



KIMU V'KIBLU

In discussing a particular linguistic nuance of the story of the giving of the Torah, which seems to say that the Jews stood under the mountain of Sinai, the Gemara in *Shabbat* 88a, raises an essential question about the nature of Matan Torah itself:

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.

"They stood at the bottom of the mountain." Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, covered them with the mountain like an [overturned] vat. And He said to them, "If you accept the Torah, good. And if not, there will be your burial." Rav Acha bar Yaakov said, from here is a strong signal [of coercion] regarding [acceptance of] the Torah.

In order to explain a troubling verse, the Gemara ends up raising the

possibility that despite the Jews' exclamation of *"naaseh v'nishmah"* — we will do and we will listen (Exodus 24:7) — the Jews actually had no choice but to accept the Torah and keep all of its doctrines. Rashi notes that because of the coercion, the Jews can later claim that they cannot be held responsible for breaking the law; for the acceptance itself was tainted.



To address this more difficult problem, the Gemara quotes a second verse, this one from Megillat Esther:

אמר רבא אעפ"כ הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש דכתיב (אסתר ט, כז) קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר

Rava said: Nevertheless, they accepted it again in the days of Achashverosh, as it is written (Esther 9:27), "The Jews established and accepted" — they established [in the days of Achashverosh] what they had already accepted [in the days of Moshe].

Despite the literary parallelism of *kimu v'kiblu* to *na'aseh v'nishma*, the verse in Esther seems a strange choice. The acceptance at the time of Esther seems limited to the holiday of Purim, not a broader re-acceptance of all of the mitzvot. Furthermore, if Chazal were looking for post-Sinaitic acceptance of the Torah, two prime examples come to mind. One occurs in 2 Kings 23, when King Yoshiyahu, after finding a sefer Torah hidden in the Beit Hamikdash, makes a covenant with the people that they will keep the laws and edicts written in the Torah. In fact, the specific language used there calls the Torah a *sefer ha-brit* — book of the covenant

(2 Kings 23:2), while earlier it is called just *sefer* or *sefer Ha-Torah* (2 Kings 22:8, 10-11, 16). The shift in the language not only emphasizes the covenantal nature of the acceptance of the Torah, it parallels the verse where the Jews originally acquiesced to keeping the Torah:

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנוֹ הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹל
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע.

Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will faithfully do."

A second example occurs in Nehemiah 8 when Ezra brings out the *sefer Torah* and reads it to the people. The people of the Second Temple listen to the Torah and the text points out that Ezra read it *meforash* — in a way that they could understand (Nehemiah 8:8). Both these instances seem better candidates for a second acceptance of the Torah that would not carry the deficiencies of the first. Yoshiyahu is not holding a mountain over the heads of the people and they nevertheless make a covenant with him to accept the Torah,¹ and Ezra makes sure that everyone understands the Torah before they accept its strictures. Both of these stories focus on a large group of people who are exposed to the whole Torah, not one specific part, and who accept upon themselves to carry out its mission. In contrast, the source in Esther seems small and insignificant. After reading the verse in Esther we do not even know if the Jews are committed to keeping any of the other mitzvot.

Perhaps what defines the Torah acceptance of the story of Esther is its location — it occurs in the *galut* — a specific place with a specific purpose. In order to understand the structure and purpose of *galut* we look to Yirmiyahu, a few generations earlier, who discusses the nature of *galut* in his letter to the exiles of Babylonia before the destruction, during the reign of King Yehoyachin (Jeremiah 29). These Jewish exiles were depressed and forlorn. They missed their old lives in Judea and especially missed the service in the Beit Hamikdash, where they felt a spiritual connection to God. Yirmiyahu tells the people that this exile will not be harsh — they will have houses, gardens, children and generations — however, their relationship with God will have to shift. Instead of the miracles present in the Temple, they will have to seek God out on their own (Jeremiah 29:12). Instead of the pillar of fire descending from the heavens to signify that God accepted their sacrifice, they will have to turn to prayer, without knowing whether God acquiesced to their requests or not. Instead of the life of Israel which is described as a land where “the eyes of the Lord are always upon it” (Deuteronomy 11:12), Yirmiyahu tells the people:

וַדַּרְשׁוּ אֶת שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגְלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם
שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בְּעֵדָה אֵל ה' כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָה יִהְיֶה
לְכֶם שְׁלוֹם.

And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

Jeremiah 29:7

How jarring it must have sounded to the Jews to hear that instead of praying for Jerusalem, now they must pray for their host city, signifying that the particularistic relationship they were used to in Israel was no longer, and their lot will be thrown in with the Babylonians.

Yirmiyahu teaches the people that *galut* is a training ground. They had abused the relationship they had with God in which He shows His face, assuring them of His presence through miracles and the rituals of the Beit Hamikdash. They need to use *galut* to reestablish the relationship through turning to God even when His presence is not apparent.

The *Meshech Chochmah*, in explaining how Hashem held the mountain over their heads, writes:

פִּירוּשׁ שֶׁהָרָאָה לָהֶם כְּבוֹד ה' בַּהֲקִיץ
וּבַהֲתַגְלוֹת נִפְלְאוּ עַד כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ בִטְלָהּ בַּחֲרִיתָם
הַטְּבִיעַ.

Meaning that God showed them His glory while they were in an awakened state, and He did so in a spectacularly revealing manner to the point where their natural free will was quashed.

Meshech Chochmah, Shemot 19:17

God did not literally hold a mountain over the heads of the Jewish people but rather revealed His presence to such an extent that it was impossible to deny, thereby removing their free will in accepting the Torah.

What better time to reinstate the free will of the Jews than the holiday of Purim, one which occurs in the very *galut* that Yirmiyahu described as a training ground for re-acceptance of



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God's sovereignty? The story of the Megillah itself follows this formula exactly. Yirmiyahu noted that one of the markers of *galut* is that the lot of the Jews will be thrown in with that of their host country. Perhaps this can explain the purpose of the first chapter of the Megillah. At first glance, the chapter detailing the decadent parties that Achashverosh throws for his officers and the people of Shushan, complete with detailed descriptions of the palace, the drunkenness and Achashverosh's own paranoia and misogyny, has no place in the story of the Jewish people. It would have perhaps been more logical to begin the Megillah with the introduction of the main Jewish characters — Mordechai and Esther, who only appear in chapter two, or the antagonist, Haman, who only appears in chapter three. With the backdrop of the meaning of the *galut*, however, chapter one, detailing the actions of a king who rules by his moods and kills to preserve his self-image is vitally important, detailing as it does the political climate that the Jews must navigate in order to survive.² Chapter one serves a vital purpose in the story, because it reveals that the Jewish people at the time of the Megillah are in a terrible state, with their fate in the hands of an unstable and dangerous despot.³ The importance of the unstable position of the Jews may also explain one of the opinions in the Gemara (*Megillah* 19a) in discussing how much of the Megillah we must read on the night of Purim. This opinion holds that we must read the entire Megillah — from the beginning of the story of Achashverosh's parties. Rav Soloveitchik explains that the reasoning behind this opinion is that, "The Megillah is not just the story of triumph; it is also a book of despair,

of human insecurity — particularly Jewish insecurity and instability."⁴

It is from this place of insecurity and instability that the Jews are truly able to accept the Torah. They turn to God in the story of Purim not because God's miracles are manifest, not because God's presence is clear, and not even in their own land with a Jewish king or governor ruling over them. Rather the Torah acceptance of Purim is a vital addition to the earlier one because it happens in the shadow of the palace of Shushan, which may be friendly to the Jews one minute but may kill them the next. While

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the stories of Yoshiyahu and Ezra/ Nehemiah happen in times that were politically unstable,⁵ and in Ezra's case, where God's presence was not as clear as it was in earlier times, it is only in the story of Purim that the Jews reach the depths of despair and insecurity. The political climate of Purim is a perfect example of Yirmiyahu's dictate — in *galut*, the fate of the Jews will be dictated by the whims of a culture alien to their own and possibly by the whims of a volatile king. It is from this tense political situation that the Jews must follow Yirmiyahu's advice — they must seek out God and pray to Him. They must remember who they are and where they come from,

and only then can they once again earn the direct connection with God that they merited during the time of the First Beit Hamikdash. When the Jews do this and establish a holiday to remember their salvation, they truly accept God's sovereignty unforced, without a barrel or anything else held over their heads.

Endnotes

1. In *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, Michael Walzer notes that in case of Yoshiyahu, "The book had to be accepted because it was about to be enforced — indeed rigorously enforced at considerable cost to some members of the community." (10)
2. Yoram Hazony develops this thesis in *God and Politics in Esther*, noting that "the book of Esther deals first and foremost with the problem of a Jewish politics in exile: how the Jews, deprived of every sovereign institution of power, may nevertheless participate in, and in the last resort make use of, the authority of an alien government to ensure their own vital interests, and in this case, their lives." (3)
3. There are various other interpretations of the purpose of chapter one of the Megillah. The Gemara *Megillah* 12a, for example, offers the opinion of R. Shimon Bar Yochai's students who commented that the reason for the decree of Haman was that the Jews themselves partook in Achashveirosh's party. In *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 7, it is R. Shimon Bar Yochai who holds that the Jews were punished for eating non-kosher food, seemingly at the party of Achashveirosh.
4. *Days of Deliverance*, 103.
5. Furthermore, in the Ramban's commentary on *Shabbat* 88a, he explains that the reason the Jews had to do mitzvot between Matan Torah and Purim, even though the acceptance of the Torah was coerced, was that they were living in Israel. According to the Ramban, living in Israel itself binds the Jews to keep the mitzvot. This is a further reason that the story of Purim, which occurred in *galut*, would be a less coerced acceptance of the Torah than the two stories of Yoshiyahu and Ezra.