

NOW IT'S OUR TURN

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Shavuot

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Of the numerous celebrations that are part of the festival of Shavuot, the one alluded to in the holiday liturgy is "the Time of the Giving of our Torah". One of the many references to this theme is the day's Torah reading of Chapters 19 and 20 of Shemos/Exodus, the narrative of the revelation at Sinai.

After the mandated three days of preparation for this most awesome event, *"Moshe brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain."*

(Shemos/Exodus 19:17) Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki; 1040-1105; his commentary on Torah and Talmud are considered essential to the basic understanding of the text) explains that the simple understanding of the verse is that the Jewish Nation was at the base of the mountain. But he also quotes the Talmud in Tractate Shabbos (88a) which explains the original Hebrew "besachtis hahar" - literally, "at the underside of the mountain" - to mean that the Children of Israel were standing UNDERNEATH Mount Sinai, the mountain literally ripped up from the earth by G-d and suspended over their heads. G-d advised, "If you accept the Torah, that is good, but if not, there will be your grave."

This is very challenging. The Talmud (Tractate Avoda Zara 2b) states that G-d offered the Torah to all of the nations of the world, but only the Jews were willing to take it. Why, at this moment of great revelation when they are to receive that which they enthusiastically accepted, would such measures be necessary? And why did G-d say, "there will be your grave"? G-d's here, the Jews are here and the mount is here; He should say, "here will be your grave"!

Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities) explains that without Torah observance and Torah study the world cannot continue to exist; that if the Children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov had not accepted G-d's Torah, all of creation would have imploded. Because

this consequence would destroy all of humanity, it was not only "here" that would be a grave, but everywhere - every "there" - on earth would be a place of death. Thus, it was not a threat to THIS nation; rather, it was a communication of the imperative of their decision. Because the Jewish people accepted the Torah - as the blueprint for life, as the source of ultimate knowledge and G-d consciousness - the world would continue to exist.

And that mission of the Jewish nation continues to this day. Jewish history, our Sages tell us, is not a timeline, it is a spiral. The festivals are not a commemoration of a quaint Divine kindness or victory of yesteryear; they are a point in time auspicious to a particular spiritual energy. As the liturgy states, it is the Time of the Giving of our Torah: Giving again in the present, not Given in the past. Rabbi Kagan notes that those in every generation who safeguard and cleave to the Torah are the ones upon whom the universe is supported. Use this Shavuot for rededication to Torah study and mitzvah observance, stand tall, stand proud and stand firm!

Have a good Yom Tov and good Shabbos!

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