

# Moshe Rabbenu at Ma'amad Har Sinai: Ascending and Descending the Mountain

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## Ascending and Descending the Mountain

One of the striking features of the account of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* in Shemot 19 is Moshe Rabbenu's recurrent movements up and down the mountain of Sinai, the geographical locus of the divine revelation.

After a long, eventful journey from Egypt, Bnei Yisrael arrive with great anticipation to this climactic destination. The atmosphere of expectation is evident in the united stance among the Israelites when they make their camp opposite the mountain. As Rashi famously declares on Shemot 19:2, "ויחזן שם ישראל - כאיש אחד בלב אחד." Israel encamps there "as one man, with one mind," putting aside their conflicts to join together to await the giving of the Torah. The hub of Moshe's activities in relation to the mountain also demonstrates this leader's great anticipation for the momentous occasion. While the people settle in and rest from their travels, Moshe begins his ascent up the mountain. Having been promised at the scene of the burning bush that he would return to that very site in order to worship Hashem with his redeemed nation (Shemot 3:12), Moshe "had gone up to God (ומשה עלה אל האלקים)" (Shemot 19:3), preparing to receive Hashem's instructions how to proceed to fulfill this divine mission.<sup>10</sup> Responding to Moshe's initiative, Hashem calls to Moshe from the top of the mountain. He delineates the divine Covenant which Moshe is to convey to Bnei Yisrael, outlining the privileges and responsibilities of the "chosen nation," a precious treasure (*am segulah*) among the nations of the world (Shemot 19:4-6).

This first communication between Hashem and Moshe begins a series of discourses, which involve Moshe repeatedly ascending and descending the mountain, the focal point of these exchanges. Instructed with the terms of the Covenant, Moshe descends the mountain to relay them to the people (Shemot 19:7). Upon unanimous acceptance of their commitment to its

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<sup>10</sup> See Ramban, Shemot 19:3, for the presumption that Moshe's ascent "to God" indicates that he had begun his ascent of the mountain in preparation for receiving prophecy. Compare Sforno, Shemot 19:3, who maintains that the "going up" does not refer to physical ascent up the mountain, but to spiritual preparation to receive prophecy. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:10, applies both literal and figurative meanings to Moshe's ascent in this context.

conditions, Moshe ascends the mountain to report their answer to Hashem (vs. 8),<sup>11</sup> at which point he is presented with a subsequent divine directive that communicates Hashem's intent to appear to Moshe "in a thick cloud" (vs. 9). Moshe is also commanded to "go to the people" with the mandate to prepare them for *Matan Torah* (vs. 10), warning them in particular to establish clear boundaries that will distance the people from the mountain, the site of the divine revelation (vs. 11-13). Moshe descends the mountain (vs. 14), reporting his divine communication to the people, and the three day preparation commences (vs. 15).

At the end of this period, the scene at the mountain is transformed, signaling the onset of Hashem's manifestation before the people. While the people are impacted visually with the sights of lightning, a heavy cloud on the mountain, the Divine presence in fire, causing the mountain to shudder and fill with smoke, they are also overwhelmed by voices and sounds—heavenly thunders, the sound of the shofar, and audible exchanges between Hashem and Moshe in the midst of this tumultuous cacophony (vs. 15-19). Anticipating the divine revelation, Moshe had "brought out the people toward Hashem, from the camp," positioning them at the base of the mountain, within their permissible bounds (vs. 17).

The giving of the Torah, however, does not transpire until another occurrence of Moshe ascending and descending the mountain takes place. Hashem had "come down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain," and He now instructs Moshe to ascend in this direction (vs. 20). Moshe receives yet another set of warnings, in which he is implored to "go down" and admonish the people once again about retaining the sacrosanct bounds that separate them from the mountain, where Hashem will openly reveal His presence (vs. 21-24). The episode concludes with the explicit statement that "Moshe descended to the people" (vs. 25), his words to them immediately succeeded by Hashem's communication of the *Asseret ha-Dibrot* (Shemot 19:25, 20:1). While the narrative delineating the preparations for *Ma'amad Har Sinai* had begun with Moshe going up to Hashem, ascending the mountain (Shemot 19:3), it concludes with his movement of descent down the mountain to the people.

## Moshe Rabbenu's Relationship to Hashem & Bnei Yisrael

What is the intent of the dynamism of this narrative episode? Why does this account center on the motif of movement up and down the mountain?<sup>12</sup> It appears that the preparatory activities are orchestrated to convey a two-fold message regarding Moshe's privileged relationship to Hashem and to Bnei Yisrael, while demarcating the limitations of this relationship. The activity of ascending the mountain portrays Moshe as the leader above the people, attaining great spiritual heights, while descending the mountain represents Moshe as being a partner with his people, joining together with them. In this manner, the movement up the mountain, where Hashem manifests His presence, and down the mountain, where the people are situated, designates Moshe as the intermediary who joins heaven to earth, serving as the conduit between

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<sup>11</sup> The assumption that he ascends the mountain to report back to Hashem is noted by Ibn Ezra, long commentary, and Ramban, Shemot 19:8.

<sup>12</sup> This motif of movement in this narrative account is also noted by Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 364.

the Divine and the human.<sup>13</sup> The flurry of activity up and down the mountain sets the stage for Moshe Rabbenu's role as the "prophet-messenger (שליח-נביא),"<sup>14</sup> who will ultimately communicate most of the Torah from Hashem to the people.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, to underscore the exclusivist divine origin of the Torah, Moshe's final movement prior to the giving of the *Asseret ha-Dibrot* must be that of descent. At this juncture, the Torah is received by Moshe together with the people, bounded by the restrictions and limits to which they must adhere. While Moshe's incomparable prophetic stature is confirmed through prerequisite events, Hashem also orchestrates the circumstances of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* to emphasize Moshe's humanity and affirm the singular, superhuman origin of the Torah.

## Confirming Moshe's Prophetic Role

The message of Moshe ascending the mountain, affirming his role as the prophetic messenger and intermediary, is reinforced by a spiritual "ascent" experienced by Bnei Yisrael. In order to confirm Moshe's unsurpassed prophetic stature, Hashem determines that a one-time event must take place in which Bnei Yisrael collectively become a nation of prophets. As Hashem indicates to Moshe in his second ascent up the mountain, He will appear to Moshe in the thickness of a cloud "so that the people may hear when I speak with you and also trust in you forever ( וגם בך ) (יאמינו לעולם)" [Shemot 19:9]. By elevating Bnei Yisrael's spiritual stature, Hashem provides a scenario that establishes both the authenticity of Hashem's words as well as eternally substantiates the belief in the superiority of Moshe's prophecy.

In his commentary on Shemot 19:9, Ramban explicates the importance of this event.

*I, Hashem, come to you in the thickness of a cloud, that you will approach the thick cloud so that the nation will hear My words and they themselves will be prophets when I speak, not that they should believe from the mouths of others . . . and they will also believe in you eternally, for all generations. Therefore, if a prophet arises in their midst or a dreamer of a dream (Deut. 13:2) [who speaks] against your words, they will immediately deny him, for they have already seen with their eyes and heard with their ears that you have reached the highest heights of prophecy.*

אני בא אליך בעב הענן שתגש  
אתה אל הערפל בעבור ישמע העם  
דברי ויהיו הם עצמם נביאים  
בדברי לא שיאמינו מפי אחרים . . .  
וגם בך יאמינו לנצח בכל הדורות .  
ואם יקום בקרבם נביא או חולם  
חלום כנגד דבריך יכחישוהו מיד  
שכבר ראו בעיניהם ושמעו  
באזניהם שהגעת למעלה העליונה  
בנבואה.

All of Israel, by virtue of being raised to the status of prophets, would be witness to Moshe's prophetic experience, that Hashem speaks with him directly. This testimony would erase any doubts among those who might have believed in Moshe only because of his ability to perform

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Fox, *ibid.*, p. 364, who observes that Moshe's movement "serves to bridge the gap, usually great, between heaven and earth." The role of Moshe Rabbenu as the conduit between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael is particularly evident in Moshe's ascent of the mountain to report the people's acceptance of the terms of the Covenant. As Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004), p. 424, notes on Shemot 19:8, observes, while God does not need assistance to learn of the people's answer, this context "stresses Moses's crucial role as intermediary in this episode." See his comments on Shemot 19:21 as well.

<sup>14</sup> See R. Yosef Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikarim*, 1:18, for this designation of Moshe Rabbenu.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ramban, Shemot 20:16; Devarim 5:24, on Moshe's role as communicator of the mitzvot of the Torah.

signs and wonders, which could be attributed to magic and sorcery.<sup>16</sup> It would further establish the inviolability of Moshe's prophetic communications from Hashem, such that any future prophet who aims to eradicate the Torah and its commandments would be deemed a false prophet.<sup>17</sup>

The question arises regarding the exact content of this dialogue between Hashem and Moshe. This issue also hinges on the relationship between Shemot 19:9 and the subsequent context of 19:19, which relates, "Moshe speaks and Hashem answers him with voice ( משה ידבר והאלקים יענו בקול )." Some commentators, such as Rav Saadia Gaon, read this account sequentially and presume that this dialogue takes place prior to *Matan Torah*. Amidst the reverberating noises of the dramatic atmosphere surrounding the mountain, Bnei Yisrael hear the voices of Hashem and Moshe in the communication of the final divine warning not to approach the mountain (Shemot 19:21-24), even though they do not necessarily discern the words themselves.<sup>18</sup> The approach of the Midrash maintains that Shemot 19:19 refers to Moshe's communication of the remaining eight *dibbrot* to the people, assuming Bnei Yisrael only heard the first two declarations directly from Hashem.<sup>19</sup> However, a third alternative, based on R. Yosef Albo's understanding of Maimonides' opinion in *Hilkhos Yesodei Torah* (8:1), claims that Shemot 19:9 refers to Bnei Yisrael hearing Hashem command Moshe in *Devarim* 5:27-28, that they should return to their tents, but Moshe "would remain with Me and I shall speak to you the entire commandment and the decrees and the judgments that you shall teach them . . ." (vs. 28).<sup>20</sup> Perhaps one may speculate that this conversation did not consist of specific warnings or directives to be communicated to the people. This verbal episode aims to authenticate the *nature* of the relationship between Moshe and Hashem, such that direct conversations are a norm between them. Such eyewitness testimony confirms the legitimacy of all future communications that Moshe presents to his nation in the name of Hashem.

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<sup>16</sup> On this point, compare Maimonides, *Hilkhos Yesodei Torah*, 8:1-3, whose approach influences Ramban's analysis in this context. For a discussion of these commentators' approaches to this context, see Yehudah Cooperman, "Ma'amad Har Sinai be-Sifrut ha-Parshanut: Matarat ha-Ma'amad," *Shema'atin*, Vol. 150 (2003): 43-50.

<sup>17</sup> For these insights, see as well Ramban, *Devarim* 4:9, 12-14, 24. Compare Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:63, where he observes that while divine prophecies were communicated to the patriarchs, they primarily addressed "their private affairs . . . in regard to their perfection, their right guidance concerning their actions, and the good tidings for them concerning the position their descendants would attain." [Translation derives from Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Vol. I, p. 154.] However, Moshe serves as a divine messenger with a national mission, first to redeem his people from Egypt and now to deliver the contents of the divine covenant and present the Torah's commandments to the people. His prophetic status must be validated unequivocally because of the national ramifications of his role. In the context of *Guide* 1:63, Maimonides explains Shemot, 3:13-14, as Moshe's request to be provided with demonstrable proofs of God's existence in order to validate his divinely ordained mission.

<sup>18</sup> Saadia Gaon's interpretation is cited in Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 19:9, particularly in his short commentary. For this approach, compare Ramban, *Shemot* 19:19, as well as Shmuel David Luzzatto, *Peirush Shadal al Chamisha Chumshe Torah*, ed. P. Schlesinger (Tel Aviv: Dvir Pub., 1965), on *Shemot* 19:9, 19.

<sup>19</sup> See *Midrash Mechilta, ba-Chodesh, parashah* 4. This approach is upheld by Rashi, *Shemot* 19:19, as well as Ibn Ezra, long commentary on *Shemot* 19:9, 19. Cf. Ramban, *Shemot* 20:7, on this midrashic approach. Compare as well Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:33, who applies this approach.

<sup>20</sup> See Rav Cooperman, "Ma'amad Har Sinai," pp. 48-49, who notes R. Yosef Albo's reading of Maimonides, *Hilkhos Yesodei Torah*, 8:1, in his *Sefer ha-Ikarim*, 1:18.

## “You shall fix boundaries for the people all around” (Shemot 19:12)

Because the divine revelation is an unprecedented event, physical boundaries around Mount Sinai are demarcated. U. Cassuto notes the unusual language of this divine restriction, “ והגבלת ׀ את העם,” you shall bound the *people*, as opposed to a command delineating boundaries around *the mountain* (which is, in fact, how Moshe reiterates its intent in vs. 23). He infers that the boundaries around the physical focal point of the divine revelation send a clear message that limits are also being imposed on the people themselves. Particularly at this moment of direct communication between Hashem and His people, the boundaries between the human and the Divine must be clearly marked and upheld.<sup>21</sup> As Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains,

*The complete separation between the origin of the Law and the people is also to be apparent in actual space. The place from where the people get the Torah is completely, very specifically separated from them, and raised to the realm of the extraterritorial. No man, not even an animal may be on the Mount or even touch it. Should one do so, it must be killed. . . All this to impress the fact of the superhuman origin of the Torah.*

**Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Shemot, 19:10-13<sup>22</sup>**

## Moshe’s Position in Relation to the Mountain at Matan Torah

The limits placed upon the people regarding their relative position around the mountain during the divine revelation raises the question about Moshe’s own situation at the moment that Hashem commands the *Asseret ha-Dibrot*. Should one presume that Moshe was given a privileged position because of his leadership role and lofty prophetic stature? Where is he standing in relation to Bnei Yisrael when Hashem declares, “אנכי ה' אלקיך”?

The answer to this question hinges on how one understands the dialogue between Hashem and Moshe that takes place at the end of Shemot 19.

*Hashem descended on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain and Hashem called Moshe to the top of the mountain, and Moshe went up. Hashem said to Moshe, “Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to Hashem to see, and many of them will perish. Even the Kohanim who approach Hashem must sanctify themselves, lest Hashem burst forth against them.” But Moshe said to Hashem, “The people will not be able to come up to Mount Sinai, for You Yourself warned us, saying, ‘Fix boundaries for the mountain and sanctify it.’” Hashem said to him, “Go down, and you shall come up, you and Aharon with you, but the Kohanim and the people must not break through to go up to Hashem, lest He burst out against them.”*

וירד ה' על הר סיני אל ראש ההר ויקרא ה' למשה אל ראש ההר ויעל משה. ויאמר ה' אל משה רד העד בעם פן יהרסו אל ה' לראות ונפל ממנו רב וגם הכהנים הנגשים אל ה' יתקדשו פן יפרץ בהם ה' ויאמר משה אל ה' לא יוכל העם לעלות אל הר סיני כי אתה העדתה בנו לאמר הגבל את ההר וקדשתו. ויאמר אליו ה' לך רד ועלית אתה ואהרן עמך והכהנים והעם אל יהרסו לעלות אל ה' פן יפרץ במ.

<sup>21</sup> See U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 4th edn. (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1965), p. 158, who notes that this demarcation between the human and divine realms is distinguished from polytheistic beliefs in which the forces of nature are regarded as gods. The Torah teaches that God is above all natural entities, and it is not possible to erase the barrier between God and man.

<sup>22</sup>Rav Hirsch also observes that this is the purpose for the preparations for *Matan Torah* and the three day waiting period. The Torah does not originate from the people; it comes to the people.

Moshe descended to the people and said to them.

**Shemot 19:20-25**

וירד משה אל העם ויאמר אליהם.

שמות יט:כ-כה

This dialogue is perplexing as it consists of a command to reiterate the warning to maintain a distance from the mountain during the revelation. Moshe seems to have been called up only to be told to go down the mountain once again. Nevertheless, he is also commanded that at some point he, together with Aharon, will “go up” the mountain. How does this ascent relate to the command from Hashem to descend the mountain? How should one reconstruct the sequence of events?

According to Yizhak Abarbanel (1437-1508) and Shmuel David Luzzatto (Shadal) (1800-1865), the subsequent ascent was intended to transpire *after* the giving of the Torah, in the context of the covenant ceremony in Shemot 24, when Moshe was to go up the mountain to receive the *Luchot* (Shemot 24:1-2, 12, 18). During the divine revelation, Hashem wanted Moshe to be together with the people, “all of them as one (כולם כאחד),” without difference.<sup>23</sup> Moshe needed to be *equal* to the people during *Matan Torah* in order to highlight the exclusive focus on the divine origin of the Torah.<sup>24</sup>

Explaining the purpose of Hashem’s command to Moshe that he should descend (19:21, 24) and stand with the people when the *Asseret ha-Dibrot* are given, Abarbanel declares:

*Since Hashem wanted to merit Israel by giving them the Torah and mitzvot, He determined, based on His great providence, to give them His Torah in a way that would not leave any doubt in their minds that Moshe Rabbenu from his own intellect and knowledge established it and searched it out and presented it before Bnei Yisrael, saying, that Hashem the king had commanded it to him. Therefore, Hashem did not give the Torah to Moshe through his lofty prophecy, so that he would relate it and present it to Israel, in order that they would not doubt if the Torah was divine or from the work of Moshe. Accordingly, in order to nullify any doubt or concern about this [matter], Hashem, by way of miracle, created a very strong voice, that could be perceived, at the divine revelation, through which all of Israel- men, women, and children- would hear the Asseret ha-Dibrot, the young like the old . . . In order to ensure that Israel would not think that since Moshe is on the mountain at the time of the giving of the Dibrot, the voice is*

לפי שהב"ה כשרצה לזכות את ישראל לתת להם תורה ומצוות היה מעוצם השגחתו עליהם לתת תורתו באופן שלא ישאר אצלם ספק בהיות התורה אלקית ונתנה מן השמים ושלא יעלה על לב אדם שמשה רבינו משכלו ודעתו הכינה גם חקרה ושמה לפני בני ישראל לאמר כי כן צוה לו המלך ה' צבאות. ומפני זה לא נתן את התורה למשה בנבואתו העליונה ושהוא יגידה ויערכה לישראל כדי שלא יספקו בה אם היא האלהית או מפועל משה. ולבטל כל חשש וכל ספק מזה חדש יתברך על דרך הפלא באותו מעמד קול נברא מוחש ועצום מאד שבו ישמעו עשרת הדברות כל ישראל אנשים ונשים וטף כקטון כגדול . . . וכדי שישראל לא יחשבו בהיות משה בהר בשעת הדברות שהקול ההוא היה של משה והוא היה המדבר אתם בהשמעת קולו ולא היה קול

<sup>23</sup> Shadal, Shemot 19:24.

<sup>24</sup> Abarbanel, Shemot 19:23; Shadal, Shemot 19:24. For this approach, see as well the commentary of Sforno, Shemot 19:24, and Rav Hirsch, Shemot 19:20-24. Abarbanel indicates that the different relative positions of the various classes of Bnei Yisrael would only be instituted after *Matan Torah*, at the covenant ceremony in Shemot 24. Therefore, according to Shadal, Shemot 19:24, Moshe’s approach to the thick cloud where Hashem was, in Shemot 20:17, is only in response to the people’s reaction of 20:16. Moshe would not have ascended the mountain at this juncture had the people not begged him to be their intermediary. The ascent described at the end of the dialogue in 19:24 was intended to occur post-*Matan Torah*, with the formal acceptance of the covenant.

that of Moshe and he is the one speaking to them, and it is not Hashem's voice, Hashem wanted that even Moshe should go down to the people and be with them at the time of the hearing of the Dibbrot... "Go down" to stay with the people, as before them, and do not say in your heart, "How can I be equal as one of the people when the Torah is given?"

**Abarbenel Shemot 19:23-24**

אלקים מפני זה רצה הקב"ה שגם משה ירד אל העם ויהיה עמהם בעת שמיעת הדיברות... לך רד לשבת עם העם כלפניהם ואל תאמר בלבבך ואיך אהיה אני שוה לכל אחד מן העם בנתינת התורה.

**אברבנאל, שמות יט:כג-כד**

## The Command to Descend the Mountain and Moshe's Resistance

From this perspective, Hashem's final instruction to Moshe to descend the mountain is a clear indication that there is no differentiation between the prophetic leader and his people at the moment of the giving of the *divine* Torah.<sup>25</sup> This intent may be juxtaposed with Hashem's insistence that the people be warned once again, right before the momentous revelation, to maintain the bounds around the mountain where Hashem will openly reveal His presence. Moshe descends the mountain and goes to the people in order to acknowledge and accept the fact that even *he* has boundaries by which he must abide in his relationship with Hashem.

Based on this reading, one may clarify why Moshe unusually resists the divine command to repeat this warning about boundaries, declaring that the people have already been informed of their limits and there is no necessity to address them again (19:23). Considering the tremendous consequence of this admonition in the context of the unprecedented event that is about to occur, it is baffling why Moshe would retort and question Hashem's judgment to repeat this warning.<sup>26</sup>

However, as Shadal explains, "It appears to me that Moshe wanted to remain on the mountain and therefore he was avoiding descending [the mountain] to warn the nation."<sup>27</sup> Moshe wants to be as close to Hashem as possible when His presence is revealed in a way never before experienced.

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<sup>25</sup> According to Ibn Ezra, however, after Moshe descends the mountain, he is commanded to "go up," that is, to approach closer to the mountain than the rest of Bnei Yisrael, *before* the giving of the *Asseret ha-Dibbrot*. This movement would establish a hierarchical arrangement around the mountain so that different classes of individuals, such as the first born, heads of the tribes, elders, and Aharon and Moshe, stand at the mountain "according to their status (כפי מעלתם)." While the text does not relate Moshe's subsequent ascent prior to *Matan Torah*, it is understood that the events are recorded in a concise form and the reader will infer the complete account. Cf. Ibn Ezra, long commentary, Shemot 19:2; long commentary, 19:17; short commentary, 19:22; and short and long commentary on 19:24. Ibn Ezra also cites Deut. 5:5 as proof that Moshe was closer to the area of the divine revelation than the rest of his nation. For this approach, compare Rashi, Shemot 19:24, based on *Mechilta, ba-Chodesh, parashah 4*, who indicates that there were *mechitzot*, or designated stations, at the mountain, such that Moshe approached closer than the rest of the nation. That Moshe is positioned near the people is highly significant, for this serves to underscore the *divine origin* of the Torah. However, just as all of Israel witnesses Moshe ascending the mountain for the final time prior to *Matan Torah* (Shemot 19:20) in order to emphasize "the greatness of Moshe's stature" (cf. Ibn Ezra, long commentary, Shemot 19:20), similarly, Moshe's privileged status among his people is noted during *Matan Torah*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Rashi, Shemot 19:24, who states that it is prudent to warn someone before an action is performed and again at the moment of the action.

<sup>27</sup> Shadal, Shemot 19:24.

Hashem, however, responds that Moshe will have the privilege to demonstrate his higher status before the people after *Matan Torah* (Shemot 24). But, the giving of the Torah must occur with Moshe only acting in the role of recipient of a divine Torah, equal to that of his nation.<sup>28</sup>

As the Midrash elaborates with an analogy:

*At that moment, Hashem wanted to give them [Bnei Yisrael] the Torah and speak with them, but Moshe was standing. Hashem said: "What shall I do with Moshe?" Said R. Levi: This is compared to a king who wanted to make a royal proclamation without the knowledge of his minister. He said to him, "Do this matter." He answered him, "It has already been done." He responded and said to him, "Go and call this advisor, and he shall come with you." While he was going [on this mission], the king did what he had set out to do.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Hashem wanted to give the Asseret ha-Dibrot, and Moshe was standing by His side. Hashem said, "I am revealing to them the upper heavens and saying, 'I am Hashem your God,' and they will respond: 'Who said this? God or Moshe?'" Therefore, let Moshe go down and then I will say, "I am Hashem your God." Thus, Hashem said to Moshe ... "Go, descend, and you will go up, and Aharon with you." When Moshe went down, God revealed Himself, as it states, "Moshe went down to the people," and immediately, "Hashem spoke..."*

**Shemot Rabbah 28:3**

אותה שעה ביקש הקב"ה ליתן להם את התורה ולדבר עמהם והיה משה עומד. אמר הקב"ה: מה אעשה מפני משה? אמר ר' לוי: משל למלך שביקש לעשות אופימשטאטא חוץ מדעתו של אפרכוס. אמר לו: עשה דבר פלוני. אמר לו: כבר נעשית. שוב אמר לו: לך קרא לפלוני סינקליטקוס ויבוא עמך. עד שהוא הולך עשה המלך מה שביקש. כך ביקש הקב"ה ליתן עשרת הדיברות, היה משה עומד מצדו. אמר הקב"ה: אני גולה להם את הרקיע ואומר, אנוכי ה' אלקיך, הם אומרים: מי אמר, הקב"ה או משה? אלא ירד משה ואחר כך אני אומר: אנוכי ה' אלקיך. כך אמר הקב"ה למשה ... לך רד ועלית אתה ואהרון עמך, עד שמשה יורד נגלה הקב"ה, שנאמר: וירד משה אל העם, מיד: וידבר אלקים.

**שמות רבה כח:ג**

## Moshe Rabbenu at Ma'amad Har Sinai

The directed movements of Moshe Rabbenu up and down the mountain throughout the account of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* in Shemot 19 present us with a distinct understanding of his role during *Matan Torah* and in his subsequent leadership of his nation. The repeated ascents and descents of the mountain establish Moshe as the mediator between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. His ascent up the mountain confirms his absolute prophetic authority as the chosen agent for transmitting the Torah to Bnei Yisrael. But, Moshe's final descent from the mountain at the conclusion of this account, when he rejoins the people, affirms the absolute divine origin of the Torah and Moshe's humanity.

<sup>28</sup> See Shadal's analysis, Shemot 19:24.

<sup>29</sup> Note that this Midrash suggests that the command to summon Aharon is a type of ruse to ensure that Moshe remains with the people at the giving of the Torah. Cf. the commentary of *Matnot Kehunah* on this Midrash, Shemot Rabbah 28:3, who explains, "עשה דבר פלוני-כדי להשיאו לדבר אחר אמר כן שילך לו משם." ("Do this matter": In order to divert his attention to another matter, He said this, so that he would go from there). For a parallel midrashic analysis, cf. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 41