The most iconic image associated with matan Torah is surely the one described in the Gemara (Shabbat 88a):

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר א"ר אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם.

"And they stood bi-tahtit of the mountain" (Shemot 19:17). Rav Avdimi son of Hama son of Hasa said, “This teaches us that The Holy One, Blessed be He, suspended the mountain over them as a vat (gigit) and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, good. But if not, there will be your burial place.’”

Rav Avdimi interprets the unusual word tahtit as if it were tahat, meaning “under,” probably influenced by a verse later in the Torah where that image is explicitly indicated, “And you approached and stood under (tahat) the mountain” (Devarim 4:11). In this view, at matan Torah, the Jews stood, literally, under Har Sinai and were presented with an ultimatum: either you accept the Torah or you will die.

This vision of the ultimatum offered the Jews under the mountain at the moment of Revelation is also found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. In describing how the Nations of the World will seek reward from God at the End of Days, the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 2b) records that their claim will be rejected because they refused to accept the Torah even after being offered it by God. Their retort, in the words of the Sages, will be, “Master of the Universe, did You suspend the mountain over us as a vat as you did to the Torah, they all made up their minds alike to accept the kingship of God with joy,” and goes on to note that “God appeared on Mount Sinai like an old man full of mercy.” This very different sentiment is also reflected in a number of other rabbinic texts as well.

For me the most compelling expression of this perspective is found in the comment of Mekhila de-Rabi Yishmael on the verse, “And they stood bi-tahtit of the mountain” (Shemot 19:17):

It teaches us that the mountain was uprooted from its place and they [the people of Israel] came near and stood under it, as it is said, “And you approached and stood under the mountain” (Devarim 4:11). Of them it is declared in the traditional sacred writings, “O my dove in the clefts of the rock” (Shir ha-Shirim 2:14). This verse in Shir ha-Shirim, invoking the image of the Jews under the mountain at Revelation like a dove is found in the clefts of the rock, is also found in Mekhila de-Rabi Shimon ben Yohai and Midrash Rabbah Shir ha-Shirim.

Why is a dove found in the clefts of the rock? It is fair to assume that...
it is seeking protection from the elements rather than continuing to feel vulnerable to them; resting under the outcropping of the rock enables the bird to feel safe and secure. Now imagine the Jews standing at the foot of Mount Sinai exposed to the merciless heat of the summer sun in the desert. How uncomfortable they must have felt. How unpleasant and even painful the experience must have been for them! Who can concentrate on hearing the words of Moshe, or even God Himself, in such a distressed position? And so, sensing the aggrieved state of the Jewish people, God lifted the mountain over them to provide shade for them, to protect them from the sun, like the dove is protected by finding shelter in the clefts of the rock. Now, as a result of God’s kindness, they were in a much better position to focus on what they were hearing. Yes, the image is the same. The Jews were, indeed, under the mountain, but gone is the sense of ultimatum, coercion, compulsion or duress. In its place we have God’s love, God’s sensitivity, God’s protection. We can now better appreciate a different statement in the Midrash,

אוי בבצלת השור, אני היא והבכה אני, אני שחייתת בתכל של פיט.

“I [the Jewish people] am a rose of Sharon (Shir ha-Shirim 2:1). I am the one and beloved am I. I am she who was hidden in the shadow of Sinai.”

God’s arranging for the Jewish people to be in the shadow of Sinai was, indeed, a most clear indication of how beloved they were by Him.

So which is it? Were the Jewish people forced into accepting the Torah or did they accept it voluntarily, with great joy? Was God being coercive or was God being kind? This is the subject of much discussion but I would suggest that, ultimately, both are true. On the one hand, it is imperative that we submit to God’s will and devote ourselves to following what we believe to be His commandments. We should experience our commitment to Torah and mitzvot as if we were coerced into observing them, as if we have no choice in the matter at all. And, at the same time, we should appreciate the gift that God kindly bestowed upon us by granting us the opportunity to live our lives blessed by the warmth and the specialness of Jewish life and Jewish living. To borrow from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s description of what he learned from his mother, “Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to mitzvot.” Judaism is both, requiring compliance and providing warmth.

On this holiday of Shavuot, then, when we invoke the image of our ancestors under Har Sinai at the great moment of Revelation, we reaffirm that our observance of mitzvot is motivated by these two dimensions. We do so, one, because we have no choice, and two, because we appreciate how meaningful they are for our lives. Indeed, we would choose to observe them even were we not obligated to do so.9

It is my pleasure to contribute to this collection of essays in honor of Yeshiva University President Richard Joel as he completes his tenure as the leader of our institution. Reflecting upon his many very significant contributions, I want to conclude with an insight on this Talmudic passage that I heard from my father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter z”l.

There is one word that is out of place in this rabinic formulation. In the view of Rav Avdimi, God held the mountain over the Jewish people at Sinai and said, “If you accept the Torah, good. But if not, there will be your burial place (sham tehei kevurathkhem).” There will be your burial place? Should He not have said, “Here will be your burial place?” Would it not have made more sense for the text to have read, “If you will not accept the Torah, I will drop the mountain on top of you and you will die right here”? True, it is interesting to note that the version of this statement in the Mekhilta de-Rabi Shimon ben Yohai does in fact read, “If you accept upon yourselves the Torah [good], and if not here (kan) will be your burial place.”10 What is the significance of the “there (sham)” in the Talmudic version?

The answer lies in understanding the particular choice of the “kafah alehem har ki-gigit” image adduced here. Gigit means vat or “something arched, roofing, a huge vessel, tub, tank (for brewing beer).”11 Kafah, similar to kipah, or dome, gives the impression that the Jews were not under the vat or mountain, but in the mountain, surrounded on all sides by the mountain. The Maharsha, in his commentary on this passage in Shabbat uses the phrase “betokh ha-tahtit.” Perhaps, then, we can understand the choice of the word sham. Imagine trying to kill a fly not by hitting it but by trapping it inside a glass. It will live for a while but, soon, it will tire and die. So too the Jewish people, suggested my father z”l. God was telling them, “If you accept the Torah, good. But if you will not do so, you will continue to live for a while just like all the other nations around you, the Hitit, Hivi, Yevusi, Emori, and Girgashi. They too will continue to exist without the Torah. But sham,
there, in the future, down the long road of history, tihiyeh kevruratchem, you will be buried. You will not be able to sustain eternal existence without the Torah. At some point I guarantee you that you will disappear, just as all those other nations will disappear."


I have dealt with the contemporary challenge of experiencing submission to God’s commandments while at the same time seeking to make them personally meaningful and resonant in my article, "Halakhic Authority in a World of Personal Autonomy," in Michael J. Harris, Daniel Rynhold and Tamara Wright, eds., *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks* (New Milford and Jerusalem, 2012), 155-76.

10 See above, n. 1.

11 Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary* (New York, 1950), 234. Rashi, *Shabbat* 88a, s.v. ggetic, translates it as "a vessel in which beer is placed."

12 I am reminded of the formulation of the Rambam (*Hil. Melakhim* 5:4) in connection with *The Seven Nations*, "their memory has already been lost (u-kevar avad zikrhem)."

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Endnotes


2 The Talmud itself is sensitive to this assessment because it immediately wonders (*Shabbat*, ibid.) why any Jew can ever be faulted for not observing the Torah since it was originally accepted only under duress.


4 Midrash Rabbah Shir ha-Shirin 1:2:2, 1:2:3, Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer, Chapter 41; Mekhilta de-Rabi Yishmael, Masekhta de-ba-Hodesh, Yitro, Parshah 6, beginning (Weiss edition, p. 74b; Lauterbach edition, p. 319). See too Rashi, Shemot 19:9, s.v. et divrei ha-am.

5 Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhta de-ba-Hodesh, Yitro, Parshah 3, end (Weiss edition, p. 72b; Lauterbach edition, p. 307).

6 Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, Yitro 19:17 (Hoffmann ed., p. 99); Midrash Rabbah Shir ha-Shirin 2:14:4.

It is interesting to note that it appears that Rashi conflates both of these sources (the Talmud in *Shabbat* and the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael) in his commentary to the verse, "And they stood bi-tahtit of the mountain" (Shemot 19:17). He writes, "According to the simple meaning (lefshepshuto) [it means] at the foot of the mountain. And its midrashic interpretation [is] that the mountain was uprooted from its place (she-nitlash ha-har mi-mekomo) and was held over them like a vat (ve-nikhpah aleihem ki-gigit)." Notice that the source Rashi gives for this second interpretation is a midrash and not a Talmudic text. Indeed, the first half of his comment, the words "she-nitlash ha-har mi-mekomo," appear in the midrash (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael) and not in the Talmud. The second half, "ve-nikhpah aleihem ki-gigit," invokes language found in the Talmudic passage and not in the midrash. I thank my son-in-law, Corey Tarzik, for drawing this interesting point to my attention many years ago. See too Rashi, Devarim 32:10, s.v. yesovevenhu.

7 Midrash Rabbah Shir ha-Shirin 2:1:1.


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