

# The Individualized Experience of Matan Torah

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Shavuot is the anniversary of the day that perhaps most significantly altered the history of the Jewish people. It is the celebration of the Jewish people's receiving the Torah. This event signifies a one-time national direct encounter with G-d and the forging of an eternal covenant, with implications for the major and minor beliefs and behaviors of every Jew thereafter. Chazal even write that the continued existence of the world was contingent upon the willingness of the Jewish people to accept the Torah,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that this event had profound universalistic ramifications beyond its direct impact on the Jewish people.

*Matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah) was, on the one hand, a major event on a national, collective level. The unity experienced by the Jewish people as they stood at the foot of the mountain was unparalleled, as noted by Rashi on Shemot, 19:2. The exclamation of “*na'aseh vinishmah*, we will do and we will listen,” affirmed the collective active acceptance of the Torah by the entire Jewish people as one unified body. On the other hand, a close examination of the manner in which the Torah was given points subtly to highly individualized elements of the experience. Indeed, given that the Torah was meant not just to be collectively accepted, but also personally embraced and internalized, it follows logically that the *Matan Torah* experience would include individually-unique elements. In the brief article that follows, the private dimensions of the *Matan Torah* event will be explored, along with a consideration of the implications for the personal relationship with Torah that each individual can attain.

## Approach # 1: Everyone Can Learn

There is some ambiguity surrounding the events of *Matan Torah*. One issue left somewhat unclear is the precise location of Moshe Rabbeinu during *Kabbalat haTorah* (the receiving of the Torah). According to Rashi (see Shemot 24:1), Moshe was standing on top of Har Sinai when

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my husband, Yehuda Turetsky, for his valuable suggestions in preparation of this article.

<sup>2</sup> See *Bereishit Rabbah* 1:1, and an elaboration of this point in *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* 4:25.

Hashem gave the Jewish people the Torah. However, a close reading of the text may indicate otherwise, as the final *pasuk* prior to the giving of the *Aseret Hadibrot* (Ten Commandments) states that Moshe went down from the mountain. Based on that *pasuk*, Ramban and Ibn Ezra (ad loc) challenge Rashi's assertion and maintain that Moshe was in fact at the bottom of the mountain during *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

R. Zvi Grumet<sup>3</sup> notes that Ramban and Ibn Ezra's reading of the Chumash conveys an important message. Moshe's physical position among the people during *Matan Torah* indicates that the Torah belongs to all of *Klal Yisrael* equally. Lest one think that greater piety or increased scholarship grants a stronger claim to the Torah, Moshe's position at the bottom of the mountain clearly signifies that all Jews have equal access to the Torah, irrespective of status or stature.

An additional implication of Moshe's stance among the people during *Kabbalat HaTorah* relates to the role of intermediaries in *avodat Hashem* (service of G-d). Had Moshe been on the mountain, the Jewish people could have erroneously concluded that they could only truly connect to Hashem through Moshe or some other intermediary. Moshe's position within the nation suggests that it is incumbent upon each individual to forge his or her unique and personal relationship with G-d, without reliance on any outside mechanism or individual to mediate the relationship between G-d and him or herself.

The Jewish tradition has long embraced this very powerful idea; the Rambam's principles of faith include the prohibition against relying on an intermediary when approaching G-d. Additionally, the Talmud<sup>4</sup> writes that in contrast to the crown of kingship and priesthood, the crown of Torah is accessible to all. It sits in the corner, available for anyone who desires it to take it. It is possible this same idea of equal access and opportunity manifests itself through an additional element of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* (the gathering at Sinai). The Jewish religion is unique in that its national inception was marked by a mass revelation rather than a revelation to an individual. R. Yehuda HaLevi notes one important dimension of mass revelation, in that it serves as strong evidence in demonstrating the Torah's authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

However, in light of the above ideas, it is possible that mass revelation underscores an additional message. Every member of *Klal Yisrael* alive at that time, and according to some, every Jew that would ever be born, was present at the moment of the most intense Divine revelation the world has ever known. This signifies that every Jew has a unique portion in the Torah and is charged with an individualized role in carrying out the Torah's mission in the world. As long as one believes that he or she can rely on the Torah study of others, or that one individual's Divine mission in the world is less important than that of another, one will be unable to maximally invest in and grow from the treasure of Torah. When one perceives the Torah as uniquely meaningful for each individual, one can commit to actualizing one's own potential through scrupulous yet personalized *avodat Hashem*.

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<sup>3</sup> His article is available at <http://www.tzemachdavid.org/Vsamachta/Shavuot01/mountain.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> See *Yoma* 72b.

<sup>5</sup> See *Kuzari* 1:25.

## Approach # 2: The Role of Passion in Personal Acquisition of Torah

The Sinaitic experience is often referred to as “*Kabbalat haTorah*,” loosely translated as “the acceptance of the Torah,” referring to the Jewish people’s willing acceptance of the Torah. Chazal, on the other hand, paint a very different picture. Rather than portraying the *Matan Torah* episode as one in which the Jewish people lovingly embraced the Torah, Chazal suggest that Hashem forced the Jewish people into accepting the Torah:

*The verse states, “And they stood under the mountain.” R. Avdimi b. Chama b. Chasa said: This teaches that God hung the mountain over them like a barrel and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, good, but if not, this will be your burial ground.”*

**Shabbat 88a**

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר אמר רב אבדימי  
בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקדוש  
ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר  
להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב  
ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם.  
**שבת פח.**

Various commentaries have explored the significance of the coercion that was used by G-d during *Matan Torah*. Tosafot (ad loc) question why any amount of force would be necessary in convincing *Klal Yisrael*, given that *Klal Yisrael* had already stated “*na’aseh vinishmah*,” expressing their absolute commitment to accepting the Torah!<sup>6</sup> They answer that while the Jews were initially prepared to accept the Torah willingly, they became incredibly frightened when witnessing the awesome fire that accompanied the delivering of the *Luchot* (Tablets). Hashem therefore had to force them to accept the Torah because they would otherwise have reneged on their initial commitment.

An astute question is asked by R. Shmuel Birnbaum, the late *Mirr*er Rosh Yeshiva.<sup>7</sup> R. Birnbaum questions why the Torah needed to be given with fire if it would cause the Jewish people to retract their commitment. Would it not have been simpler to give the Torah without fire, thereby letting the Jewish people accept the Torah on their own volition and not as a result of being threatened by possible doom? R. Birnbaum suggests that the Torah needed to be given with fire, even if it meant that the Jews would have to be forced into accepting the Torah. This, he explains, is because “Torah without fire isn’t called Torah.” Torah void of passion, fervor and excitement is not authentic Torah; Torah must be infused with an emotional zeal and dedication.

Perhaps R. Birnbaum’s understanding of the role of the fire at *Ma’amad Har Sinai* can also inform one’s understanding of the role of metaphorical fire when engaging with Torah. Acquisition of Torah is not meant to involve the mere imparting of information. If Torah were meant to remain relegated to the cognitive domain, perhaps it could have been given in a more subdued manner. However, Torah is inextricably linked with fire: with an emotional attachment

<sup>6</sup> This follows the position of Rashi (and Chazal) that the Jewish people said *na’aseh vinishmah* prior to receiving the Torah. Ramban offers an alternate approach in his commentary on the Torah.

<sup>7</sup> His approach is cited in *Yalkut Kitrah Shel Torah* 21-22.

and with a passion that is reflective of a personal enthusiasm toward that which one treasures, values and perceives as eternally meaningful. Only when one proactively invests all of one's faculties into understanding and penetrating Torah can the personal relationship with the divine word be maximized.

### Approach # 3: One Torah for Many Different People

An age-old educational question relates to whether to teach to the top, middle, or bottom of the class. Should one teach to the lowest common denominator, explaining and re-explaining the material until every single student understands, even if the stronger students will become bored and disengaged within the first few minutes? Alternatively, perhaps teachers should aim to challenge and stimulate, thereby promoting a rich experience for the stronger students, though at risk of losing the weaker ones along the way? This struggle is common to novice and veteran teachers alike, across all grade levels and disciplines. Consider this educational challenge in the context of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*. *Ma'amad Har Sinai* was meant to be personally meaningful, engaging and instructive for not just a handful of students but for an entire nation of individuals. If a teacher finds it difficult to engage a diverse class that may consist of only 10 or 15 students, how did Hashem deliver the Torah in a way that was accessible and meaningful to the entire Jewish people? Based on the writings of later commentaries, two approaches can be suggested that highlight the individualized dimensions that were subtly woven into what was otherwise the highly collective experience of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*.

R. Shlomo Luria, known as the Maharshah, describes the differentiated nature in which the Torah was conveyed.<sup>8</sup> According to the Maharshah, while the actual Torah presented by G-d was finite, each person processed and experienced the Torah through the unique prism of his or her background, thereby receiving the Torah in a unique and personalized way. In that sense, *Matan Torah* reflects a sophisticated educational model in which various individuals are capable of partaking in a single experience, yet benefiting in different ways. Indeed, recent developments in the field of education in which teachers use an array of strategies to simultaneously meet the needs of diverse students mirror the methods modeled by G-d at *Matan Torah*.<sup>9</sup> Individual needs and proclivities are respected, while still promoting a sense of community and cohesiveness. What was on some level an experience focused on the collective was actually a highly personal encounter for each member of *Klal Yisrael*.

R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, author of *Meshech Chochma*, offers an alternate approach.<sup>10</sup> He suggests that at times the Torah intentionally uses a vague formulation in order to allow for different interpretations and to remain relevant for different people. A prime example of this phenomenon relates to the obligation to learn Torah. The Torah avoids giving an explicit measurement that quantitatively delineates how much Torah each person is expected to learn. This ambiguity necessitates follow up with an oral law and later rabbinic clarification to

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<sup>8</sup> *Yam Shel Shlomo*, Introduction to *Bava Kamma*.

<sup>9</sup> Levy, H. M. (2008). Meeting the needs of all students through differentiated instruction: Helping every child reach and exceed standards. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas*, 81(4), 161-164.

<sup>10</sup> See *Ohr Sameach*, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:2 and *Meshech Chochmah*, *Parashat Eikev* 11:13.

elaborate on the various factors that determine one's particular obligation to study Torah. This ambiguity, therefore, should not be perceived as an imperfection in the Torah's formulation; rather, R. Meir Simcha suggests that Hashem never meant for the requirement to study Torah to be categorical and absolute. Recognizing individual differences, both internal traits and external circumstances, Hashem crafted a sophisticated system in which each individual is meant to use divine guidelines to honestly assess personal roles and responsibilities.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the pedagogical ramifications of the individualization of *Matan Torah*, the nuances of the experience at *Ma'amad Har Sinai* highlight opportunities for finding personal meaning in Torah, and encourage each individual to forge a personal connection with the Torah. Rather than trying to squelch a sense of uniqueness, we are encouraged to bring our individuality into our relationship with Torah and to use it as a basis to strengthen and deepen our connection with the divine word.

## Conclusion

*Matan Torah* may be among the most significant national events in Jewish collective history. At the same time, the nuances of the *Matan Torah* story demonstrate that while G-d interacts with us as a nation, He also engages with us as individuals. The physical arrangement of the nation and its leader during *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, the divine revelation to which every single Jew bore witness, the symbolism of the fire that accompanied the *Aseret Hadibrot*, and the individualized manner in which each person heard and processed the divine word, all point to the unique portion in Torah that is allotted to every single Jew. Through the carefully crafted *Ma'amad Har Sinai* experience, G-d conveyed the value of every individual Jew and their potential for forging a deep, meaningful, personalized connection with G-d and His Torah.

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<sup>11</sup> R. Avraham Yitzchak HaKohain Kook has a similar formulation in *Ma'amarei Raaya* p. 198-199. It is interesting to compare how R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk and R. Kook agree in their general position on the amount of Torah one must study, while possibly differing on which factors would lead to people having different requirements.