

SINAI'S LESSON

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

This week's Sidrah is Yisro. The highlight of the Parsha occurs when Hashem gives the Aseres HaDibros (Ten Commandments) to the Jewish people. Although the Torah only records the Ten Commandments, Chazal, our Sages tell us that they received on Sinai the entire Torah, including the Talmud and any laws that were derived in later generations, up to and including our generation.

At Mount Sinai the Jews witnessed first hand Hashem's great glory, as we read in the Parsha (19:16-20:15), "And there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the voice of the shofar was very powerful, and the entire people that was in the camp trembled... All of Mount Sinai was smoking because Hashem had descended upon it in the fire... and the entire mountain shuddered greatly... The entire people saw the thunder and the flames, the voice of the shofar and the smoking mountain; the people saw it and trembled and stood from afar..."

The Ma'amad Har Sinai (giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai) is considered an event of great proportions. Hashem commanded the people of Israel to remember this event and to tell their children and grandchildren for all future generations. Referring to the events at Mount Sinai, the Torah states (Devarim 4:9-10), "Beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things your eyes have beheld... And you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children - the day you stood before Hashem your G-d, at Chorev (Sinai)."

At the Passover seder table, in the well-known song "Dayeinu," we say:

If He would have brought us before Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, Dayeinu - it would have been enough!

Commentators are bothered by this statement. Surely just being at the mountain was a momentous experience, yet what purpose would the events at Mount Sinai have served if not as a lead-up to kabalas HaTorah, the receiving of the Torah?

Possibly we can understand an answer to this question from the words of Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azoulay zt"l (1724-1806), the Chida (an acronym of his first and last names). In his sefer, Nachal Kedumim, he analyzes a pasuk from our parsha (19:2): "And they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai... and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain." Chazal, our sages of blessed memory, note that the word "encamped" is in the singular ("vayichan") - and he (Israel) encamped there. They teach: And they encamped there - like one person with one heart.

From the moment Israel encamped opposite Mount Sinai, an atmosphere of great unity came upon them; an entire nation of over a million individuals was considered as one. What was it about Mount Sinai, asks the Chida, that brought the Jews to such achdus?

We are taught that Mount Sinai was chosen as the location for kabalas HaTorah because it was the lowest of all mountains. This teaches us, say Chazal, that the Torah is not acquired through haughtiness and might, but rather through humility and modesty. From Mount Sinai, Bnei Yisrael learned the value of "anavah" - humility.

Achdus, unity, is a result of humility: The arrogant, self-centered person is concerned only with himself, but the humble person takes the time to be concerned with the needs of those around him, and thus promotes harmony and unity. "And Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain," - from gazing upon the mountain, and witnessing its great humility, they too were humbled, and became unified as one.

There is a minhag (custom) at Orthodox weddings to dance a special dance called the Rebbe R' Elimelech's Dance. In it, each person joins hands with a partner, and they progress through a chain of partners coming towards them, one time elevating their hands and letting the next group pass under them, then ducking and passing under the hands of the following group. I once heard that this dance demonstrates to the chosson and kallah the secret to a successful marriage: only if they are willing to sometimes duck, and let their spouse pass above, will they experience harmony. If they both want always to be on top, their marriage will end in a crash.

Our sages teach that brotherhood and harmony are the key to the entire Torah (Shabbos 31a): "A gentile once came before Hillel. 'Teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot, and I will convert to Judaism.' 'Okay,' said Hillel, 'no problem.' He converted him. Then he said, 'Just don't do to your neighbour something that you wouldn't like done to yourself - that's the whole Torah. The rest is just a clarification of this - go and learn it!'"

If He would have brought us before Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, it would have been enough! From Mount Sinai we learned possibly the most valuable lesson of all time: Humility breeds achdus, and that is the key to the entire Torah. Humility can transform a diverse nation of millions into a single entity; without it, even husband and wife can't get along.

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