



The experience at Har Sinai

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Har Sinai is known as the greatest religious experience in history. Receiving the Torah as a nation at Har Sinai transformed the way man relates to God, from an abstract leap of faith to a clear, tangible sense of mission.

If we look at the way that the story of Har Sinai is described in the Torah, we realize that it was not only about the information, the Mitzvot of the Torah; there was an element of experience that went along with the laws and lessons. The Torah describes the fire and smoke, the sounds of the shofar blast, the cloud resting on the mountain. It was a multisensory experience. Why are these details important? Wouldn't hearing the voice of God and receiving the Torah be enough to achieve the goals of Matan Torah?

Chazal notice a number of miracles, hinted to in the psukim, that Hashem performed during Har Sinai. The Pasuk in Shemot (20:15) says "And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they

stood from afar." The Midrash (Mechiltah Yitro 9) finds the words "saw the voices" to be quite strange. Voices are generally heard, not seen. Rebbe Akiva explains that at Matan Torah their senses were swapped – they saw the sounds and heard the sights. This sounds incredibly miraculous, however it is hard to understand why Hashem would perform such a miracle.

It can be a struggle sometimes to recognize how the minutia of everyday Halacha fit into these lofty and comprehensive ideas

Immediately prior to Hashem proclaiming the Aseret Hadibrot, the pasuk (Shemot 20:1) states: "And God spoke all these words, to be said". What does the phrase "all these words" come to teach us? The Midrash in the Mechiltah (4) explains that before stating each of the ten Dibrot individually, Hashem miraculously said all the Dibrot all at once,

in a manner that "no man is able to do". After proclaiming the Aseret Hadibrot in this extraordinary way he then expressed each one individually. Again we must ask, what is the goal of this miracle? Why would Hashem not just teach us the Aseret Hadibrot one by one?


A well-known Zohar (Shemot 93b) commonly quoted in the name of the Yerushalmi shines light on this question. The Zohar states that "These ten dibrot are the general rules of all the commandments of the Torah". In other words, the Aseret Hadibrot are the ten main categories of the Torah. One might suggest that by stating all of the Dibrot at once, Hashem was trying to demonstrate to us that the entirety of the Torah should be seen as a whole. The Torah is not a list of individual laws and precepts, rather an intertwined system that only fully reaches its potential when complete.

This may also be the message of seeing the sounds and hearing the sights. We generally hear sounds individually, and then piece together the series of sounds to make words, sentences, and paragraphs. ►

► Auditory communication is made up of individual sounds put together to make a whole. When one hears two sounds at once, it is often extremely difficult to process. Our eyes, though, are able to encompass a much wider spectrum. This is why we say “seeing the big picture” as opposed to “hearing the big picture”. Hearing denotes the understanding of individual pieces of information, whereas seeing is the recognition of grand comprehensive ideas.

Seeing the sounds at Har Sinai emphasizes that we were able to understand how individual laws fit into the universal system of the Torah. Hearing the sights enables us to internalize the importance of each piece as an integral part of the whole.

There are many beautiful, general ideas in the Torah whose values are very easy for us to see, for example connecting to Hashem, Tikkun Olam, or being honest and upright. However, it can be a struggle

sometimes to recognize how the minutia of everyday Halacha fit into these lofty and comprehensive ideas. The miracle at Har Sinai experience allows us to better understand how every mitzvah and aspect of Halacha is an integral part of achieving the grand, all-encompassing message of the Torah. 

Matan Torah: To hear and to see

Rabbi Dr. Charles Grysman

Rabbi of Zichron Yisroel Congregation of Associated Hebrew Schools

Shavuot celebrates the experience of Matan Torah, the only time that God spoke to the entire nation of Israel. The Talmud in Masechet Shabbat says that with each word of the first two commandments that God uttered, the souls of Bnei Yisrael actually left their bodies and they were then revived with the *tal*, dew, used to revive the dead. This provided the nation with the opportunity to understand life from a uniquely spiritual perspective.

The heightened awareness at Mount Sinai is poignantly expressed in the pasuk (Shemot 20:14): וכל העם ראים את הקולות ואת הלפידים ואת קול השפר ואת ההר עשן, “All the people saw the sounds, the flames, the blast of the ram’s horn and the mountain smoking”.

Rashi tells us that the capacity to see sound is unique to this one experience. Rav Zevin says that the difference

between sight and sound is that sight reveals more, but its scope is limited to


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what the eye can see. Hearing covers a greater distance than sight, but is less accurate.

Our field of vision in life is often

cluttered with immediate needs, and that which has lasting benefit is often heard only from a distance. The miracle of receiving the Torah is that for a brief interlude, the lasting and more spiritual aspects of life came near, causing the faint echoes of a grander reality to become apparent.

We need to constantly revisit this pivotal moment in our history so that we may develop a productive sense of direction and value the spiritual aspects of our existence. In highlighting the giving of the Torah, Shavuot also highlights our need to lend focus to matters of the spirit. Torah study is the best vehicle for accomplishing this task.

May we all have opportunities to develop an enhanced perspective of matters of the spirit so that the important things in life become clear and near. 

From barley to bread: the path from slavery to royalty

Rabbi Avram Rothman, PhD

Senior Rabbi, Aish Thornhill Community Shul

Following forty nine days of counting the Omer, we arrive at the holiday of Shavuot. The relationship between counting each day from the second day of Pesach until Shavuot is one worthy of investigation.

On a daily basis we are commanded to take a set amount (Omer) of barley and bring it as an offering. Doing so on a daily basis is the actual counting of the Omer.

Finally, on the fiftieth day, the start of Shavuot, the offering is changed from one of barley to one of fine wheat flour baked into loaves of bread. The significance between the two is quite great. Barley, in the tradition of Torah, is a food usually designated for animal consumption. It is inexpensive, readily available, and requires little or no real preparation to be consumed.

Wheat flour, on the other hand, is very labour intensive and is considered a food suitable for human use. It must be gathered, cleaned, separated from the chaff, ground, and cleaned again. All of that is done even before the start of creating bread. Then water is added to the ground wheat flour, and the mixture is kneaded and baked. All of this is done before the bread can be eaten.

The message we are given is that the Hebrews, having just left over 200 years of slavery, were more animal-like than human in many ways. Their slave-masters took away the ability to make decisions, to find any form of higher satisfaction in work, to even decide what to eat, where to live, or when to go home. Virtually every decision, major or minor, in a slave's life was decided by the master.

Now, the Hebrews need to become

a strong, self-determined nation with the ability and inspiration to become higher humans. Humans with free-will, with self-determination, with the ability to choose what career to pursue, how to live, what to eat, where to go, and so much more. As well, they need to lose their slave mentality and quickly develop the ability to make ethical decisions, strive

Travelling from slavery to the pinnacle of actualized human potential in just over seven weeks is an enormous undertaking

for the spiritual, help others, and grow as individuals, families, communities, and as a nation.

For seven weeks from leaving Egypt we are commanded to offer animal food on a daily basis and we are constantly reminded that we need to grab each of those days and use them to strive towards the greatness of the nation we will become. We offer the animal food with full knowledge that come that fiftieth day we will have worked on ourselves and when we offer the final sacrifice of finely ground flour baked into bread- we will have achieved a level of spirit high enough to be the nation who receives the Torah.

Travelling from slavery to the pinnacle of actualized human potential in just over seven weeks is an enormous undertaking.

Yet, it is one we do each year. We leave Pesach and climb, day by day so that each of us, as those before us, can reach the majestic level of experiencing the singular moment that man and G-d touch: the receiving of the Torah.

This message given to us by the symbols of animal food and well prepared human food is a profound one and one that is compelling. We need to grab the spirit all around us that is there to inspire and encourage us to become one with the Jewish people, one with the Torah and one with G-d.

May we all find success in our personal growth as we climb from slavery to the ultimate of freedoms, from the lowly start as a slave to one of royalty as we each receive the Torah personally on that very special fiftieth day we call Shavuot. 🕎

Celebrating redemption

Rav Shlomo Riskin Chancellor and Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Torah Institutions

The Megillah of Ruth contains one of the most idyllic stories in the Bible, a tale of “autumnal love” between a widow (Ruth) and a widower (Boaz), within the backdrop of diaspora intermarriage, conversion to Judaism, and the agricultural life in ancient Israel. The Rabbinic Sages ordained that we read this Megillah on Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, the anniversary of the Torah Revelation at Sinai and the celebration of the first fruits brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. And since Shavuot is the climatic zenith of Pesach, the development of a newly-freed group of slaves in the Sinai desert into a Torah-imbued nation firmly ensconced in their own homeland of Israel, the reasons for this special reading are many: Boaz and Ruth are the great – grandparents of David, the Psalm-singing military hero who united the tribes of Israel and first envisioned the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Ruth the Moavite is Jew-by-choice whose commitment to Torah Judaism makes her worthy of being the great grandmother of the prototype of the eventual Messiah-King, and the last three chapters of the story takes place between the beginning of the barley harvest (just before Pesach) and the very end of the wheat harvest (not long after Shavuot). I would wish to ask three questions on the Megillah of Ruth, the answer to which I believe will provide an extra dimension of our understanding as to why we read this particular Megillah on Shavuot, the festival which serves as harbinger to redemption.

Firstly, from a narrative perspective: the first chapter spans the ten years the family of Naomi is in Moav, and the last three chapters describe the happenings of the three month period between the barley and wheat harvests. Why did the author give so much text space to such a small span of times?

Secondly, the Midrash (Ruth Rabbah)

tells us that Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the precise time of the funeral of Boaz’s wife, and that Boaz died immediately after he impregnated Ruth; that is how the Rabbinic Sages account for the fact that Boaz is not mentioned in the last verses of the Megillah (Ruth 4:14-22), which specifically deal with the birth of Oved, son to Boaz and Ruth as well as father to Yishai. Why do the Sages see fit to sandwich these joyous verses recounting such a significant love story between two seemingly tragic deaths – without the text itself mentioning those deaths explicitly or even hinting at a mournful mood?

And finally, can we possibly glean from between the lines of the Megillah what precisely occurred between Boaz and Ruth during the night they spent together on the threshing floor. What did her mother-in-law Naomi suggest that she do – and what did she do in actuality?

If Shavuot is truly the Festival of Redemption – and redemption links humanity to the Eternal G-d of all eternity – the period which is eternally Sabbath – then the Megillah of Ruth must deal with the eternal rather than the temporal. Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people – and any diaspora experience can only be temporal at best and destructive at worst. The first chapter opens with a famine in Israel, and an important personage (Elimelech) who leaves Bethlehem (literally the house of bread) with his wife and sons to seek “greener pastures” in the idolatrous Moav. As happened with Father Avraham, Diaspora proved far more dangerous (Bereishit 12:10-20), the two sons, Machlon (lit. sickness) and Kilion (lit. destruction) marry Hittite wives – and since the children follow the religion of the mother, the Israelite line of Elimelech and Naomi – seems to have ended! The

father and his sons all die in Moav – their earlier spiritual demise expressing itself physically; fortunately one daughter-in-law clings to her mother-in-law Naomi, converts to Judaism (“Where you will go” – to Israel – “there shall I go, where you will lodge, there shall I lodge,” – maintaining the same sexual purity as you – “Your people shall be my people, your G-d my G-d” – Ruth 1:16), and returns to Bethlehem. Only now – in Israel – can eternal history begin, and so the next three chapters, and the next three months, are far more significant than the previous ten years, which had almost destroyed the family line.

The Midrash tells us that Boaz’s wife has died just as Naomi and Ruth return – and that Boaz will die three months later. But death in itself is not tragic for Judaism: after all, every individual must die sooner or later. The only relevant question is to what extent the individual, when alive, participates in Jewish eternity. Naomi sends Ruth to glean the forgotten grain and harvest the produce in the corner of the field – agricultural provision which the Torah provides for the poor Israelites. Divine Providence sent Ruth to Boaz’s field – and Boaz was a kinsman of Elimelech. Boaz seems to be attracted to this comely proselyte – stranger and gives her his protection. Naomi understands that participation in Jewish eternity means having a child with Jewish parentage in Israel; she therefore instructs Ruth to wash and anoint herself, dress in special finery, visit the place on the threshing floor where Boaz will be spending the night at the height of the harvest season, and lie down at his feet. She also warns Ruth not to reveal who she is (Ruth 3:3,4). In effect, she is suggesting that Ruth tempt Boaz as Tamar had tempted Boaz’s forbear Yehudah generations earlier – and at least enter ►



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Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

CHANCELLOR AND ROSH YESHIVA OF OHR TORAH INSTITUTIONS

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"Kedushat Yerushalayim – the sanctity of Jerusalem"

Drasha in the Main Shul following Mussaf

"The message of a Cohen's love"

Afternoon shiur


7:00 PM Rebbetzin Judy Taub Hall

"The purpose of Torah Sheba'al-peh and the tragedy of the agunah"

D'var Torah at Seudah Shlishit



- Jewish history by bearing his child (see Bereishit 38).

Ruth senses that Boaz loves her – and so she holds out for higher stakes than a mere “one night stand.” She tells him exactly who she is, and she asks that he “redeem” her by marriage and by restoring to her Elimelech’s previously sold homestead in Israel. Ruth understands that true eternity means bearing a child on your own piece of land in Israel – not in the sly, but as a respected wife and householder. Boaz complies, and Oved, the grandfather of King David, is born. Ruth’s commitment to Torah – the land of Torah, the laws of Torah, the loving-kindness of Torah, the modesty of Torah – catapults this convert into the center stage of Jewish eternity. Indeed, there is no book more fitting for the Festival of The First Fruits, Torah and Redemption than the Megillah of Ruth. 



SPOTLIGHT ON: OHR TORAH STONE

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Rav Kook: The whole Torah in its parts

From Orot Hatorah Perek 2: Torah Lishma

“Learn Torah for its own sake” – Learn for the sake of the Torah. God desires that wisdom be made actual. This wisdom is more desirable and uplifted than we can ever understand. Any lacking in understanding comes from us. Because we are immersed in a physical body, we cannot recognize [wisdom’s] greatness, its strength and uplifted nature.

The wisdom of the Torah is the divine revelation that, in accordance with God’s will, results from our worship and learning. When we learn Torah, we bring its wisdom from potential to actual, as it relates to our spirit. There can be no comparison between the light that is renewed when the Torah is connected to one person’s spirit and when the Torah is connected to another person’s spirit. So when we learn Torah, we literally make it greater. Since the Holy One, blessed be He, wishes to make the Torah greater, we should learn out of love for the great light that God wishes to be revealed, [in our own desire that it] grow greater and greater. Even more, we should create Torah thoughts, for this certainly makes the Torah greater—literally, with a double measure of light.

א. ענין תורה לשמה - לשם התורה. כי מציאות החכמה הוא רצון השי' שתהי' בפעל, והיא מציאות יותר נחמדה ומעולה מכל מה שאפשר להחשב, ואין החסרון כי אם מצדנו, שמצד היותנו שקועים בגוף אין אנו מכירים כל ענין וחזק ועילוי מציאותה.

וחכמת התורה הרי היא הגילוי האלהי כפי רצונו ית' הבא מצד עבודתנו ותלמודנו. והנה כל הלומד תורה הוא מוציא מהבחי אל הפעל את מציאות חכמתה מצד נפשו, ובודאי אינו דומה האור המתחדש מצד חיבור התורה לנפש זו לאור הנולד מהתחברותה לנפש אחרת, ואם כן הוא מגדיל התורה ממש בלמודו, וכיון שהקב"ה רוצה שיגדיל תורה, הדרך הישר הוא שילמד האדם מצד אהבתו את האור הגדול, שרוצה השי' בגילוי מציאותו, שיתגדל יותר ויותר. ומכל שכן לחדש בתורה, שהוא ודאי הגדלת התורה ממש באור כפול.

In the early 19th century, there was an argument between the leaders of the chasidut movement and those of the mitnagdim movement about the purpose of learning Torah. The Baal Hatanya (Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi) wrote that Torah Lishma, the ideal way to learn Torah, was dveikut – connecting to Hashem. Rav Chaim of Volozhin in his Sefer Nefesh Hachaim disagreed and wrote that Torah Lishma meant learning for the sake of Torah, to develop and cultivate the ideas and precepts of the Torah.

Rav Kook in this piece attempts to create a synthesis between the two sides. He explains that Torah is the will of God, and learning Torah is the actualization of that will in our material world. Learning Torah Lishma is realizing that every individual has a perspective on Torah that no other individual has. Therefore, in order to completely materialize the will of God in this world everyone is responsible to clarify and develop their understanding of Torah. We are therefore both developing the Torah as well as connecting to the will of God in the most personal way.

The main principle of “learning Torah for its sake” can only be realized, if one understands and realizes the significances of how all the specifics in the Torah are loved with a holy appreciation, and how the universal light of Torah, that fills the whole world with life, lies within all of the specifics.

ז. עיקר למוד תורה לשמה אי אפשר לבא כ"א ע"י הכשר זה של ההבנה וההדגשה הבאה עמה, איך כל פרטי תורה חביבים חבת קדש ואיך האור הכללי, המלא חיים ומביא חיים לעולם, מתפלש הוא בכל הפרטים כולם.

There are many beautiful, general ideas in the Torah, whose values are very easy for us to see, for example connecting to Hashem, Tikkun Olam, or being honest and upright. However, it can be a struggle sometimes to recognize how the minutia of everyday Halacha fit into these lofty and comprehensive ideas. The Goal of learning Torah Lishma, is to allow us to better understand how every mitzvah and aspect of Halacha is an integral part of achieving the grand, all-encompassing message of the Torah.

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