

BACK TO THE PRESENT

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"G-d said to the Jewish Nation: My children, you read the Torah narrative of the Giving of the Torah every year and I will give you merit as if you stood at Mount Sinai and accepted the Torah, as it says, 'On this day, they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai.' (Shemos/Exodus 19:1)" (Yalkut Shimoni, Yisro 271) How are we to understand this Divine instruction? How does this process accomplish anything?

Michtav Me'Eliyahu (collected writings and discourses of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1891-1954) of London and B'nai Brak, one of the outstanding personalities and thinkers of the Mussar movement) explains that the "merit" is G-d's credit based on His celestial estimation of our actions, His evaluation of our service from a spiritual perspective. Furthermore, the perception that we stood at Mount Sinai is actually to be understood literally, as the verse states, "on THIS day." But if it is meant literally, why is it not stated literally? Why does the Yalkut state "as IF you stood at Mount Sinai"? It needs to be expressed in detached terms because such a phenomenon - that the reading of the Torah's description of the Revelation at Sinai IS a reliving of that most profound experience TODAY - is unfathomable to the human.

Rabbi Dessler compares this to Rashi's explanation of a difficult verse in the Torah. Bamidbar/Numbers 3:1 implies that Aaron's sons were also considered to be Moshe's children. Rashi explains that one who teaches his friend's son Torah is given the merit by the Torah as if he bore him. Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv ("The Alter of Kelm"; 1824-1898; One of the foremost disciples of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the Mussar movement, he founded and led the famous Mussar yeshiva, the Talmud Torah of Kelm, Lithuania) elucidates that the physical connection between a father and son is insubstantial. The core of "fatherhood" is not the contribution of mere chromosomes that generate the physical body. The essence of life that a father gives his son is the spirit and passion and values, the conveyance of the father's true self to his child. Therefore, in the Torah's evaluation, one's student is truly his child. But again the Torah uses the construction "he is given the merit...as if" because this perspective of the father-son relationship is not one with which people readily identify.

So too here, concludes Rabbi Dessler, we are to approach the Festival of Shavuot with the appreciation that our spiritual essence IS standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, and our reading of the narrative is a real-time, real-life recreation of those events 3315 years ago. With this, our acceptance of the Torah on this day will be as real on this day as it was then.

How do we, thousands of years later in a place thousands of miles away, accomplish this?

The first step is appreciating that time is not linear. In another essay, Rabbi Dessler delves into why the festivals are referred to as the TIME of our joy (Succos), the TIME of our freedom (Pesach) and the TIME of our receiving the Torah (Shavuot). Therein lies the implication that there is a return to a previous time. Indeed, Rabbi Dessler explains that time is a circle in which we travel. There is a "one week circle", and every Shabbos (Sabbath) we find ourselves returning to the Shabbos position in the circle. The spiritual connection and renewal that are Shabbos are waiting at that position for us to come back to it. There is also an "annual circle", and every Shavuot is really the same festival to which we return year after year. We are not commemorating an ancient event of significance in our national history. Rather, we return to that position in the circle of time where we are yet again infused with the strength to accept the Torah anew.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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