

AT THE MOUNTAIN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The parsha begins with the word that defines its name - b'har - on the mountain. The mountain naturally is Sinai and the Torah's emphasis is to reinforce Judaism's core belief that our Torah is God-given and not the work of a committee over centuries. This basic belief lies at the heart of many of the contentious disputes that have marked Jewish life over the ages.

While original splinter groups within the Jewish, such as the Saducees and the Karaites, did not openly deny the validity of the Written Torah as being godly in origin, they strenuously denied the holiness of the Oral Law of Sinai and denigrated its rabbinic interpretations and decrees. This led to serious splits within the Jewish people and to bitter recriminations that lasted centuries. In all of these instances the divinity of Torah and of its Oral Law always eventually won out. Deviant movements eventually fell away from the main body of the Jewish people, both individually and as a potent group in influencing Jewish life and mores.

The "mountain" referred to is the one at Sinai where the Torah was given to Israel. It is a difficult mountain to ascend, The Psalmist asks: "Who can ascend the mountain of God?" But as difficult as it is to ascend the mountain it is even more difficult to remain there. The Psalmist again intones "and who can maintain one's self in the holiness of God's place?" The struggle about maintaining the Jewish people on the mountain of God in belief and faith has been the hallmark of Jewish life over millennia. It has not abated in our time.

Jewish secularism comes in two different and divergent forms. One is simply that the Torah's way of life and value system does not harmonize with modern society and its demands. Shabat, kashrut, etc. are all too restrictive to be functional in today's world. The Jewish people cannot afford to be so different from the rest of the world. The mountain may have had its purpose at one time but that time has now passed. New ideologies and circumstances have rendered it obsolete. So, for them the mountain no longer exists.

A second group denies the existence of the mountain altogether. There never was a mountain - it is all an urban legend fostered by the rabbis over the ages. In effect, our grandfathers were all liars or naïve believers in legends and stories for which there is no current historical scientific evidence. Aside from these two groupings there are groups who wish to be included in the religion of Judaism and who do not see themselves as being secular. But, in varying degrees, they follow the ideas of the Saducees and the Karaites though they essentially also deny that the mountain has anything to do with God and divine origins.

History shows that in the long run such philosophies and movements give way to the pressures of time and circumstance and eventually lose their influence and power. At the end of the day only the mountain remains as it always has, challenging us to ascend it and maintain ourselves upon it.

Shabat shalom.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com