# Parashat Yitro: Seeing is Believing?

**Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York**[1]

| **Shemot 19:9** | |
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| וַיֹּ֨אמֶר יְהוָ֜ה אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֗ה הִנֵּ֨ה אָנֹכִ֜י בָּ֣א אֵלֶ֠יךָ֠ בְּעַ֣ב הֶעָנָ֗ן בַּעֲב֞וּר יִשְׁמַ֤ע הָעָם֙ בְּדַבְּרִ֣י עִמָּ֔ךְ וְגַם־בְּךָ֖ יַאֲמִ֣ינוּ לְעוֹלָ֑ם וַיַּגֵּ֥ד מֹשֶׁ֛ה אֶת־דִּבְרֵ֥י הָעָ֖ם אֶל־יְהוָֽה׃ | And God said to Moses, “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.” Then Moses reported the people’s words to GOD, |

1. **Proof Necessary**

| **Rashi on Shemot 19:9** | |
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| **את דברי העם וגו'.** תְּשׁוּבָה עַל דָּבָר זֶה; שָׁמַעְתִּי מֵהֶם שֶׁרְצוֹנָם לִשְׁמֹעַ מִמְּךָ, אֵינוֹ דּוֹמֶה הַשּׁוֹמֵעַ מִפִּי שָׁלִיחַ לַשּׁוֹמֵעַ מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ, רְצוֹנֵנוּ לִרְאוֹת אֶת מַלְכֵּנוּ (מכילתא): | **The words of the people**— He said to God: “I have heard from them a reply to this statement — that their desire is to hear the commandments from You and not from me. One who hears from the mouth of a messenger is not the same (in the same position) as one who hears directly from the mouth of the King himself. It is our wish to see our King (cf. Mekhilta). |

| **Ibn Ezra on Shemot 19:9** | |
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| וישראל היו במצרים והיו בהם אנשים על דעת האמונה הזאת. והיתה נבואת משה בספק... | Now the Israelites were in Egypt. There were among them people who followed this belief [that it is impossible for God to talk to a person and for that person to live]. They doubted Moses’ prophecy. |

| **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah 8:1** | |
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| וּמִנַּיִן שֶׁמַּעֲמַד הַר סִינַי לְבַדּוֹ הִיא הָרְאָיָה לִנְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁהִיא אֱמֶת שֶׁאֵין בּוֹ דֹּפִי שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שמות יט ט) "הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעַב הֶעָנָן בַּעֲבוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְּרִי עִמָּךְ וְגַם בְּךָ יַאֲמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם". מִכְלַל שֶׁקֹּדֶם דָּבָר זֶה לֹא הֶאֱמִינוּ בּוֹ נֶאֱמָנוּת שֶׁהִיא עוֹמֶדֶת לְעוֹלָם אֶלָּא נֶאֱמָנוּת שֶׁיֵּשׁ אַחֲרֶיהָ הִרְהוּר וּמַחֲשָׁבָה: | How is it known that the [revelation] at Mount Sinai alone is proof of the truth of Moses' prophecy that leaves no shortcoming? [Exodus 19:9] states: "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will hear Me speaking to you, [so that] they will believe in you forever." It appears that before this happened, they did not believe in him with a faith that would last forever, but rather with a faith that allowed for suspicions and doubts. |

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

**2. No Proof Necessary**

| **Ramban on Shemot 19:9** | |
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| **...**כִּי זֶרַע אַבְרָהָם לֹא יִסְתַּפְקוּ בַּנְּבוּאָה, כִּי הֶאֱמִינוּ בָּהּ מֵאֲבוֹתָם. וּכְבָר אָמַר עוֹד "וַיַּאֲמֶן הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ" (שמות ד':ל"א), "וַיַּאֲמִינוּ בַּה' וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ" (שמות י"ד:ל"א), וְאִם לֹא אָמַר שֶׁם כָּל הָעָם וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל, אַף כָּאן לֹא נֶאֱמַר בַּעֲבוּר יִשְׁמַע כָּל הָעָם: וְהַנָּכוֹן בְּעֵינַי שֶׁאָמַר, אֲנִי **בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעַב הֶעָנָן**, שֶׁתִּגַּשׁ אַתָּה אֶל הָעֲרָפֶל בַּעֲבוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם דְּבָרַי, וְיִהְיוּ הֵם עַצְמָם נְבִיאִים בִּדְבָרַי, לֹא שֶׁיַּאֲמִינוּ מִפִּי אֲחֵרִים... | …The children of Abraham never doubted prophecy, as they had always believed in it since the time of their forefathers. Scripture already has stated so: *And the people believed, and they heard that the Eternal hath remembered the children of Israel; and they believed in the Eternal, and in His servant Moses*. Even though it does not say there, “and all the people [believed]” or “all Israel believed,” neither does it say here “that ‘all the people’ may hear.” The correct interpretation appears to me to be that God said to Moses: “*I come to thee in a thick cloud*, so that you should draw near *to the thick darkness in order that the people may hear when I speak*. They themselves will be prophets when I speak, not [necessitating] that it should be confirmed to them through others…” |

| **Or Ha-Hayyim on Shemot 19:9** | |
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| **ונראה** לומר כי האמונה שהאמינו ישראל במשה היתה שהוא עבד ה' וה' חפץ בו ועושה תפלתו ורצונו אך לא האמינו שהיה ה' מדבר עמו, כי יש סברא מחכמי אומות שמוכיחים בהרבה הוכחות כפי פילוסופיותם כי מן האי אפשריות שידבר ה' עם אדם וחי, ואלה יצדיקו כי ה' ישמע ויענה ויאהב לחביביו ויעשה רצונם, ולצד שיש סברא זו בעולם נוכל לומר כי הגם שהאמינו ישראל במשה עבדו פירוש שהוא עבד ה' וישמע ה' תפלתו ויעשה חפצו ורצונו אבל לא מפני זה יצדיקו כי ידבר ה', וישנה עדיין לחששת פילוסופי האומות, לזה אמר ה' אליו **בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך** ובזה יצדיקו כי ידבר ה' עם האדם וחי. | I believe that initially the Israelites believed that Moses was a true **servant** of the Lord who enjoyed God's ear, that God would respond favorably to Moses' prayers, etc. They did not believe that God actually spoke to Moses. They believed the theories of the philosophers that it is impossible for God to speak with man and for man to remain alive. The same philosophers admitted however, that man can speak to God and that He listens to man and responds positively. Inasmuch as this was a widespread belief, we may say that though the Israelites believed that Moses was a true servant of God, i.e., one to whose prayers God would respond and carry out his wishes, this did not mean that they also believed that God spoke to Moses. The suspicion still lurked in the back of the minds of the Israelites that God did not **speak** to Moses. This is why God now wanted to erase this suspicion from their minds by making them witnesses when He spoke to him. The people would then realize that it was possible for God to speak to man without man having to die. |

**3. Seeing is Believing? Or Believing is Seeing?**

| **Mary Oliver, “The World I Live In”** | |
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| I have refused to live<br>locked in the orderly house of<br>reasons and proofs.<br>The world I live in and believe in<br>is wider than that. And anyway,<br>what's wrong with Maybe? | You wouldn't believe what once or<br>twice I have seen. I'll just<br>tell you this:<br>only if there are angels in your head will<br>you ever, possibly, see one. |

**Big Question: What is at stake when commentaries debate whether the Israelites required proof of God independent of Moses?**