

# ELIXIR OF LIFE OR DEATH

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

**The Talmud relates an** interesting story which prompts an important question. In spite of the fact that the Jewish people had already accepted the Torah wholeheartedly, God, the Talmud says, uprooted Mt. Sinai and raised it above the heads of the Jewish people below.

It must have been both an incredibly awesome and yet terribly frightening moment. A confusing one as well, given what God told them:

If you accept the Torah, then it is good. If not, here shall be your burial. (Shabbos 88a)

"But didn't we just say yes to Torah?" they must have asked each other. "What's with the threat?"

The Talmud provides its own answer. It says that the Jewish people only accepted the Written Law with a full heart. The Oral Law, with all of its many details was a harder pill for them to swallow. According to the Talmud, they didn't really do that until much later after the Purim miracle.

The Maharal offers an alternative explanation. He says that the mountain over their heads was to send a message to the Jewish people. God was telling them that, in spite of the fact they had CHOSEN to accept Torah and would be rewarded for doing so, there hadn't been an option to reject it. The future of Creation, the Talmud explains, depended upon Jewish acceptance of Torah. They HAD to accept it for Creation's sake alone.

I'm going to offer another explanation for this highly insightful midrash. After all, if Torah can splinter into 70 different "sparks," this "pshat" may be one of them.

The Talmud tells us elsewhere that Torah can be an elixir of life, and an elixir of death. That in itself should raise an eyebrow or two. How can something as Godly as Torah be an instrument of death for anyone? Is it not called a "Tree of Life"?

The truth is, history itself answers the question. How many times has a verse from Tanach or a section of Talmud been used to draw Jews away from Torah Judaism? It was the Sadducees strict adherence to the literal reading of Torah verses that turned them against traditional Judaism.

Perhaps this was also the message of the hovering mountain. Maybe it was a warning from God to the Jewish people, about Torah's other potential. They may have assumed that by saying "We will do and we will understand," they were safe from spiritual harm. The overhead mountain told them, "It's not so simple. Be careful even AFTER accepting Torah."

Of what? What is it about Torah that can make it so dangerous? How does one safeguard against Torah having an adverse effect? If it has already happened to so many Jews over the ages, how does one make sure they do not become one of them?

The Talmud answers that question as well with something called "Torah Lishmah," the learning of Torah for its own sake. It is one thing to learn Torah. It is another thing to learn Torah for its own sake. To not do so, the Talmud says, one is better off not having been born at all.

Now we can understand why. It is better to have not been born at all than to have lived and "killed" oneself through Torah. The spiritual damage is horrific and very costly, to the person's soul and to Creation in general. An unborn soul can remain untainted in the upper realm, free of any responsibility of any damage to God's world.

There is a lot of discussion regarding what constitutes "Torah Lishmah." On its simplest level it means learning Torah without any thought of personal gain whatsoever. It means learning Torah just for the sake of learning it, because it is the word of God and ultimate wisdom.

It is easy to make a mistake about Torah. It has 613 commandments, making Torah seem to many like a "Shtar Chov," a document of obligation. It demands intense loyalty, and a person could easily come to think that Torah owes them.

If a person craves recognition or power, he can see Torah as a way to get both. It can make him knowledgeable and wise, two commodities very much in demand in the Torah world. This would make Torah his ticket to a life for which he yearns.

To learn Torah Lishmah, a person has to take himself out of the equation, becoming almost a bystander. He can benefit from Torah, even in a generous manner. But it has to be as a by-product of his learning, not a planned goal.

I was told a beautiful "vort" this past Shabbos along these lines. The mishnah says:

Anyone who says a statement in the name of the one who said it brings redemption to the world . . . (Pirkei Avos 6:6)

Traditionally, this is understood to mean that giving credit where credit is due, contributes significantly to the process of redemption. The proof? Esther warned King Achashveros in the name of Mordechai about the planned coup by his guards. As a result, the king later rewarded Mordechai at a cost to Haman. It ended up contributing to the Purim redemption.

I heard something about this in the name of Rabbi Ya'akov Weinberg, zt"l, who said it in the name of the Maharal. What it really means is that when it comes to leaders of the Jewish nation, God looks for the humblest of people. Moshe Rabbeinu wasn't called the humblest man on the face of the earth just in passing. It was what made him the leader he became.

Rabbi Weinberg said that when someone does not take credit that belongs to others, he becomes

the kind of person God chooses to bring redemption. His humility makes him the kind of person God can plug into the redemption equation to fulfill His will on earth. It is for such people that Torah remains an elixir of life, and not one for death.