

Afterthoughts

- Yocheved Bienenfeld

MATAN TORAH

In parashat Va'etchanan, after recounting the Aseret HaDibrot and the Mt. Sinai experience, the text says ET HAD'VARIM HA'ELEH DIBEIR HASHEM... MITOCH HA'EISH... KOL GADOL V'LO YASAF - HaShem spoke these words... from amidst the fire... a great voice that didn't cease. Targum Onkelos translates YASAF as PASAK - the voice did not stop. When the people approach Moshe afterwards to request that he be the go-between lest they die from hearing the voice of HaShem, they say LAMA NAMUT... IM YOSFIM ANACHNU LISHMO'A ET KOL HASHEM ELOKEINU OD VAMAT'NU - why should we die... if we continue to hear the voice of HaShem, our Gd anymore, we will die.

The p'shat, simple understanding is clearly that YOSFIM here means 'to continue'. But this word has been used in other contexts of the Torah where this meaning is not so clear. In parashat Vayeishev (32:26), the Torah tells us that after Yehuda realizes that he is the one who impregnated Tamar, V'LO YASAF OD L'DA'ATAH. Rashi tells us this can be understood in two different ways: 'there are those who say that he didn't continue (being intimate) and there are those who say that he didn't stop. In addition, we find this same split in parashat B'ha'alot'cha (11:25) when

the Torah talks of the 70 elders who received the spirit of prophecy from Moshe. It says: VAYITNAB'U V'LO YASFU. Onkelos and Targum Yonatan both translate this as LO PASKU - they didn't stop prophesying.

If this is so, perhaps we can use this option to understand the sentence in Va'etchanan. Instead of it meaning "if we continue to hear His voice, we will die", we can hear a warning here: "If we POSKIM - stop - listening to HaShem, then we will die"!

Indeed.