

ELEVATED BY DIVINE COMMAND

by Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

For many, the song of Dayeinu serves as one of the primary hallmarks of the Passover Seder. The composition highlights the many wonderful acts of kindness that the Almighty has bestowed upon His people throughout the process of the exodus from Egypt, and the need for us to express our collective gratitude for each item independently.

There is one line, however, that does not seem to belong together with the others. It is the twelfth stanza, which states that even if the Almighty would have brought us before Mount Sinai - Keravnu Lifnei Har Sinai - but would not have presented to us the Torah, it would have been sufficient an act as to warrant our appreciation. The obvious question is why is this so? Was not the entire purpose of bringing our nation to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah? What independent benefit was presented to them by simply arriving at Mount Sinai?

One answer that is commonly given relates to the supernatural experience of receiving the Torah. The Jewish people were treated there to an unparalleled occurrence, one that has never been replicated in human history. However, the description of this event presents some significant challenges.

There was thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of a shofar was exceedingly loud; so that all the people who were in the camp trembled... And Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled greatly... And all the people saw the thunder, and the lightning, and the sound of the shofar horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood far away. (Exodus 19:16, 18; 20:15)

How are we to understand the idea of the Jewish People "seeing" the thunder and the sounds of the shofar horn? How can one see things that are relegated exclusively to the aural sense?

As we know, "a picture is worth a thousand words". One cannot compare the clarity and knowledge that one receives from hearing a description of the item or event to that of viewing something directly. When one actually beholds an experience, it translates directly in one's mind to a deep understanding, without having to rely on one's imagination to create the picture and fill in the gaps. At Mount Sinai, the Almighty's revelation was so complete that it reached their deepest senses, to the point where their knowledge of the event was akin to the level of having seen every aspect of it.

For that experience alone it would have been sufficient to thank G-d, even if we would not have actually received the Torah. Of course, the fact that we did receive the Torah made this experience all the more rewarding.

However, there is an alternative explanation for this statement found in Dayeinu; one which focuses less on the supernatural experience of standing before Mount Sinai and more on the transformation which occurred to the Jewish People as they experienced this seminal, historic event.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, zt"l (Michtav M'Eliyahu, Volume 3, p. 52) describes the transcendent experience at Sinai as one in which the nation collectively became elevated to the level of M'tzuveh V'oseh, of those who are commanded to perform Mitzvos. This was in contrast to those select few, such as the Patriarchs, who had kept the Torah's dictates previously based on their own lofty spiritual levels. Now, as it were, the Torah would be made accessible to all.

Based on this approach, we can deduce a new understanding of the famous expression of acceptance of the Torah used by the Jewish People at Mount Sinai "Na'aseh V'nishma (we will do and we will hear)". Following the Sinaitic experience, the Jewish people were in position to raise themselves to loftier spiritual levels (Nishma), once they were given direct access to the Torah's precepts (Na'aseh).

Similarly, in the words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Da'as T'vunos, 158):

Even though the Jewish people were themselves prepared to serve the Almighty... the ability to serve Him was only given to them by the Almighty Himself... This is what He gave to them at the time when the Torah was given... This is the distinction between one who is commanded to fulfill mitzvos and does so ("M'tzuveh V'oseh") and one who is not commanded ("Aino M'tzuveh V'oseh"). A man who is so commanded was granted the power by the Almighty to accomplish with his deeds that which is necessary for the (ultimate fulfillment of) creation, which is not the case for someone who is not.

Rabbi Luzzatto is also saying that our gathering at Sinai was not simply a logistical prerequisite (albeit a supernatural one) for us to receive the Torah. Instead, the assembly provided us with a unique opportunity to become transformed into a community who would serve G-d as those who were commanded to do so, rather than those who did so out of their own volition. Through this process, we entered into a new dimension, one in which our actions were given the power to accomplish much more than they had previously.

What, however, is the source of this increased power? The Talmud (Avodah Zara 50b, Bava Kama 38a) informs us that, "greater is one who is commanded to fulfill the Mitzvos and does so than one who is not commanded and still does so."

At first, this idea seems counterintuitive. How is it possible that a mandatory act - the consequence

of whose neglect is some form of punishment - can be considered to be of a higher level than one which is performed altruistically by an individual who carried no such responsibility to fulfill it?

The Tosafos commentary (Avodah Zara 50b) explains that a person who is "commanded" must routinely struggle to nullify his evil inclination, and is challenged to fulfill the Mitzvos despite such resistance. Alternatively, a person who is not commanded had no compelling urge to contest the act, and faces little opposition in the process. It is because of this unique struggle that the deeds of a M'tzuveh V'oseh are considered to be more impactful than those of an Aino M'tzuveh V'oseh.

Based on the above approaches, it is clear that there was far more to arrival at Mount Sinai than that which first meets the eye. And while we are surely grateful for having received the Torah, it would behoove us to try and fully appreciate the unique benefits of becoming M'tzuveh V'oseh.