

The Parshah in a Nutshell

Shavuot Torah Readings

Exodus 19: 1-20: 23;

Deuteronomy 14: 22--16: 17

The Children of Israel camp opposite **Mount Sinai**, where they are told that G-d has **chosen** them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall **do**."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the **Exodus**, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai. G-d **descends** on the mountain amidst thunder, lightening, billows of smoke and the blast of the *shofar*, and summons Moses to **ascend**.

G-d proclaims the **Ten Commandments**, commanding the people of Israel to believe in **G-d**, not to worship **idols** or take G-d's **name** in vain, to honor their **parents**, keep the **Shabbat**, and not to **murder**, commit **adultery**, **steal**, bear false **witness** or **covet** another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the **Torah** from G-d and convey it to them.



On the second day of Shavuot we read from Deuteronomy chapters 14-16 which detail the laws of the three **pilgrimage festivals** -- **Passover**, **Shavuot** and **Sukkot** -- on which all Jews came "to **see** and **be seen** before the **face of G-d**" in the Holy Temple in **Jerusalem**.

Shavuot Torah Readings

The Torah reading for the first day of Shavuot describes the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai which occurred on this day, where G-d revealed Himself to the Children of Israel, entered into an eternal covenant with them, communicated to them the Ten Commandments, and summoned Moses to the top of the mountain to receive the Torah

*In the third month following the children of Israel's exodus from the land of Egypt; **that same day** they came into the*

Commentary

***that same day:** In the third month... that same day they came into the wilderness of Sinai (19:1)*

On the first of the month [of Sivan] they arrived in the Sinai... and on that day Moses did not say anything at all to them, on account of their exhaustion from the journey.

On the second day, he said to them, "And you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests..."

On the third day, he informed them of G-d's command to set boundaries [around Mount Sinai]...

On the fourth day, he commanded them to "Sanctify [yourselves today and tomorrow" (Exodus 19:10); following which the Torah was given on the sixth day of Sivan].

Rabbi Jose says that the Torah was given on the seventh day of the month... Moses having added a third day of sanctification out of his own understanding.

All agree that the Torah was given on Shabbat. They differ only in that Rabbi Jose says that the first of the month was a Sunday, while the other rabbis hold that the first of the month was a Monday.
(Talmud, Shabbat 86b)

A most puzzling thing in the Talmud's account is the fact that on the first day of Sivan--the day on which the people of Israel arrived at the place where they would receive the Torah--"Moses did not say anything at all to them, on account of their exhaustion from the journey." For six weeks the children of Israel had been eagerly awaiting the most important event in their history--their receiving of the Torah from G-d. Our sages tell us that they literally counted the days (hence our annual practice of "counting the omer" during the weeks that connect Passover to Shavuot). Does it make sense that on the very day they arrived at Mount Sinai they would do *nothing at all* in preparation for the great day?

At Sinai, the divine wisdom was revealed to man. Obviously, the human mind cannot attain the divine wisdom on its own--it that must be *given* to it by G-d Himself. So although G-d instructed us to *study* His Torah, desiring that human intellect should serve as the vehicle by which we apprehend His truth, a crucial prerequisite to Torah study is the mind's total abnegation of its ego. Only after it has voided itself of all pretension that it is capable of attaining the truth of truths on its own, can the mind become a "fit vessel" to receive it. In the words of the Sages, "An empty vessel can receive; a full vessel cannot receive."

***wilderness** of Sinai... and there Israel camped opposite the mountain.*

Moses is summoned to the top of Mount Sinai, where G-d tells him that He is taking the **children** of Israel as His own chosen nation:

*"Thus shall you say to the **house of Jacob**, and tell the children of Israel:*

Commentary

So the day on which "Moses did not say anything at all to them" was an integral part of their preparations for receiving the Torah. This was the day on which they undertook the most "exhausting journey" of emptying their souls of intellectual vanity and make themselves fit receptacles of the divine truth.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

***wilderness:** And they camped in the desert (19:2)*

In the ownerless wilderness was the Torah given to the people of Israel. For if it were given in the Land of Israel, the residents of the Land of Israel would say, "It is ours"; and if it were given in some other place, the residents of that place would say, "It is ours." Therefore it was given in the wilderness, so that anyone who wishes to acquire it may acquire it. (Mechilta D'Rashbi)

Why was the Torah given in the desert? To teach us that if a person does not surrender himself to it like the desert, he cannot merit the words of Torah. And to teach us that just as the desert is endless, so is the Torah without end. (Pesikta D'Rav Kahana)

***children:** And all the people answered together, and said: "All that G-d has spoken we will do" (19:8)*

Said G-d to them: "I require guarantors."

Said the people of Israel: "The heaven and the earth shall be our guarantors."

Said G-d: "They won't last forever."

Said they: "Our fathers will guarantee it."

Said He: "They are busy."

Said they: "Our children will guarantee it."

Said He: "These are excellent guarantors. (Mechilta D'Rashbi)

"You have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice, and keep My covenant, you shall be My own treasure from among all peoples, for **all the earth** is Mine

"And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."

Moses descends from the mountain and "called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which G-d had commanded him."

Commentary

house of Jacob: Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel (19:3)

"The house of Jacob" are the women; the "children of Israel" are the men.

Why did He command the women first? Because they are the more diligent in the fulfillment of the commandments. Another explanation is: So that they should introduce their children to the study of the Torah.

Rabbi Tachlifa of Caesarea says: G-d said, "When I created the world, I commanded Adam first, and only then Eve was commanded, with the result that she transgressed and upset the world. If I do not now call upon the women first, they will nullify the Torah." (Midrash Rabbah)

all the earth: And G-d spoke all these words (20:1)

When G-d gave the Torah no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, none of the angels stirred a wing, the seraphim did not say "Holy, Holy," the sea did not roar, the creatures spoke not, the whole world was hushed into breathless silence and the voice went forth: "I am G-d your G-d." (Midrash Rabbah)

With each and every utterance that issued forth from the mouth of G-d, the souls of Israel flew from their bodies, as it is written (Song of Songs 5:6), "My soul went out when He spoke." But since their souls departed at the first utterance, how could they receive the second one? G-d brought down the dew with which He will resurrect the dead and revived them. (Talmud, Shabbat 88a)

In other words, even after they were revived by the divine "dew" following the first utterance, this did not suffice to keep body and soul together at the second utterance; and the "dew" which enabled them to absorb the second utterance, did not suffice for the third; and so on "with each and every utterance." This means that each utterance involved a greater revelation of divinity than the previous one. Thus the commandment "Do not murder," for example, expresses an even loftier divine truth than "Remember the Shabbat" or "I am G-d your G-d." (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

And all the people answered **together**, and said: "All that G-d has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to G-d.

G-d instructs that the people should purify and sanctify themselves for two days, "Because on the third day G-d shall descend upon Mount Sinai before the eyes of the entire people." The mountain itself should be fenced in, and all should be warned against ascending the mountain or even "touching its edge."

The Revelation

And it came to pass on the **third** day when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and

Commentary

together: And there Israel camped opposite the mountain (19:2)

At all their other encampments, the verse says *vayachanu* ("and they camped," in the plural); here it says *vayichan* ("and he camped," in the singular). For all other encampments were in argument and dissent, whereas here they camped as one man, with one heart. (Mechilta; Rashi)

third: And it came to pass on the third day (19:16)

A Galilean scholar lectured before Rabbi Chisda: "Blessed be the Merciful One who gave a three-fold Torah (consisting of Torah, Prophets and Scriptures) to a three-fold people (comprised of Kohanim, Levites and Israelites) through a third-born (Moses, the third child of Amram and Jocheved) on the third day in the third month. (Talmud, Shabbat 88a)

The Torah is associated with the number "3" because the ultimate function of Torah is "to make peace in the world" and "3" represents the concept of peace.

Peace is unity in diversity. The number "1" implies exclusivity and singularity; the number "2" connotes diversity and plurality; the number "3" represents a state in which the diversity of "2" is superseded by a third, encompassing truth, within whose context differences no longer divide but rather unite diverse components into a harmonious whole.

This is the function to Torah: to introduce a unity of purpose to the diverse objects, forces and peoples of creation, uniting them all in the harmonious endeavor of serving the divine objective in creation. (The Chassidic Masters)

At the Torah's conclusion of its account of the creation of the world, it is written (Genesis 1:31): "And there was evening and there was morning, *the sixth day*." What is the purpose of the additional "the" (*hashishi*)?

(Regarding the other days of creation, the Torah simply says, "And it was evening and it was morning, one day... a second day.. a

a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of a shofar exceeding loud; so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with G-d; and they stood **under** the mountain.

And Mount Sinai smoked in every part, because G-d descended upon it in fire: and the smoke of it ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.

The voice of the shofar sounded louder and louder; **Moses speaks**, and G-d answers him by a **voice**.

Commentary

third day, etc."; "the sixth day" implies that the verse is referring to a certain famous "sixth day").

This teaches that G-d stipulated with the works of creation and said to them: "If Israel accepts the Torah (on the sixth of Sivan), you shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness."
(Talmud, Shabbat 88a)

under: And they stood under the mountain (19:17)

This teaches that G-d overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them: "If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, there shall be your burial."

Rabbi Acha ben Yaakov observed: This resulted in a strong legal contest against the Torah (since it was a contract entered into under duress). Said Raba: But they re-accepted it (out of their own, un-compelled choice) in the days of Ahasuerus, as it is written (Esther 9:27): "The Jews confirmed, and accepted"--on that occasion they confirmed what they had accepted long before.

(Talmud, Shabbat 88a)

Moses speaks: Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal (20:13)

When Moses ascended to heaven, the angels protested to G-d: "What is a human being doing amongst us?"

Said He to them: "He has come to receive the Torah."

Said they to Him: "This esoteric treasure, which was hidden with You for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created, You wish to give to flesh and blood?... 'What is man, that You are mindful of him, and the son of man, that You take notice of him? ... Place Your glory upon the heavens!' (Psalms 8:2-5)"

Said G-d to Moses: "Answer them."

And G-d **came down** upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And G-d called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses **went up**....

Commentary

Said Moses: "Master of the Universe! I fear lest they consume me with the breath of their mouths."

Said G-d: "Hold on to the Throne of Glory, and return them an answer."

Said Moses: "Master of the Universe! This Torah that You are giving to me, what is written in it? I am the L-rd Your G-d, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt."

"Have you descended to Egypt?" asked Moses of the angels. "Have you been enslaved to Pharaoh? So why should the Torah be yours?"

"What else does it say? You shall have no other gods. Do you dwell amongst idol-worshipping nations? What else does it say? Remember the Shabbat day. Do you work? ... What else does it say? Do not swear falsely. Do you do business? What else does it say? Honor your father and your mother. Do you have parents? What else does it say? Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal. Is there jealousy among you? Do you have an evil inclination?"

Straightway the angels conceded to G-d... and each one was moved to befriend Moses and transmit something to him. Even the Angel of Death too confided his secret to him...

(Talmud, Shabbat 88b)

voice: Moses speaks, and G-d answers him by a voice (19:19)

"The voice of G-d is in power" (Psalms 29:4). If it would have said, "The voice of G-d is in His power," the world could not survive it; rather it says, "The voice of G-d is in power"--in accordance to the individual strength of each and every one of them. To the old, according to their strength, and to the young, according to theirs; to the children, to the babes and to the women, according to their strength; and even to Moses according to his strength, as it is said: "Moses spoke, and G-d answered him by a voice."

(Midrash Rabbah)

came down: And G-d came down on Mount Sinai... and G-d called to Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up (19:20)

Once there was a king who decreed: "The people of Rome are forbidden to go down to Syria, and the people of Syria are forbidden to go up to Rome." Likewise, when G-d created the world, He decreed and said: "The heavens are G-ds, and the earth is given to man" (Psalms 115:16). But when He wished to give the

The Ten Commandments

And G-d spoke all these words, saying:

I am G-d your G-d, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself any carved idol, or any likeness of any thing... you shall not bow down to them, nor serve them...

You shall not take the name of G-d your G-d in vain...

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you **labor**, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to G-d... For in six days G-d made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore G-d blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Honor your **father and your mother**...

Commentary

Torah to Israel, He rescinded His original decree, and declared: "The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms. And I, Myself, will begin" as it is written, "And G-d descended on Mount Sinai," and then it says, "And to Moses He said: Go up to G-d." (Midrash Tanchuma)

Our Sages tell us that the Patriarchs studied the Torah and fulfilled its precepts many centuries before the Torah was "officially" given at Sinai. Since no "new information" was revealed on the sixth of Sivan, what is the significance of the "giving of the Torah" on that occasion?

The answer lies in the above-quoted Midrash: at Sinai G-d abolished the decree which had consigned the physical and the spiritual to two separate domains. Thus, at Sinai was introduced a new phenomenon--the *cheftza shel kedushah* or "holy object." After Sinai, when physical man takes a physical coin, earned by his physical toil and talents, and gives it to charity; or when he forms a piece of leather to a specified shape and dimensions and binds them to his head and arm as *tefillin*---the object with which he has performed his "mitzvah" is transformed. A finite, physical thing becomes "holy," as its very substance and form become the actualization of a divine desire and command.

The mitzvot could be, and were, performed before the revelation at Sinai, and had the power to achieve great things *within* the spiritual realm (by elevating the soul of the one who performed them and effecting "unions" (*yichudim*) and "revelations" (*giluyim*) in the supernal worlds) and *within* the physical realm (by refining the object with which it was performed, within the limits of its natural potential). But because the mitzvot had not yet been *commanded* by G-d, they lacked the power to bridge the great divide between matter and spirit. Only as a command of G-d, creator and delineator of both the spiritual and the physical, could the mitzvah supersede the natural definitions of these two realms. Only after Sinai could the mitzvah actualize the spiritual and sanctify the material. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

G-d: *I am G-d your G-d (20:2)*

Because G-d appeared to them at the Red Sea as a mighty warrior, at Sinai as a sage teaching Torah, in the days of Solomon as a handsome lad and in the times of Daniel as a compassionate old man, G-d said to them: Just because you perceive Me in many guises, do not think that there are many gods; rather, it is I who was at the sea, I who was at Sinai, I who is in every place -- "I am G-d your G-d." (Midrash Tanchuma)

I am G-d your G-d, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt (20:2)

Would it not have been more appropriate for G-d to say, "I am G-d... who created the heavens and the earth"?

Commentary

But G-d the creator is the G-d that Israel shares with the rest of creation. At Sinai, G-d did not speak to us as the author of nature, but as the executor of the miraculous Exodus. For at Sinai we forged a covenant with G-d in which we pledged to surpass all bounds of nature and convention in our commitment to Him, and He pledged to supercede all laws of nature and convention in His providence over us. (The Chassidic Masters)

Remember: *Remember the Shabbat day (20:8)*

In Deuteronomy 5 (where the Ten Commandments are repeated), it says, "Safeguard the Shabbat day." "Remember" and "safeguard" (which represent the imperative and prohibitive aspects of Shabbat) were expressed in a single utterance--something which the human mouth cannot articulate and the human ear cannot hear. (Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 27a)

labor: *Six days shall you labor... (20:9)*

This, too, is a divine decree. Just as the people of Israel were commanded to rest on Shabbat, so, too, were they commanded to work on the other days of the week. (Mechilta D'Rashbi)

Six days shall you labor, and do all your work (20:9)

Is it then possible for a person to do "all his work" in six days? But rest on Shabbat as if all your work is done. (Mechilta)

father and mother: *Honor your father and your mother (20:12)*

There are three partners in man: G-d, his father, and his mother. When a man honors his father and his mother, G-d says: "I consider it though I had dwelt among them and they had honored Me." (Talmud, Kiddushin 30b)

You shall not **murder**.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your fellow.

You shall not covet... anything that is your fellow's.

The people are overwhelmed by all that they **see and hear**, and beg Moses: "You speak with us, and we shall hear; but let not

Commentary

(The commentaries point out that the Ten Commandments were engraved on two tablets--five on the first and five on the second. The first tablet contains mitzvot that are "between man and G-d," while the commandments on the second tablet govern the relationship "between man and man." This means that as the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," belongs to the category of "between G-d and man"!)

And in Leviticus 19:3 it says, "Every man, his mother and father should fear." For it is revealed and known to G-d that a person adores his mother more than his father, and that he fears his father more than his mother. G-d therefore set the honor of one's father first, and the fear of one's mother first, to emphasize that one must honor and fear them both equally. (Talmud, Kiddushin 31a)

murder: *Do not murder (20:13)*

How were the Ten Commandments given? Five on one tablet and five on a second tablet. This means that "Do not murder" corresponds to "I am G-d your G-d." The Torah is telling us that one who sheds blood it is as if he has reduced the image of the King.

What is this analogous to? To a king of flesh and blood who entered a country and put up portraits of himself, and made statues of himself, and minted coins with his image. After a while, the people of the country overturned his portraits, broke his statues and invalidated his coins, thereby reducing the image of the king. So, too, one who sheds blood reduces the image of the King, as it is written (Genesis 9:6): "One who spills a man's blood... for in the image of G-d He made man."

(Mechilta)

see and hear: *And all the people saw the voices (20:15)*

They saw what is ordinarily heard and they heard what is ordinarily seen. (Midrash Lekach Tov; Rashi)

As physical beings, we "see" physical reality. On the other hand, G-dliness and spirituality is only something that is "heard"--it can be discussed, perhaps even understood to some extent, but not experienced first hand.

G-d speak with us, lest we die." So "the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near to the thick **darkness** where G-d was."

The reading concludes with a number of additional laws communicated at Sinai, including the prohibition to use any **iron** tools in constructing an altar to G-d.

Pilgrimage

On the second day of Shavuot we read from Deuteronomy chapters 14-16, which detail the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals--Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot--on which all Jews came "to see and be seen before the face of G-d" in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The reading also includes the laws of tithing, the sabbatical year, charity and the consecration of firstborn animals.

Commentary

At the revelation at Sinai, we saw what is ordinarily heard--we experienced the divine as an immediate, tangible reality. On the other hand, what is ordinarily "seen" --the material world--was something merely "heard," to be accepted or rejected at will.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

darkness: *And Moses drew near to the thick darkness where G-d was (20:18)*

There are three types of darkness: the "heavy darkness" of the Covenant Between the Pieces (Genesis 15:17); the "tangible darkness" of the ninth plague in Egypt (Exodus 10:22); and the "thick darkness" at the giving of the Torah. (Rabbeinu Bechayei)

iron: *And when you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone: for if you lift up your sword upon it, you have defiled it (20:22)*

Iron was created to shorten the life of man, and the Altar was created to lengthen the life of man; so it is not fitting that that which shortens should be lifted upon that which lengthens.

(Talmud, Middot 3:4)

The Breakthrough

And it came to pass on the third day, when morning came, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of the shofar exceedingly loud; and the entire people within the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with G-d, and they stood at the foot of the mountain...

And G-d came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And G-d called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses ascended.

Exodus 19:16-20

The most momentous event in history took place on Shabbat, the sixth day of the month of Sivan, in the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE). On that day, the entire people of Israel -- more than 2 million men, women and children,¹ as well as the souls of all future generations of Jews -- gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from G-d. Ever since, the event has been marked on our calendar as the festival of Shavuot, "the Time of the Giving of Our Torah."

But the Torah we received at Sinai had already been in our possession for many generations. Our ancestors had studied and fulfilled the entire Torah even before it was given, observing its every law and ordinance -- including the obligation to make an *eruv tavshilin* when a festival falls on the eve of Shabbat.² No new document was unveiled at Sinai, and no hitherto unknown code of behavior was commanded there. What, then, was given to us at The Giving of Our Torah?

The Midrash explains the significance of the event with the following parable:

Once there was a king who decreed: The people of Rome are forbidden to go down to Syria, and the people of Syria are forbidden to go up to Rome. Likewise, when G-d created the world He decreed and said: "The heavens are G-d's, and the earth is given to man."³ But when He wished to give the Torah to Israel, He rescinded His original decree, and declared: The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms. And I, Myself, will begin -- as it is written, "And G-d descended on Mount Sinai,⁴ and then it says, "And to Moses He said: Go up to G-d."⁵ (*Midrash Tanchuma, Vaeira 15; Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 12:4*)

For the first twenty-five centuries of history, there existed a *gezeirah* -- a decree and schism -- which split reality into two hermetic worlds: the spiritual and the physical. The spiritual could not be truly brought down to earth -- its very nature defied actualization; nor could the physical be made transcendent and divine -- its very nature kept it imprisoned within the finiteness and mortality of the lower realms. So Torah, the divine wisdom and will, could have no real effect upon the physical world. It was a *wholly spiritual manifesto*, pertaining to the soul of man and to the spiritual reality of the heavens. While its concepts could, and were, applied to physical life, physical life could not be elevated - it could be improved and perfected to the limits of its potential, but it could not transcend its inherent coarseness and subjectivity.

At Sinai, G-d revoked the decree which had confined matter and spirit to two distinct realms. G-d came down on Mount Sinai, bringing the spirituality of the heavens down to earth. He summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, empowering physical man to raise his physical self and world to a higher state of existence. The Torah could now sanctify physical life.

This encounter between G-d and man at Sinai introduced a new phenomenon: the *cheftza shel kedushah* or holy object. After Sinai, when physical man takes a physical coin, earned by his physical toil and talents, and gives it to charity; or when he bakes flour and water as unleavened bread (*matzah*) and eats it on the first night of Passover; or when he forms a piece of leather to a specified shape and dimensions, inserts into it parchment scrolls inscribed with specified words, and binds them to his head and arm as *tefillin* -- the object with which he has performed his mitzvah (divine commandment) is transformed. A finite, physical thing becomes holy, as its substance and form come to embody the realization of a divine desire and command.

The mitzvot could have been, and were, performed before the revelation at Sinai. But because they had not yet been *commanded* by G-d, they lacked the power to bridge the great divide between matter and spirit. Only as a command of G-d, creator and delineator of both the spiritual and the physical, could the mitzvah supersede the natural definitions of these two realms. Only after Sinai could the mitzvah actualize the spiritual and sanctify the material.

[Thus we find that when Abraham required his servant Eliezer to take an oath, he told him to "place your hand under my thigh."⁶ An oath is taken while holding a sacred object such as a Torah scroll or *tefillin*; here Abraham is telling Eliezer to swear on the part of his own body sanctified by the mitzvah of circumcision. But since Abraham "observed the entire Torah even before it was given" -- i.e., he studied Torah, put on *tefillin*, affixed a *mezuzah* on his doorpost -- it would seem that he had no shortage of sacred objects available to him. Why, then, did he have Eliezer place his hand under his thigh, contrary to all common standards of modesty and propriety? But as we

said, the effects of Abraham's pre-Sinai mitzvot were of a wholly spiritual nature. Since G-d had not *commanded* him to do them, they remained subject to the law that separated the supernal from the material; while they had a profound effect on his own soul, the souls of his descendants, and the spiritual essence of creation, they had no impact on the material substance of the universe. The single exception was the mitzvah of circumcision, which G-d *did* command to Abraham (as related in Genesis 17), imparting to this mitzvah something of the nature of the post-Sinaitic commandments of the Torah.⁷

An Absorbent World

Therein lies the significance of a curious detail related by our sages regarding the revelation at Sinai.

The Torah tells us that G-d spoke the Ten Commandments in "a great voice, which did not cease" (Deuteronomy 5:19). The Midrash offers a number of interpretations for this description of the divine voice. One interpretation is that the divine did not confine itself to the holy tongue but reverberated in mankind's seventy languages. A second meaning is that the voice did not cease on that particular Shabbat morning some 3300 years ago: throughout the generations, all the prophets and sages who prophesied, taught and expounded upon the wisdom of the Torah are the extension of that very voice, for they added nothing that was not already inherent in the Ten Commandments. Finally, the Midrash offers a third explanation of the voice's "unceasing" nature: the divine voice at Sinai was unique in that it had no echo.

The first two interpretations obviously point to the universality and timelessness of Torah. But what is "great and unceasing" about a voice that has no echo? Why should the divine voice at Sinai have been distinguished in this manner from all other sounds?

In truth, however, the echoless nature of the divine communication conveys the very essence of what transpired at Sinai. An echo is created when a sound meets with a substance which resists it: instead of absorbing its waves, the substance repels them, bouncing them back to the void. Prior to Sinai, the voice of Torah had an echo. Belonging to the spirituality of the heavens, it could not truly penetrate the physicality of the earth. The world might hear of Torah and be affected by it; but there remained a certain degree of resistance, as the Torah and the physical world each remained defined by their respective "higher" and "lower" realms. At Sinai, however, G-d rescinded the decree which had severed the heavens from the earth. The world could now fully absorb the divine voice; a physical object could now become one with its mission and role.

The Empowering Precedent

Therein lies an important lesson to us as we pursue our mission in life to implement the ethos and ideals of Torah in our world.

At Sinai we were charged to serve as "a light unto the nations" -- to actualize in our own lives, and to teach all of humanity, that no matter what the conditions of a particular time, place or society may be, there is an all-transcendent, unequivocal, divinely ordained truth and moral code of behavior to which to adhere.

At times, we might be confronted with a seemingly unresponsive and even resisting world. It may appear that one or another of the Torah's precepts does not fit in with the prevalent reality. So the Torah tells us that the voice which sounded G-d's message to the world had no echo.

The voice of the Ten Commandments permeated every object and reality in the universe. So any resistance we may possibly meet in implementing them is superficial and temporary. For at Sinai, the essence of every created being was made consistent with, and wholly receptive to, the goodness and perfection which G-d desires of it.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe; adapted by Yanki Tauber

Footnotes:

1. A census taken eleven months later counted 603,550 males between the ages of 20 and 60 (excluding the tribe of Levi).
2. Talmud, Yoma 28b
3. Psalms 115:16
4. Exodus 19:20.
5. Ibid., 24:19
6. Genesis 24:2; cf. Jacob's similar administration of an oath to Joseph, Genesis 47:29
7. Nevertheless, Abraham's mitzvah of circumcision was only a *precedent* for the divine commandments issued at Sinai, and not a full revocation of the decree dis severing heaven from earth; it was the closest thing he had to an object of holiness, but not a complete sanctification of the physical, which is possible only after Sinai. Thus Maimonides writes: "Pay attention to the major principle expressed by [the words] "It was said at Sinai" ... For everything from which we refrain or which we do today, we do only because of G-d's command to Moses at Sinai, not because of any communication by G-d to earlier prophets. For example, that which we do not eat a limb from a live animal is not because G-d forbade this to Noah, but because Moses forbade it to us by commanding at Sinai that the prohibition of eating a limb from a live animal should remain in force. Similarly, we do not circumcise ourselves because our father Abraham circumcised himself and the members of his household, but because Gd commanded us through Moses that we should circumcise ourselves as did Abraham (Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah, Chulin 7:6)