

DIVIDED YET UNITED

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And they traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai desert, and they camped in the desert, Israel camped facing the mountain." [19:2]

The *Ohr HaChaim*, Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, asks why it was necessary to say that Israel came to the Sinai desert - the previous verse already said that. In addition, why must the verse tell us that they camped in the desert - is it not obvious that they would camp whenever they arrived at their destination?

The *Ohr HaChaim* offers a *drasha*, a deeper interpretation of the verse, saying that these words teach us three crucial acts of preparation for receiving the *Torah*.

"And they traveled from *Refidim*" - the place where Amalek met and fought with them, because, our Sages tell us, they suffered a "*Rifyon Yadayim*," a weakness. What sort of weakness? A weakness in *Torah* learning. One can only truly understand a difficult subject after making a total commitment. One cannot learn *Torah* in a lazy way, and gain more than a superficial understanding. To receive *Torah*, one must leave "*Refidim*," laziness, behind.

"And they camped in the desert" - they made themselves like a desert, which everyone steps on. Modesty and humility are also requirements, "for words of *Torah* only last in a person who lowers himself, and makes himself like a desert." A haughty and proud person will be too proud to ask, too proud to admit error. *Torah* is acquired by one who is willing "to learn from every individual," and displays this trait in every aspect of his life.

"Israel camped facing the mountain" - in the singular, meaning as a united body. The scholars sat down to learn together in an environment of unity and peace, rather than making divisions. And this was perhaps the most difficult of all. They put aside petty arguments and concentrated upon that which they all held dear.

I wonder when in our history the Jewish people has been divided as it is today. I doubt that this bears elaboration - everyone knows what I mean. Petty arguments are indeed the order of the day.

I'm delighted, on the other hand, that when it comes to traditional learning, we see plenty of exceptions. This is truly one of the highlights of our program - that we have 7000 participants from

all over the world, representing practically every stream and school of thought, all learning something about Judaism and our united Jewish heritage with each piece of email. Let's please remember that. At the bottom line, we really are all one people, all brothers and sisters, children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. May we - all of us together - go forward and receive the Torah. *Chag Sameach!*

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The author is the Director of Project Genesis.