound was growing exceedingly stronger — Moses kept speaking, and God kept answering him in the sound (19:19)

וַיָּרַד הַיְלָדֶן הַר סִינְיָה  
אֶל רֹאשׁ הַהָר  
וַיַּקְרַא הַיְלָדֶן לְמֹשֶׁה  
אֶל רֹאשׁ הַהָר וַיַּעֲלֵל מֹשֶׁה.

God came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. God called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. (19:20)

וַיֹּאמֶר הָיְלָדֶן אֶל מֹשֶׁה:  
רֹד הַצָּדְבָעֵם  
פֹו יְהִרְסֹן אֶל הָיְלָדֶן  
לְרֹאשׁוֹ וְגַפְלָמְדָנְיוֹ רַב.

And then God said to Moses: Go back down, warn the people, not to break through to God to gaze, lest many of them perish. (19:21)

## THEY TREMBLED BUT THEY DID NOT ASCEND THE MOUNTAIN!

Despite Moses' efforts, instead of coming out towards God on the mountain...they stayed beneath it, at the base of the mountain! God's plan was that they were supposed to be in the sacred zone! But because they are scared, they remain in the non-sacred zone!

## GEVALT!

They stayed at the base of the mountain precisely BECAUSE the mountain was on fire!

Billowing smoke! Like a kiln! And shaking! They were terrified. Can we blame them? The sound of the horn summoned then to assemble amid the smoke and fire and mayhem and they stayed put basically saying:

Um, no thank you!

Why was the sound of the shofar getting stronger? Because nobody was going up the mountain!

What was Moses saying?  
God what do we do!

But Moses cannot make out God's reply!

It is pure chaos! Finally...

As God comes down onto the mountain he sees the chaos. The people have not moved from the base of the mountain. They are too scared! God has to adjust the plan and tell Moses what to do.

Moses is somewhere on the mountain trying to get the people to move. To no avail. So, God calls him up to the top for an urgent consultation.

With the plan gone awry, will God still be able to reveal himself to the people? Clearly the people are too scared to come onto the mountain. Their trembling and perhaps their other physiological reactions have compromised their strict state of "cleanness" and they have unfortunately reverted back to their pre-sanctified state.

God tells Moses to tell them to stay back **for their own safety**, because now, if they accidentally advance to the mountain to gaze at it in curiosity, they will perish. Furthermore...

וְגַם הַפְּהָנִים הַגְּנִשִּׁים אֶל הָיְלָדֶן  
יַתְקַדְּשׁוּ פָנֵי וּפְרִצֵּבָהָם הָיְלָדֶן.

Even the priests who approach God must make them-selves holy, lest God burst out against them! (19:22)

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָיְלָדֶן: לֹא יָכֹל  
הַעַם לְעַלְתָּה אֶל הַר סִינְיָה  
כִּי אַתָּה הַנְּצָרָת בְּנֵי לְאָמֹר  
הַגְּבָל אֶת הַהָר וּקְדַשְׁתָּו.

But Moses said to God:

The people are barred from going up Mount Sinai, for you warned us, saying: Fix boundaries for the mountain and make it holy. (19:23)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל הָיְלָדֶן לְךָ רֹד וְעַלְיתָ  
אַתָּה וְאֶחָרֶן עַמְּךָ

God said to him: Go, get down, and then come up, you and Aaron with you. (19:24a)

וְהַפְּהָנִים וְהַעַם אֶל הַר סִינְיָה  
לְעַלְתָּה אֶל הָיְלָדֶן פֹו וּפְרִצֵּבָהָם.

But the priests and the people must not break through to go up to God, lest he burst out against them! (19:24b)

Moses to God: God, your plan has failed. The 2-day sanctification period has expired and the people are too scared to come to the mountain.

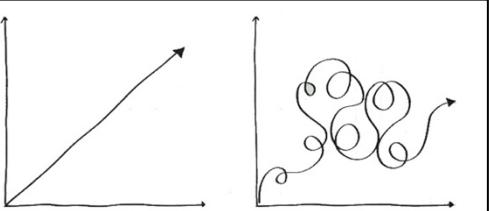
I know you want to reveal your words to them. However, to save their lives, let me suggest then that we reiterate your earlier ban: The people are not able to go up to the mountain...

God to Moses: I understand. We will have to make do with just Aaron. His sanctity is beyond doubt. Let him come up. Only you and Aaron will be present. The rest of the people, even the kohanim will have to hear it second hand for their own safety.

וַיָּרַד מֹשֶׁה אֶל הַעַם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל הָעָם.

Thus Moses went down to the people and spoke to them...

...the Ten Commandments.



What I planned.

What happened.

**Conclusion:** God planned to reveal himself to the entire people when they were in a state of holiness, all together, **on the mountain**.

That plan failed. To prevent catastrophe and, more importantly, **to still reveal himself under these changed circumstances** God had to improvise. Now, Moses and Aaron would be the only ones to come into the sacred zone. **From now on, the people will just have to rely on them for God's word.**

**And the rest of us? Their descendants?**  
**We will just have to rely on the text.**

Plan A was really dangerous; but thank God for Plan B!

This parsha sheet is sponsored by Paula and Aaron Kondioti to commemorate the 26th anniversary of Ben Kondioti's bar mitzvah.

שבת שלום!

Shabbat Shalom!