

The Power of Obligation

My Choice

Although I wasn't Jewish, I grew up going to Chabad Hebrew school, day camp, and shul. As I got older, my mother and I celebrated all the Jewish holidays in a more and more Orthodox fashion. It wasn't long before I often wore a kippah and tzitzit. My mother managed to get me into an Orthodox day school before I was even officially Jewish (an exception to school policy). Finally, at age 10, I went with her to the mikvah and went through the conversion process.

The question has occasionally occurred to me since then — as I'm sure it has to many *gerim* (converts) — what would have happened had I not converted? The question itself implies a choice, but upon further reflection, my choice doesn't seem to have been present at all. This type of situation, a child under the age of bar mitzvah converting along with a parent, is precisely what necessitates a reacceptance of the *mitzvot* at the dawn of adulthood for child *gerim*. Yet, even such an affirmation of one's choice is embittered by the same problem: Where is indeed the choice?

I was invested in Orthodoxy, certainly; sometimes even more than my mother, at least as far as the strict nature of the law was concerned. But this did not change the fact that I was extremely close to my mother, who



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had raised me — an only child — by herself for most of my life, and if she was going through a religious process, then so was I. My taking said process seriously is inherent in my personality. The point remains: If I was forced into Judaism, albeit circumstantially and more by coercion than force, how was my choice meaningful?

A Strange Midrash

The giving of the Torah at Sinai might be viewed as the pinnacle of Jewish history. It was the climax of the people's miraculous exodus from a centuries-long slavery in Egypt, a national covenant with the omnipotent God of their ancestors and Creator of the world. A crucial part of this covenant was Bnei Yisrael's end of the pact: the acceptance of the Torah and all the laws and systems of law therein. An oft quoted aggadic fragment of Gemara, found in *Shabbat* 88a, throws a wrench into the significance of this event. In classic midrashic fashion, the Gemara paints a strange picture based on the word *tachtit*:

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 א"ר אחא בר יעקב מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא אמר רבא אעפ"כ הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבה

"... And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). R. Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: [the verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. R. Aha bar Ya'akov said: From here is a substantial caveat to [the obligation to fulfill] the Torah. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: "They ordained and took upon them..." (Esther 9:27); they ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.

For the purposes of Purim, this aggadic passage strikes a chord; the holiday not only contains its own depth, but is now imbued with the additional significance of the real acceptance of the Torah. But for Shavuot, a holiday on which our



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acceptance of the Torah should be in far more focus, what is left by this midrash but a seemingly meaningless, half-hearted acceptance of a body of law resulting only from a sure death sentence had it not taken place? How could such a covenant even be enforceable, when its participants could claim they only agreed because the alternative was death? Furthermore, even if we choose not to take the midrash literally, how would such a counterintuitive angle on history deepen our perception of the already momentous occasion of the giving of the Torah?

We might attempt to limit the scope of the problem by narrowing its subject. An alternate version of the midrash in *Shabbat* is found in *Tanchuma*, beginning the same way but, instead of continuing to discuss the first statement's implication or continuation in history, taking a radically different turn:

ולא קבלו ישראל את התורה עד שכפה עליהם
הקב"ה את ההר כנגיגית שנאמר ויניצבו
בתחתית ההר ואמר רב דימי בר חמא א"ל
הקב"ה לישראל אם מקבלים אתם את התורה
מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם, ואם
תאמר על התורה שבכתב כפה עליהם את
ההר והלא משעה שאמר להן מקבלין אתם
את התורה, ענו כלם ואמרו נעשה ונשמע
מפני שאין בה יגיעה וצער והיא מעט אלא
אמר להן על התורה שבע"פ שיש בה דקדוקי
מצות קלות וחמורות ...

The Jewish people did not accept the Torah until the Holy One, Blessed Be He held the mountain over them like a barrel, as it states "And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount," and R. Dimi bar Hama said: The Holy One, Blessed Be He said to the Jewish people: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. If you will say that He held the mountain over them for the Written Law, did not the Jewish people respond "We will do and we will

listen" when they were first asked if they would receive the Torah? Because [the Written Law] doesn't involve toil and effort and its laws are small in number. Rather [the holding of the mountain] was said about the Oral Law that has many details to both stringent and less stringent mitzvot.

According to *Tanchuma*, the Jewish people were only forced to accept the Oral Law. If the focus of the giving of the Torah was the Written Law and the Oral Law simply came along with it, the problem posed by this midrash is minimized. However, this is not the case. R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in a beautiful essay on Shavuot,¹ explains that the significance of our annual holiday marking the giving of the Torah indeed is concentrated on the cruciality of the Oral Law, not the Written Law (though the latter is, of course, certainly necessary). If the import of the events at Sinai was Bnei Yisrael's acceptance of the Oral Law specifically, and this was the very portion of the Torah that they were forced to accept, what are we celebrating on Shavuot?

A closer look at the midrash reveals a detail with interesting implications. Of anything to compare a mountain to, the midrash strangely picks a *gigit*, which is a tub or barrel. One might think that, if a mountain hovering in the sky waiting to drop on millions of people were to resemble anything, the pictorial simile would certainly not be hollow. Not only does such an object not accurately represent the internal structure of a mountain, but it would also seemingly not convey the idea the midrash is attempting to portray. God explicitly threatens the people with death — "if not, there will be your burial" — so why not do so with something that would kill them immediately?

Here the midrash reveals its true intentions. God was threatening Bnei Yisrael with death, but not in the way one might think. Instead of being instantly crushed under the weight of a mountain, the apprehensive nation would be restrained behind a wall of rock for the duration of their lives. This would (ignoring loss of oxygen — this is a midrash, after all), rather than rendering them dead, simply render them immobile. In doing so, this imprisonment would theoretically remove all meaning from the people's lives, leaving the collective as a mere shell of what it would have been, at least in purpose, with the Torah. In an exaggerated sense, this is the central tenet of the midrash; God was, in forcing the people to accept the Torah, simultaneously imparting the notion that their lives would be empty without it.

This point is manifest on two levels, respectively contained in the two versions of the midrash. The Gemara's presentation addresses the consequence of a relationship with God without an accompanying Law. God held a hollow mountain over the people to symbolize that this type of relationship is purposeless. Without the Torah, they would feel trapped in a hollow existence. *Tanchuma* makes a similar point, emphasizing the importance of the Oral Law specifically.

It is in this vein that the midrash supplies insight into Shavuot as it appears through Hirschian lenses. Without the Oral Torah, the Written Torah would be difficult if not impossible to understand, inflexible, and limited in time scope. Furthermore, the nation's continuity is dependent upon the generational transmission established by the Oral Torah. This fact is again related back

to our midrash by the version in the *Mechilta of R. Shimon bar Yochai*:

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר מלמד שכפה עליהם
הקב"ה את ההר כגגית ואמר אם מקבלין
אתם עליכם את התורה [מוטב] ואם לאו כאן
תהא קבורתכם באותה שעה געו כולן בבכייה
ושפכו לבם כמים בתשובה ואמרו כל אשר
דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע (כ"ד ז') אמר הקב"ה
ערבים אני צריך הרי שמים וארץ יערבנו אמר
להן עסיקין הן אמרו בנינו יערבנו אמר הרי
ערבים טובים.

“... And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17), [the verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, here will be your burial. At that moment, they all cried out in tears and their hearts poured out like water in repentance and they said “All that God said, we will do and we will listen.” The Holy One, Blessed Be He said: I need guarantors. [They said], let the heaven and earth be the guarantors. He said to them, they are busy. They said, our children will be our guarantors. He said, these are good guarantors.

One might question the connection between the first and second portions of this excerpt. What does being forced to accept the Torah have to do with the identity of its guarantors? Based on what we have already explained, there is no non-sequitur present here. Part of the purpose of the forced acceptance of the Oral Torah was to establish the integrality of an oral tradition within which children are inherently central, transforming our tradition into an ever-blossoming tree of transmission. Had our receiving of the Oral Torah been voluntary, the factor of obligation to continuously pass on this body of the law to the next generation would have been greatly diminished, if not altogether absent. On Shavuot,

therefore, we celebrate what truly makes us what we are, despite — nay, because of — the fact that it was not really a choice.

My Choice: Redux

As I have moved from local Chabad to slightly yeshivish middle school to Modern Orthodox high school to Gush to YU, I have befriended many a peer from different backgrounds and with different interests and skill levels. Almost none of them know about my background. I made it somewhat of a policy to not outright tell people that I am a *ger* unless directly prompted. The decision largely developed from my bashfulness, but at least in my head, I had good reasons for remaining quiet about my origins. There was a latent fear, perhaps irrational, perhaps not, that people would view me differently if they knew. Maybe their expectations for me would be lowered. Maybe their esteem for me would grow.

While I wanted to be acknowledged for my identity, I also scornfully harbored anxiety for these possibilities. I desired to be held under only the highest of expectations, lest I be treated as if my ability or potential was limited. I did not deserve higher esteem for simply living my life in the way it was dealt to me; I did not accomplish anything extraordinary. In part, it is this attitude that has outwardly reinforced my ability to integrate to the degree that I have. *Gerim* are often looked upon with utmost respect and admiration; a praiseworthy perspective, no doubt. However, it becomes problematic when this view morphs into *ger* lenses, and the first thing one sees is a *ger* rather than a Jew. Such an attitude is what I was afraid of, and is what hinders many *gerim* from reaching

their potential. My upbringing has allowed me to fully internalize a key ingredient in a Torah life: obligation without choice.

While a choice of Judaism, as opposed to birth or coercion into it, may be more impressive, it is certainly no less meaningful. One of the greatest factors of the meaning and fortitude of our tradition, and of the Oral Torah on a broader scale, is the fact that it is *not* chosen. Instead, it was, even in the beginning, “forced” upon us as an integral component of our *brit* with God. It is not only the Oral Torah, but this aspect of coercion itself which is necessary for national survival and the deep meaning and beauty behind what we do every day, week, and year. This experience should be, even needs to be, available for every Jew, regardless of background or means of entrance into our nation. Part of our obligation to welcome the *ger* is to recognize that while his or her entry to Judaism was by choice, it was a choice to bind oneself by the same obligations incumbent on all Jewish people. It is this binding, this sense of absence of choice, that is to be celebrated particularly along with our celebration of the receiving of the Torah on Shavuot. Along with the resulting universal sense of appointed devotion will come a stronger and larger whole that we may look to with great pride as we once again revel in the Torah that we had no choice but to accept, and are all the happier for it.

Endnotes

1 *Judaism Eternal: Selected Essays from the Writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch* - Vol. 1, Chapter IX, Sivan, “The Festival of Revelation and the Uniqueness of the Torah.”