

Geulas yisrael #66

Re'eh: First Israel, then Sinai

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Our historic entry into the land of Hashem can't be a muted or low-key event. A river crossing of this historical magnitude must be marked by a rite of passage, or by some iconic ceremony which can properly frame this epic pilgrimage.

The obvious choice for an inaugural ceremony, is a re-dramatization of the grand events of Har Sinai. Though the Torah was delivered in a sandy desert, and is universal, it was specifically designated for inhabitants of Israel. As we entered Israel, the full sweep of mitzvot became operative, lending Sinai its total resonance. It makes sense to restage Har Sinai, as we cross the Jordan river into Israel.

Furthermore, our warrant to this contested land was forged at Sinai, as we embraced the will of Hashem. Absent of the Sinai covenant, we have no license to the land of Israel. For all these reasons, Har Sinai was redramatized upon the twin peaks of Gerizim and Eival. Proclaiming fundamental mitzvot and elementary prohibitions at these two mountains was reminiscent of the ten commandments broadcast at Sinai.

First Sinai, then Israel

So it was during our first passage to Israel, and so it was hundreds of years later, when we returned from our first exile. After repeated efforts to return to Israel, Ezra and Nechemiah finally led forty-two thousand Jews back home. On the first Rosh Hashanah after their return, the entire nation assembled

for a public Torah recital in the streets of Yerushalayim. Tears streamed down the cheeks of older people who had been exiled from Yerushalayim just seventy years earlier. Sometimes redemption stretches over millennia, while other times, it occurs in a flash. It is hard to predict.

Every time we enter Israel, we must revisit those seminal moments at Sinai, when a human community first accepted the word of God. One day, when our current redemption concludes, we will, once again, restage the Sinai drama. Jewish history is fueled by Sinai, and every surge into Israel must be propelled by that mountain.

Location is everything

Why, though, was such an iconic ceremony situated in such a peculiar location? Shouldn't this transformational ceremony be conducted immediately upon entry into the land? If the embrace of Torah is a necessary precondition for settling Israel, shouldn't it occur sooner?

Yehoshua did build a stone monument in the Gilgal region immediately after crossing the Jordan river, but the full Sinai re-dramatization was delayed until they journeyed west, to Shechem.

To be sure, there were topographical complications delaying the Sinai ceremony, as the Jordan river region is a level valley without notable mountains upon which to restage Sinai. However, if the Jordan flatlands weren't suited for a mountain ceremony, there is a nearby mountain range which *is* perfectly suited to host a Sinai sequel. Why not schedule this ceremony upon the hilltops of Yerushalayim and upon the Har Habayit? Why travel all the way to Shechem and postpone this iconic moment?

An Ancient journey

The people currently entering Israel were not the first travelers to walk through Shechem on their way to “greater Israel”. Hundreds of years earlier, Avraham had journeyed to Israel, arriving in the north from his former hometown, in modern-day Syria and Iraq. One of the first places he camps is Elon Moreh near Shechem- עד אלון מורה עד שכם. By voyaging to Shechem for our inaugural ceremony, we were, effectively, retracing the founding steps of Avraham.

Israel was originally awarded to great visionaries who discovered Hashem in a dark world of confusion and mayhem. Unfortunately, History wasn't ready for an immediate Jewish settlement, causing a four-generation delay, and a miserable detour through the darkness of Egypt.

The time had finally come to claim this ancient land, but the living recipients of Israel had never “met” their founding fathers, to whom the land was originally gifted. Four hundred years of slavery had severed them from their heritage, reducing these great pioneers to ancient unknown personalities. To this new generation, the great heroes of Breishit were just storybook characters. By traveling north to Shechem, and retracing the pioneering steps of their grandfather Avraham, they blended history and heritage.

A land of a thousand dreams

Our generation has begun the final return home. The struggle to claim Israel has produced modern heroes who have ignited our redemptive imagination, and others, who have navigated us home. Sometimes the modern struggle is so demanding though, that it obscures past “heritage heroes” of Israel. Our claim to this land didn't begin in 1948. We are living the dreams and hopes of thousands of generations. As we craft a modern

state, with a robust democracy and a formidable military, we mustn't ignore past generations whose dreams floated to this land for centuries. From Avraham to the dreamers of the 19th century, millions longed for the land we casually stroll through. As we build this land we must "retrace" their steps and their dreams.

First Israel, then Sinai

Scheduling the mini-Sinai upon Gerizim and Eival isn't just a "scheme" to redirect the nation to Shechem. The Torah deliberately guides us upon a considerable "journey" אַחֲרֵי דֶרֶךְ מִבּוֹא הַשְּׂמֶשׁ - to a region which requires a voyage *after* we cross into Israel. Evidently and ironically, the Torah prefers that the mini-Sinai be conducted *after* they have traversed a 'derech' of Israel.

Torah is, indeed, a prerequisite for settling Israel, but not everyone may be immediately prepared to accept its entirety. Much has transpired since those heady days at our mountain rendezvous with Hashem. The desert journey was long, tedious and plagued by constant rebellion. Perhaps not everyone who entered Israel fully identified with the expectations of Sinai. What can condition them toward greater religious commitment?

Living in the land Israel, under the shadow of divine care and supervision is meant to advance the entire nation to Sinai readiness. Breathing the air of this magical land, observing the divine miracles, and living in the land of history, rebuilds broken Jewish spirit, advancing us to a Sinai "state of mind". First Israel, then Sinai.

We have returned from our own long journey through the wastelands of history, but this journey has exacted a heavy toll. Sadly, once again, many Jews are not yet ready for a renewed

Sinai covenant. Once again, the Sinai moment is being delayed to give our people a chance to catch their breath, process the past two-thousand years, and rebuild our spirit. There is no better way to rebuild Jewish identity than to live in the land of Israel. This reconstruction of Jewish pride and spirit may not always manifest itself in religious expression, but one day it will. It may take a few generations, but our final Sinai moment will occur. It is just being delayed, as it was then.

What happened before will happen again.