

VIEW FROM THE TOP

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying... (Vayikra 19:3)

MOUNT SINAI. AT least that is what people call the 7,497 ft. moderately high mountain in the Sinai region. It's not the tallest mountain in the area, but THAT, according to the Midrash, was EXACTLY why God chose it as His temporary base of operation.

According to geologists, THIS Mt. Sinai's rocks were formed in the late stage of the Arabian-Nubian Shield's evolution. Mt. Sinai displays a ring complex that consists of alkaline granites intruded into diverse rock types, including volcanic. The granites range in composition from syenogranite to alkali feldspar granite. The volcanic rocks are alkaline to peralkaline, and they are represented by subaerial flows and eruptions and subvolcanic porphyry. Generally, the nature of the exposed rocks in Mount Sinai indicates that they originated from differing depths.

"Hmm," he said, not quite sure what all those terms meant. He hadn't come this far into the Sinai Desert, now part of Egypt, because of the geology. He enjoyed geology, but that was not the purpose of this tiyul. He was a recent ba'al teshuvah, and he wanted to see what might have been the origin of it "all."

When it comes to Islam, there is no doubt in the minds of Muslims about their ancient locations. There may be controversy about what, if anything, occurred there. But for those who believe that the events did happen, they believe with certainty.

The same thing is true about the second largest religion in the world, Christianity. There is much historical dispute about what actually happened back at the beginning, but not for its believers. They are certain about their history, and where it happened.

Which is not much. Well, at least compared to what Judaism claims. The other religions do not claim, as Judaism does, that their people, millions and millions of them, left the mightiest nation of its time as a result of mind-boggling miracles. And they don't claim, as the Jewish people do, that God spoke to them directly, ALL 3,000,000 of them, and gave them HIS Torah.

Yet despite archaeologists' best efforts to find some visible proof to validate such claims, they have found little, which is not surprising given the passage of time. This lack of physical evidence gives many what they believe is a free conscience to turn their back on the word of God.

Two years ago, Jim was one of those people. He had gone to cheder until he was old enough to

decide to quit. A completely secular Jew, he had no reason, and certainly no desire to pursue ANYTHING even remotely Jewish, and went after a secular profession instead.

After receiving his BA, Jim decided to take a few months off before heading out to grad school. He had worked summers to earn money, and exerted himself at school to justify the trip. Together with two other friends, he packed up and headed to Europe for what was planned to be the trip of a lifetime.

At the last minute, one of his friends wanted to change the itinerary. This friend wasn't Jewish, but he wanted to stop in Israel to visit the Christian holy sites. He was mildly religious, and both his parents and priest had encouraged him to make the detour. "You don't know when you'll get the chance again," they told him, and he agreed.

"Israel?" Jim questioned.

"Yes, Israel," his friend confirmed.

Jim felt uneasy just at the mention of the word. He didn't know why, but something inside him didn't like the idea, and he was at a loss to explain himself.

"Why Israel?" he asked.

"I don't know when I'll get the chance again," the friend said, "so I'd like to take a week and visit some historical places while I'm on that side of the world."

Jim was trying to come up with a logical reason for why it was a waste of their time to go there, and in that time his friend continued.

"And quite frankly, I'm surprised you're so resistant. I mean, you're Jewish."

The hairs on the back of Jim's neck bristled, and he answered, "Yeah," he said, "but by birth only. It's not like I do anything Jewish..."

"Listen," his gentile friend told him, "I've heard there are some great places for hiking and it's relatively cheap there. Let's go and have a blast for a week, and then we'll continue on through Europe."

Jim considered the plan, and reluctantly agreed. He wasn't sure why, perhaps to avoid traveling alone, but he immediately felt regret at his decision.

They made all the necessary travel arrangements and were on their way to Israel within two weeks. They were pleasantly surprised to see how modern and open Israeli culture was, and Jim was happy that he had come.

That is, until he got to Jerusalem. That's where he met Yitzy, a young, unassuming yeshivah student who, within two short days, changed Jim's life. If only he hadn't gone for that falafel, he would later

joke with Yitzy, he would have happily and blissfully gone on to Europe and a mitzvah-free life.

In more serious moments, however, he said just the opposite. On the contrary, he THANKED God that he had decided to go to Europe for the summer, and that he had LISTENED to his gentile friend to stop in Israel. He was eternally GRATEFUL for the falafel stop that brought him and Yitzy together, and that even though during their long debates every fiber of his being had screamed out for him to flee for his secular life, he hadn't listened.

It had taken less than a week of intense discussions to convince him to postpone the European leg of his trip. It took about six months of intense learning to convince him to move beyond only being born Jewish. One year after that, he was a committed Torah Jew, learning full-time while trying to figure out his true destiny in life.

As he sat at the base of the mountain, he recalled all the events that brought him to that point. Whenever he recalled how easily he might have totally missed out on Torah, he got goosebumps. "How could something so true and so important be so ignored by so many Jews?" he always wondered.

Now, at the base of what may be the most important mountain in the world, he looked up. He thanked God for waiting for him all his secular years, and for bringing him back to the ways of his ancestors against his initial will. He had wanted to run away several times, and each time he just found himself staying longer and longer until he finally accepted the truth.

He was not traveling alone, physically or spiritually. He was there with a group of friends he had met at the yeshivah, many of whom had stories similar to his. They all came from very different places, and yet were so much alike, becoming closer by the day.

"Ready?" Shlomo, once named Steven, asked him. He was English and had come to the yeshivah a year before Jim had. He had once been a professional rugby player, and still looked the part, even with the hat, sunglasses, and sun protector hanging down from the back of his hat.

Yosef looked up, shielding his eyes from the hot Sinai sun. It was only 5 a.m., and the sun was still low in the sky. But it was already quite bright and quite hot.

"It's now or never!" he said, pulling his stiff body up from his makeshift rock chair.

Seeing Jim get up, others followed suit, and within minutes they were walking single file along a narrow path up the side of the mountain. Normally talkative, they were silenced by the awe they felt. Even when they did speak, it was more like a whisper. It may not have been the REAL Mt. Sinai, but it certainly FELT like it.

Depending on the path used, it can take from about an hour and a half up to three hours to climb to the top. Being ba'alei teshuvah, it seemed only appropriate to take the faster "Repentance Path" and leave the "Camel Path" for, well, the camels. Halfway up with the early morning sun already beating

down on them, it occurred to the group that the path was not for those who had ALREADY repented, but rather those who wanted to repent for their choice of path!

Making only a few short stops, they reached the summit in under an hour.

"How long did that take?" one of them asked, too tired to look at his own watch and make the calculation.

"Fifty-seven minutes and 32 seconds," another answered.

They all looked at him.

"I used my stop watch," he told them, explaining his accuracy.

As they caught their breath, they gazed at the place and the view. It was OVERWHELMING. In fact, it was MORE than overwhelming and they hadn't yet had time to figure out why. Just by being THERE, something seemed to go off inside them, invoking all KINDS of feelings. It took several minutes before they became aware of one another again.

"Wow," one of them said under his breath.

"Yeah, really," another concurred.

They walked around, each in his own area, each imagining the history of the place.

Eventually they found themselves together again, and one of them, Yoel, said, "Maybe we should take off our shoes...you know...just in case."

"We don't have to," Binyomin said. "First of all, this might not be the real place." He had been religious the longest and knew more as well. "Secondly, Moshe Rabbeinu had to do that because the Shechinah was right there with him."

He paused and tried to imagine what that moment might have been like, and then added, "We should only be so lucky!"

There was a moment of silence and then another. Stewart (he hadn't quite gotten used to being called "Shalom" yet), said, "But what if it IS the real place!"

They all thought for a moment.

"Then we are STANDING in the place where our religion BEGAN some..." he calculated as he spoke..."three thousand...three hundred...and...thirty...ONE years ago! We are in the place that GOD Himself spoke to Moshe Rabbeinu and the ENTIRE Jewish people at that time..."

"Us TOO!" Shlomo interjected. "The midrash says that ALL Jewish souls were at Kabbalas HaTorah!"

"I knew I recognized the place!" Shalom kidded.

"Maybe you did!" Yosef said. "I've certainly had this sense of déjà vu ever since we arrived here.

"It's the heat," one of them joked.

"And lack of water..." another added. "You should drink something."

Yosef just smiled, and then found a spot to sit cross-legged on the ground. The others followed suit. Yosef scanned the view down to the base of the mountain, and pictured being among the millions of Jews waiting there to hear the word of God. He looked up to imagine the massive cloud that must have hovered over the mountain, and which everyone knew was the Divine Presence, right above the spot where he was sitting.

It gave him goosebumps.

As planned, they spent the next hour learning the Parashas HaShavuah, Behar. Since it was a leap year, it stood alone, which made it easier to finish by the time they had to leave. Using Rashi, the Ramban, and a little Orach Chaim, they covered all topics...Shmittah and Yovel, selling and redeeming land in Eretz Yisroel, lending money, and slaves. They had even brought some food along in order to make blessings while there.

As they ate, Shlomo said, "That FIRST Rashi is really important..."

"ALL Rashis are important!" Shalom said.

"I know. I just mean that it says something that doesn't come up very often."

He reopened his Chumash and found the Rashi. He reread and translated it:

What does the subject of Shmittah have to do with Mount Sinai? Weren't all the mitzvos stated at Sinai? However, just as with Shmittah, whose general principles and finer details were all stated at Sinai, likewise, all of them were stated—their general principles and their details—at Sinai.

"ALL of Torah," Yosef said, "right from this spot. What a miracle!"

He glanced at his watch and was surprised to see how fast the time had gone. They had to get a move on if they were going to catch the bus back to the Israeli border before sundown.

"We gotta head back," he told the rest.

"Well, THAT was meaningful," Shlomo said, packing up.

"Really!" the others agreed.

As they made their way to the path down, they had to overcome the desire to stay longer. Each picked up a stone and put it into his knapsack.

"A little souvenir," one of them said.

"A little REMINDER," another corrected. "It probably won't take long to forget what we experienced here today. Maybe these rocks will help us hold onto it longer!"

They barely spoke a word the entire way down. Instead, they imagined Moshe Rabbeinu descending the mountain and teaching the ENTIRE Torah to their ancestors millennia ago. At one time they might have argued AGAINST the divine validity of the Torah. Today they argued FOR it, and their Sinai experience only concretized their belief even more.

Hours later, they were grateful to cross the border back into Israel once again. It was uncomfortable to have gone to Egypt, and some had advised them against it. Each of them, however, was GLAD he had gone, and the group even decided not to stay in Eilat for a few days as planned. Somehow their Sinai experience had spilled over into their personal lives, and they just wanted to get back to Jerusalem and their yeshivah.

As predicted, the awe they had felt that day wore off as time wore on. They had their pictures and they still had their rocks, but nature ran its course. They often talked about returning there to refresh that feeling, but something always came up. Sinai for them, as it has been for millions of Jews over the millennia, became a distant memory.

Not all was lost, though. They might not have noticed, but the experience had changed them. Without knowing it, Sinai had become a part of each of them, a part of his life, and would always remain that way, as it did for EVERY Jew whose soul once stood at the Mountain of God.