

The Decalogue: Direct From Hashem or Via Moshe?

Introduction

Unidentified Audience

The Decalogue is arguably the most important Divine communication in the history of mankind. Yet, the verses in Shemot leave considerable ambiguity as to who received this communication. In fact, the verse introducing the Decalogue in Shemot 20 is the only case in the entire Torah in which Hashem speaks (where the verse uses the root "דבר") and His addressee is not identified:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאַמֵּר.

To whom did Hashem communicate the Decalogue? Did He speak directly to the nation, or did He deliver it only to Moshe who was then charged with relaying it to the nation?

Contradictory Verses

Numerous texts seem to imply that the nation heard the Decalogue directly from Hashem, without any intermediary. This is particularly true of several verses throughout Devarim 4:

(יב) וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֲלֵיכֶם מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּבָרִים אֲתֶם שָׁמַעְתֶּם וְתִמְוִנָה אֵינְכֶם רֹאִים זֹלָתִי קוֹל.

(טו) וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לִנְפְשֵׁיכֶם כִּי לֹא רִאִיתֶם כָּל תִּמְוִנָה בַּיּוֹם דִּבֶּר ה' אֲלֵיכֶם בְּחֹרֵב מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ.

(לג) הִשְׁמַע עִם קוֹל אֱלֹהִים מְדַבֵּר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כְּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ אֵתָּה וַיַּחֲי.

(לו) מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁמִיעָךְ אֶת קוֹל לִי־סִרְךָ וְעַל הָאָרֶץ הִרְאָךְ אֶת אִשׁוֹ הַגְּדוֹלָה וּדְבָרָיו שָׁמַעְתָּ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ.

The unmediated nature of the Divine communication would appear, at first glance, to also be the very point that Moshe is attempting to drive home to the nation in Devarim 5:4:

פָּנִים בְּפָנִים דִּבֶּר ה' עִמָּכֶם בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ.

However, the very next verse seems to contradict this, implying that, even during the Decalogue, Moshe mediated between the nation and Hashem:

אֲנֹכִי עֹמֵד בֵּין ה' וּבֵינֵיכֶם בָּעֵת הַהִיא לְהַגִּיד לָכֶם אֶת דְּבַר ה' כִּי יִרְאֶתֶם מִפְּנֵי הָאֵשׁ וְלֹא עָלִיתֶם בְּהָר לְאָמֹר.

Yet a third possibility is implied by Shemot 19:9. From there it appears that Hashem's entire objective was, not to speak to the nation, but only that they should listen in while He spoke to Moshe:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בָא אֲלֵיךְ בְּעָב הָעֶנָן בְּעָבֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֹמֵד וְגַם בְּךָ יֵאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם וַיַּגֵּד מֹשֶׁה אֶת דְּבָרֵי הָעָם אֶל ה'.

And, finally, a fourth option, that the people heard the Decalogue from both Moshe and Hashem, might be understood from Shemot 19:19:

וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֹזֵק מְאֹד מִשָּׁה יִדְבֹּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל.

What exactly happened? Was the Decalogue transmitted to the Israelites by Hashem, Moshe, or some combination?

Grammatical Inconsistency

In the middle of the Decalogue, there is a shift in speaker which may be relevant to our question. While in the opening section, Hashem speaks in first person, the subsequent verses speak of Him in third person. The following table highlights this disparity:

גוף ראשון	גוף שלישי
<p>(ב) אֲנִכִּי ה' אֶל־לִהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פָּנָי. (ג) לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאֶרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאֶרֶץ. (ד) לֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנִכִּי ה' אֶל־לִהְיֶה אֵל קָנָא פֶקֶד עוֹן אָבֹת עַל בָּנִים עַל שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל רִבְעִים לְשָׁנָאִי. (ה) וְעָשֵׂה חֶסֶד לְאֻלְפִים לְאֹהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי.</p>	<p>(ו) לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת שֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹאֵן כִּי לֹא יִנָּקֶה ה' אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא אֶת שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹאֵן. (ז) זְכוֹר אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ. (ח) שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל מְלָאכָתְךָ. (ט) וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ עֲבָדְךָ וַאֲמָתְךָ וּבְהֶמְתְּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ. (י) כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה ה' אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ אֶת הַיָּם וְאֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּם וַיִּנָּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל כֵּן בֵּרַךְ ה' אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ. (יא) כִּבֵּד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוֹן יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ.</p>

First Person	Third Person
<p>(2) "I am Hashem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. "You shall have no other gods before me. (3) "You shall not make for yourselves an idol, nor any image of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: (4) you shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them, for I, Hashem your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and on the fourth generation of those who hate me, (5) and showing loving kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.</p>	<p>(6) "You shall not take the name of Hashem your God in vain, for Hashem will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. (7) "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. (8) You shall labor six days, and do all your work, (9) but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Hashem your God. You shall not do any work in it, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your livestock, nor your stranger who is within your gates; (10) for in six days Hashem made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore Hashem blessed the Sabbath day, and He made it holy. (11) "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which Hashem your God gives you.</p>

If all of the commandments were delivered directly by Hashem, one would expect them all to be in first person. Conversely, if Moshe is the speaker, then even the first two should be in third person. Is it possible that the speaker shifted in the middle of the commandments? Could this account for the ambiguous wording of 20:1 which does not specify Hashem's audience?

Philosophical Issues

The Decalogue is the only case in history in which an entire nation experienced some form of Divine revelation. This raises additional issues regarding the nature of prophecy and its prerequisites. Does a three day purification period suffice to prepare a person for prophecy? Can anyone receive prophecy, or is it limited to people who have perfected their intellect and personalities? Do all prophets achieve the same level of prophecy, or are there different degrees of clarity?

Moreover, what was the purpose of the revelation at Sinai? Was it intended to prove Hashem's existence, or perhaps it was to verify that Moshe was His messenger and chosen conduit to convey the commandments of the Torah? If the former, it would be fitting for the entire nation to hear Hashem's words, but if the latter, perhaps a distinction between the people and Moshe was necessary.

In Approaches, we will see how all of these questions and issues combine in different ways to create several distinct positions among the commentators.

The Decalogue: Direct From Hashem or Via Moshe?

Exegetical Approaches

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

Overview

The Torah's contrasting portraits of Hashem's revelation to the nation lead commentators to varying understandings of what the nation grasped directly from Hashem and what they understood only via Moshe. These, in turn, have important ramifications for how one understands the entire purpose of the revelation at Mt. Sinai.

On one end of the spectrum, Rambam and R. D"Z Hoffmann focus on the verses which present Moshe as an intermediary, asserting that the people heard only the voice of Hashem, but could not distinguish His words. Moshe, thus, acted as a mediator or translator for all ten. As such, the main purpose of revelation was not to instill faith in Hashem, but to teach the nation to believe in Moshe's prophecy. On the other end of the spectrum, the Sages in Pesikta Rabbati and others look at the depiction of the episode as a "face to face" encounter. They posit that Hashem conversed directly with the people, relaying to them all ten utterances. According to this position, the goal of the encounter might have been to inculcate belief in God.

A middle ground is charted by Rashi, Ramban, and others, who attempt to harmonize the various verses by positing that there was a split in the commandments. The nation understood only the first two from Hashem, but needed Moshe to explain the final eight. Ramban explains that the goal of Revelation was twofold – to instill belief in both Hashem and in Moshe as His prophet. The fundamentals of faith were thus relayed directly, while the rest was taught via Moshe, who from this point on was to continue in this capacity as teacher of the law.

Understood None

The nation heard only the voice of Hashem, but understood none of His words, and Moshe's mediation between the people and Hashem was thus needed throughout the entire Decalogue. Commentators disagree whether the voice was directed at the nation or if they merely overheard the sounds of the Divine conversation with Moshe.

Overheard Voice

The people listened as Hashem communicated the Decalogue to Moshe, but they only heard the Divine voice and could not decipher His words.

SOURCES: Perhaps R. Akiva in Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael,¹ Rambam,² R. Avraham HeChasid

Purpose of Sinaitic revelation – Rambam states that the main purpose of the revelation was, not to instill belief in Hashem,³ but to teach the nation to believe in Moshe's prophecy. This was best achieved by having

the nation watch as Hashem spoke to their leader. This is supported by Hashem's words, "הִנֵּה אֲנִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ", "בְּעֵבֶר הָעֵנָן בְּעִבּוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עַמְךָ וְגַם בְּךָ יֵאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם".

Prophecy for the masses – Rambam's position is motivated by his belief that indiscriminate prophecy is impossible, and his understanding that the nation was not prepared or qualified to understand Hashem. However, Rambam allows for the possibility that specific people, like Aharon and his sons, could potentially have understood more, depending on their spiritual level.

Moshe's role – Since the nation was not on a high enough prophetic level to understand Hashem, Hashem spoke only to Moshe, who then relayed Hashem's messages to the people.

"פָּנִים בְּפָנִים" – This phrase is difficult for this position, since according to these exegetes, there was no "face to face" encounter, as the people were only listening in as Hashem spoke to Moshe and they were not even able to understand His words.⁴ Rambam explains that the words "פָּנִים בְּפָנִים" refer to a vivid sensory experience of apprehending the Divine without the intervention of an angel.⁵ Thus, even though the people only overheard Hashem's voice, this sound was heard directly, not via a messenger. As such, the experience could be termed a "פָּנִים בְּפָנִים" encounter.

"אֲנִי עֹמֵד בֵּין ה' וּבֵינֵיכֶם" – This verse is understood, as per the simple reading of its context, to refer to Moshe's mediating role during the giving of the Decalogue itself.

"בְּעִבּוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עַמְךָ" – This position finds support from this verse, as it makes no mention of Hashem intending to speak directly to the nation itself, but rather only of them listening as Hashem speaks to Moshe.

"קוֹל דְּבָרִים אֲתֶם שֹׁמְעִים" – To support their position, these commentators point to the many verses in the description of the event in Devarim which consistently refer to the voice that the nation heard, rather than any words. See Devarim 4:12, 4:33-36, and 5:19-22.⁶

"מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּקוֹל" – Rambam suggests that these words refer to the role Moshe played during the Decalogue, when he relayed to the nation every statement of Hashem exactly as he heard it.⁷

"וַיַּרְדּוּ מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם" – According to this approach, this verse refers to Moshe's relaying of the Decalogue which begins a mere one verse later.⁸

"וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים" – Rambam assumes that Moshe is the unstated audience of this verse, and it is to him that Hashem addressed all of His words.

"דַּבֵּר אֲתָה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה" – These sources do not address the issue of the nation's fear but would likely explain that the sound of Hashem's voice alone was enough to scare the people. Thus, after the giving of the Decalogue, they requested that in the future Moshe receive Hashem's words in private. Had the nation not been fearful, perhaps all communications between Hashem and Moshe would have been overheard by the nation.

Singular form – Rambam explains that since Hashem was speaking just to Moshe, He used the singular ("לְךָ", "עֲשִׂיתָ", "תִּגָּנֵב" etc.), rather than the plural which might have been expected if the speech was aimed at all of the Israelites.

Switch from 1st to 3rd person – This approach would likely attribute the switch from first to third person to literary variation and not give it any additional significance.⁹

"אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמענום" – Rambam explains this statement of Chazal to mean only that the nation was able on their own to arrive at an understanding of the commandments to believe in the existence of God and His unity,¹⁰ thereby obviating the need for Moshe to serve as an intermediary for these two.



Heard Voice Directly

Hashem spoke to the people directly, but due to their distance, they could make out only a voice and not distinct words.

SOURCES: R. David Zvi Hoffmann

Moshe's role – Since the people were not sanctified enough to come very close to Hashem they stood further away than Moshe. Thus, although Hashem addressed His words to all, Moshe needed to act as a translator to relay and explain what the nation could not hear or comprehend.¹¹

Purpose of Sinaitic revelation – As Hashem could have created a scenario in which all the people could understand Him despite their distance, R. D"Z Hoffmann's approach is logical only if one posits that Hashem intentionally positioned Moshe closer, requiring him to act as translator, while still addressing His words to all. This ensured that the people would recognize Moshe's stature as prophet, but simultaneously connected them to Hashem and bolstered their belief in Him.

Prophecy for the masses – R. D"Z Hoffmann suggests that the people were at a lower level of sanctity than Moshe. This necessitated a greater distance from Hashem and resulted in reduced prophetic capabilities.

"פנים בפנים" – R. D"Z Hoffmann would assert that the encounter was considered "face to face" since Hashem was addressing Himself to the nation as a whole and not just to Moshe.

"אנכי עמד בין ה' וביןכם" – This verse is understood simply to refer to Moshe's role as a middleman, both in terms of his physical positioning on the mountain in between Hashem and the nation, as well as his duties as translator during the delivering of the Decalogue.

"בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך" – According to R. D"Z Hoffmann, Hashem is telling Moshe that He will appear to him in the presence of the entire nation so that they will no longer doubt his prophecy. This, though, does not insinuate that Hashem did not also direct His words at the rest of the people, but more simply that Moshe's positioning boosted the nation's faith in him.

"קול דברים אתם שמעים" – R. D"Z Hoffmann brings support for the idea that the nation did not comprehend Hashem's words from the repeated emphasis on having heard His voice rather than His words. See Devarim 4:12, 4:33-36, and 5:19-22.¹²

"משה ידבר והא-להים יענו בקול" – According to R. Hoffmann, this verse refers to Moshe's dialogue with Hashem in Shemot 19:19-25 and not to the Decalogue. Only when relaying the warnings is there a conversation in which Hashem responds to Moshe. During the revelation itself, Moshe simply repeated

Hashem's words to the people, but Hashem's words were not a response to Moshe and would not be aptly described as "יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּקוֹל" ¹³.

"וַיִּרְדּוּ מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם" – R. D"Z Hoffmann asserts that this verse refers to transmitting Hashem's warnings to the nation, and not to the Decalogue.

"וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים" – According to R. D"Z Hoffmann, Hashem did communicate the entire Decalogue to the nation. A go-between was necessary, though, to fully understand what He said.

Singular form – R. D"Z Hoffmann would likely attribute no special significance to the singular rather than plural formulation, as there are many instances in Torah where Hashem addresses the nation and refers to them as a singular unit. ¹⁴ Thus, this is not sufficient evidence that Hashem directed His words at Moshe alone.

The nation's fear – "וַיִּדְבֹר אֲתָם עַמּוּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה" – R. D"Z Hoffmann assumes that this event occurred after the giving of the Decalogue and suggests that had the nation not been fearful, Hashem would have relayed the rest of the commandments to them as well. He even raises the possibility that the original plan was that, after the Decalogue, the nation would approach and perhaps even ascend the mountain to partake in the sealing of the covenant over the commandments.

Switch from 1st to 3rd person – R. D"Z Hoffmann agrees with Ibn Ezra's view that the first person to third person switch is insignificant, as "משפט אנשי לשון הקודש לדבר ככה".



Understood All Ten

The nation understood the entire Decalogue from Hashem. This position subdivides regarding whether Hashem's words were aimed at the people or Moshe.

Overheard Words

Hashem's spoke to Moshe only, but He intended that the nation would listen in on this conversation.

SOURCES: R. Saadia Gaon, ¹⁵ R. Maimon

Purpose of Sinaitic revelation – This approach understands that the episode had a dual objective, to instill faith in Moshe as Hashem's messenger, and to inculcate belief in Hashem Himself. The former was accomplished by having Hashem direct His words at Moshe and elevate him above the nation, while the latter was fulfilled when the people heard Hashem speak.

Prophecy for the masses – This approach assumes that all can prophesy if Hashem so desires, even without extensive preparation. R. Maimon, though, does qualify that each person experienced Hashem's words differently, as per their spiritual level. ¹⁶

Moshe's role – R. Saadia asserts that, in addition to Moshe's unique positioning in being the addressee of Hashem's words, after each of Hashem's statements, Moshe repeated it to the people. ¹⁷

"פְּנִים בְּפָנִים" – This phrase is somewhat difficult for this approach, since one would not normally refer to overheard speech as a "face to face" encounter. These commentators might explain that Moshe is simply saying that, despite the positioning, the nation understood Hashem's words clearly, as if the statements were said to them face to face.

"אֲנִי עֹמֵד בֵּין ה' וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְהַגִּיד לָכֶם אֶת דְּבַר ה'" – According to R. Saadia, the phrase refers to Moshe's role during the revelation itself, as Moshe literally stood between the nation and Hashem in order to repeat to them Hashem's words.¹⁸

"בְּעֶבֶר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עֹמֶר" – R. Saadia explains this verse according to its simple reading. Hashem's speech was directed solely to Moshe and was only overheard by the rest of the people. Thus, the nation was able to hear God while simultaneously appreciating the greatness of Moshe.

"וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה" – R. Maimon suggests that the audience in this sentence is not explicit since Hashem's words were directed to all who were present, including Moshe, Aharon and the nation as a whole. Hashem spoke to all (despite directing His words at Moshe). This position might also point to the word "כָּל" as evidence that **all** ten utterances were said by Hashem to everyone.¹⁹

"מִשָּׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל" – R. Saadia connects this verse to the above "בְּעֶבֶר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עֹמֶר", suggesting that he thinks that it, too, refers to Hashem's speech during the Decalogue.²⁰ He asserts that the verse comes to inform the reader that, to be heard over the loud blast of the shofar, both Moshe and Hashem needed to speak at a high volume.²¹ In contrast, R. Maimon, who does not assert that Moshe spoke at all during the Decalogue, might suggest that this refers to Moshe and Hashem's earlier conversation in verses 20-25.

The nation's fear – **"דַּבֵּר אֶתָּה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה"** – According to this approach, this scene is recorded in chronological order, as it occurred only after Hashem finished relaying the entire Decalogue.

Switch from 1st to 3rd person – This position would agree with Ibn Ezra below that the switch in person is merely common variation in Tanakh and has no special significance.



Heard Words Directly

Hashem spoke directly to the people themselves, and they, not Moshe, were His target audience for the entire Decalogue.

SOURCES: Josephus, the Sages in Shir HaShirim Rabbah and Pesikta Rabbati, Tanchuma (Buber), R. Yehuda HaLevi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ralbag, Abarbanel, Shadal

Purpose of Sinaitic revelation

- This position highlights the goal of teaching the nation to believe in Hashem, as per the verse in Devarim, "אֶתָּה הָרָאָתָּ לָדַעַת כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים".²² Divine revelation to a mass audience was a unique event in world history and constitutes one of the strongest proofs of God's existence and the Torah's Divine origin.
- Cf. R. Yehuda HaLevi who emphasizes that the Divine revelation to the masses proved to the nation that humans have the ability to prophesy, leading them to believe in both Moshe and other future prophets.

This, in turn, is proof of the Divinity of Torah and that Moshe relayed God's word and not his own.

- According to Shadal, there may have been a dual purpose of instilling belief in both Hashem and Moshe. By hearing Hashem speak to Moshe before the actual revelation (see below), the nation recognized his prophetic stature, and by hearing Hashem on their own during revelation, they came to believe in God.

Prophecy for the masses – This approach assumes that anyone can prophesy, even without extended preparation. Nonetheless, most of these commentators do limit the level of prophecy of the people. Thus, R. Yose b. R. Chanina in the Tanchuma says that each person grasped Hashem's word according to his own capabilities, while Ralbag and Abarbanel emphasize how the nation could experience revelation only via their physical senses, hearing a concrete (rather than mental) voice.²³

Moshe's role – According to these sources, Moshe did not play any significant role during the revelation. He, like the rest of the nation, simply listened to Hashem. According to Abarbanel and Shadal, even physically, Moshe was positioned amidst the people and not higher up on the mountain.²⁴

"פְּנִים בְּפְנִים" – These commentators understand the phrase "פְּנִים בְּפְנִים" to refer to a direct, unmediated encounter. R. Levi in the Tanchuma describes the experience as one in which each member of the nation felt as if Hashem was speaking to them personally.

"אֲנִי עֹמֵד בֵּין ה' וּבֵינֵיכֶם" – According to most of these commentators, these words refer to the mediating role that Moshe assumed after receiving the Decalogue, when giving over the rest of the commandments.²⁵ Alternatively, this position could posit, as does Ramban, that this refers to Moshe's role before the Decalogue when he acted as a go-between to relay all of Hashem's instructions to prepare the nation.

"וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה" – Ibn Ezra supports the idea that Hashem communicated all the commandments directly from the text's usage of the words "כָּל הַדְּבָרִים".²⁶ Shadal adds proofs from Devarim 4:12-13, 4:36, and 5:19-21, all of which emphasize how Hashem spoke (and did not produce merely the sound of a voice) to the nation.

"בְּעֹבוֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֹמֶר"

- **Spoke to all** – According to Ibn Ezra,²⁷ this verse does not insinuate that Hashem was to speak to Moshe alone, but only that when Hashem did speak to him (along with everyone else), his prophetic stature would be verified. The nation had doubted Moshe's prophecy, believing that if Hashem speaks to a person, he cannot live afterwards. Thus, Hashem tells Moshe that when the nation sees Him speaking to Moshe during the giving of the Decalogue, they will finally recognize that their preconception was false.
- **Change of plan** – According to Ralbag and Abarbanel, Hashem originally told Moshe that He would speak to him alone and the nation would overhear, leading them to believe in Moshe's prophecy. Moshe then clarified to Hashem that the nation preferred to not have a mediator, but rather desired a direct face to face encounter. As a result, Hashem acquiesced and changed the original plan.²⁸
- **Before the Decalogue** – Shadal asserts that this refers to the nation hearing Hashem's conversation with Moshe *before* the Decalogue.

The nation's fear - "וַיִּדְבֹר אֲתָהּ עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה" – According to these sources, this scene is found in its chronological place and only occurred after Hashem finished relaying the entire Decalogue. According to

Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Ralbag, were it not for this fear, Hashem would have relayed all 613 commandments to the people directly.²⁹

"כִּי יִרְאֶתֶם מִפְּנֵי הָאֵשׁ וְלֹא עָלִיתֶם בְּהָר"

- According to Ibn Ezra, Moshe is saying that the nation feared the fire, despite the fact that they did not go up the mountain.
- This position could also maintain that the original plan (had the nation not been overcome by fear) was to ascend the mountain after the giving of the Decalogue and to hear the rest of the 613 commandments from perhaps an even closer vantage point and at a higher spiritual level.³⁰

"מִשֶּׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּקוֹל"

- **Before the Decalogue** – According to Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, and Shadal,³¹ this refers to the conversation between Moshe and Hashem before the giving of the Decalogue and, as such, provides no information regarding how Hashem delivered the commandments.³²
- **Before and during** – Ralbag maintains that the verse refers to Hashem's words both before and during the Decalogue.³³ The mention of Moshe speaking refers only to the earlier conversation, but the fact that Hashem spoke "בְּקוֹל" can refer to both.³⁴
- **During the Decalogue** – R. Eliezer suggests that the verse refers to the Decalogue but is simply saying that before Hashem spoke to the nation, He waited for Moshe to tell Him that they were ready.³⁵

Switch from 1st to 3rd person – Ibn Ezra explains that it is common for the text to switch between first and third person, and he points to other examples of this.³⁶ Ibn Ezra also explains the specific location of the switch, pointing out that after the nation accepted Hashem as their God in the first two commandments, He could then refer to Himself as the Israelites' God in third person.



Understood Only Two

The nation understood only two commandments directly from Hashem. These commentators disagree as to how the nation received the other eight:

Other Eight Only From Moshe

Due to the nation's fear, Hashem stopped speaking to them and instead spoke only to Moshe, who then relayed the final eight commandments to the nation.

SOURCES: R. Hamnuna in Bavli Makkot, R. Yishmael in Bavli Horayot, R. Yehoshua in Shir HaShirim Rabbah, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), R. Yehoshua b. Levi in Pesikta Rabbati, Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor³⁷

Moshe's role – Moshe acted as an intermediary for the last eight commandments, relaying them to the nation in Hashem's stead.

Why the split? According to these sources, the original plan was for Hashem to say the entire Decalogue directly to the nation. After Hashem relayed the second commandment, though, the nation became frightened and requested that Moshe mediate.

"פָּנִים בְּפָנִים" – This phrase describes the first part of the encounter, when the nation heard and understood the first two commandments directly from Hashem.

"אֲנִי עֹמֵד בֵּין ה' וּבֵינֵיכֶם" – This clause refers to the second part of the experience when Moshe served as an intermediary to deliver the final eight commandments.

The nation's fear – "וַיִּשְׁמַעְהָ" – According to these sources, this episode took place in the middle of the Decalogue, between the second and third commandments. It is recorded out of order so as not to interrupt the flow of the story and to keep the Decalogue in one continuous list. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor adds that had it not been for their fear, the nation might have heard all the commandments in this manner. Alternatively, Hashem had never planned on relaying more than these commandments regardless of the nation's fears.³⁸

"כִּי יִרְאֶתֶם מִפְּנֵי הָאֵשׁ וְלֹא עָלִיתֶם בְּהָר" – This verse seems to imply that, were it not for their fears, the people would have ascended the mountain. This poses a difficulty for this approach which maintains that the people expressed their fears midway through the Decalogue, as during the Revelation they were prohibited from ascending the mountain regardless of whether they were afraid. Thus, this approach might need to explain, as Ibn Ezra above, that Moshe is saying that despite the fact that they did not ascend the mountain, they were still in fear.³⁹

Switch from 1st to 3rd person – R. Yosef Kara adduces support for this approach from the fact that the Decalogue switches from first person to third person immediately after the second commandment. If this is when Moshe began to speak, the third person references to Hashem make sense.

"מֹשֶׁה יִדְבֹר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּקוֹל" – Rashi explains that when Moshe relayed the eight commandments, Hashem gave Moshe's voice extra strength so that he could be heard.⁴⁰

"וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים" – Ibn Ezra argues against this position from the word "כָּל" which suggests that there was no differentiation between the commandments. Rashi explains that the verse comes to teach that, originally, Hashem said all ten commandments simultaneously and only afterwards distinguished each one.

"וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹהִים... לְאָמֵר" – Rashi might suggest that the audience of Hashem's words is left ambiguous, because there were two different, consecutive, audiences for the different sections of the Decalogue. Hashem first spoke to the nation and then to Moshe alone.

"בְּעֹבוֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עֹמֶךָ" – This verse is difficult for these sources since they maintain that the original plan was not to speak to Moshe, but rather directly to the nation. They could explain that this refers to the nation listening to Hashem's earlier conversation, when He instructs Moshe before the Decalogue.

Purpose of Sinaitic revelation – This position could posit that the revelation was aimed at instilling belief in Hashem, rather than in Moshe's prophecy. It was only a concession to the people's fear that led Moshe to play any part at all.

Prophecy for the masses – These commentators assume that Hashem sometimes grants prophetic powers to the uninitiated.



Voice Without Words for Other Eight

Hashem communicated also the final eight commandments to the nation, but in these they discerned only His voice and needed Moshe to serve as an interpreter.

SOURCES: Ramban

Why the split? Ramban suggests that Hashem intentionally desired that Moshe explain the final commandments to the nation, thereby displaying his exalted prophetic status, but that He also wanted the nation to understand the first two from Him directly, as these relate to belief and serve as the basis for the rest of Torah.⁴¹

"פְּנִים בְּפָנִים" – According to Ramban, the people heard the entire Decalogue "face to face", but only comprehended the first two commandments.

"אֲנֹכִי עֹמֵד בֵּין ה' וּבִינְיָכֶם" – This clause refers to Moshe's intermediary role during the second part of the encounter, when Moshe explained the final eight commandments.

Switch from 1st to 3rd person – To support the change of speaker, Ramban points to the fact that only the first two commandments speak of Hashem in first person.

"וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים" – The word "כל" is what motivates Ramban to suggest that the nation actually heard all of the commandments (even if they did not comprehend all of them).

The nation's fear – **"וַיִּדְבֹר אֹתָם עֲמֻנָה וְנִשְׁמָעָה"** – Ramban asserts that this took place before the Decalogue. Even before Hashem began to speak, the nation distanced themselves even further than required by the set boundary and requested that Moshe speak.⁴² Ramban maintains that the similar description in Devarim which speaks of the elders conveying their fears refers to a different episode, which transpired after the Decalogue. Assuming that Hashem intended to transmit the rest of the Torah in the same manner, the elders asked Moshe that he instead be an intermediary. Hashem agreed since He had never intended to do otherwise.

"מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּקוֹל" – Ramban maintains that these words refer to Moshe and Hashem's conversation during the three days of preparations for the revelation.⁴³

"בְּעֶבֶר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עֹמֶר" – According to Ramban, this refers to the Decalogue. Hashem tells Moshe that when the nation experiences prophecy and hears Hashem speak, they will finally recognize that it is Hashem who regularly speaks with Moshe. This will lead them to believe in both.

Purpose of Sinaitic revelation – Revelation had a dual purpose, to instill belief in both Hashem and Moshe as His prophet. The latter was necessary since it was to be Moshe's job to give over the rest of the commandments.

Prophecy for the masses – This approach assumes that one can prophesy even without extensive preparation, if Hashem so chooses.

¹ This is how the Rambam appears to understand R. Akiva's words. R. D"Z Hoffmann, though, thinks that R. Akiva's words refer to the conversation between Moshe and Hashem prior to the Decalogue, and not to the

Decalogue itself.

² In Rambam's Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah, he seems to contradict himself. There, he assumes that the nation not only heard but even understood Hashem's words. He presents the nation as hearing Hashem tell Moshe, "לך אמור להן כך וכך", implying that the nation heard the entire Decalogue while Hashem was communicating it to Moshe. In R. Yosef Albo's Sefer Halkkarim, however, he presents Rambam's scenario slightly differently, having the nation hear Hashem say to Moshe only, "לך אמר להם שובו לכם לאהליכם", rather than the words of the Decalogue. According to this version of Rambam's wording, the contradiction is obviated.

³ According to Rambam, belief in God is not attained by prophetic experiences but by logical reasoning. Revelation, thus, was not necessary to prove Hashem's existence, but only to prove Moshe's prophetic powers.

⁴ Abarbanel notes this difficulty (cf. Ibn Kaspi Devarim 5:4-5). The phrase "פְּנִים בְּפָנִים" appears nowhere else in Tanakh, while the similar expression "פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים" appears regarding Hashem's communication with Moshe (Shemot 33:11, Devarim 34:10) and Yaakov and Gidon's encounters with angels (Bereshit 32:31, Shofetim 6:22).

⁵ Cf. Sforno Devarim 5:4.

⁶ These include: "קול דְּבָרִים אֲתֶם שֹׁמְעִים", "הַשְׁמַע עִם קוֹל אֱלֹהִים", "מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁמִיעַךְ אֶת קוֹלוֹ", "קִשְׁמַעְכֶּם אֶת הַקּוֹל", "וְאֶת קוֹלוֹ שָׁמַעְנוּ". It should be noted, though, that Shadal points to other parts of many of these same verses to prove that Hashem spoke directly to the nation. Thus, for instance, despite the fact that the nation speaks of hearing Hashem's voice, Hashem himself prefaces His remarks by saying, "וְאַשְׁמַעְכֶּם אֶת דְּבָרִי", I will have them listen to my **words**.

⁷ According to this, though, one might have expected the verse to read "ה' ידבר ומשה יעננו בקול" since Hashem speaks first and only then does Moshe transmit.

⁸ Only a single intervening verse, "וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאַמֵּר", interrupts between the mention of the speaker ("וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם") and the actual words spoken (the Decalogue itself). This verse is necessary to tell the reader that both Hashem and Moshe spoke these words (Hashem to Moshe and then Moshe to the nation).

⁹ See Ibn Ezra below.

¹⁰ See footnote 3 above that, for Rambam, these commandments are considered to be "מצוות שכליות" (commandments which can be rationally intuited).

¹¹ Moshe's role was somewhat akin to that of a teaching assistant in a large lecture hall. It is unclear, though, why Hashem would not have simply spoken loudly and clearly enough for all to hear. It therefore seems likely that the positioning was intentional. Hashem wanted to set up Moshe in the role of translator while still addressing the nation as a whole, thereby leading the nation to belief in both Hashem and Moshe. It is possible, though, that R. D"Z Hoffmann is motivated more by textual concerns and the desire to make sense of the seemingly contradictory verses, than by conceptual issues. His reading manages to harmonize between the verses which sound as if Hashem is speaking to the nation, those that present Moshe as mediator, and those that insinuate that only a voice was heard.

¹² R. D"Z Hoffmann would explain the other verses which suggest that Hashem actually spoke to the nation (and did not merely emit a voice) refer to the fact that Hashem did in fact address them, even if they did not comprehend what He said.

¹³ Thus, though R. D"Z Hoffmann agrees with Rambam above that Moshe played a mediating role, due to textual reasons, he prefers not to adduce this verse as evidence.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the commandments in Vayikra 19:13-19.

¹⁵ Only part of R. Saadia Gaon's commentary here is extant, making it difficult to completely reconstruct his position.

¹⁶ Cf. Rambam's position above.

¹⁷ Thus, the nation heard each commandment in the Decalogue twice, once from Hashem and once from Moshe. We do not have the continuation of R. Saadia's commentary, where he explained the purpose of such a doubling.

¹⁸ Alternatively, the phrase means only that Moshe's positioning between the nation and Hashem is what enabled them to overhear Hashem's speech. This might be the position of R. Maimon.

¹⁹ See Ibn Ezra below.

²⁰ Ibn Ezra and Shadal understand that R. Saadia thinks that both verses refer to the scene before the giving of the Decalogue, when Hashem issues to Moshe the various warnings. R. Saadia's comments to verse 9, though, clearly suggest that he assumes that the verse refers to the Decalogue itself.

²¹ According to him, both Moshe and Hashem were speaking since Moshe repeated each of Hashem's statements to the nation. Since Moshe spoke second, though, one might have expected the verse to be written in the opposite order "ה' ידבר ומשה יענו בקול".

²² Shemot 19:9 seems to contradict this, explicitly stating that the goal was to establish faith in Moshe. Ibn Ezra agrees that this, too, was accomplished when the nation learned that speaking to God does not automatically result in death, and that it was thus possible that Moshe had all along been communicating with Hashem. Ralbag and Abarbanel, in contrast, suggest that instilling faith in Moshe was only part of an original plan (where Hashem thought He would speak to Moshe and not directly to the nation) but that plan was then rejected. See below for elaboration.

²³ Ralbag points out that this was in contrast to Moshe who heard the Decalogue "prophetically", using his mental facilities.

²⁴ This follows the approach found in Shemot Rabbah.

²⁵ Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel say this explicitly. According to them, the phrase "בְּעֵת הַהוּא" (at that time) does not refer to the immediate period spoken of in the verse (the giving of the Decalogue) but rather some point afterwards. See Indicators of Achronology for a discussion of the term's usage in Tanakh.

The Sages and Ralbag are more ambiguous. They do not say explicitly that the words refer to relaying the other commandments, only that Moshe is referring to the conversation in which the people confess their fear and request that Moshe speak with them rather than Hashem.

²⁶ He argues against the position below which posits that only two commandments were transmitted directly by Hashem by pointing out that the word "כָּל" implies that there was no differentiation between the manner in which the commandments were relayed; all were from Hashem directly.

²⁷ Cf. R. Yehuda HaLevi.

²⁸ The two commentators differ in the details of this theory. Both are trying to solve the problem of the double "וַיִּשָּׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶת דְּבָרֵי הָעָם אֵל ה'... וַיַּגֵּד מֹשֶׁה אֶת דְּבָרֵי הָעָם אֵל ה'" and to understand what "words of the people" Moshe is relaying each time. According to Ralbag, when the people told Moshe that "כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה'" he understood that they wanted a sign that would prove that it was Hashem who had spoken to Moshe all along, for then they were sure to adhere to his words. Hashem, thus, suggested that they overhear Him speak to Moshe in the cloud. Only then did Moshe realize that he had been mistaken and the nation had really requested to hear Hashem directly (thinking that if they hear Him, then they would surely

observe His commandments). This is consistent with Ralbag's general view of Moshe as fallible, especially with regards to his interactions with people. See Did Moshe Need Yitro's Advice?.

According to Abarbanel, in contrast, Moshe understood this all along. When he first relayed the people's words to Hashem, though, he simply told Hashem that the people said they want to listen to Hashem's voice and if so, they will keep His covenant. Hashem, thus responded that He will reveal Himself to Moshe with a physical voice (rather than giving him a mental prophecy) so that the nation can overhear. Only then did Moshe clarify that the people really wanted to hear Hashem directly.

²⁹ Hashem's reaction to the fear, "הִיטִיבוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרוּ... לֹךְ אָמַר לָהֶם שׁוּבוּ לָכֶם לְאֶהֱלֵיכֶם וְאַתָּה פֹּה עֹמֵד עִמָּדִי וְאַדְבָּרָה" would support this supposition. Hashem is apparently telling Moshe that he agrees with the nation, and that the *new* plan is that he should ascend the mountain to hear the rest of the laws.

³⁰ See R. D" Z Hoffmann above, who heads in this direction. He understands the phrase, "בְּמִשְׁחַ הַיּוֹבֵל הָמָּה" to mean that originally there was to be some call from the shofar to assemble the people to ascend the mountain. Such a blast is not mentioned because in the end the nation was too fearful and preferred not to hear any more from Hashem. Cf. R"M Leibtag, "Parshat Yitro - The Four Stages of Ma'amad Har Sinai" and R.Y Grossman, "פרשת יתרו - במשך היובל המה יעלו בהר" who also explain the phrase "בְּמִשְׁחַ הַיּוֹבֵל" not as a sign to indicate that Hashem's presence has left, but as a call for the nation to ascend the mountain in order to hear Hashem. They suggest, though, that the original plan was to ascend the mountain so as to hear the Decalogue itself.

³¹ Rashbam is not explicit but seems to agree.

³² Ibn Ezra asserts that the verse is simply saying that Moshe did not fear from the thunder and continued to listen as Hashem spoke to him loudly over nature. Abarbanel, in contrast, assumes that the verse is relaying that this conversation between Hashem and Moshe was not a mental one, but was said in a physical voice, so that it could be heard by the nation as well.

³³ Abarbanel claims that Ralbag assumes the verse refers only to the Decalogue, but in Ralbag's comments to verses 20-21 he says explicitly that all the warnings of those verses were given to Moshe and heard by the nation "בְּקוֹל".

³⁴ He assumes that the verse is coming to teach that Hashem conversed with Moshe prophetically, but simultaneously transmitted the message to the nation out loud (via a concrete voice rather than a mental prophecy).

³⁵ Thus, when Moshe spoke and gave the "go-ahead", Hashem replied with the ten commandments.

³⁶ See also Abarbanel who brings a whole list of verses as further proofs. See Person for discussion and many examples.

³⁷ This is how he explains the encounter in his comments on Devarim 5. In Shemot 20, though, he first suggests that the nation heard all ten commandments from Hashem and only afterwards brings the opinion that there were two stages.

³⁸ It should be noted that, in this aspect, this position is much more similar to the approach above that has the nation hear all ten commandments, than to Ramban below. In contrast to Ramban, both these positions assume that at some point Hashem's original plan changed due to the nation's fear, disagreeing only regarding at which point the nation was fearful (after the second or tenth commandment). In selecting between the possibilities, one position is motivated by the switch in speaker and the other by the placement of the scene depicting the fear.

³⁹ R"Y Bekhor Shor, in contrast, posits that Moshe is referring to a future ascent of the mountain, to hear the rest of the commandments.

⁴⁰ Accordingly, the phrase "וַיַּעֲזֶבְהוּ בְּקוֹל" means that Hashem amplified the volume of Moshe's words, and not that He responded to Moshe.

⁴¹ Thus, in contrast to the above position, Ramban asserts that this was the original plan.

⁴² Moshe managed to calm them enough that they stood their ground and listened.

⁴³ See Ibn Ezra and others above. It is possible that he explains the verse in this manner, despite maintaining that Moshe did speak during the Decalogue, because the phrase assumes that Hashem responded to Moshe and not vice versa.