

In this week's *Parashah*, we read that *Hashem* appeared to *Bnei Yisrael* at *Har Sinai* and gave them the Torah. R' Yosef Konvitz z"l (1878-1944; rabbi in Newark, NJ; President of the Agudath HaRabonim of the United States and Canada) asks: Why was the Torah given on *Har Sinai* and not on *Har Ha'moriah*, where the Patriarchs prayed and where the *Bet Hamikdash* would later stand?

He answers: *Hashem* deliberately gave *Bnei Yisrael* the Torah in an uninhabited place outside of *Eretz Yisrael* so that *Bnei Yisrael* could never claim, "We accepted the Torah only on the condition that we would possess *Eretz Yisrael*, but when we are in exile, we are not obligated to observe the Torah!"

R' Konvitz continues: To foreclose that argument, *Hashem* chose to give the Torah in a desolate wilderness. This teaches us that even if we find ourselves in a desolate place, we still are obligated to keep the Torah because the Torah was not given to help us enjoy the world; to the contrary, the entire world was created for the Torah. A Jew must always reflect on this reality and never be ashamed in the face of someone who mocks his Torah practices. In such a situation, R' Konvitz writes, a person should imagine that he is all alone in a wilderness, and those who are mocking him are merely "monkeys." One should always be proud of going in G-d's ways and of the fact that he is part of the nation that was chosen to stand before *Hashem* and serve Him. Indeed, that is the essence of what it means to be a complete person. (*Divrei Yosef*)

Shabbat

The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 86b) describes the preparations that were made each day between *Bnei Yisrael's* arrival at *Har Sinai* on *Rosh Chodesh Sivan* and the Giving of the Torah on the following *Shabbat*. The *Gemara*, as explained by *Rashi* z"l, states that *Bnei Yisrael* were ready to receive the Torah on Friday, but Moshe Rabbeinu was too busy.

R' Eliezer Ben-Zion Brok z"l (1904-1985; founder and Rosh Yeshiva of the Novardok-Bet Yosef Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) asks the obvious question: The whole purpose of the Exodus--indeed, the entire purpose for which the world was created--was for *Bnei Yisrael* to receive the Torah. And Moshe was too busy?!

The *Gemara* itself explains that Moshe had no time to ascend *Har Sinai* on Friday because he was busy with *Shabbat* preparations. But what exactly was he busy with? All of Moshe's *Shabbat* food was delivered early on Friday morning in the form of *Mahn*, which satisfied a person's hunger and nutritional needs and could taste like anything. What, then, was Moshe so busy with?

R' Brok explains: The *Gemara* is teaching that *Shabbat* preparations should involve more than cooking, cleaning and bathing. There are also spiritual preparations one must make before *Shabbat*--preparations that were needed even by the generation that ate *Mahn*, and even by the master of all prophets, Moshe Rabbeinu. (*Hegiyonei Mussar* p.25-26)

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“You shall be to Me the most beloved *Segulah* / treasure of all peoples...” (19:5)

R' Nachman of Breslov z"l (1772-1810; Ukraine) writes: The word “*Segulah*” refers to something that has effective healing properties (for example), but whose effects cannot be explained using any known science. The cure works, but the reason why is beyond man's intellect.

R' Nachman continues: This is what the Torah means, as well, when it refers to the Jewish People as *Hashem's Segulah*. No human being can understand why *Hashem* chose the Jewish People. Indeed, only a short time before *Hashem* spoke the words in our verse, *Bnei Yisrael* had stood at the *Yam Suf*, where the prosecuting angel had argued that *Bnei Yisrael* were idolators just as the Egyptians were. Even so, *Hashem* chose us as His holy nation, a fact that is beyond human comprehension. (Likkutei Moharan 21:9)

R' Avraham Zvi Kluger *shlita* (*Chassidic Mashpia* in Bet Shemesh, Israel) writes: The above idea is found in *Midrash Tehilim*, which relates a parable about a lost princess who was gathering stalks of grain. The king drove by in his carriage and recognized her, whereupon he lifted her up and seated her in the carriage. All of her friends wondered: “Yesterday, you were gathering grain, and today you are sitting in the royal carriage?!” She replied, “Just as you wonder, so I wonder!”

Similarly, says the *Midrash*, the nations of the world wonder, “Yesterday you (*Bnei Yisrael*) were enslaved, and you were dirtied by bricks and mortar. Now you have been redeemed and you are princes among men?!” To this *Bnei Yisrael* reply, “Just as you wonder, so I wonder!” [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R' Kluger elaborates: *Hashem's* selection of *Bnei Yisrael* took place before the Torah was given, when *Bnei Yisrael* were still mired in the impurity of Egypt. We have no idea why *Hashem* chose us to be His people. It is a wonder in our eyes and not explainable.

How does this impact our Divine service? R' Kluger explains: Everyone experiences ups and downs in his Torah study, his performance of *Mitzvot*, his prayer, and so on. Of course, a Jew is expected to do his best and not shirk his obligations. But if he believes that his status as part of *Hashem's* beloved treasure is contingent upon his success, then a downturn in his Divine service will lead to despair. Accordingly, a Jew must remember that he is part of the chosen people—but not because of any merit that he has. Rather that status is a *Segulah*, something unexplainable. (La'berit Habeit p. 290)



“You shall not ascend My Altar on steps, so that your nakedness will not be uncovered upon it.” (20:23)

R' Elimelech of Lizhensk z"l (1717-1787; early *Chassidic Rebbe*) comments: When a person elevates himself in a haughty way, he inevitably reveals the ways in which he is lacking. (Quoted in *Ma'ayanah Shel Torah*)

“Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe took an *Olah-offering* and feast offerings for *Elokim*, and Aharon and all the elders of Yisrael came to eat bread with the father in-law of Moshe in the presence of *Elokim*.” (18:12)

The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 64a) asks: Did they eat in the presence of *Elokim*? No! They ate in the presence of Moshe! The *Gemara* answers: From here we learn that if one enjoys a feast in which Torah scholars are participating, it is as if he is basking in the presence of the *Shechinah*. [Until here from the *Gemara*]

R' Avraham Yehoshua Heschel z"l (1748-1825; the *Apter Rov*) writes: I asked the holy Maggid of Kozhnitz (R' Yisrael Hopstein z"l; 1737-1814) what was bothering the *Gemara*. Are we not taught (*Tehilim* 16:8), “I have set *Hashem* before me always”? Obviously, then, these great men ate “in the presence of *Elokim*”!

The *Maggid* answered: *Halachah* states that a person should not *Daven* in proximity to his *Rebbe* / teacher of Torah out of a concern that his awe and trepidation of his *Rebbe* will interfere with the awe and trepidation of G-d that one must feel when he prays. Along the same lines, the *Gemara* is asking, “Did they eat in the presence of *Elokim*? No! They ate in the presence of Moshe!” --i.e., how could they feel the presence of *Elokim* when they were in the presence of Moshe? To this the *Gemara* answers: Enjoying a meal in which Torah scholars are participating is itself an expression of awe of Heaven. (*Ohev Yisrael*)

R' Avraham Mordechai Alter *shlita* (Yerushalayim) suggests another reason for the *Halachah* that a person should not *Daven* in proximity to his *Rebbe*: When a student learns Torah from a teacher, G-d is, in effect, speaking to him (the student) through an intermediary (the teacher). Prayer, however, is every person's opportunity to speak directly to G-d; there is no place in that interaction for an intermediary.

(*Divrei Emet: Emtza Makom L'Hashem* p.60)

“All of *Har Sinai* was smoking because *Hashem* had descended upon it in the fire...” (19:18)

Midrash Tanchuma states: This teaches that the Torah is like fire--if one gets too close to it, he will be burned by it, but at a proper distance, one is warmed by it. [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R' Yedayah Ha'penini z"l (13th century; Provence) writes: The *Midrash* is teaching the same lesson that we are taught in *Pirkei Avot* (2:15, see there), i.e., that one who draws close to a Torah scholar will have his soul warmed, but one who becomes too close—that is, one who lacks the proper respect--will be scalded. (*Be'urei Haggadot*)