

MOUNTAIN OF FAITH

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

There is a fascinating sequence of verses in this week's portion which tell us that it is our responsibility to remember more than just the Commandments, but the manner in which they were given. Moshe exhorts the nation, "Now, Israel, listen to the decrees and the mandates that I teach you to observe. You shall not add to them nor subtract. See I have taught you decrees and ordinances as Hashem commanded me." Moshe warns the nation to "safeguard and perform them, for they are your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations who will hear all the decrees and declare that surely this is a wise and sagacious nation" (cf. Deuteronomy 2:1-9). What follows is a warning to remember the scenario of Sinai. And though its remembrance would seem much less significant than that of the observance of the laws themselves, the Torah uses stronger terminology in reminding us. "Only beware for yourselves and heed your very souls, lest you forget the words that your eyes saw and lest you remove them from your heart. You must make them known to your children and your children's children the day you stood before Hashem at Chorev" (Deuteronomy 2:9-11). Moshe continues to remind the Jews of the fiery scenario and the awe-filled events of the revelation at Mount Sinai.

What bothers me is a simple question. If Moshe already impressed upon his nation the importance of the actual laws, if he already explained to them that it is those commands that will inspire other nations to marvel at the brilliance and veracity of the Jews, then why is the scene at Sinai such an integral part of the faith? Why is the warning both to the Jews and their souls seemingly stronger concerning the revelation scenario, greater than that of the admonition to obey the complex laws of the Torah?

A prominent Rosh Yeshiva lived next door to the simple clerk of his celebrated yeshiva. The Rabbi had scores of people visiting him asking him advice for the most difficult complexities, Talmudic or otherwise. The clerk did his job in the yeshiva office and attended to the needs of the Rosh Yeshiva, faithfully and devotedly.

Both of them had sons. The revered Rabbi's son did not follow in his father's footsteps. He became a professor, in a secular university, something that brought consternation to his father. As a young man he began to shine in the yeshiva world and was well on his way to become a Torah luminary.

One day, after the Rosh Yeshiva's son, attired in the casual uniform of a secular intellectual, visited his father at the Yeshiva, an intellectual debate ensued between the two. When the professor left, the Rosh Yeshiva had let out a short sigh of frustration, whispering something about the difficulty in

raising children to follow one's ideals.

One of the rabbis in the Yeshiva approached his mentor. "Rebbe," he meekly began. "I don't understand. The secretary of the Yeshiva merited to have his children become brilliant and devoted Torah scholars. What did he do so special that his sons are so strongly committed to Torah study?"

The Rosh Yeshiva did not let him continue. "I do not know for sure," he answered. "But one thing I can tell you. At my Shabbos table I was discussing questions on Maimonides writings and Talmudic difficulties. He was singing zemiros (songs of faith and devotion)."

The Torah exhorts us to keep the laws as they will inspire others to marvel at Jewish wisdom. But Moshe adds the finality of the argument. Do not ever forget that we stood at Mount Sinai, saw the fire and heard G-d's voice! The intellectual analyzing, even actual observance, is, of course, of utmost importance. But nothing supercedes the simple faith of the G-d fearing Jew who traces his steps to the foot of the mountain. The Chasid Rav Yosef Ya'avetz, one of the great rabbis who was exiled during the Spanish Inquisition, writes that Jews whose observance was based on intellectualism withered in the face of Torquemada's torments. The simple Jews with simple faith remained loyal and steadfast throughout. It is obviously important to think, to rationalize and to perform. But Moshe tells us to watch ourselves and our souls lest we forget what really happened some 3,300 years ago. Because when look for the bottom line, it's at the bottom of the mountain.

Good Shabbos

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