

Back to Mt. Sinai

by [Petr Chylek](#) (April 2025)



The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt (Francis Danby, 1825)

Most Christians and Jews regard the event at Mt. Sinai, when the Torah was given to the Jewish people, as a great gift. According to the story, the Hebrews reached Mt. Sinai just fifty days after leaving slavery in Egypt. They obviously had not yet reached a high spiritual level. They needed another almost forty years to let the old state of mind die and a new generation to enter the Holy Land.

So what happened at Mt Sinai? Moses went up to the mountain and talked to God. Then he came down and told people what God said. The entire people responded:

Everything that God has spoken, we shall do. –Exodus 19:9

Moses returned to the mountain and related people's words to God. After descending, he revealed to people God's instructions and the Ten Commandments followed. –Exodus 20:3-14

Did people hear the Ten Commandments from the mouth of Moses or directly from God? We do not know. Nobody knows. The Torah is not clear. Even Jewish sages cannot agree. Maimonides (1138-1204) said that people heard the sound of the first two commandments from God, but they heard only the sound, not individual words, and Moses had to explain what the words were. The remaining eight commandments they heard from Moses. Nachmanides (1194-1270), who often disputed the words of Maimonides, disagreed. He stated [\[1\]](#) that people heard all ten commandments directly from God. Each of them (Maimonides and Nachmanides) expressed his own opinion supported by different statements of Torah.

After hearing the Ten Commandments, people declared to Moses:

You speak to us, and we shall hear. Let God not speak to us lest we die. –Exodus 20:16

I consider this sentence to be one of the most important parts of the conversation. Unfortunately, most commentators do not pay attention.

God came especially to talk to the Hebrew people. Now, they were not interested in listening to him. Let God talk to Moses, and let Moses talk to us, and we will listen. People do

not want to listen directly to God. From now on, according to the Old Testament, God talked only to Moses, and Moses told the people what God said. From now on till the end of the five books of Moses, this is how God communicated to the Hebrew people. Is there a difference between listening to God directly and listening to Moses, His Messenger?

The Rabbis who wrote the Zohar[\[2\]](#) tell us that those who listen to the interpreter become *servants of God*, while those who listen directly become *children of God*. The Zohar continues to explain the difference between a servant and a child of a King, saying that the servant can enter the master's quarters when allowed to do it, while a child can enter whenever he/she wants. We must remember that a good servant is better than a disobedient son. Also, in Hebrew, the word *EVED* means both a servant and a slave.

He (Moses) took the Book of Covenant and read it in earshot of people, and they said, "Everything that God has spoken, we will do, and we will obey!". –Exodus 24:7

What is the Book of Covenant? There is no book of this name in the Torah. Rashi (1040-1105), the commentator most Jews cite, said that the Book of Covenant represents the whole Torah from the beginning to this point[\[3\]](#). However, it is unlikely that Moses would have read the Torah to people up to this point. The other two famous commentators, Nachmanides and Bachya (1255-1340), conveniently omit to comment [1, [4](#)] on Exodus 24:7.

Is the Book of Covenant referencing the first covenant God made with the people of the earth? After the flood, God said to Noah:

And I will confirm My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by waters of the flood and never again there shall be a flood to destroy the earth. –Exodus 9:11

Or is this a reference to the next covenant God made with Abraham:

Walk before me and be perfect ... As for Me ... to be God to you and to your offsprings after you; and I will give to you and to your offsprings after you—the whole land of Canaan—as an everlasting possession; and I shall be a God to them. –Exodus 17:1-8

After many years and centuries of discrimination and persecution, the leaders and writers of Jews needed to encourage the Jewish spirit to survive in the hostile world. Therefore, they selected a part of the statement of Exodus 24:7, “*We will do, and we will hear!*” (or, we will obey), as a celebrated phrase distinguishing Hebrew people from the rest of the world. They promised they would do it even before the hearing what it was that they were supposed to do.

However, in my opinion, the most important statement of the above discussion is, “*You (Moses) speak to us, and we shall hear. Let God not speak to us lest we die.*” People did not want to hear from God directly; they wanted to hear only from the interpreter, which was later very convenient for priests and rabbis. Rabbinic Judaism taught that the prophesy ended with the last prophet, and now the Rabbis were the source of all wisdom. There were, however, Jewish philosophers and mystics who believed that direct communication between people and God was still possible.

In his classification of degrees of prophecy,[\[5\]](#) Moses Maimonides mentioned the *Rauch Ha Kodesh* (Divine Inspiration), which he considered a low degree of prophecy. This Divine Inspiration was available to people to a higher or lower degree depending on their spiritual level.

Moses Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1747) writes[\[6\]](#)

In this manner, called the Divine Inspiration (Ruach HaKodesh), one can gain knowledge of things otherwise accessible to human reason ... On the other hand, one can also gain information that could not be otherwise gained through natural means.

Both Maimonides and Luzzatto caused great controversy in Jewish communities of their time. One reason was that they believed that an individual could develop direct communication with the Divine without the help of an intermediary.

[\[1\]](#) R. Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, translated by C. Chavel, Shilo Publishing House, Brooklyn, NY 1973.

[\[2\]](#) Y. Ashlag, *The Zohar by Shimon bar Yochai*, Kabbalah Centre International, New York, NY, and Los Angeles, CA 2003.

[\[3\]](#) Rashi, *Commentary on the Torah*, Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn, NY 2008.

[\[4\]](#) Bachya ben Asher, *Torah Commentary*, Translated by Eliyahu Munk, Lambda Publishers, Brooklyn, New York 2003.

[\[5\]](#) Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Translated by M. Friedlander, Dover Edition, Mineola, NY.

[\[6\]](#) Moses Chaim Luzzatto, *The Way of God*, Translated by A. Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers, New York and Jerusalem 1997.

[Table of Contents](#)

Petr Chylek is a theoretical physicist. He was a professor at several US and Canadian Universities. He is the author of over 150 publications in scientific journals. He thanks Lily A. Chylek for her comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)