

United We Stand

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Parshas Yisro

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Written By Yehuda Dov Reiss, Talmid of Yeshivas Rabeinu Yitzchak Elchonon (YU)

The Parsha's Paths

All that G-d tells us we shall do and we shall listen (24:7).

This week's Parsha records the momentous giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. The Pasuk tells us that all of our ancestors accepted the Torah willingly (*We shall do and we shall listen*). However, Tosafos famously asks that the Gemara (Shabbos 88a) learns from a different Pasuk (19:17) that G-d raised the mountain over them like a barrel and said that if they accept the Torah, fine, but if not, there they would be buried. This seems to contradict the notion that they accepted the Torah willingly.

My father, in his amazing, must-buy sefer *Kanfei Yonah* (available at the YU Seforim sale, select stores, and at crcweb.org), which discusses many fascinating contemporary issues and other important topics, discusses many of the approaches to resolve this issue, quoting from the Rav to the Besht to Rav Yehuda Amital to the Maharal, but I think all of them can basically be broken down into four categories:

1. We accepted the Torah willingly, but we were in a state of spiritual bliss. The Torah was forced upon us to make it binding even in times of difficulty when we might not be willing to accept it.
2. We were willing to accept the Torah in theory, but weren't necessarily committed to rigorous practical observance. This is what we were forced into.
3. We willingly accepted the Written Law, but not the Oral Law, which is much more difficult.
4. We were willing to accept the Torah in its entirety no matter what happened, and being forced was just to teach us the message that while it's true we accepted the Torah willingly, we have to recognize that this was not simply "our choice"- rather, we have a responsibility towards G-d to bend our will to His will.

Ultimately, I think that all these answers really reflect one common idea: by using force, G-d made our Kabalas HaTorah a more idealistic acceptance, intensifying and increasing what we were willing to do voluntarily. But why should this be true?

To answer this question, perhaps we have to answer a second question: At the beginning of Meseches Avoda Zara, we are told that in the days of Mashiach, the non-Jews will complain to G-d that they were deprived of the reward of the Jewish people

because they didn't get the Torah. G-d will reply that He offered the Torah to them (as per the midrash), but they refused it. They will complain that unlike with them, G-d forced the Torah on the Jewish people, so it wasn't a fair comparison. G-d seemingly agrees at this point and offers them one "easy" mitzva- Sukka. The non-Jews will sit in their sukkas until G-d will make the weather boiling hot, making the sukka uncomfortable. The non-Jews will leave their sukkas, kicking it down. Even though they would be exempt from sukka due to the weather, the fact that they would kick it down demonstrates their lack of commitment to Torah.

How does G-d giving the non-Jews the mitzva of sukka answer their complaint that they didn't have a mountain over their heads forcing them to accept the Torah? What does one have to do with the other?

The mitzva of Sukka represents man's vulnerability and submission before G-d and a desire to live in His house. In a sense, then, it is a house of humility. In this vein, my father suggests at the end of his essay that the idea of the mountain was to remind the Jewish people of the famous midrash as to why Har Sinai was chosen as the mountain for the giving of the Torah: because unlike the larger mountains, Har Sinai symbolized humility, and humility is an essential quality for receiving the Torah (the Gemara in Taanis says that Torah only stays with one who is humble). One who does not have a sense of reverence for the Rabbis, tradition, and submission to G-d is liable to either reject the Torah or distort it for their personal agenda. The idea of being forced into receiving the Torah is that following the Torah is not all about our own free choice and it's not a partial commitment - it is a complete, humble submission to G-d. By kicking the sukka down, the non-Jews demonstrated that they were uninterested in such submission.

The message of what Matan Torah is all about is essential, even to the most devout and committed of Jews, to facing a world of instant gratification, where sometimes our desires, lifestyle, and values clash with those of the Torah. It is especially important to reflect on all the ways our tendencies conflict with what the Torah demands of us, and recognize where our true goals and mission lies. Because no matter where our inclinations lead us, being a Torah Jew means being humble enough to realize that our commitment to Torah always comes first.

Deeper Meanings

The Gemara (Berachos 34b) tells of the following incident: Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa went to learn Torah by Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, and Rabbi Yochanan's son got very sick. Rabbi Yochanan requested that Rabbi Chanina pray for his son that he should live. Rabbi Chanina did so and Rabbi Yochanan's son recovered. Rabbi Yochanan remarked that even if he had prayed all day long, G-d would not have listened to him. His wife asked him, "But is Chanina greater than you?" "No," he replied, "But he is like a servant before the King, while I am like a noble/officer before the king."

Rashi explains that a king's servant frequently comes before him, while a noble/officer only comes on occasion. This does not, however, mean that the servant is more important than the noble. As Maharsha explains, the noble is busy doing important work on behalf of the community. He is more actively involved in a direct way with the communal needs. The servant, on the other hand, is not involved in those activities. Instead, he helps people by frequently telling the king about their needs. This leads to a dynamic where it is more natural and easier for the servant to request something of the king than the noble. Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa focused his energies on prayer, developing a deep relationship with G-d that allowed him to easily tap into G-d's mercy. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, on the other hand, was busy with communal work which inevitably detracted from his ability to have the same type of relationship, as important as he was.

I was particularly taken by this story because it clearly illustrates a paradigm I have encountered frequently in the lives of others and my own life. Service of G-d takes two primary forms: action and emotion, or the internal and the external. Some people are primarily inclined towards action, doing important communal work in some capacity, while others take a primarily introspective approach, constantly developing a relationship with G-d and using their passion to cry out for mercy and peace. For many of us (like myself), there is more of a tension between both of these approaches. Sometimes, we may be more inclined towards one but G-d expects us to push ourselves a little more in the direction of the other, and it's important to reflect and consult our Rebbeim when navigating where we focus our energies.

Of course, the foundation for both approaches is a firm commitment to Torah living and learning (though our approach to learning may be affected by our approach to life; for instance, one with a passion for external involvement may be more likely to focus on Halacha, while the introspective person may find greater satisfaction in Iomdus [deep conceptualization] or Aggadta [stories and lessons]).

Wherever our tendencies lie, it's important to identify them so that we can maximize our strengths while appropriately working on our weaknesses, and strive to reach our fullest potential in our relationship with G-d and with all our fellow Jews.

Notes on Neviim

In the 10th Perek of Shmuel, Shmuel privately anoints Shaul as king and tells him that after he leaves, he (Shaul) will encounter two men by Kevar Rachel, who will tell him that his father had stopped worrying about his lost donkeys and started worrying about him. Then he will meet three men on a pilgrimage to Beis El to sacrifice to G-d. One will have three goats, another will have three loaves of bread, and a third will have a flask of wine. They will give him two loaves of bread. Then he will arrive in Givas HaE-lokim, where he will encounter a band of prophets and spontaneously begin to prophesize with them. All of this comes to pass, just as Shmuel said. When people see Shaul prophecy, they say, "What's happening to the son of Kish? Is Shaul too among the prophets?" One man replies to them, "and what about their (the other prophets') fathers?" Meaning, why be amazed that Shaul is prophesying, when no Navi has to be the son of a Navi. Prophecy is something anyone can acquire.

The Perek ends with Shmuel publicly drawing lots, relying on Providence, to determine who the king should be, and of course the lot falls on Shaul. Some baseless men, however, scorn his abilities, but he pays them no attention.

Perhaps the primary takeaway from this Perek is that anyone can achieve greatness; you don't have to come from a remarkable family or background to reach unprecedented heights in your service of G-d. Malbim teaches that the three groups of people Shaul met on the road represented three different levels of people (space does not permit a full explanation): the first group were baseless people, the second group were people who were religiously active but only for personal gain or pleasure, and the prophets were sincerely committed to G-d with no ulterior motive. While each had at least something to offer- the first informed him about his father, the second gave him bread, and the third, prophecy; it was made clear to all that Shaul stood firmly in the latter group. Despite all precedent, Shaul's firm commitment to the loftiest ideals and goals were a pivotal part in becoming the leader of the Jewish people. Let us strive to learn from his example and reflect on how we can defy our own past precedents in achieving the highest of levels.

Goal of the week

Reflect on how you could act better than you normally do in one frequent situation.

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