

- 10 *And God said to Moshe: Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow and have them wash their garments.* י וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל־הָעָם וְקַדְּשֵׁתָם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֹתָם:
- 11 *Let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day God will descend before the eyes of all the people upon Mount Sinai.* יא וְהָיוּ נְכֻנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי אֵבְרֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד יְהוָה לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעָם עַל־הַר סִינַי:
- 12 *Set a boundary around the people and say to them: Be careful not to ascend the mountain or even to touch a part of it! Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.* יב וְהִנְבַּלְתָּ אֶת־הָעָם סָבִיב לְאַמֹּר הַשְּׁמָרוּ לְכֶם עֲלֹת בְּהָר וּנְגַע בְּקַצֵּהוּ כָל־הַנִּגַּע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת:
- 13 *Let no hand touch it! For he shall be stoned to death, or only thrown down, whether it be beast or man, it shall not live. When the horn of dismissal will sound a long, drawn-out blast, they may ascend the mountain again.* יג לֹא־תִגַּע בּוֹ יָד כִּי־סָקוֹל יִסָּקֵל אִו־יָרֶה יִרְהַ אִם־בְּהֵמָה אִם־אִישׁ לֹא יִחִיָּה בְּמִשְׁעוֹ הַיִּזְלַל הַמָּה יַעֲלוּ בְּהָר:

a repetition of those words. By repeating those words, Moshe wanted to indicate that the people had already unanimously declared themselves completely ready to carry out all that God would command them, and thereby had also proclaimed their unreserved trust in Moshe as the bearer of these commands. Moshe therefore felt that perhaps such an overwhelming display [i.e., God coming in a cloud to speak with Moshe so that the people might hear] was not needed to substantiate and ensure their trust in him. Hence, ויגד — from the root נגד — which we have presumed to render literally here: Moshe offered a counterargument.

- 10–13 Precisely this mistaken confidence of Moshe himself, who thought that the people had already attained the required level of spiritual and moral

maturity, greatly clarifies the meaning of, and necessity for, the preparations and restrictions that now follow. For if we understand them correctly, their purpose was to make the people realize, and to establish for all time, the vast gulf that separated the spiritual and moral level of the people at that time from the height to which they would ascend and be educated, in the course of hundreds and thousands of years, through the Torah, which they were now about to receive.

Closely related to the foregoing is a second purpose: to establish historically for future generations that God, as it were, remained in His place, opposite the people, and that His Word came *to* the people; God was not inside them or in their midst, and His voice did not emerge from within the people.

Jewish Law is the *only* system of laws that did *not* emanate from the people whose constitution it was intended to be. Judaism is the *only* “religion” that did *not* spring from the hearts of the people who find in it the spiritual basis for their lives. It is precisely this “objective” quality of Jewish Law and of the Jewish “religion” that makes them both unique, setting them apart clearly and distinctly from all else on earth that goes by the name of law or religion. This quality makes Jewish Law the sole factor in human culture that can be considered the catalyst and ultimate goal of every other manifestation of progress, whereas the Law itself, as the given absolute ideal, remains above and beyond any idea of progress.

All other “religions” and codes of law originate in the human minds of a given era; they merely express the conceptions of God, of human destiny, and of man’s relation to God and to his fellow man, that are held by a given society in a particular period of history. Hence, all these man-made religions and codes, like all other aspects of human civilization — science, art, morals and manners — are subject to change with the passing of time. For by their very nature and origin they are nothing but the expressions of levels reached by civilization at various stages in human development.

Not so the Jewish “religion” and Jewish Law. They do *not* stem from beliefs held by human beings at one period or another. They do not contain time-bound human concepts of God and of things human and Divine. They are God-given; through them men are told by God’s Will what their conceptions should be, for all time, about God and things Divine and, above all, about man and human affairs.

From the very outset, God's Torah stood in opposition to the people in whose midst it was to make its first appearance on earth. It was to prove its power first of all upon this people, who opposed it because they were an עם קשה ערף. *This resistance which the Torah encountered among the people in whose midst it obtained its first home on earth is the most convincing proof of the Torah's Divine origin.* The Torah did not arise from **within the people**, but was given **to** the people, and only after centuries of struggle did the Torah win the people's hearts, so that they became its bearers through the ages. (On the uniqueness of Judaism and its relation to religion, see *Collected Writings*, vol. I, pp. 183–186; Commentary above, 6:7.)

The purpose of all these preparations and restrictions is apparently to emphasize and mark this contrast as clearly as possible, at the Torah's first entrance into the world — a contrast that so fundamentally characterizes the Torah's nature and origin. The Torah is about to come **to** the people. Its arrival is to be anticipated over a period of three days. In order to be worthy of even awaiting the Torah, the people must first sanctify their bodies and their garments; that is, they must become worthy of receiving the Torah by becoming aware, symbolically, of the rebirth — the renewal of their lives, within and without — that the Torah is to bring about. In their present state, they are not yet ready to receive the Torah. Only their resolve to ultimately become what they should be will make them worthy of receiving the Torah.

The distinction between the people about to receive the Torah, and the Source from which they are to receive it, is underscored also in terms of physical separation. The place from which the people are to receive the Torah is very clearly set apart from them. It is elevated into the realm of the extraterrestrial. No man or animal may set foot upon that place, or even touch it. Any living thing that sets foot upon it must be put to death. Only when the Lawgiving has been completed will the place be restored to the terrestrial sphere, and both man and beast will be free once more to walk upon it. Until that time, the people are to be restricted by a boundary all around, beyond which they must not go. All this is done in order to illustrate *the fact of the Torah's superhuman, extraterrestrial origin.*

לֹא תִגַּע בּוֹ וְגו'. refers to the mountain.

אוּ יִרֶה יִירֶה. The object of the verb יִירֶה in the *kal* is always the thing that is cast, not the person at whom something is cast. When the ref-

- 14 *Moshe went down from the mountain to the people. He sanctified the people and they washed their garments.* יד וַיֵּרַד מֹשֶׁה מִן־הָהָר אֶל־הָעָם וַיְקַדְּשׁ אֶת־הָעָם וַיִּכְבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֹתָם:
- 15 *And he said to the people: Keep yourselves in readiness for three days; do not come near a woman.* מִן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָעָם הָיוּ נְכֻנִים לְשִׁלְשֶׁת יָמִים אֶל־תִּגְשׁוּ אֶל־אִשָּׁה:
- 16 *And it came to pass on the third* מִן וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהֵיטֵל הַפֶּקֶד

erence is to a person at whom something is cast, the preposition ל- is added, as in: לִירוּחַ וּגוֹי לְיִשְׂרָאֵל (Tehillim 11:2).

In our verse as well, ירה does not denote being shot with arrows, but being pushed off a height (דחייה), the first and essential act of סקילה (stoning). His penalty is the same as that of the מגדף and the עובד עבודה זרה. They, too, are put to death by דחייה, and only if this fall is not fatal is the execution completed by סקילה (see *Sanhedrin* 45a-b).

יבל means “to bring home”; thus יבול, the produce of the fields, which is brought home (likewise, תבואה derives from בוא), and thus יובל, the year of homecoming. Thus also the יובל, the horn that is sounded to give the signal of homecoming and release. So, too, in the case of the procession encircling Yericho, שופרות היובליים were blown (*Yehoshua* 6). For these were not warlike blasts; Yericho was *not* to be conquered by Israel’s sword. Rather, they were a signal to the city walls to release the city and to restore it to those who had now become its lawful owners.

In our verse, too, יבל is the “home-calling” signal, signalling the people’s release — i.e., the conclusion of the Lawgiving.

- 16–19 The people saw all of nature trembling at the approach of God’s glory; they alone, man alone, were to stand upright — ויחיצבו — in the Presence of God, Master of the universe. The people learned that when man enters the service of God with full knowledge and awareness, he ascends to an exalted level that is without parallel in the world, and his status before God is one of direct intimacy. Heaven and earth, the world and