

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Vezot Habera'kha Part I

1. Introductory Remarks

The Rashbam explains the *vav* that begins *Vezot Habera'kha* (“And this is the blessing” [Deut. 33:1]), linking the blessing to the previous chapter (32), as a complement to the chastisements foreseen in the just completed Song. It is as if to say, “and now the blessings.” The blessings – essentially prayers – request G-d’s intervention which may preclude national backsliding and the chastisements it would engender. In the literary sphere, particularly as concerns the positive effect that reading the blessings would have on the audience, they counteract the gloomy feelings that the preceding dire visions may have fostered.

An alternative approach to the meaning behind the *vav* sees the opening words (“And this is the blessing”) as responding to the hope that the Israelites surely had that Moses would bestow a blessing upon them before his death in accordance with the then widespread Near Eastern practice of caring leaders. The *vav* serves to render the phrase as, “And now, the [awaited] blessing.”

Moses is here termed “man of G-d” (*Ish HaElokim*) the only time he is so described in the Torah. This appellation – recalling his spiritual stature as one who communicates with G-d – suggests an extra measure of potency to his prayers.

The passage that immediately precedes the blessings relates of G-d’s command to Moses to ascend Mount Nebo where he is to pass away, while the passage that follows (the final passage in the Torah) is the account of his compliance with that order. These surrounding passages are narrated with a degree of similar phraseology, providing an envelope around the blessings that highlights the fact that they constitute Moses’ last words recorded in the Torah. Perhaps Moses had delayed transmitting them until he received those final instructions concerning his death. (This is contrary to the view of Ibn Ezra, who

assumed the blessings were recited when he “went and spoke all these words to all Israel” [Deut. 31:1], but were recorded in the written text afterwards, presumably to provide an optimistic conclusion to the Torah.)

After an introductory third-person verse (33:1), the blessings begin with a four-verse prologue that concerns the nation as a whole followed by the blessings of the individual tribes. At the conclusion of the blessings to the tribes is a four-verse epilogue that complements the prologue.

This composition is difficult to explicate with a high degree of certainty particularly due to its many poetic features that include archaic terms, compact expressions and abstruse allusions.

2. Beginning of the Prologue: “Hashem Came from Sinai”

The prologue’s first verse may be translated as follows: “Hashem came from Sinai and shone forth from Seir to (or upon) them; He appeared from Mount Paran and approached from *Ribebot-Qodesh*, from His right (or from the right of) אֲשֶׁרָה to (or upon) them.” It describes an aspect of G-d’s manifestation to Israel without providing specific details.

Many classical commentators – including Saadia, Rashi, Rashbam and Ramban – interpret the verse as referring to an aspect of the lawgiving at Mount Sinai. Rashi interprets as follows: “He came forth [from Sinai] to greet them [the Israelites] when they came to stand at the foot of the mountain as a groom comes forth to greet his bride.” Ramban comments that G-d’s glory came down from Mount Sinai to the Israelites below at the time of the lawgiving to be with them as he subsequently moved from there to the Tabernacle to remain with them.

Regarding the several locations cited in the opening verse, Rashi takes the mention of Seir and Paran to

indicate that G-d had first approached Esau and Ishmael (who are identified with those locations, respectively) with the opportunity to receive the Torah, but who refused. He then came to Israel. Ramban takes those locations as referring to later events when G-d manifested Himself. Saadia views both Seir (as Mount Seir) and Mount Paran as referring to Mount Sinai, each to a different side of the mountain. He postulates that mountains were named for adjacent territories; hence, the territories of Sinai, Seir and Paran are all projections from a different side of the same mountain. In a somewhat similar manner *Olam Hatanakh* cites a suggestion that the various place-names of the verse all refer to Sinai, assuming that poetic license permits places to be called by adjacent locations. These interpretations appear strained. The difficulty in negotiating the *mem* prefix (clearly meaning “from”) to apply it to the lawgiving, especially in several successive clauses in a consistent, straightforward manner, is obvious.

Onqelos translates *meribebot-qodesh* as “the holy myriads” of angels that accompanied G-d (see Zech. 14:5; Ps. 89:8) when He transmitted the *esh dat* (the “fiery law”; i.e., the Torah) to Israel. (This interpretation follows the Masoretic tradition that *אשדת* is a case of *קרי וכתוב*, that is, although written as one word it is read as two words, *אש דת*, “fire” and “law.”) Saadia takes *ribebot-qodesh* as the “holy myriads” of Israel to whom G-d brought the *esh dat*. Of course, the *mem* prefix of *meribebot* renders these “holy myriads” translations problematic. The JPS translates: “And He came from the myriads holy, at His right hand was a fiery law.” However, as regards the word *dat*, present-day scholarship recognizes it as having entered Hebrew late, from the Persian, and is most unlikely to have been used in the early books of the Bible. (Its only scriptural attestations are in Esther, set in Persia.) In *peshat*, it appears that *אשדת* should be understood according to the manner in which it is written in the Masoretic Text, as one word. The precise pronunciation would depend on its meaning.

Others take the place-names as referring to different sides of the Sinai Peninsula: Sinai is the South, Seir the East, and Paran the North. Alternatively, taking *Ribebot-Qodesh* as a place-name, possibly reading *Qadesh* as does the Septuagint, *Qadesh* would be the North, Paran the West, as the Paran desert stretches to the west in the northern part of the peninsula. In any event, according to these interpretations, Moses

begins with a description of G-d radiating forth from all sides of this distinctive area. We will elaborate on this shortly.

Some take *מִיְמִינוּ* (from His right) as meaning “from the south,” similar to Habakkuk’s description of G-d’s coming forth from *Teman* (“Yemen” [Hab. 3:3]), in accordance with the ancient practice of naming directions while facing the rising sun. *אשדת* might then refer to *Ashdot Hapisgah*, the area around which the nation was then encamped (Deut. 3:17; 4:49; and particularly see Josh. 12:3 – *וּמִתֵּימֵן תַּחַת אֲשְׁדוֹת הַפִּסְגָּה* [“and from the south beneath the slopes of Pisgah”]). In this view the verse is providing five successive clauses referring to G-d’s coming forth, the last one declaring that He has come to *Ashdot*, the present location of the Israelites. (Omission of a verb equivalent to “came” or “shone forth” in the final clause is possible in biblical poetry, as the effect of the verb may be “carried over” from the previous clause. Since the final clause provides the information about *where* He went, information that is not mentioned in the previous clauses, the verse is balanced.)

The word *אשדת* has also been taken to mean light rays or lightning, derived from *אָשַׁף*, “flowing” (see Num. 21:15), imagery based on Habakkuk’s portrayal of G-d’s manifestation (Hab. 3:4) in which radiating light rays was a prominent feature. It also is the case that such imagery was then common in the ancient Near East. The NJPS translates, “Lightning flashing ... from His right.” The Schocken Bible has “a fiery stream.”

Isaac Sassoon suggests that the verse be seen as composed of two segments, each of which comprises two clauses that conclude with *lamo* (“to them,” albeit in the singular). *Mimino eshdar* would constitute a parenthetical clause that describes *Ribebot Qodesh*; since there likely was more than one Qodesh or Qadesh, the verse identifies it by a neighboring site, it is the Qadesh “to whose south is Ashdot.”

3. Ibn Ezra’s View

Ibn Ezra disagrees with interpreting the verse as referring to the lawgiving. The “from” prefix of the various place-names, the verbs that mean “came to” or some near synonym, the various locations mentioned in the verse, and the difficulty of a straightforward

explanation of the verse have been seen as providing general support for his view. He cites three other scriptural passages that portray G-d's manifestations in a manner that he considers to be somewhat analogous to our verse. It is noteworthy that these passages possess several words and phrases in common.

Judges 5:4-5: "Hashem, when You came forth from Seir, when You marched forward from the field of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water. The mountains quaked at the presence of Hashem – this Sinai, at the presence of Hashem, the G-d of Israel."

Habakkuk 3:3-4: "G-d comes forth from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran, *selah*. His glory covers the heavens, His praise fills the earth. There is brilliance like the light, light rays coming forth from His hand, there His might is enveloped."

Psalms 68:8-9: "G-d, when You came forth before Your people, when You marched through the desert, *selah*, the earth trembled, the heavens dripped at the presence of G-d – this Sinai, at the presence of G-d, the G-d of Israel."

Just as these sources are embedded in a battle context, describing G-d leading Israel to triumph – the cataclysmic events depicted signifying His intervention – so, too, should we understand our verse. Further, as the various locations cited in these passages describe chronological divine manifestations, so should we interpret our verse. Although G-d's presence entered Israel at Sinai it did not become manifest to the rest of the world until Israel began battling its enemies years later and winning wondrous victories, events that occurred when it traveled by Seir and Mount Paran.

However, the verse states that He shone forth from Seir to "them," that is to the Israelites, and the same applies to His appearing from Mount Paran. This does not indicate manifestations to other nations except perhaps in an indirect manner. In addition, it is problematic to interpret the successive clauses of our verse, that reflect a degree of equivalence and symmetry with each other, in a manner that does not take this into account.

In addition, the above-cited Judges and Psalms passages that celebrate battle victories do not seem to be closely linked to our verse. They invoke the awesomeness of the Sinaitic revelation with the words "this Sinai." This phrase does not merely signify that the earth or mountains trembled at those later manifestations as they did at the lawgiving. Rabbi S. D. Sassoon explained this matter as follows: The tablets – the stones that were quarried out of Mount Sinai – and the ark in which they "resided," were called "Sinai," and the presence of the ark was considered the manifestation of Hashem. When the ark was taken to battle, those who viewed it were considered to be viewing a part of Mount Sinai and required to relate to it as to the Mount Sinai revelation. They would receive inspiration from the experience, renew their commitment to the covenant and hence merit divine intervention. The Judges and Psalms passages should be seen as stating that the wondrous victories Israel enjoyed were performed in the presence of the ark or "Sinai," as "Sinai" was carried to those locations and observers could point to the ark and say "this Sinai" (cf. *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, pps. 71-72).

4. Another Approach

Especially as the beginning of a concluding passage, Moses' statement that Hashem came forth (from Sinai and the various places mentioned) to the Israelites may refer to His coming to them when they were in Egypt, to rescue them from bondage. This would be understood as associated with His intention to establish a covenant with them and have them recognize Him as their G-d. In the following verses of the prologue Moses states these matters and in its final verse he proclaims that G-d was installed as king over a righteous Israel. According to this interpretation, Moses starts his blessing as Hashem began the Ten Commandments, with reference to G-d rescuing Israel.

The verse seems to indicate that prior to His coming forth to the Israelites Sinai was His earthly "home base." The description of His also coming forth to them from various locations around Sinai is consistent with such a concept since His presence is not to be thought of as restricted to just one mountain; rather it would have spread through the region, with Mount Sinai the focal point.

When Moses led Jethro's sheep to Sinai it was termed הַר הָאֵלֹקִים ("the Mount of G-d" [Exod. 3:1]). At the burning bush, which was in that location, G-d instructed Moses to remove his shoes because the ground he was standing on was holy (v. 5). He then informed Moses that He was "coming down" to rescue His people from Egypt (v. 8) and that He planned to bring the redeemed people to that very mount where they and Moses would worship Him (v.12). This undoubtedly is a reference to the lawgiving.

Aaron came to meet Moses at הַר הָאֵלֹקִים (4:27). Jethro came to meet Moses, most probably before the lawgiving in accordance with the order of the Torah's narratives,* at הַר הָאֵלֹקִים (18:5). It is most unlikely that it was so called because of the future event that occurred there. Calling it the "Mount of G-d" based on the future event of the lawgiving would prematurely signal a successful conclusion to the continuously tense narrative, contrary to the literary style of the Torah.

When the Israelites departed from that location, G-d "moved" with them, accompanying them to the promised land. At that point Sinai's distinction basically became historical, although it retained its name as the Mount of G-d (see 1 Kings 19:8).

Some scholars claim to have discovered indications of some religious developments, apparently non-pagan, that had been percolating in that region prior to the time of the lawgiving. The name of the Deity associated with that development might also have had some similarity to Y-H-V-H. (See the JPS commentary on Deut. p. 319.)

The inhabitants of that region were apparently nomadic Midianite tribes. Midian, the fourth of Abraham's six sons from Keturah (Gen. 25:2), would thus have preserved some of the monotheistic heritage bequeathed him by the patriarch. Surely the *matanot* (gifts) that Abraham gave his sons from Keturah should not be thought of as merely material grants (v. 6), but endowments of spiritual significance.

Moses married the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, after having lived by him for a period of time and obviously having got to know him well (Exod. 2:21). Surely he ascertained that his father-in-law was not a priest of the pagan world. (This was possibly

signified by his having seven daughters, the pre-Torah number that indicated prominence and perfection.) Moses' contact with Jethro would have been connecting with Abraham's legacy. This might be a case of Abraham's spiritual input contributing to Israel's religious growth in yet another way, not a surprising phenomenon.

G-d's "home base" being at Sinai is consistent with the most likely interpretation of the reference made to Him later in our chapter, that He is שְׁכֵנֵי סֹדָה ("the One who dwells in the bush" [Deut. 33:16]). Undoubtedly, "the bush" alludes to the bush (סֹדָה) at Mount Sinai where Moses experienced his first divine revelation. The term שְׁכֵנֵי סֹדָה is probably related to the name of the mountain, סִינַי. It is noteworthy that שְׁכֵנֵי סֹדָה is at the exact center of the *Berakha's* words (excluding the introductory superscription, through the word וַיֵּאמֶר). Word number 162 from the beginning is שְׁכֵנֵי and word number 162 from the end is סֹדָה, a feature invariably found consequential in biblical poetry.

V. The Rest of the Prologue

The second prologue verse (33:3) begins with acknowledgment of Hashem's love for the nation's tribes (אֶף הַרְבֵּי עַמִּים). (That the plural '*amim* may refer to the tribes within the nation is similar to the usage in Gen. 28:3 and 48:4. '*Amim* may also refer to special individuals, or leaders, as we pointed out in our *Parashat Shofetim Part II* study.) Hashem's love explains His election of Israel, similar to Moses's earlier statement on the subject "from Hashem's love for you" (Deut. 7:8). The next clause asserts that "all His holy ones are in Your hands" (כָּל קֳדָשָׁיו בְּיָדְךָ), meaning they are under His direct care, recalling Moses' statement, "for you are a holy nation to Hashem your G-d" (Deut. 7:6), also stated in the context of election. The shift from third to second person in mid-verse may reflect the intimate bond being described. The third clause, "They are smitten at Your feet" (וְהֵם תָּכּוּ לְרַגְלֶךָ), indicates that they submit to following Him, and finally, they are committed to "carrying" His words (יִשָּׂא מִדְּבָרֶיךָ), characteristics that set the stage for the Lawgiving.

The third prologue verse (33:4) cites the lawgiving: "The teaching Moses instructed us is the heritage of the assembly of Jacob." This pronouncement is stated as emanating from the Israelites. In it they acknowledge that the teaching (the Torah) is an

essential element in the nation's identity. It is thus a statement of their commitment to the covenant.

Now that the bond between Hashem and Israel was established, the final prologue verse asserts that He became king of a righteous Israel (וַיְהִי בְיִשְׂרָאֵל מֶלֶךְ). The nation is here termed *Yeshurun*, a play on *Yisra'el* (Israel), which highlights the stem יָשַׁר ("straight"), the root of both terms. (The וַיִּשְׁמַן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְרָט clause in 32:15 should be translated, "The nation that had been upright grew fat and rebelled.") Our verse continues – and closes the prologue – with the statement that the status of Hashem being king of Israel (with the covenant understood to be established) was celebrated (or ratified) at a united national leadership assembly (בְּהַתְּאֵפֵף רְאִשֵׁי עַם יִחַד שְׁבֹטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). The latter may refer to the original covenant "cutting" or to their current assembly (described in the immediately preceding chapters), at which they had just reaffirmed the covenant.

The blessings of the individual tribes follow. Some see the flow from prologue to blessings proper as, "Hashem, You who came forth from Sinai, etc., bless Reuben, etc." However, it appears that the prologue can stand as an independent unit linked to the epilogue.

6. The Epilogue

The epilogue begins with a pronouncement directed to Jeshurun, proclaiming the incomparability of G-d who "rides the heavens as your help, and in His majesty the skies" (Deut. 33:26). (Imagery depicting G-d traveling through the heavens is common in Tanakh, such as in Psalm 68:5, 34-35 as well as in pre-Torah Near Eastern literature. In Tanakh, G-d's purpose in riding through the heavens is invariably to rescue His servants and/or punish the evildoers.)

In the next verse G-d is described as *me'onah*, Israel's "safe haven" (an extension from the word's basic meaning of "a dwelling place"). He also is its ever-sustaining support, "and from beneath are the everlasting arms," (וּמִתַּחַת זֶרַעַת עוֹלָם), v. 27a). In the continuation of the verse, Moses foresees G-d as "having driven out the enemy before you, having said 'Destroy'" (v. 27b), speaking of these events as having already occurred. At that point, Israel is envisioned as dwelling securely (וַיִּשְׁכֵּן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּטוֹחַ) in an agriculturally productive land "whose heavens drip

dew" (v. 28). The epilogue closes with a declaration of how fortunate and unique Israel is to have such a relationship with Hashem, who is "the shield of your assistance and the sword of your glory" (v. 29).

Besides containing poetic parallels throughout, the epilogue's opening and closing verses possess artistic motifs of correspondence: "There is none like G-d" (v. 26) is coupled with "Fortunate are you, Israel, who is like you?" (v. 29); בְּעֶזְרְךָ ("as your help") and וּבִגְבוּרָתוֹ ("in His majesty" [v. 26]) reappear in another application in עֶזְרְךָ ("of your protection") and גְּאוּנֹתְךָ ("of your triumph" [v. 29]).

The prologue and epilogue blend together. Indeed, the latter can almost be read as a continuation of the former. Five words are common to both and they appear in two chiasm formations. The prologue has "Hashem" (v. 2), "Jacob" (v. 4) and "Jeshurun" (v. 5), while the epilogue has "Jeshurun" (v. 26), "Jacob" (v. 28) and "Hashem" (v. 29). Also, in verse 5 the prologue has 'am followed by "Israel" while the epilogue has those two words in the reverse order in verse 29.

This chapter, which concludes Moses' words and the Torah except for the account of Moses ascending Mount Nebo, parallels Jacob's deathbed prophecies and blessings to his sons, which he spoke just before he passed away. There are several literary correspondences between them.

The epilogue has a parallel of sorts in Psalm 144. That 130-word composition concludes the book of Psalms proper, succeeded only by the eighty-verse unit of Psalms 145–150, which constitutes a coda. Both our epilogue and that psalm speak in a manner appropriate for a conclusion and focus on G-d supporting Israel, providing it material success and security. Both close with similar expressions about how fortunate Israel is to be in its relationship with Him: אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכוּ' here, and אֲשֶׁרֶי הָעַם שָׂכְבָה לוֹ וְכוּ' in Psalm 144:15.

Endnote

* See the section *Before or After the Lawgiving?* in our study *Parashat Yitro Part I: Jethro's Visit*