

A Welcome Tension

When asked what is celebrated on Shavuot, the common answer is the giving of the Torah. The very phraseology of “giving of the Torah” is a reminder of the event at Mount Sinai and all the requisite miraculous events that took place there. However, when the question of what **specifically** was taught at Sinai, the answer becomes a bit harder to elucidate. Much ink is spilled regarding the historical question of what the Jewish people learned at Mount Sinai. A seemingly innocuous reference to Mount Sinai at the beginning of the Torah portion of Behar helps reframe the issue of what occurred to grasping the identity of Torah itself.

The first verse of Behar is quite terse (Vayikra 25:1):

“And the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying,”

The next verses begin to lay out the details of *shemitta*, the laws relating to abstaining from farming (and other agricultural activities) on the land of Israel every seventh year.

Rashi raises an obvious question:

“What [special relevance] does the subject of shemittah have with Mount Sinai? Were not all the commandments stated from Sinai? However, [this teaches us that] just as with shemittah, its general principles and its finer details were all stated from Sinai, likewise, all of them were stated-their general principles [together with] their finer details-from Sinai.”

Rabbi Baruch Epstein, in his Torah Temimah, notes that Rashi (who is quoting a Midrash) is siding with one opinion of an important debate. We find the issue discussed in the Talmud (Zevachim 115b):

“For it was taught, R. Ishmael said: The general laws (kelalim) were stated at Sinai, while the details (pratim) were stated at the Tent of Meeting. R. Akiba said: The general laws and the details were stated at Sinai, repeated in the Tent of Meeting, and a third time in the plains of Moab.”

When analyzing the above debate, the position of Rabbi Yishmael stands out as being awkward. Why not teach the entire corpus of Torah at Sinai? What is there to gain by splitting up the legal system, teaching *kelalim* at Sinai while saving the *pratim* for a different location? In fact, one could argue that separating the two could lead to a challenge concerning the chain of tradition.

While Rabbi Akiva’s overall approach appears to be more sensible, the fact that he requires repetition would seem to be a bit of overkill. Why is he insistent on reiterating the entire Torah?

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg
Rosh HaYeshiva
rabbiginsberg@migdalthatorah.org



This type of debate may reflect a fundamental tension that emerged with the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people. There are two characteristics of Torah that push and pull against each other, fighting for dominance. At the same time, both are necessary to create the entity we call Torah.

On the one hand, the perseverance of Torah is grounded in the idea of tradition, or *mesora*. The Torah being handed to the Jewish people at Sinai, in its entirety, guaranteed that no challenge could come forth against the authenticity of Torah. For example, one could never argue that the general idea of Shabbat was given at Sinai, but the specific laws were fabricated later. Rabbi Akiva emphasizes the importance of a clear and unbroken chain, pointing to the Torah being taught multiple times prior to entering the land of Israel. The information of Torah, once given at Sinai, was now consecrated as a permanent and unchangeable system.

Along with tradition comes the importance of teaching and learning Torah. Hashem was going to teach the Jewish people the system of *halacha*, a system that transcends legalities. Torah is a way of life, allowing humanity to ascend and live at the highest possible level. In learning Torah, it is critical to first understand the underlying concepts before engaging with the details. One can, for example, discuss the exact measure of a defect in an *etrog* to render it unusable during the holiday of Sukkot. Yet, without a comprehension of the purpose and construct of Sukkot itself, the discussion of specifics has no meaning or address. The foundations must be in place first, and only then can the particulars be understood in their appropriate light. Rabbi Yishmael is accentuating the importance of how the Torah was taught, rather than how it was transmitted, and is seeking out the ideal way of educating the Jewish people.

The above tension now becomes clearer. We honor our *mesora*, treating it as an object of incalculable value. Our *mesora* has been crucial in sustaining Judaism, and without our *mesora*, there is no system of *halacha*. The rigidity demanded by tradition is the bedrock of the sustainability of Judaism. At the same time, learning Torah is so much more than a review of that which is known. Learning Torah involves creativity, uncovering new ideas, allowing for an evolution of *halacha*. The Torah's success is as much rooted in the new as it is in maintaining the old. While the *mesora* must remain static, learning brings with it a unique dynamism. One can sense the tug when immersed in learning, almost a welcoming of the tension.

And this tension is always on display. Debates rage across the spectrum about this very issue. How far can creativity take us before we abandon the demands of *mesora*? How beholden to *mesora* must we be when faced with challenging modern situations? While there is no clear answer, the very idea of being immersed in this back and forth reflects the very debate cited in the Talmud. In many ways, Shavuot is not just the celebration of the historical event of the giving of the Torah. It is also the celebration of the system of Torah, tradition and learning working hand in hand.