

OPIATE OF THE ELITE

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"The entire people saw the thunder and the flames..." (20:15)

Rashi cites the Midrash which teaches that since the verse states "kol ha'am ro'im es hakolos" - "the entire nation was able to see the thunder", miraculously all those who suffered from impaired vision had their sight restored. Similarly, since the verse states that the entire nation responded "na'aseh venishmah" - "we will do and we will obey", all those who were deaf or mute were miraculously healed.¹ Why is physical perfection a prerequisite for the Sinaitic revelation?

The Torah is dispelling the myth that religion is primarily a crutch for the infirm and misfortunate of society. Religion has always been prevalent amongst the lower classes of society, bringing them solace and hope in the face of the travails of their daily lives. The elite have generally shunned religion with affluence and health in inverse proportion to religious observance. The Jews leaving Mitzrayim were all laden with great wealth and were miraculously cured from any physical ailment, for Hashem wanted to ensure that there should be no misconceptions as to the nature of the Jewish religion; it is not a religion solely for the misfortunate, but on the contrary, for the elite.

1.20:15

ESSENTIALLY THE SAME

"I am Hashem, your G-d, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt..." (20:2)

The commentaries all question why it was necessary for Hashem to identify himself as the G-d who took Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt. Rashi cites the answer given by the Midrash stating that at Sinai, Hashem appeared to Bnei Yisroel as an elderly person, full of compassion, whereas upon leaving Egypt, at the splitting of the Red Sea, He appeared as a powerful warrior. This apparent dichotomy could leave a person with the impression that the world is controlled by different deities. Therefore, Hashem accentuates that He is the same G-d who took Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt.¹ Monotheism is a basic tenet of Judaism introduced to the world by Avraham Avinu. After Avraham, this concept was passed down from father to son, and is the basic belief of every Jew. How could any person standing at Sinai require a message regarding the unity of Hashem? Furthermore, another basic tenet of Judaism is Hashem's omnipotence, His ability to perform any miracle He desires. Why would there be any doubt that the G-d who split the Red Sea and drowned the Egyptians is the

same force at the Sinaitic revelation? The Midrash is offering a powerful insight into the level of revelation which occurred at both the Red Sea and Sinai. All miracles require some level of revelation of the presence of Hashem. However, the level of revelation at the splitting of the Red Sea and at Sinai was so strong that, although Hashem is incorporeal, having no body or form, the people experiencing this event perceived that they "saw" Hashem's true essence. It would cause great conflict in the human mind to perceive Hashem's essence in one form, and then again in another. It required a statement from Hashem to prevent any misconceptions and to prove that there were no inconsistencies in His true essence.

1:20:2

TAKING A NEW IDENTITY

"who took you out of the land of Egypt " (20:2)

This week's parsha records the Decalogue. The first commandment, which is the basis of all precepts, requires us to believe in the existence of Hashem. Hashem identifies Himself as the One "who took you out of the land of Egypt". The Ibn Ezra recounts a question which he was asked by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi¹: Why does Hashem define Himself as the G-d who took us out of Egypt?² It seems that a more appropriate title for Hashem would be "G-d, Creator of the Universe". Defining Hashem as "Creator" identifies Him as the One responsible for all existence, while, "the One who took us out of Egypt" indicates that He is responsible for only one historical incident. Rashi, apparently sensitive to this difficulty, comments "kedai hi hahotsa'ah shetihiyu mishubadim li" - "Taking you out of Egypt is sufficient reason for you to be subservient to Me."³ Most commentaries interpret that Rashi is explaining that we are obligated to be subservient to Hashem because He saved us from the tyranny of Pharaoh. Citing the Midrash, Rashi offers a second explanation; Hashem was identifying Himself at Sinai as the same power that took Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt. When punishing the Egyptians Hashem appeared as a "man of war", while at Sinai He appeared as an "elderly man full of compassion". Hashem was dispelling the notion that there were two different deities. He therefore stated at Sinai "I am the G-d who took you out of Egypt."⁴ How does compelling Bnei Yisroel to subjugate themselves to Him reflect the compassion of an elderly man? Bnei Yisroel left Egypt to begin a relationship with Hashem. Rashi is not stating that the basis of our relationship with Hashem is that we owe Him our allegiance because He saved us. Rather, Rashi is explaining that the basis for every healthy relationship is each party's concern for the well-being of the other. Hashem's taking us out of Egypt reflects His compassion and care for the Jewish people, and it is therefore the cornerstone of the relationship. "Kedai hi hahotsa'a" means that it is fitting that this act should be the basis for our serving Him, for He has shown His commitment and concern for our well-being. The

relationship forged at Sinai is described by our Sages as a marriage; by definition it must be exclusionary. Stating that Hashem created the world does not indicate a unique concern for the Jewish People alone. Therefore, it could not be the cornerstone of the marriage. The exodus from Egypt, which was performed exclusively for us, is the appropriate basis of our marital bond.

1. 20:2 2. Ibid 3. Ibid. 4. Ibid.
