BS”D

Parshas Ki Tisa

*Where did Moshe’s prayer to save the Jewish people really take place, on the mountain or in his tent? And if it was in his tent, why does it say he didn’t eat or drink for 40 days and 40 nights?*

Moshe’s Prayer

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

In the book of Shmos (Exodus), the Torah mentions Moshe spending 40 days and nights on Mt. Sinai twice.

In Parshas Mishpatim, the Torah states that after the utterance of the “Ten Commandments” at Sinai, Moshe went up the mountain and was there for 40 days and 40 nights.

At the end of Parshas Ki Tisa after the Jewish people had been forgiven for the sin of the golden calf, Moshe was told to bring two tablets of stone to Mt. Sinai upon which G-d would write the same words that had been on the first tablets that Moshe had broken. Moshe went up and “was there with G-d for 40 days and 40 nights. He did not eat bread or drink water.”

The Torah does not mention here a middle period of 40 days that took place between the golden calf and the granting of the second tablets.

However, in the retelling of the story of the giving of the Torah and of the golden calf in the book of Devorim (Deuteronomy) the Torah describes how Moshe prayed for the Children of Israel after the golden calf, “I threw myself down before G-d as before for 40 days and 40 nights, I ate no bread and drank no water.” (9:18) Now the Torah does not explicitly say that these middle 40 days took place at Mt. Sinai, but the traditional explanation of the sages is that it did. Thus, Moshe was on Mt. Sinai three times: to receive the Torah and the tablets, to pray on behalf of the Jewish people, and to receive the second set of tablets. We’ll get back to this topic later.

Let’s get back to our Parsha. Moshe has been on the mountain for 40 days and night. He has received “the tablets [which] were G-d’s work, and the writing was G-d’s writing, carved upon the tablets.” (32:16) Moshe is informed that his people have made and worshipped a golden calf. G-d tells Moshe “Let Me be” so that He can destroy the Jewish people. Moshe implores G-d. He says that the Egyptians will say G-d purposely took the Jews out of Egypt in order to slay them. Moshe invokes the merit of the patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov, to whom G-d has promised to increase their children “as the stars of the heaven” and to inherit the Promised Land.

Moshe’s pleas succeed. G-d relents and does not destroy the Jewish people.

The Torah continues with the account of what Moshe did when he descended from the mountain. He shattered the tablets, not considering the Jews worthy of receiving them. He destroyed the golden calf. With the help of his fellow Levites, he punished the worshippers of the calf. He continued to plead for the Jewish people and continued a dialogue with G-d. Finally, G-d consented to write the Ten Commandments again on two tablets and to reveal Himself to Moshe on the highest level capable for a human being to perceive. So Moshe goes back up to the mountain.

Now the Ibn Ezra has a problem with the chronology of events as described here. After dealing with the golden calf, Moshe tells the Jews (32:30), “You have been guilty of a great sin. Now I will go up to G-d. Perhaps I will win atonement for your sins.”

But hasn’t G-d already forgiven them before Moshe came down from the mountain? At that time, after Moshe’s prayer, the Torah tells us, “G-d rescinded the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.” (32:14)

Furthermore, in the book of Devorim, Moshe recounts some of the prayers he said *after* the golden calf, including a paraphrase of the prayer he supposedly said *before* he came down from the mountain (See Devorim 9:26-29).

Also, the Ibn Ezra continues, how can Moshe entreat G-d for the Jewish people before he has destroyed the calf and punished its worshippers?

The Ibn Ezra suggests the following solution: At Sinai, when G-d said, “Let Me be,” He was telling Moshe that Moshe *could* pray and stop the destruction of the Jewish people. But Moshe did not do so immediately. First, he went down, destroyed the golden calf, etc., and told the people that he would plead for them. *Then*, he went to G-d and prayed the prayer as stated in the book of Devorim. In our Parsha, the Torah is merely telescoping the events. G-d said He would destroy the Jewish people. He told Moshe, “Let Me be.” Moshe, after going down and destroying the golden calf, prayed the prayer as recorded in Shmos 32 (11-13). It’s mentioned *here* because its Moshe’s response to G-d’s giving him an opening to pray. But it actually happened during the middle 40 days as clearly stated in the Book of Devorim.

The Ramban deals with these issues differently. He agrees with the Ibn Ezra that Moshe’s prayer (32:11-13) invoking the patriarchs is the same prayer that Moshe recounts in the Book of Devorim. However, the Ramban maintains that Moshe prayed this prayer immediately before descending from Mt. Sinai the first time. Even though one might argue that it would behoove Moshe to first acknowledge the sin of the Jews and ask for forgiveness (as Moshe does later on [32:31] “This People has done a great sin; they made themselves a god of gold…), Moshe could not wait. He was afraid G-d would immediately destroy the Jewish people. He could not wait until he had gone down and destroyed the calf and punished its worshippers as the Ibn Ezra says he did. It might have been too late to save the Jewish people. He had to immediately invoke the merit of the patriarchs and the consequences that the destruction of the Jews would bring: the nations of the world would think G-d took the Jews out of Egypt only so He could kill them.

G-d’s response was that He would not destroy the Jews. However, He had not forgiven them, and they were still totally guilty. At that point, Moshe could go down to achieve that forgiveness. He did so by destroying the calf, punishing the idolaters, and praying to G-d for 40 days as the Book of Devorim tells us.

In the Book of Devorim, Moshe recounts the story, including how he prayed for the Jews for 40 days. He does not reprise all of the prayers he said, just some of them. In those passages, he combines the prayers that he said at Sinai with the prayers that he said afterward.

The chronology of the events that took place between Moshe’s original descent from Sinai and his final ascent to receive the second tablets is complex. It requires a comparison of the details provided in Shmos and in Devorim and a reconciliation of possible contradictions. I will deal with that, please G-d, on another occasion.

Now I would like to go back to where Moshe prayed to G-d during the middle 40 days. In my opinion, the strongest argument for the view that he was on the mountain is from the fact that in Devorim Moshe said he didn’t eat or drink for 40 days. If he was talking to G-d, let’s say, from his tent, why would he not have eaten? Presumably, he did not eat or drink because there was no food on the mountain. Another argument in favor of the 40 days being on the mountain is that in our Parsha (32:30), Moshe says, “I will go up to G-d; perhaps I will gain atonement for your sin.” “Going up” surely means up the mountain.

There is, however, another view quoted by the Ramban (33:7) from *Pirkei d’Rabi Eliezer*. That view states that Moshe was in the *camp* for the middle 40 days and that is where his praying took place (presumably, from the tent that he pitched outside of the camp which he called “the tent of meeting” [See 33:7]). The Chizkuni supports this view (32:11) by saying that how could Moshe go up to the mountain without being called by G-d? (For the final 40-day period, he was, in fact, told to go up on the mountain.)

I’ll conclude with a possible explanation of why Moshe did not eat or drink if he was in, our just outside of, the camp where food was surely available.

Moshe was pleading for the atonement and forgiveness of the Jewish people. G-d had said He would not destroy them, but the idea of the Jewish people living in estrangement from G-d was unimaginable to Moshe. To attain forgiveness, he prayed constantly. Who had time to eat? Besides, how could he eat when the future of the Jewish people was at stake?

We live in a time when the spiritual future of the Jewish people is in great danger. So many Jews are being lost to assimilation and indifference.

None of us is a Moshe. But each one of us can and must do his or her part to save the Jewish people. We can’t save them all like Moshe did. But each individual is like a whole world. Bring back one Jewish man or woman, adult, or child to G-d and to Torah. The need is so desperate. And each one of us who cares can do something. How can we eat , how can we drink, how can we complacently go on with our lives when the spiritual danger is so very, very great?

May we be inspired by our teacher Moshe not to give up on any Jew, not to be concerned only with our personal lives, but rather to care for others, to reach out to others in any way that we can, and to hear from Hashem the words (33:14): “My presence will go [with you.]”