

The Difference between “From” and “Than”

As we know, the Satan was able to gain sway over the people as a result of confusion and miscalculation regarding Moshe’s expected descent from the mountain. The *passuk* that headlines the chain of events states: וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בִשְׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָרְדָת מֹשֶׁה מֵהַר – “And the people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending from the mountain” (*Shemos 32:1*). This final phrase appears to be extraneous, for the Torah, of course, does not employ unnecessary words. We know where Moshe was; why was it necessary to accentuate that he had delayed his descent “*min hahar* – from the mountain?”

To account for this phrase, let us first clarify some of the details relating to the chronology and the mistake involved in the calculation. Rashi here elaborates on the error. Moshe Rabbeinu was to remain on the mountain for a period of forty days; the issue that arose related to when the “clock” started. The people assumed that the tally began the day that Moshe ascended, which was the 7th of Sivan. The true intent, however, was that Moshe would be on the mountain for forty *complete* days (i.e., the previous evening *plus* the following day), thus disqualifying the day of ascent. Thus, the real count began the *next day*, on the 8th.

Chazal inform us of the date on which Moshe actually did descend. This occurred, unfortunately, after the worship of the calf had already begun, prompting Moshe to destroy the *Luchos* he held. As the Mishnah states (*Ta’anis 4:6*):

בְּשִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמּוּז גִּשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלּוּחֹת.

“On the 17th of Tammuz, the *Luchos* were broken.”

Why, indeed, did the people think that he was supposed to come down earlier? R’ Shlomo Kluger understands that this is precisely what the *passuk* is alluding to. Moshe descended on the 17th of Tammuz – 40 days after the 8th of Sivan – and proceeded to destroy the *Luchos*. *But he had actually received them from Heaven on the preceding day*, the 16th of Tammuz. Recall that the mountain remained suspended in mid-air until the receiving of the Torah was “finalized”. In other words, it was on the 16th of Tammuz that the people witnessed the mountain fall back into place – because that was when the *Luchos* were transferred into Moshe’s possession.

This, then, is the meaning of the *passuk*. We wondered why it was necessary for the Torah to spell out from where Moshe descended: “And the people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending **from the mountain.**” Actually, R’ Shlomo Kluger explains, the phrase “*min hahar*” here does not mean “**from** the mountain.” The term “*min*” can also translate to mean “**than**” – and this is its meaning here. The *passuk* is reporting on what caused Yisrael’s error. On the 16th of Tammuz they saw the mountain return to place and so assumed that the forty-day period was over. But then Moshe did not appear; *he did not return at the same time the mountain did*. As the *passuk* states: “And the people saw that Moshe delayed *more than* the mountain did.” Really – had they been paying better attention – they would have correctly calculated Moshe’s return date as the 17th of Tammuz, the following day. But on the 16th of Tammuz there was a development: they saw mountain itself “descend”. They became confused when Moshe’s appearance did not immediately follow the descent of the mountain. And thus the tragic events unfolded as they did.