A Wedding at Mount Sinai

About 3500 years ago, the people of Israel, in the Sinai Desert, experienced the most important event in human history: a formal alliance – a covenant, a Berit–between the Hebrew nation and HaShem. This covenant is unique in the history of humanity and defines Judaism: it is not a religion. It is an Eternal Covenant between God and Israel.

On the festival of Shavuot we remember this covenant, which in Hebrew is usually called Maamad Har Sinai: the event and the pact that took place at Mount Sinai. This event is described in detail in chapters 19, 20, and 24 of the book of Shemot (Exodus) .

The best way to understand the development of this alliance is to see it the way our prophets and poets saw it through the centuries: a "wedding" between HaShem and Am Israel. A marriage born of mutual love and established through a commitment of fidelity and loyalty.

And like every wedding, it had three stages: the proposal, the engagement, and the wedding itself.

 THE PROPOSAL (1st of Sivan)

On the first day of the month of Sivan, Moshe ascended Mount Sinai and received this divine message (Shemot 19:3-6):

"This is what you shall say to the house of Yaaqob and speak thus to the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now, if you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My most precious possession – segula – among all the nations… and you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

This was the proposal. HaShem "asked for Israel's hand": "Will

you be My special people? Will you accept becoming a kingdom of priests – Cohanim – dedicated to serving Me, to learning and teaching My laws, and to bearing witness to My existence?"

Being a Nation of Priests brings the privilege of closeness to HaShem. But that right also demands a very high level of morality and a much greater number of obligations and precepts. It is the principle of "Noblesse oblige."

When Moshe presented the terms of this covenant to the people, they answered with one voice with the first "yes" (Shemot 19:8): "Everything that HaShem has said, we will do" – naase.

But, just like in a marriage engagement, this "yes" was not yet the formal wedding. It was the acceptance of the proposal, the willingness to enter the covenant. In the following days, Am Israel prepared themselves – like a bride and groom preparing for the great day.

□□ THE PREPARATIONS (Mikve)

When Israel expressed its willingness, HaShem announced that He would reveal Himself to the entire nation in three days, on Shabuot. God told Moshe (Shemot 19:10-11):

"Consecrate the people today and tomorrow. Let them purify themselves, wash their clothes, and prepare for the third day, for on that day I will descend upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people."

According to our Sages, the purification and washing of clothes refers to immersion in a mikve or ritual bath – the same thing a bride does before her wedding. Bene Israel purified themselves during those three days (the 3rd, 4th, and 5th of Sivan) and were ready for the following day.

□ THE ENGAGEMENT (the night of the 6th of Sivan)

On the night of the 6th of Sivan, the ceremony moved to its most formal stage: HaShem pronounced the Ten Commandments, the

first terms of the Covenant. This was the only time in history that HaShem revealed Himself to an entire nation. God spoke directly, without Moshe's mediation, the first two commandments.

The Torah tells us that the people could not physically tolerate the impact of the Divine Revelation. HaShem does not speak with a voice produced by vocal cords; the divine voice and its effect are indescribable. The Torah expressed this unique experience with a singular phrase: "And the people saw the words." They saw the words – probably in their minds, telepathically – as HaShem spoke to them.

The Sages explain that the experience was so intense that it became part of Jewish genetic memory, shaped our character, and strengthened our belief in HaShem: at that moment we became witnesses to the existence of God (atem edai). No other people ever experienced this revelation.

After the second commandment, the people asked Moshe to mediate and receive the rest of the Mitzvot. That same night, after hearing all the precepts (Shemot 21-23, the Mishpatim), the people declared for the second time their willingness to enter into a covenant with God (Shemot 24:3):

"Moshe conveyed to the people all the words of HaShem and all the laws. And the people answered with one voice: Everything that HaShem said, we will do" – naase.

This was the formal engagement. Moshe stayed awake all night and wrote what HaShem had transmitted to him in a document that the Torah calls, suggestively, Sefer haBerit – the Book of the Covenant. It is the Ketuba of this wedding.

□□ THE WEDDING (the morning of the 6th of Sivan)

At dawn on the 6th of Sivan, Moshe built an altar—representing the Divine Presence—and twelve pillars, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent the young men to offer

sacrifices, took the blood, and divided it in two: one half in basins beside the pillars and the other half on the altar.

This is how the Torah describes the ceremony (Shemot 24:7):

“Then Moshe took the Sefer haBerit, the Book of the Covenant that included the Ten Commandments and the basic laws of the Mishpatim, and read it in the ears of the people. And the people declared: Everything that HaShem has said, we will do and we will obey.”

The most famous words in all of Jewish history are these: naase venishma – □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□. They mean: “We accept to do everything we have heard until now, and we will also obey all the precepts that HaShem will command us in the future (613 precepts).” This was the definitive “Yes, I do.”

Then Moshe took the blood and sprinkled it on the altar – which represents HaShem’s Presence–and on the pillars that represent the people, saying (Shemot 24:8):

“This is the blood of the covenant that HaShem has made with you, based on all these words.”

With this formal ceremony, our Eternal Covenant with HaShem was sealed.

HaShem adopted us as His people: He supervises us directly, does not allow Israel to disappear, and will never abandon us or cancel this alliance. Israel, for its part, accepted to be governed by the Divine Law, the Torah, becoming a Nation of Priests.

From that moment on, we became the chosen people – as if married to HaShem – and committed ourselves, forever, to be loyal to God and to obey the Torah, which from that day we adopted as the Constitution of our nation.

Thanks to this Covenant, a Jew has the possibility of maintaining a permanent “conversation” with God without

intermediaries: he listens to God when he studies Torah, and speaks to Him directly – in the second person singular, atta – when he prays.