



PURIM: THE HOLIDAY WHERE WE CELEBRATE ACCEPTING THE TORAH?

The Gemara in *Masechet Shabbat* 88a tells us that when the Torah was given to the Jewish people, they were coerced into receiving it, almost like “having a gun to their heads”:

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.

“And they stood under the mount” R.

Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your burial.” R. Aha b.



Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah.

The Midrash says that God held a mountain over the heads of the Jewish people to compel them to agree to the laws found in the Torah. Rashi

explains that due to this coercion, the Jewish people would have legal justification to claim that they could not be held responsible for keeping the laws since a person who enters a contract under duress is not bound by it. This principle is seen in monetary law, as expressed in the *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 205:1:

אם מסר מודעא קודם שימכור ואמר לשני עדים דעו שזה שאני מוכר חפץ פלוני או שדה פלוני לפלוני מפני אונס הרי המכר בטל ואפילו החזיק כמה שנים מוציאים אותה מידו ומחזיר הדמים.

...If the seller conveys a protest before the sale and says to two witnesses, “know that I am selling the object or field to so and so under duress,” then the sale

is annulled, and even if the buyer had possession for several years we still remove it from him and return the money.

The Gemara then tells us that this legal claim expired at the time of Purim, when the Jewish people reaccepted the Torah without duress:

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

Said Raba, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, "the Jews confirmed, and took upon them etc."

It is important to explore the nature of the coercion at Matan Torah, and to understand why it took close to a thousand years for that coercive force to end.

At Matan Torah, and later at Har Grizim and Har Eival, it is clear that Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah; yet Rabbeinu Tam explains (*Shabbat* 88a) that because the Torah was given as the direct word of Hashem, it was considered as if Bnei Yisrael were coerced into accepting it. Why? At Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael had just witnessed the unprecedented miracles of Yetziat Mitzraim: the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea. They were then taken into the desert where they were given the miraculous manna. Finally, at Har Sinai they all had an experience of prophecy as they heard Hashem speak. Freedom of choice can only exist when a person has the option to either accept or reject something, and where there is comparable push to either side. Even the most ardent atheists would admit that if they personally experienced the events leading up to Matan Torah and then heard Hashem speak to them, they too would accept the

word of Hashem. Ultimately, Hashem wants His people to exercise their free choice in accepting Him and His laws, and the direct experience of the Divine at Har Sinai precluded this. Their acceptance cannot be considered a free choice, since there really is only one option. As such, this acceptance of the Torah can reasonably be classified as a coerced choice. Yet why does this coercion last for close to another thousand years?

If we explore Jewish history from the time of Matan Torah until Purim, we see a constant struggle with many ups and downs. Battles were won and battles were lost but through it all, Hashem's connection to His people was apparent. They continued to maintain their political and spiritual independence, had active prophecy, and witnessed miracles on a daily basis in the Temple, as we learn in *Yoma* 21a:

עשרה נסים נעשו בבית המקדש לא הפילה אשה מריח בשר הקדש ולא הסריח בשר הקדש מעולם ולא נראה זבוב בבית המטבחים ולא אירע קרי לכהן גדול ביום הכפורים ולא נמצא פסול בעומר ובשתי הלחם ובלחם הפנים עומדים צפופים ומשתחווים רווחים ולא הזיק נחש ועקרב בירושלים מעולם ולא אמר אדם לחברו צר לי המקום שאלין בירושלים.
Ten miracles were done in the Temple: no woman miscarried from the scent of the holy flesh; the holy flesh never became putrid; no fly was seen in the slaughterhouse; no pollution ever befell the high priest on the Day of Atonement; no rain ever quenched the fire of the wood-pile on the altar; neither did the wind overcome the column of smoke that arose therefrom; nor was there ever found any disqualifying defect in the Omer or in the two loaves, or in the showbread; though the people stood closely pressed together, they still found wide spaces between them to prostrate

The Vilna Gaon on the G-d's Hidden Hand in Megillat Esther

ומ"ש אסתר מן התורה מנין פירוש היכן מרומז שאפילו בהסתר פנים דהיינו בגלות עושה לנו נסים נס גדול כזה ואמרו דכתיב ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא פי' אפילו בשעת הסתר פנים אשלח את אסתר.

Our rabbis (Chullin 139b) asked, "Where do we see [a hint to] Esther in the Torah?" What they mean is, "Where do we see a hint to the fact that even in times where Divine providence is hidden, in times of exile, does He perform such great miracles for us like [the ones performed in the Megillah]? The rabbi said that it is based on the verse (Devarim 31:18), "And I will hide (haster astir) my face on that day," meaning that even in times of hiddenness, I will send Esther.

Chidushei HaGra, Megillah 11a

themselves; never did serpent or scorpion injure anyone in Jerusalem, nor did any man ever say to his fellow: The place is too narrow for me to stay overnight in Jerusalem.

With this level of Divine presence and connection, the original coercive nature of the revelation at Sinai continued unabated.

All of this changed at the time of Purim. The Jewish people lost their spiritual and political independence when the First Temple was destroyed and they were exiled. They had not lost just a battle; they had also lost the war. The miracles of the Temple were absent, and the Divine presence was hidden. Even though we recognize the Purim story as a miraculous event, we know that it was a hidden miracle.

Even though Megilat Esther is a sefer that focuses on the extreme challenges faced by the Jewish people and their ultimate salvation, we see no mention of Hashem anywhere in the text. For the first time since the exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people faced the prospect of complete annihilation, and grappled with the challenge of feeling completely abandoned by Hashem.

The hidden nature of Hashem, *hester panim*, at this moment in history created the opportunity for the Jewish people to finally experience complete free will, where they could choose to accept or reject Hashem and His laws. Since they continued to believe and to accept the Torah in these circumstances, it became clear that their acceptance did not depend on overt miracles and undeniable revelation.

Rabbeinu Tam (*Shabbat* 88a) explains that the Jewish people accepted the Torah at this point in history out of their love and appreciation for the miracle of their salvation. This idea offers a profound insight into human nature and our relationship with Hashem. During the thousand years that the Jewish people experienced independence and miracles, they did not appreciate these gifts to the degree that would motivate them to accept the Torah freely. Often, when we experience something on a regular basis, even overt and awesome miracles, we take it for granted and it becomes part of the accepted status quo. Unfortunately, sometimes the only way to regain an appreciation for Hashem's involvement in our lives is to have that involvement completely concealed so that the loss can be noticed, and people can then

anticipate its return.

Since the time of Purim, the Jewish people have faced even greater *hester panim*, with close to 2,000 years of exile filled with extreme persecution and destruction. Despite the ease with which they could have rejected their beliefs, the Jewish people continue to live lives committed to Hashem and His Torah. With this strong and undeniable commitment, given with the greatest possible free will, may we merit to see a time when Hashem is revealed to the world, when we can once again experience the miracles of the Temple, and when He and His name will be one.

