

# Revelation to the Elders at Sinai

## Introduction

### Praiseworthy or Blameworthy?

Shemot 24 describes the covenant at Sinai. After detailing the bringing of sacrifices, reading of the covenant, and sprinkling of blood on the nation, the verses share how a select few were privileged to see Hashem:

(ט) וַיַּעֲלֵל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן נָדָב וְאַבְיָהוּא וְשְׁבָעִים מִזְקִנֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתַחַת רְגָלָיו בְּמִשְׁעָה לְבִנְתַּת הַסְּפִיר וּבְכָעָם הַשְׁמִים לְטַהָּר. (יָא) וְאֶל אַצְּילִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁלַח יְדֹו וַיְחַזֵּן אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּאֱכַלֵּו וַיִּשְׁתַּ�

(9) Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up. (10) They saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was like a paved work of sapphire stone, like the skies for clearness. (11) He didn't lay his hand on the nobles of the children of Israel. They saw God, and ate and drank.

At first glance this appears to be a positive event, indicative of the worthiness of the elders. Verse 11, though, might make one question this assumption. We are told "וְאֶל אַצְּילִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁלַח יְדֹו". What does this mean? Often when the text employs the phrase "שליחות יְד", it refers to harming another.<sup>1</sup> Does this imply that the nobles were deserving of punishment, but for some reason were spared? What, though, did the elders do wrong? How else might the term "לא שָׁלַח יְדֹו" be understood?

### Additional Questions

The verses raise several other textual and theological questions as well:

- **Seeing Hashem** – What does it mean to see Hashem? If Hashem is not a corporeal being, how can He physically be seen?<sup>2</sup>
- **"וְתַחַת רְגָלָיו בְּמִשְׁעָה לְבִנְתַּת הַסְּפִיר"** – What does this phrase suggest that the elders saw? What is "מִשְׁעָה", "לְבִנְתַּת הַסְּפִיר", and how does it describe Hashem?
- **"אַצְּילִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל"** – Verse 9 speaks of Moshe, Aharon, Nadav, Avihu, and the 70 elders, while verse 11 speaks of "אַצְּילִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל". What is the relationship between the two groups? Are they identical or two distinct sets of individuals? If the former, why are they referred to in different ways in the two verses?
- **"וַיַּחַזֵּן אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים" vs. "וַיַּרְאֵו אֶת אֱלֹהִים"** – Is there a difference in meaning between the roots "רָאָה" and "חַזֵּה"? Why is the vision described in one way in verse 10 and in another in verse 11? Moreover, why is the fact repeated twice?
- **"וַיִּאֱכַלֵּו וַיִּשְׁתַּ�"** – Why does the story conclude with the fact that the nobility "ate and drank"? How is this connected to their seeing of the Divine; was a meal part of the encounter? Is eating an appropriate response to seeing God?
- **"וְאֶל פְּזִקְנִים אָמַר שְׁבֹו לְנוּ בָּזָה"** – When Moshe ascends the mountain to get the tablets, he tells the elders to remain below with Aharon and Chur. Should this be read as an admonition and warning, betraying

Moshe's fear lest the elders breach any boundaries? Or, should this be viewed as an honor, as the elders are tasked with sharing in the overseeing of the nation in Moshe's absence?

## The Elders Elsewhere in Tanakh

Several other episodes in Tanakh mention the elders and might shed light on their character:

- **Elders in Egypt** – In Shemot 3, Hashem tells Moshe that he should gather the elders to join him when he confronts Paroh. Though Moshe gathers the elders, when he goes to the palace in Shemot 5, they are not mentioned. Does this indicate that they did not heed the directive, being reluctant to defy Paroh, or is the text's omission of their presence insignificant?
- **Elders and the Sin of the Golden Calf** – Though the elders are mentioned as joining Aharon and Chur when Moshe ascended the mountain, we hear nothing of their role during the episode with the calf. Where were they when the nation approached Aharon? Does their absence from the text imply innocence or guilt?
- **Elders in Bemidbar 11** – When Moshe can no longer bear the nation's grumblings in Bemidbar 11, Hashem suggests that he select 70 elders to help him, implying that no such group existed at the time. Where, though, were the elders of our story? Why were they not tasked with aiding Moshe?

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "תִּנְלַשׁ" often connotes sending forth one's hand specifically with intent to harm. See, for instance, Bereshit 22:12, Shemot 3:20, Shemot 9:15, Shemuel I 22:17, and Shemuel I 24:6.

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of this issue, see Seeing Hashem.

# Revelation to the Elders at Sinai

## Exegetical Approaches

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

### Overview

Commentators differ in their evaluation of the elders' encounter with Hashem at Sinai, with some finding them blameworthy and others viewing them as meritorious. Many Midrashim maintain that the elders did not treat the encounter with the proper respect and thus were deserving of punishment. Rambam, too, faults the elders, asserting that they did not sufficiently prepare themselves, leading them to an inappropriate conclusions regarding Hashem's essence. In contrast, Rashbam and others assume that there was nothing at all problematic about the elders' actions. The encounter was an honor in which they were privileged to see Hashem on a higher level than most of the nation.

### Blameworthy

Though they were granted a temporary stay of punishment, the elders at Sinai were deserving of death. This position differs regarding why:

### Inappropriate Behavior

The elders were deserving of death either because they lacked the proper respect when granted the privilege of seeing Hashem or for the very act itself of seeing Hashem.

SOURCES: Vayikra Rabbah, Pesikta DeRav Kahana, Tanchuma, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Rashi

**"לֹא שָׁלַח יְהוָה יְדָיו"** – These sources understand the phrase to mean that Hashem did not send forth His hand to punish the elders,<sup>1</sup> learning from this that they must have been deserving of death. They were granted a stay of execution only because Hashem did not want to ruin the happiness of the Giving of the Torah with the tragedy of their deaths.<sup>2</sup>

**"לֹא אָכַל וְיִשְׁתַּחַוו"** – These sources divide regarding whether the eating and drinking of this verse is literal<sup>3</sup> or metaphorical,<sup>4</sup> but all agree that it signified that the people did not have proper respect for the encounter with God. They either approached the revelation amidst literal food and drink, or as if engaged in food and drink, belittling the gravity of the experience and treating Hashem as a friend before whom you are comfortable eating.

**Seeing Hashem** – Rashi suggests that the elders physically saw Hashem directly. As such, this action alone, regardless of their accompanying behavior, made them liable for death, as Hashem says, "לֹא רָאַתִּי הָאָדָם אֲלֹא".<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, one might question why Hashem would have invited the elders to approach if this was to result in their deaths.<sup>6</sup> Rashi might respond that Hashem had invited them only to "bow from a distance", yet they took the liberty to also look.

**Purpose of the episode** – These sources do not explain what was the goal of the episode, but might suggest that Hashem was simply extending to these distinguished individuals the honor of coming closer to God than the rest of the nation. They, unfortunately, proved unworthy.

"וְאֶל פְּדָקִים אָמַר שָׁבּוּ לְנוּ בְּזַה עַד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁׁבּוּ אֲלֵיכֶם" – Given the elders' inappropriate behavior it is not surprising that Moshe warned them to stay at the bottom of the mountain when he ascended to get the Tablets. Shemot Rabbah, though, suggests that this was a punishment for even earlier misdeeds of the elders. When Moshe had gathered them to accompany him to confront Paroh in Egypt (Shemot 4), the cowardly elders had sneaked away, leaving Moshe to face the king on his own.<sup>7</sup> Now, measure for measure, they are forced to leave Moshe, so that he alone will face the King of Kings, Hashem.

**The punishment of Nadav and Avihu** – According to this approach, Nadav and Avihu were finally punished on the eighth day of the consecration of the Mishkan.

- Rashi brings the opinion of R. Yishmael that the brothers entered the Mishkan while drunk. According to him, then, this day might have been chosen for their ultimate punishment because they proved themselves repeat offenders, once again approaching Hashem with disrespect, from drink.<sup>8</sup>
- It is alternatively possible that Nadav and Avihu erred in once again in seeing God Himself. On the eighth day, Hashem's presence had descended and filled the entire Tabernacle,<sup>9</sup> and it is possible that the brothers encountered it upon their entry. After seeing Hashem not once but twice, death was unavoidable. [For further discussion of the brothers' sin, see Why Were Nadav and Avihu Killed.]

**The punishment of the elders** – Tanchuma and Rashi state that the elders died at Taverah (Bemidbar 11:1-3), together with the "מִתְאָגִים". The motivation for this suggestion might be two-fold:

- Later in Bemidbar 11, Hashem tells Moshe to gather 70 elders to aid him in leading the nation, implying that no such elders existed. As the elders are present in our story, Tanchuma concludes that they must have died in the interim, perhaps immediately before, and prompting, Moshe's crisis.<sup>10</sup>
- When describing the initiation of the new elders, Bemidbar 11 shares, "וְאֶל מִן קָרְבָּן אֲשֶׁר עַלְיוֹ נִתְּנָן עַל", making use of both the roots "אֶל" and "זָקֵן", recalling our episode in Shemot 24.<sup>11</sup> It might be this linguistic connection which motivates Tanchuma to suggest that perhaps the "אֶזְרָאִים" / "זָקִינִים" died during the events of Bemidbar 11 specifically.<sup>12</sup>

"אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" – Rashi identifies "אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" with Nadav and Avihu and the seventy elders of verse 10, suggesting that both verses speak of but one group of people.

"וְאֶל אֲלֹהִים" – This approach does not differentiate between the terms, assuming that both verses 10 and 11 speak of the same vision. It might suggest that the fact is repeated only so as to explain where the elders erred and what was problematic about their action, that they did not only see, but did so with food and drink.



## Flawed Perception

Due to insufficient preparation, the elders attained a flawed perception of God and thus deserved death.

SOURCES: Rambam, Ralbag #2<sup>13</sup>

"**לֹא שָׁלַח יְהוָה**" – Rambam understands the phrase to mean that Hashem did not send forth His hand to punish the elders, learning from this that they must have been deserving of death. They were granted a stay of execution only because Moshe intervened on their behalf to delay their punishment.

**Seeing Hashem** – Rambam asserts that the roots "רָאָה" and "חִזְחָה" have more than one meaning and can refer not only to physical vision, but also to mental insight. The verses do not imply that the elders physically saw Hashem, but rather that they attained some level of intellectual perception and comprehension of Hashem's essence.<sup>14</sup>

**The elders vs. the nation at Sinai** – According to Rambam, who believes that indiscriminate prophecy is impossible, the nation as a whole was neither qualified nor prepared to understand Hashem at Sinai, and thus, not only saw no picture of God, but could not even decipher His words.<sup>15</sup> The elders, in contrast, were at a higher level, and were given the opportunity to achieve a higher level of understanding.<sup>16</sup>

"**וּמְתַתְּ רְגִלֵּי קְמֻשָּׁה לְבָנֵת הַסְּפִיר וְכָעֵם כְּשָׁמִים לְתָכָר**" – Rambam suggests that this description of the elders' understanding, filled as it is with corporeal imagery, teaches that their perception was flawed, for they comprehended Hashem as a material being.

"**וַיֹּאֵכְלُו וַיִּשְׁתְּחוּ**" – Ralbag suggests that this points to the elders' improper preparation. Rather than engaging in solitude, they ate and drank. Rambam might similarly suggest that immersing in physicality is what led the elders to perceive Hashem, too, in physical terms. When it comes to comprehending the Divine, insufficient preparation and overreaching can be fatal.<sup>17</sup>

"**וְאֵל כְּזָקִנִּים אָמַר שְׁבֹו לְנוּ בָּזָה עַד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁׁבֶּב אֶלְיכֶם**" – After the encounter, as Moshe is about to ascend the mountain to get the Tablets, he warns the elders "בָּזָה". This approach might suggest that he proffered an extra admonition to the elders to stay put since he recognized that they had sought more than their intellect could handle and he wanted to ensure that they did not attempt to once again approach to see more than they were capable of.

**Who were the elders?** This position might suggest, as does Ibn Ezra, that they were firstborns, perhaps parallel to the "נָעָרִים בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" who offered sacrifices in verse 5. The latter were the younger generation of firstborns, not yet invited to perceive Hashem, while the זָקִנִּים were the older firstborns who were granted the privilege but botched the opportunity.

**Sin of the Golden Calf** – According to this approach, the sin of the Golden Calf might have been a direct result of this botched encounter. The elders' perceiving of Hashem as a corporeal being might have contributed to the desire to create a concrete image of Hashem.<sup>18</sup> Lekach Tov, in fact, suggests that the people chose the form of a calf because this is what the elders had seen at Sinai. Amnon Bazak<sup>19</sup> supports this idea by noting the parallel between "מְשֻׁעָה בָּנֵת הַסְּפִיר" seen by the elders and "מְרָאָה אֶבֶן סְפִיר" seen by Yechezkel, who describes the four headed creature in his vision as having "the legs of a calf" (וְכֹף רְגִלֵּים").

**Death of the elders** – This approach might suggest that the elders met their death with the rest of those who worshiped the calf.<sup>20</sup> If they were instrumental in suggesting the creation of the calf, their flawed vision had catastrophic consequences, proving the dangers of misconstruing God as a corporeal Being. In

addition, if one assumes that the elders were the firstborns whose task it was to offer sacrifices, then it is likely that they themselves were among the most active worshipers of the calf.

"אַצְלֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" and "אַצְלֵזְוֹ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים" vs. "וַיַּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרָאֵל" – As these sources identify the elders with the firstborns and do not differentiate between the terms "וַיַּרְאוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים" and "וַיַּרְאֵל אֶת אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרָאֵל", they must explain the repetition. They might suggest, as above, that the second verse comes only to explain why the nobles deserved death.

**Moshe and Aharon** – Akeidat Yitzchak questions this approach, noting that the verses do not differentiate between the cognition achieved by Moshe and Aharon and that achieved by the rest of the elders, ascribing the same vision to all. As it is evident that Moshe and Aharon were not deserving of punishment for their vision and perception, it is difficult to say that the others were.



## Meritorious

The elders' encounter with Hashem at Sinai was a privilege that they had earned.

**SOURCES:** Targum Onkelos, Bavli Berakhot, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, R"Y Bekhor Shor, R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Ramban, Daat Zekeinim, R. Yosef ibn Kaspi, Ralbag #1, Sforno, Or HaChayyim, Shadal

**Purpose of the episode** – This approach views the elders' invitation to see Hashem as an honor associated with Hashem's covenant. Rashbam suggests that though, normally, no mortal can see Hashem directly, Hashem makes exceptions during covenantal ceremonies, honoring the second party by allowing them to see Him<sup>21</sup> as He appears to seal the covenant.<sup>22</sup>

**The elders vs. the nation at Sinai** – Shadal asserts that in contrast to the masses who saw no picture at all at Sinai, Hashem allowed the elders to see a prophetic image of Him. This might be compared to a king who shows his face only to a select few of his subjects, highlighting their special stature.

**Seeing Hashem** – These sources vary regarding the nature of the vision received by the elders,<sup>23</sup> though all agree that it was not only appropriate but should even be considered an honor.

- **Direct revelation** – According to Rashbam and Daat Zekeinim, the elders merited a direct revelation of Hashem, being given permission to physically see Hashem Himself.<sup>24</sup>
- **Non-physical sight** – Ibn Ezra, in contrast, asserts that the verses are speaking of only a prophetic vision, while R. Avraham b. HaRambam<sup>25</sup> and Ralbag maintain that the text speaks of a cognitive experience, the elders' partial apprehension of Hashem's essence.
- **Viewed Hashem's glory** – Most other commentators<sup>26</sup> speak of the elders viewing the brilliant light of Hashem's glory.

"לֹא שָׁלַח דָּבָר" – These sources differ in their specific understanding of this phrase, but agree that it does not imply that the elders were deserving of punishment:

- **Were not harmed** – Most of these sources assume that the verse is stating that, in contrast to what one might have expected given Hashem's statement, "לֹא יְرַאַנִּי בַּאֲדָם וְלֹא",<sup>27</sup> the elders' were not harmed by their encounter with Hashem as they were worthy of seeing what they saw.

- **Vision was not blocked** – Daat Zekeinim, Sforo, and Or HaChayyim go further and claim that the verse points to the high level of the elders' encounter.<sup>28</sup> Hashem did not send forth His hand to limit their vision, but allowed them to see more than expected.<sup>29</sup>

"וַיֹּאכְלُו וַיִּשְׁתָּהּ" – All these sources agree that there was nothing problematic about the nobles eating and drinking, but they differ regarding the nature of this activity:

- **Covenant** – According to Rashbam, the eating refers to partaking from the sacrifices mentioned earlier in the chapter and is an expected element of a covenantal ceremony.<sup>30</sup>
- **Celebration** – Bavli Berakhot and others<sup>31</sup> maintain that "eating" is a metaphoric way of saying that the elders basked in and enjoyed Hashem's glory and their insight into His essence, while Ramban, Ibn Kaspi, and Sforo, in contrast, explain that this was a physical meal of celebration for either the elders' personal achievement or the receiving of the Torah.<sup>32</sup>

"אֲצִילִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" – Most of these sources identify "אֲצִילִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" with Nadav, Avihu, and the elders and view the title as one of respect. Ramban suggests that the word relates to the root, "אַצֵּל", to set aside or reserve, and that the elders are so called because Hashem's spirit was set upon them. Alternatively, the root is related to the Arabic 'asil, meaning "noble" or "of known stock".<sup>33</sup>

"וְאֵל כְּדָקְנִים אָמַר שְׁבוּ לְנוּ בָּזָה עַד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁׁבוּ אֶלְיכֶם" – According to this approach, Moshe's command is not an admonition, but an honor, indicative of the high stature of the elders. They are charged with helping Aharon and Chur lead the people during Moshe's absence.

**Relationship to the elders in Egypt** – This position would likely equate these elders with those mentioned in Shemot 3-4, seeing in them a group of veteran leaders. Already in Egypt they were set apart and tasked by Hashem to join Moshe in confronting Paroh ("וְבָאתָ אֶתְּךָ וַיַּקְרִין יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם"), ever ready to assist Moshe. Though their fulfillment of this directive is not explicit in the text, Ibn Kaspi asserts that it can be assumed, explaining that their presence in the palace is not mentioned only because they were secondary to Moshe.

### Where are the elders in Bemidbar 11?

- **Martyred for belief** – According to Bemidbar Rabbah, the elders stood up against the nation when they desired to build the calf, attempting to dissuade them. Having actually seen Hashem<sup>34</sup> the elders' belief in Him was solid, obliterating any temptation for idolatry. The nation, though, refused to listen and in their frenzy killed them. As such, the elders died as righteous martyrs, not because of any sin.
- **Still alive** – Alternatively, it is possible that these elders were still alive in Bemidbar 11, but were simply inappropriate for the task. Hashem tells Moshe to choose "שְׁבָעִים אִישׁ מִזְקָנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל",<sup>35</sup> those whom Moshe knows are "שְׁטָרִים," officers capable of executing his commands. It is possible that the original seventy excelled in the spiritual realm (meriting to see God), but were not particularly helpful in the administrative or political sphere (they were not "שְׁטָרִים").<sup>36</sup> Moshe needed people to complement him, not those who shared his elevated spiritual status.

"וַיַּחֲדֹזְוּ אֶת אֱלֹהִים" vs. "וַיַּרְאֻוּ אֶת אֱלֹהִים" – These sources do not distinguish between the terms.

**Variation of this approach** – A variation of this approach, taken by R. Avraham HeChasid, Akeidat Yitzchak, and others,<sup>37</sup> suggests that the verses speak not of one but of two different groups of people who were privileged to "see Hashem": the elders of verse 9 who attained prophecy and merited to comprehend the

Divine at a fairly high level, and the nobility of verse 11 (perhaps the firstborns<sup>38</sup> or princes) who were honored, but received only a very low level of cognition or no prophecy at all.<sup>39</sup>

- **"וְיִרְאֹו" vs. "וְיִחְזֹה"** – These sources distinguish between the terms "וְיִרְאֹו" and "וְיִחְזֹה", claiming that a "מִחְזָה" represents a much lower level of prophecy than a "מִרְאָה".<sup>40</sup>
- **"לֹא שָׁלַח יָדָו"** – Drawing off the phrase, "נִתְחַזֵּה עַלְיוֹ יָדָיו", these commentators assert that "לֹא שָׁלַח יָדָו" means that Hashem did not extend his hand to give prophecy to the nobility.
- **"וְיִאֱכַלוּ וְיִשְׁתַּוּ"** – This highlights the low level of cognition received by the nobility. They did not lose function over their senses as happens when prophesying, allowing them to immediately resume normal physical activities such as eating.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the note in the Introduction that the phrase "שָׁלַח יָד" often connotes sending forth one's hand with intent to harm.

<sup>2</sup> See below that these sources maintain that the elders were killed at Tavera and Nadav and Avihu were killed in the eighth day of the consecration ceremony.

<sup>3</sup> This is how Rashi appears to understand the verse.

<sup>4</sup> See Vayikra Rabbah, Pesikta DeRav Kahana, and Tanchuma.

<sup>5</sup> See Shemot 33:20.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Hirsch who for this reason rejects this approach's evaluation of the elders.

<sup>7</sup> This is not explicit in the text. The Midrash reaches this conclusion from the fact that despite Hashem's statement in Shemot 3:18 that the elders will accompany Moshe, and Moshe's gathering of them in Shemot 4, in Shemot 5 only Moshe and Aharon are said to have confronted Paroh.

<sup>8</sup> This would explain why even though the Days of Consecration were also a festive occasion, Hashem nonetheless let tragedy mar it. One may get a stay of execution once, but a repeat offender is no longer granted that mercy.

<sup>9</sup> Shemot 40:35 records that when Hashem's glory filled the Tabernacle, even Moshe himself could not enter.

<sup>10</sup> According to this theory, their deaths left a leadership vacuum, explaining why it is in this story specifically that Moshe breaks down.

<sup>11</sup> The root "אֶצְל" as a noun or verb appears only 7 times in all of Tanakh, three of which are in these two stories. This, together with the added mention of the elders, might suggest that Bemidbar is intentionally alluding to the story in Shemot.

<sup>12</sup> The Midrash understands the phrase "קָצִינִים" to refer to "וְתַבְעֵר בְּמֵאָשׁ וְתַאֲכֵל בְּקָאָה בְּמִפְקָדָה" and equates these with "אֶצְלִים" of our story. The fact that these two words are synonyms, both meaning "those who are at the side", strengthens the association. [See Yeshayahu 41:9, "אֲשֶׁר הַחֲזָקָתִיב מִקְצָות הָאָרֶץ וְמִאֶצְלִים קָרָאתִיךְ", where the two roots are parallel.] Both "אֶצְל" and "קָצִין" take on the connotation of chieftain or officer, being both set apart and having the function of supporting another (with side being understood as support). [It is possible that in Melakhim 12:31, when we are told that Yerovam appointed priests "מִקְצָות הָעָם", this, too, refers to officers; though he did not choose his priests from the tribe of Levi, he did take them from the elite of the nation.]

<sup>13</sup> Ralbag explains the story according to both the opinion that the elders were meritorious and the opinion that they erred.

<sup>14</sup> See Seeing Hashem and Anthropomorphism that Rambam is consistent in reinterpreting cases where someone is said to have seen Hashem to mean that they non-physically apprehended His essence.

<sup>15</sup> For elaboration on his understanding of the revelation to the nation, see The Decalogue: Direct From Hashem or Via Moshe.

<sup>16</sup> The fact that they, too, proved insufficiently prepared highlights the enormous dedication needed to attain prophecy.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Mystery at the Malon for Abarbanel's reading of Moshe's near fatal experience at the lodging place, where he similarly explains that insufficient preparation for prophecy almost cost Moshe his life.

<sup>18</sup> This reading assumes that the people were not looking to create an alternative deity, but rather a concrete representation of Hashem. Their motives, thus, were not negative, and stemmed from a sincere desire to continue the connection begun at Sinai. For elaboration on this understanding of the sin, see Sin of the Golden Calf.

<sup>19</sup> See his article, "The Ideological Basis of the Sin of the Golden Calf".

<sup>20</sup> Rambam himself does not say this, instead following Tanchuma that they died at Taverah.

<sup>21</sup> See below that these sources differ in their understanding of the nature of the vision.

<sup>22</sup> He compares our episode to both Bereshit 15, where Avraham is allowed to see Hashem pass during the Covenant Between the Pieces, and Shemot 33, when Moshe sees Hashem from the rock as Hashem makes a covenant there as well.

<sup>23</sup> For a fuller analysis of the various understandings of what it means to see Hashem, see Seeing Hashem.

<sup>24</sup> While Rashbam highlights that, like Moshe in Shemot 33, they saw only Hashem's "back", Daat Zekeinim asserts that they saw even more than Moshe.

<sup>25</sup> This is the second possibility that he raises.

<sup>26</sup> See Onkelos, Bavli Berakhot, R"Y Bekhor Shor, R. Avraham b. HaRambam (in his first explanation), Ibn Kaspi, and Or HaChayyim.

<sup>27</sup> According to Rashbam, though directly seeing Hashem normally results in death, in exceptional circumstances like this one, man might be granted permission to see Hashem without danger. Ralbag, in contrast, assumes that "לא יראניadam v'ani" means that no mortal can totally comprehend Hashem's being. This, though, did not preclude the elders from reaching a lower level of cognition.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Kaspi, in contrast, asserts that the term comes to limit the extent of the elders' encounter. Though they were honored with seeing Hashem's glory, Hashem did not extend them His hand to either invite them forward, strengthen, or "embrace" them in any manner. See also R"Y Bekhor Shor who understands the phrase to mean that Hashem did not support the elders enough to enable them to be nourished on His glory alone.

<sup>29</sup> Daat Zekeinim and Or HaChayyim contrast this episode with Moshe's vision of Hashem from the crook of the rock in Shemot 33. There, Hashem covered Moshe's eyes to obscure his vision, "ושכתי כפי עלייך". Here, in contrast, "לא שלחתי לך" to block the vision. Accordingly, the elders merited to see even more than Moshe himself! [Or HaChayyim nonetheless emphasizes that Moshe still grasped more than the elders. What they were able to comprehend without cover, Moshe was able to comprehend regularly.]

Sforno, instead, points out that when many prophets begin to prophesy, we are told that "וְיִצְחַק" comes upon them, removing them from their senses. Here, in contrast, Hashem did not place His hands upon the elders, allowing them to prophesy while still in full control of their faculties.

<sup>30</sup> See Treaties in Tanakh and the Ancient Near East for evidence that covenants and treaties in the Ancient Near East often included both the slaughtering of an animal and passing through its parts and/or the sharing

of a meal. In this case, Hashem's portion, the Zevachim, is burned, while the Shelamim were eaten by the nobility

<sup>31</sup> See Onkelos, Ralbag, and Or HaCahayyim.

<sup>32</sup> R. Yehuda HaLevi, Ibn Ezra, R"Y Bekhor Shor, and R. Avraham b. HaRambam, in contrast, assert that this verse serves to contrast the elite and Moshe. While Moshe's seeing of Hashem enabled him to fast for forty days, these individuals still needed to eat.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn Ezra suggests that the elders are given a unique title in the second verse only so as to exclude Moshe, as both the phrases "לֹא שָׁלַח יְהוָה" and "לֹא אָכַל יְהוָה" do not apply to him. While the nobility, not being on such a high level that they could subsist on Hashem's glory alone, needed to eat and drink, Moshe, being on a higher level, did not. In addition, since it was their first time prophesying, the elders feared that they might not be worthy and thus might be punished necessitating the verse to emphasize "לֹא שָׁלַח יְהוָה". With regards to Moshe, who had prophesied many times previously, this was obvious.

<sup>34</sup> This would be true whether the term is understood metaphorically or literally.

<sup>35</sup> This implies that there were more than seventy elders and Hashem was looking to choose just 70 of them. In Shemot 24, too, it is implied that there were more than seventy elders for there, too, it states, "וּשְׁבָעִים מִזְקָנִים יִשְׂרָאֵל".

<sup>36</sup> The new group of seventy, in contrast, might have excelled in administrative tasks but were lacking in the spiritual realm, necessitating Moshe to impart some of his own spirit onto them enabling them to prophesy.

<sup>37</sup> See Abarbanel, R. Avraham Saba, HaKetav VeHaKabbalah, R. Hirsch, Malbim

<sup>38</sup> R"A Saba suggests that they might be identical to "גָּנְעָרִים בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" of verse 5, understood by many to be the firstborns.

<sup>39</sup> In other words, in contrast to most of the commentators discussed until now, who equate the elders and the nobility, these exegetes view them as two distinct groups of people.

<sup>40</sup> Thus, while the elders received a prophetic vision, apprehending Hashem's essence on a somewhat high level, the nobility only comprehended Hashem in their hearts, in a very general and partial manner. R. Hirsch also raises the possibility that "ראה" refers to seeing from up close, while "זה" connotes long distance vision. The elders, on the mountain, were privileged to see Hashem from up close, while the others saw Him only from a distance.

<sup>41</sup> In addition, in contrast to the elders, they were not privy to enough of Hashem's glory to allow them to be nourished by it and subsist on it alone, and thus they needed physical sustenance.