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Walking Through Smoke

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1.

SMOKE AND CLOUD

At the end of our *parshah*, on the words,¹ “in the midst of the *anan*,”² Rashi explains: “This *anan* is a kind of *ashan*...” (The continuation of Rashi’s remarks will be quoted below in Section 2).

This is difficult:

Generally, *anan* is translated as “cloud,” and *ashan* means “smoke.” These are two different things. In fact, they are opposites: Clouds come from moisture, and smoke is produced by fire. Thus: (a) How does Rashi know that *anan*, here, is to be rendered differently than its usual translation? Additionally, (b) what difficulty in *pshat*³ compels Rashi to interpret this word at all?

2.

A PATH

Rashi continues, “Inside of it, the Holy One made a path for Moshe.”

This interpretation originates in the *Gemara*,⁴ where it is cited to solve two paradoxical verses:

It says,⁵ “Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud rested upon it,” and it says {elsewhere}:⁶ “Moshe came in the midst of the cloud.” ... In the academy of Rabbi Yishmael, it was taught: Here it says, “{Moshe came} in the midst,” and it says

¹ {*Shemos* 24:18.}

² {This verse describes Moshe on Mount Sinai. See Rashi on *Shemos* 24:16, where two opinions are cited as to when this took place. See Section 3 below for an analysis of these opinions.}

³ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” When the plain meaning is understood clearly, Rashi does not comment. Though there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

⁴ *Yoma* 4b.

⁵ *Shemos* 40:35.

⁶ {*Shemos* 24:18.}

earlier, “in the midst” — “and the children of Israel came in the midst of the sea.”⁷ Just as earlier, there was a path {in the midst of the sea}, as it says, “and the water was a wall for them,”⁸ so too here, there was a path {in the midst of the cloud}.

We cannot say that the intent of Rashi’s commentary is also to resolve this paradox because the paradox surfaces only **later**, in the verse, “Moshe was not able to enter...” (in *parshas Pekudei*). Rashi should resolve the difficulty {in his commentary on *parshas Pekudei*} when it appears.

Therefore, we must conclude that the reason Rashi is compelled to clarify how Moshe could enter the cloud (“Inside of it, the Holy One made a path for Moshe”) is not because **later** the verse says, “Moshe could not enter... because the cloud rested upon it.” Rather, it is because the verse **here** indicates that Moshe could not enter. This is perplexing:

Earlier in his commentary, Rashi explains that the clause “Moshe approached the *arafel*”⁹ means, “**within** three partitions — darkness, cloud, and *arafel*.” In other words, Moshe not only passed through darkness and cloud, but he also passed through *arafel*, which (as Rashi explains there) refers to “the **thickness** of the cloud.” But even so, Rashi does not clarify how Moshe could pass through these substances.

This indicates that at the outset, the novice student of Scripture¹⁰ would have no difficulty understanding how Moshe could pass through the cloud — as the fact is people can walk through clouds even without a path. Why, then, does Rashi need to address this issue in our verse?

⁷ *Shemos* 14:22.

⁸ {*Shemos* 14:22.}

⁹ *Shemos* 20:18.

¹⁰ {“*Ben chamesh lemikra*,” in the Hebrew original, meaning, “a five-year-old beginning to study Scripture.” This is a term borrowed from *Pirkei Avos*, which teaches that the appropriate age for a child to begin studying *Chumash* is at the age of five. Rashi wrote his commentary on *Chumash* to solve problems that a 5-year-old student would encounter in understanding the simple meaning of a verse.}

3.

A NEEDLESS REPETITION

The explanation: There is a difficulty with the *pshat* of our verse. The Torah **previously** said:¹¹ “The cloud covered the mountain.” Thus, it is obvious that when Moshe “ascended the mountain,”¹² he entered the cloud. Why, then, does the verse need to preface and specify that “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*”?¹³

[We can explain why the Torah repeats that he “ascended the mountain,” (after it already said,¹⁴ “Moshe ascended the mountain, and the cloud covered...”) according to both the opinions that **Rashi** quotes in a previous verse:¹⁵ According to the first opinion — since “Moshe came... and he ascended,” describes events that occurred on the day of *Matan Torah*,¹⁶ the Torah needed to repeat this, since in the interim, the Torah went back to discuss something that occurred **before** *Matan Torah* (“the cloud covered... six days” (from Rosh Chodesh) “He called... on the seventh day...”)¹⁷ And certainly, there is no redundancy according to the second opinion that the two times it says, “וַיַּעֲלֶה, he ascended,” are **not** referring to the same event. The first refers to Moshe’s ascent up the mountain **immediately** after *Matan Torah*, and the verse, “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*, and he ascended the mountain” occurred on the **seventh** day, **after** *Matan Torah*.]

This suggests that with the phrase, “in the midst of the *anan*,” the verse seeks to teach us that the cloud mentioned here is **not** the same cloud as the one mentioned in the previous verses. This raises a question: What was **this** cloud? Rashi answers: “**This** (meaning, the one in this verse) *anan* is a kind of *ashan* {smoke}...”

¹¹ *Shemos* 24:15.

¹² {*Shemos* 24:18.}

¹³ {*Shemos* 24:18.}

¹⁴ {*Shemos* 24:15.}

¹⁵ {Rashi on *Shemos* 24:16.}

¹⁶ {Lit., “the Giving of the Torah,” the day on which the Jewish people heard the Ten Commandments at Sinai.}

¹⁷ {*Shemos* 24:16.}

Rashi does not need to define the “*anan*” mentioned in the previous verses or sections, as the meaning of this word is obvious. It was an actual **cloud**, which contained Hashem’s Glory. Similar to the pillar of cloud,¹⁸ “**Hashem** went before them in a pillar of cloud by day” (“and in a pillar of fire by night”) — an actual cloud.

This is in contrast to the *anan* in our verse. We must presume, as discussed above, that this cloud was of a different sort. Rashi, therefore, needs to clarify: “(This *anan*) **is a kind of *ashan*** {smoke}...”

4.

WHERE THERE’S SMOKE, THERE’S FIRE

Rashi’s proof that “**this *anan*** is a kind of smoke,” is derived from the verses themselves:

Between the verse “He called to Moshe,”¹⁹ and the verse, “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*,” the Torah adds:²⁰ “The Glory of Hashem appeared as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain.” This is difficult: The Torah should have placed the verse, “The Glory of Hashem appeared as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain,” before the verse, “He called to Moshe,” in continuation of the previous verse “Hashem’s Glory rested,” thereby explaining that the appearance of the “the Glory of Hashem” was “as a consuming fire.” Why does the verse first appear after the verse, “He called to Moshe on the seventh day from within the cloud”?

[This question certainly holds true according to the opinion that “He called to Moshe” on the seventh day **after** *Matan Torah*. On that day, Hashem called Moshe to ascend the mountain to receive the Tablets. Thus, “Moshe came” was the “response” to Hashem’s calling. Consequently, it certainly makes no sense to

¹⁸ *Shemos* 13:21.

¹⁹ {*Shemos* 24:16.}

²⁰ {*Shemos* 24:17.}

interrupt between the verses “He called to Moshe,” and, “Moshe came” (the verse teaching how he fulfilled the instruction) with the verse, “The Glory of Hashem appeared....”

And even according to the first opinion, which maintains that “He called to Moshe” was “to say the Ten Commandments,” this question holds true. {According to this opinion, Moshe was called to hear the Ten Commandments, and so} “Moshe and all of Israel {in actuality} were standing {and heard the Ten Commandments, not Moshe alone, as the verse seems to imply}, but Scripture accords honor {to Moshe, by singling him out}.” (Meaning, this verse is not referring to Hashem calling Moshe to ascend the mountain.) Accordingly, it emerges that the verse, “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*...” is unrelated to the verse, “He called to Moshe... from within the cloud.” Nevertheless, it would still be more fitting for the description, “The Glory of Hashem appeared...” to follow immediately, “Hashem’s Glory rested on Mount Sinai.”]

Therefore, Rashi understands that the verse, “The Glory of Hashem appeared...,” serves to introduce the following verse: “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*....” Meaning, the verse alludes to the difference between **this** *anan*, and the *anan* mentioned in the earlier verse (which explains why the verse must emphasize that “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*”): **This** *anan* was produced by the “consuming fire.” Meaning, as Rashi says, “this *anan* is a kind of **smoke**,” which came from the “consuming fire” mentioned in the previous verse.

5.

CONSUMING FIRES MAKE SMOKE

On this basis, we can also appreciate the verse’s nuanced wording, “a **consuming** fire.” We need to clarify: In order to describe the **appearance** of Hashem’s Glory, it would have sufficed to mention that it appeared like **fire**. Why does the Torah need to add that Hashem’s Glory appeared as a “**consuming** fire”?

But in light of the above discussion, we can understand this simply. This verse {“a consuming fire”} clarifies the meaning of the following verse: “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*.” This teaches us that this *anan* was **smoke** produced because of Hashem’s Glory appearing as fire. — Therefore, the verse adds and emphasizes, “consuming (fire).” This is because smoke does not emerge from fire alone. Rather, smoke forms from a fire that consumes (burns) whatever the fire catches hold of.

[In addition, a Heavenly fire is generally **not** a “consuming fire.”²¹ This is evident from what we have already learned about the Burning Bush²²: “He appeared... in a flame of fire... but the bush was not consumed.” Therefore, the verse must specify that, in this case, **yes**, the fire was a “**consuming** fire.” For this reason it created (a cloud of) **smoke**.]

6.

STAYING CLEAN

Based on the entire discussion above, we can also appreciate why Rashi needed to add, specifically in our verse, “Inside of it, the Holy One made a path for Moshe” (following Rashi’s explanation that “this *anan* is a kind of smoke”).

If the *anan* here was the same type of *anan* as those mentioned in the previous verses, Rashi would not have needed to address how Moshe could enter “the midst of the *anan*.” (On the contrary, as mentioned above, “Moshe approached (even) the *arafel*” — “the **thickness** of the cloud.”)

However, “this *anan* is a kind of smoke.” When a person is engulfed by smoke, the person and his clothing are naturally blackened, and both will stink of smoke. (This results from the “soot” in the smoke, which is produced by a burning substance). This is perplexing: How could this have possibly happened

²¹ See *Yoma* 21b.

²² *Shemos* 3:2; *Shemos Rabbah* 2:5.

to Moshe Rabbeinu? How could he possibly have looked this way when he ascended the mountain to Hashem to receive the Tablets? It would have been disgraceful!

Therefore, Rashi continues, “Inside of it, the Holy One made a path for Moshe.” Moshe walked through the path, and the smoke did not affect him.

7.

NOTHING FLAMMABLE

However, we still need to clarify: (a) Why does Rashi say, “This *anan* is a **kind** of smoke”? Based on the above discussion, this substance was *actual* smoke produced by fire! (b) Why does the verse say, “Moshe came in the midst of the ***anan***,” and not, “in the midst of the **smoke**”?

The explanation: Mount Sinai, located in the Sinai **desert**, and specifically, at “the **top** of the mountain” (where “the Glory of Hashem appeared as a consuming fire”), is not a place where trees, plants, and grass grow. It is a place of stones and dust. Smoke is produced only when a fire consumes flammable things (such as trees, etc.). Inanimate objects (stones and dust) are not flammable. Therefore, Rashi adds it was not **actual** smoke, rather, “a **kind** of smoke.” The smoke produced by **consuming** (burning) **inanimate** objects on Mount Sinai was **like** (regular) smoke (produced from vegetation being burned by fire).

For this reason — because it was not natural smoke — the Torah calls it *anan*.

8.

SMOKE EQUALS *BITTUL*

From the “wine of Torah”²³ in Rashi’s commentary:

In *parshas Yisro*, when describing Mount Sinai during *Matan Torah*, the Torah mentions **explicitly** the smoke:²⁴ “ The whole of Mount Sinai was in smoke {*ashan*} because Hashem had descended upon it.” In contrast, our *parshah* uses the word “*anan*.”

The following is a plausible explanation:²⁵ Actual smoke is produced by an object being burned because the burning object is physical, and the fire consumes its physicality. As a result of this consumption, smoke is created.

For this reason, different kinds of smoke are produced depending on the composition of the substance being burned: When something refined is burned (it burns quicker, and), the smoke is also more delicate and thin. In contrast, when the substance being burned is dense and coarse, the smoke is denser and thicker (and there is more of it).

Thus, the type of smoke reflects and discloses the nature of the object’s substance.

Just as this is true in a physical sense, it is also true in a spiritual sense regarding the *bittul*²⁶ and consumption of worldly matters to G-dliness. The revelation of heavenly fire “consumes” worldly selfhood; it causes worldly matters to become *battel* to, and absorbed in, G-dliness.

(Spiritually,) this is the idea of smoke. Smoke represents the consumption of selfhood and the *bittul* of the world to G-dliness.

²³ {The deeper ideas in Torah.}

²⁴ *Shemos* 19:18.

²⁵ For the following concepts, see *Torah Or*, 94a; *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5704, p. 212.

²⁶ {*Bittul* connotes self-nullification, and the negation of ego.}

9.

BEFORE AND AFTER *MATAN TORAH*

This explains the difference between the two above verses:

“The whole of Mount Sinai was in smoke” refers to the time of *Matan Torah*. During *Matan Torah*, the revelation came because of Hashem’s initiative (as the verse continues, “because Hashem had descended upon it” — the revelation was prompted from On High). The world, at that moment, was still in a physical and material state that had never been refined. Therefore, the G-dly revelation caused the world to become *battel* and consumed, as described by the verse, “the whole of Mount Sinai was in smoke.” The large quantity of smoke was a telltale sign that the world’s coarseness had not yet been attenuated or refined at all.

In contrast, our *parshah* discusses the period **following** *Matan Torah* — after *Matan Torah* brought about a {measure of} nullification and refinement to the world. Then, the nature of the world was not so crude.

Therefore, Hashem’s Glory in the form of a fire did not generate actual smoke. Rather, “because it was so refined, the Torah doesn’t call it ‘smoke’ but ‘*anan*.’”²⁷ The word *anan* does not connote the consumption and elevation of physical matters to spirituality.²⁸

Regarding this point, Rashi — in the “wine of Torah” — teaches that “this *anan* is a kind of **smoke**.” This verse is not discussing the revelation of G-dliness prompted from On High,²⁹ as was the case regarding the cloud

²⁷ *Torah Or*, 94a.

²⁸ See *Torah Or*, 16a.

²⁹ {Earlier, the *sichah* explained that at *Matan Torah*, the revelation was a G-dly initiative on its own accord, מלמעלה למטה, which caused the mountain to (become consumed, which is reflected in the resulting) smoke. Presently, the *sichah* is saying that a revelation of G-dliness prompted from On High, is referred to as a “cloud,” not smoke. The difference, perhaps, is the following: Here we are talking about a revelation of Hashem’s Glory which is not focused on elevating the world below. Rather, it is a revelation from Above, merely to manifest Hashem’s Glory. This is called a *cloud*. (Note that here in the original it says only מלמעלה, not מלמעלה למטה). In the verse describing *Matan Torah* (although there was also a revelation from Above), the Divine revelation is referred to as a *fire*, since its purpose was to “consume” the world, thereby producing *smoke*.

Accordingly, from this whole section, it emerges that there are three dimensions:

mentioned in the earlier verses. Rather, this cloud emanated from Hashem's Glory, which appeared as a consuming fire, the manner in which G-dliness obliterates the world's feeling of selfhood. Thus, the *anan* was "a kind of **smoke**":

Here, too, the underlying idea of smoke — which is dust-like and murky (produced by the consumption of a physical substance) — is relevant. The purpose of the Torah is to transform this **lowest realm** into a home for Hashem. Therefore, "**this anan**" — the cloud into which Moshe needed to enter in order to receive the Tablets (and Torah) and then bring them back **down** — is "a kind of smoke." It is a G-dly revelation that consumes and nullifies the physicality of Hashem's creations.

[However, since this occurred after the revelation at *Matan Torah*, that is, after a general refinement and nullification of the physicality of the world had already occurred, the mountain did not become "(wholly) **smoke**" (as it did at the beginning of the G-dly revelation of *Matan Torah*). Rather, it was, "a **kind** of smoke," as discussed — but smoke was still necessary.

10.

THE DIRECTIVE

The lesson for our *avodah*:

Some people protest: What connection do I have with mundane matters? And even if I do already lower myself, it should suffice for me to condescend to deal with matters within the realm of 'animal life,' or even lower, in the realm of 'plant life.' But I do not wish to interact with worldly matters in the category of the 'inanimate.' Something belonging to this category is very coarse, and

1) the fire at *Matan Torah*, a revelation from Above that consumed the world;
2) a cloud, a revelation from Above that was not aimed at elevating the world;
3) the fire after *Matan Torah*, which this verse is referring to, which is a revelation from Above focused on refining the world. But the smoke is not so coarse; therefore, we refer to it as a *cloud*, and Rashi explains it is really a type of *smoke*.)

possesses no vitality at all. And even when Hashem's fire illuminates it, it is not (innately) a suitable receptacle, and the fire does not catch hold (because the prerequisite of 'crushing it'³⁰ has not yet occurred).

The response to this protest: We need to ensure that even the lowest category of worldly existence, the "inanimate," experiences "smoke" and elevation. The reason: This is the purpose of *Matan Torah* — to apply the process symbolized by smoke, the nullification and elevation of worldly materiality, not only in the realm of "plant life" but even in the "mountain" — the inanimate.

These people may further object: "He who grapples with a grimy person becomes grimy himself."³¹ If I introduce "smoke" into earthly matters, it is possible for me to become soiled. Wouldn't it be smarter if I kept my distance from these things altogether? The answer to this:

a) "Inside of it, the Holy One made a path (for Moshe)": The level of Moshe that exists in the soul of every Jewish person,³² **it** will not become soiled; it will remain spotless because it transverses a path. It always remains faithful to Hashem.³³

b) Furthermore, on a deeper level, even a person's revealed faculties do not become soiled by the smoke. For, in truth, it is not smoke at all; rather, it is merely **a kind of** smoke. It is really a cloud that merely looks like smoke.

Meaning, that the world hides and conceals G-dliness is only **a kind of** reality that exists in order to allow a person to exercise free choice. For if people were to see the truth, there would be no room for free choice.

Furthermore, since this concealment exists for (the purpose of) holiness, it is actually "a cloud" (holiness). It appears as "smoke," i.e., as a physical reality which — even after it is consumed and ascends — leaves behind soot. But this is

³⁰ See *Tanya*, "Likkutei Amarim," beg. of ch. 29.

³¹ See *Tanya*, "Likkutei Amarim," end of ch. 28.

³² See *Tanya*, "Likkutei Amarim," ch. 42.

³³ See *Tanya*, "Likkutei Amarim," end of ch. 24.

the way the matter appears only to the physical eye. In a deeper sense, it is a “cloud” of holiness, for its entire purpose is to create additional G-dly light.

This, then, is the directive for us: We need to enter and pass through the smoke. In this way, we will receive the Torah. Moshe Rabbeinu — and the level of Moshe in each person’s soul — received the Torah after “Moshe came in the midst of the *anan*.” And “this *anan* is a kind of smoke” (and he needed a path that traversed it).

Although temporarily and superficially, this journey appears to be fraught with concealment, through this process we will attain {what Moshe attained}: “Moshe was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights,”³⁴ and we will receive the Torah in its entirety.

Subsequently, each individual infuses Torah into his corporeal body and into his divinely designated environment.³⁵ This explains the thematic continuation of *parshas Mishpatim* into *parshas Terumah* (which follows):³⁶ “They shall make Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them.”

From physical objects — gold, silver, etc. — we make a Sanctuary for Hashem. By doing this, we fulfill Hashem’s purpose: “The Holy One desired a home in the lower worlds.”

— Based on talks delivered on *Shabbos parshas Mishpatim* 5725 (1965)

³⁴ {*Shemos* 24:18 — this is the conclusion of the opening verse of this *sichah*: “Moshe came in the midst of the cloud...”}

³⁵ {In the original Hebrew, “*chelko ba’olam*.”}

³⁶ *Shemos* 25:8.