

# SINAI: THE BASIS FOR JUDAISM

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The Mountain of Sinai occupies a most central place in Jewish history. The actual geographical location of the mountain itself is somewhat in doubt but its place in human civilization is cemented in memory. The Mountain of Sinai is no longer a definite place as much as it is a symbol of God's revelation to humans and the granting of a moral code to humanity. And the conduit for the transference of that message of Sinai to the world was and still is the people of Israel.

The world is accustomed to the specialness of the Jewish people. It is the source of all the anti-Jewish rhetoric and behavior that has gone before us and continues so prevalently in our time. The world's opinion is summed up in the famous doggerel "How odd of God to choose the Jews." It is the oddity of the Jews being somehow "chosen" that drives many of the other peoples of the world to be aggravated and frustrated by us.

So, the statement that appears in the Talmud, "Why was the mountain called Sinai?... is because sinaah - mindless unreasonable hatred - descended upon the world!" And this certainly reflects this viewpoint. It is not the mountain itself that is so important. Perhaps that is why in Jewish tradition the geographical location of Mount Sinai is so uncertain and even unimportant. Rather it is the result of Sinai, the enormous consequences generated by the revelation that took place there 3326 years ago that dominates all of Jewish and general history.

We can also understand the necessity of relating all of the commandments and other components of Jewish life to Sinai. That is why Rashi, quoting Midrash, asks what is the relationship between the commandment of shmitta (the sabbatical year) and the Mountain of Sinai. For everything that is important and eternal in Jewish life, by definition, has to be connected to Sinai - to the symbol and message that Sinai represents. In reality, anything not connected with Sinai will not be of lasting value as far as the Jewish future is concerned.

The distance between current ideas, plans and Sinai is not geographic - it is ideological and a matter of faith and traditional belief. Jewish history clearly shows that those who abandoned Sinai eventually fell by the wayside of Jewish life. Berlin proved not to be Jerusalem and Marx did not end up being Moses. For both Berlin and Marx were prime deniers of Sinai. It is interesting to note that the Catholic Church built a monastery on the summit of what it considers to be Mount Sinai.

All monotheistic religions claim a connection to Mount Sinai. In its symbolism and message, Mount Sinai remains the sole underpinning of a moral and optimistic human society. It is quite

understandable why the Torah emphasizes in its opening verse of this parsha that the Torah is inextricably bound together to Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is the basis for Judaism - the representative icon that transforms the physical into the spiritually eternal.

Shabat shalom

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