

## BEHAR

# THE GREAT SMALL MOUNTAIN

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## *Shmitta* and Har Sinai

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This week's *parsha* starts with a general introduction, stating that the *mitzvos* of Hashem were given to us at Har Sinai. Then the *parsha* tells us specifically about one *mitzva*: *shmitta* (Vayikra 25:2). Rashi on the spot asks: We know that all the *mitzvos* were given to the Jews at Har Sinai. Why does the Torah emphasize that this specific *mitzva* of *shmitta* was taught there?

Rashi answers that the intention of the *pasuk* is that just as the *mitzva* of *shmitta* was given in all of its details at Har Sinai, so too were all of the *mitzvos* given at Har Sinai with all of their details, even though the specific laws weren't stated as clearly and explicitly as the laws of *shmitta*.

This leaves us with a great problem. Certainly, Hashem explained the laws of *shmitta* in detail to Moshe at Har Sinai during those first forty days that Moshe was on the mountain. But why is *shmitta* the example par excellence of the *mitzvos* whose details were explained at Har Sinai? There are many other *mitzvos* that the Torah could have used to teach us this concept. There must be a deeper connection between the *mitzva* of *shmitta* and Har Sinai. We will explore that connection.

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## The Pride of the Mountains

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The Shem Mishmuel explains the *pasuk* regarding the arrival of Bnei Yisrael at Sinai, “*Vayachanu bamidbar vayichan sham Yisrael neged hahar*. They encamped in the desert, and Yisrael camped there near the mountain” (Shemos 19:2). The Sages noticed that the verse starts with the plural construct, *they* came to the desert. But then it switches to the singular construct, *vayichan*, meaning *he* camped. Why does the Torah switch from the plural to the singular in the course of one *pasuk*?

Our Sages say that the Torah teaches us here that Israel camped together like one individual person with one heart, even though they were many individuals. What does this mean?

The Shem Mishmuel explains a deep concept. There are several verses in Tehillim that say that Hashem chose Har Sinai as the special place where He would give the Torah. One such *pasuk* calls Har Sinai, “*Hahar chamad Elokim l’shivto*, the mountain that God desired for His dwelling” (Tehillim 68:17). Why did God specifically desire Sinai?

The Gemara (Megilla 29a) poses a question. Why were the other mountains upset that God chose Sinai? They were upset because they wanted to be the mountain upon which Hashem would give the Torah. But, in comparison to Sinai, these other mountains had a blemish. The great mountains of the world, like Mt. Chermon, the Alps of Switzerland, and Everest in the Himalayas, all had a blemish. They were all proud of themselves. Chermon is the only snow-capped peak in all of Israel. The beautiful Alps are a uniquely stunning range. Mount Everest is the highest mountain in the world.

These mountains are powerful, beautiful, and glorious. They deserve to be proud of that. But when it comes to giving the Torah, pride is a blemish. The Torah has a deep aversion to pride. Pride blinds a person. He cannot see any of his own faults. A

proud person refuses to admit faults. How can a proud person ever do *teshuva*? *Teshuva* is the foundation of the development of the perfect human society. We all have weaknesses, and we all make mistakes. How can we improve as a society if we don't even recognize our mistakes?

I am very disturbed when I see politicians in various positions of leadership who won't admit mistakes. If our leadership will not admit mistakes, how will we, as a society, improve ourselves? There is nothing wrong with admitting a mistake. On the contrary, it is a sign of greatness. But our feelings of pride sometimes prevent us from admitting that we really made a mistake. Egotistical thinking allows pride to dominate, and that pride prevents us from improving. This is a great tragedy for humankind.

The mountains of the world were proud, but the mountain of Sinai was not. It is one of the smaller mountains in the desert. In the Sinai Desert, there are other mountains that are taller and more impressive. In comparison to the Alps or the Himalayas, Sinai is a small hill. Sinai itself didn't understand why Hashem chose it: "Why should I, a little mountain, be together with the Almighty himself? He wants to give the Torah on me? Why should I be the place to change the fabric of the human race?" Hashem chose this mountain, though, precisely because it was so humble.

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### **The Humility of the Mountain**

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The Shem Mishmuel notes that, of course, we are not discussing the emotions and statements of physical mountains. Our Sages teach us that every blade of grass has an angel in heaven. Certainly, each mountain does too. These angels talk in heaven, and they speak up about their respective places. Each angel wants its mountain to exist. The pride of Everest is in the angel who guards Everest. I can imagine this angel introducing himself, with a booming and

proudly confident voice, “I represent Everest, the greatest mountain in the world!” The Alps also have angels who are proud of them. Sinai has an angel, but that angel is not so proud.

One of my friends once told me that life according to Torah is about learning from our mistakes. The Torah gives us a standard and, as we miss the standard, we try again and again to aim for it. This can only be achieved if when we make the mistake, we then correct it. Overwhelming pride will block us from recognizing our mistakes. Pride, therefore, is the greatest obstacle to self-perfection. Seeking honor and bowing down to one’s self-aggrandizement deters us from personal and communal growth. The inability to be humble and to see our limitations prevents us from improving.

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### **The Power of the Place**

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The Shem Mishmuel explains another profound Chassidic concept. The angel of Sinai represents a certain kind of character, while the other mountains’ angels represent another kind. This teaches us that physical places have an influence on who we are when we are there. The Jews needed to come to Sinai to receive the Torah because of the unique angelic power within that place. This spiritual energy influenced the Jewish People who camped at Sinai. They may not have realized it, but it was an invisible and perhaps even a supernatural influence. Humility and modesty pervaded the very rocks and air of Sinai. It helped us be meek, recognize our limitations, and then change. Had the Jewish People been standing at the foot of Mt. Everest, they would have felt a very different influence. They had to go to Sinai to receive that energy of humility.

Wherever we are, the place has an influence on our souls. Some places breed greed, and others breed acceptance of one’s

position in life. Some places are anti-intellectual, while others are very intellectual. It is in the air, the rocks, the soil, and the food. Where we choose to live can have a profound impact on our attitudes towards life.

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### **An Intelligent Fractious People**

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The Shem Mishmuel quotes a deep and profound statement from the Maharal, who explains a perplexing condition of the Jewish People. We are a wonderful, beautiful people. We have a tremendous gift that Hashem has given us—the Torah. Even with this wonderful gift in our possession, we suffer from internal strife. Why for so long, from the very beginning of our inception and birth as a nation until today (more than 3,500 years), have we been plagued and crippled by internal strife? We have a sorry history of Jew versus Jew conflicts, including dictator kings, rebellious factions, and internal splits. King Shlomo was the only king who united all of Israel. After his passing, the kingdom split into two and until today we have not really been reunited. There is so much dissension among us, no matter where we live. The joke goes that if two Jews would live on a desert island, there would be three synagogues—one for each Jew and a third that both would refuse to enter. How can such a beautiful people be so splintered? It is very perplexing. This is an astoundingly self-destructive weakness.

This incredible, terrible phenomenon of Jewish infighting traces back to early events in our history: the sale of Yosef, the rebellion of Korach against Moshe, the split of the Jewish kingdom after the death of Shlomo, etc. Surprisingly, the Maharal explains that this fractiousness comes from the greatness of Israel. Indeed, it *must* be related to our greatness.

## The Individual Jewish Intellect

Every Jew was given the tremendous privilege to study and know the Torah. Jews were given powerful minds. Today, we see so many Jewish Nobel Prize winners in science and literature. We are way over-represented. In the population of the world, we are less than one percent, but we are over ten percent of Nobel Prize winners. How does this happen? The Jewish mind is unique; we have a powerful intellect. Hashem gave us this gift when He gave us the Torah. He wanted us to be able to probe the depths of the Torah in order to understand it. The soul of Israel carries a special level of intellect. This great intellect is necessary to understand the Torah, the expression of God's intellect.

This superior intellect is an individual feature. I have a unique way of thinking. It is *my* thinking, not *your* thinking. Chazal say, "*K'sheim she'partzufei hem shonim kach dei'osei hem shonos*. Just as every person has a unique face, so too people think differently" (see Yerushalmi Brachos 9:1). Each person thinks in his own way. I think my way, and you think your way. I like the way I think. *Adam karov eitzel atzmo*. A person is prejudiced towards himself. *Adam rotzeh b'kav shelo mi'tisha kabin shel chaveiro*. A person prefers one measure of his own thinking and his own product over many measures of the thinking and products of other people. The intelligence of a person is personal, private, and unique. It is mine, not yours. I don't think like you. I think like me. God made us both think differently.

The great power to be our own thinker is one of our greatest gifts. We can make our own private, individual choices. We each have different tastes. I like ice cream with a cherry on top. You like ice cream without a cherry on top.

We also possess free will to make our own moral choices. This principle stands at the heart of the Torah, which wants us to make individual choices. We can disagree with the crowd. The crowd

may not keep Torah, but I will. The crowd may not understand that I have a commitment to Hashem. No one can force me to think his way.

Many times in the course of human history, it was the individual who thought differently than the crowd who brought humanity a great idea that saved it. Moshe Rabbeinu was able to stand up against Pharaoh and bring the world the gift of Torah and freedom. Magellan and Elcano proved that the world is round and thus brought us a greater recognition and understanding of God's world. The physicists who thought of quantum mechanics introduced a major change in the understanding of physics. Many people throughout history have changed the course of humanity by expressing their unique thoughts and opinions. This is a great gift of Hashem—the gift of individuality.

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### Unity and Intelligence

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The *seichel* and *da'as* of the individual are especially valuable to the Jewish People, since we have to analyze the Torah. However, this gift creates barriers between people. I don't think like you and you don't think like me. Jews disagree more than anyone else in the world, because we have the gift of the Jewish mind, which makes me think that I am right and you are wrong. Really, this curse of fighting among Jews is a result of our blessing.

This has created a tremendous burden for us. We have suffered so much due to our disunity, when we are convinced that only our own individual opinions are correct. What is the solution to this difference of opinions and the strife it causes? *Ish echad b'lev echad*. If I look at myself as part of a larger body, I lose my view of myself as an individual, private person. I can see myself as part of the collective nation of Israel. We are truly all one nation, like one body. A healthy body doesn't fight against itself. A healthy

awareness of the unified purpose and existence of Am Yisrael will help us maintain our unity even amidst our disagreements.

How can I demote my individuality and let the collective lead? We must realize that a finger can't disagree with the rest of the body. When the legs walk, the fingers shouldn't, and don't, disagree. When the collective of Israel, the soul of Israel, decides, I should go along. I must realize that I am a limb in this great body called Am Yisrael.

How can everyone do this? We should access the power of *hachna'a*, *bitul hayeish*, and nullify our individuality. When I ponder my fallibility and see my weaknesses and shortcomings, I can weaken and destroy the pride that gets in my way. My pride in my own personal life creates a tremendous barrier. When I realize my limitations and weaknesses, my pride becomes manageable.

Sinai taught us the power of humility. Everyone can annul himself to the people and realize that he or she is nothing compared to the infinite and almighty God. I must lose myself in His existence and in His will. He willed me to be part of Am Yisrael and, therefore, I perform His will as part of His people. Rashi (Bereishis 1:1) says that God created the world for the sake of Am Yisrael, who would have a collective mission to bring God's name and presence into the world. I am *bateil* to that. Avraham said, "*Anochi afar va'eifer*. I am dust and ashes" (Bereishis 18:27). Moshe and Aharon said, "*V'nachnu mah*. We are nothing" (Shemos 16:7). We are only doing God's will.

The secret of becoming part of the collective comes from learning from the humility of Sinai. On the other hand, too much humility can lead a person to falling into a depression, thinking that he or she is worthless, weak, and hopeless. There are many self-doubts that can cripple us. We must have some pride. It keeps us strong and active. Yet we must also feel that we are nothing. We must strike a balance between pride and humility.



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## Balancing Pride and Humility

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What is the proper balance between pride and humility? We need pride in our individual abilities, but we also have to realize that, as individuals, we are really nothing. We must vacillate between feelings of *yeish*, being something, and feelings of *ayin*, nothing. Hillel said, “*Im ein ani li mi li uk’she’ani l’atzmi ma ani*. If I am not for me, then who else is for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I?” (Avos 1:14). If I don’t believe in my own thinking, who will do this for me? I have the power of my individual brain, my individual *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neschama*. I have something to be proud of. However, alone and isolated, detached from the collective of Israel, I am nothing.

A person has a right to pride. Each one of us is great. However, if I only think of myself, then I am truly weak. I will make horrible mistakes and, because of my terrible pride, I will never learn from any of them. I must realize that I need Hashem and Am Yisrael. My one *mitzva* will help every other Jew, and every *mitzva* of other Jews will help me. If I can’t achieve my own redemption, then I will receive it together with the collective of Am Yisrael.

We need the pride of the individual and the humility of a miniscule grain of sand on the beaches of the oceans of the world. We have to feel that we are both something and nothing. We have to be a *yachid*, an individual, and a part of the *klal*, the collective. This is what Hillel meant.

This is the lesson of Har Sinai. It was a mountain; as an individual it had certain pride. It did not have the pride of Everest, though. Sinai didn’t reach up to the clouds, but it did stand above its desert surroundings. We have to know we are a *yeish*. But Sinai knew it wasn’t a huge mountain. Compared to the Alps and the Himalayas, it was tiny. Sinai was both great and humble at the same time. This is the lesson of Hillel for the Jew. You should be

*yeish* and *ayin*, both something and nothing simultaneously. This is why the Torah was given on Har Sinai.

The Shem Mishmuel explains the double expression in this *parsha* that we mentioned earlier. *Vayachanu bamidbar*—they, the mass of people, camped in the desert. And *vayichan sham yisrael neged hahar*—the people camped as one near the mountain. When the Jews came to Sinai, they were great individuals; *vayachanu*, each one had his own view of Sinai. Each one recognized his or her special talents, mind, and way of thinking. At the same time, each one realized that as a lone individual, he or she was weak. They needed to merge together with the rest of Israel. They then became one. This is the paradox of Sinai and the way a Jew must live to be a *ben* or *bas Torah*. We can join together with pride and humility simultaneously.

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### Achieving the Balance

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How does one balance *yeish* and *ayin*, pride and humility? It is an extremely difficult challenge. Here are some points that may be helpful in achieving this worthy goal.

First, Chazal say that one should primarily learn Torah and let other people do a *mitzva*. Only when no one else will do a particular *mitzva* should one stop Torah study in order to perform the *mitzva* (Rambam, Talmud Torah 3:4).

When someone learns Torah, our prime activity, he or she should be filled with humility. The Torah is so vast, and we are so unfit to ever master all of it! On the other hand, one should be proud of being a Jew whom Hashem has chosen to learn His holy Torah. Furthermore, one can be proud of whatever he or she accomplishes in Torah despite all of the difficulties that this entails. Thus, Torah study develops both proper humility and pride.

When a *mitzva* begs to be done, one does that *mitzva*.

However, first one should seek others to help with the *mitzva*. The *pasuk* says “*Tovim hashenayim min ha’echad*. Two can accomplish more than one person alone” (Koheles 4:9). This is the proper attitude of humility—to realize one’s own limitations and work as a team with others to achieve the goal.

If you cannot find partners for the *mitzva* project and you do it yourself, this can be a source of some good pride. This pride is called *simcha shel mitzva*, the joy of doing a *mitzva*. Our Sages say, “*B’makom she’ein anashim, hishtadeil lihyos ish*. When there is no one else, you try to be the one person to do the good deed” (Avos 2:5).

However, our Sages always praise someone who avoids public honor and fame. The ideal is *hatznei’a leches im Elokecha*, to walk modestly with God, without fanfare (Micha 6:8). One should do the good deed even alone with no help, but one should then avoid publicity, honor, and accolades. We must do what has to be done without seeking honor. This will help moderate excessive pride.

Finally, always pray to Hashem to help you achieve this lofty goal of proper humility and pride. We need His help!

Remember, whatever you accomplish is ultimately because of Hashem. He created you and sustains you. He has given you the opportunity and ability to accomplish great things. Be forever grateful to Him and always live with the maxim, *shivisi Hashem l’negdi samid*, that God is always with you at all times (Tehillim 16:8).

With these ideas always in mind, you should be on the road to achieving proper humility and pride. With Hashem’s help, you will do so!

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### The Downside of Pride

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The Shem Mishmuel explains that this duality is a serious challenge for us. The Jewish People has a tremendous love for Hashem. However, as the Tanya explains, this love of Hashem, which burns as powerfully as a fire, is hidden deep within the Jewish soul. The Shem Mishmuel says that the pride of the individual hides the burning fire of love for Hashem. After all, the Gemara (Sota 4) says that Hashem doesn't like a *ba'al ga'ava*—someone who is supercilious, convinced of his own greatness to the exclusion of all others. Hashem leaves such a person. But when Hashem leaves, evil forces rush in. A person may start with terrible pride, but then will come *ta'ava*, evil passions. The key is to remove this pride. We are not perfect. We must realize that only together with Hashem can we achieve great things.

When we can divest ourselves of this personal pride, we can get away from individual self-centeredness. We must be honest regarding our limitations and our failures. Then Hashem will help us, Am Yisrael will help us. Together with other Jews, each *mitzva* that we perform counts; each *mitzva* performed by myself or by others will bring us closer to perfection and salvation.

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### Two Sides of *Shmitta*

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Let us return to our original question. The *mitzva* of *shmitta* has two levels. On one hand, the farmer gives up his fields to Am Yisrael. The farmer says, "I don't own anything. This land is not mine now; it belongs to every single Jew. The gates are open. I am a tiny part of this nation called Israel. The nation is the rightful owner of the land. I eat with the poor, and they share their food with me." This is the collective side, the *bittul hayeish*, the annulment of the

individual. The farmer gives away his property to the collective of Am Yisrael.

The other side of *shmitta* is that this farmer has to be a very strong man. He has to conquer the innate human drive to own private property. I can imagine the voice of the farmer insisting, “It’s mine! I worked for this, I developed this land. I don’t want to give it away.” Nonetheless, he does give it away. This strength of commitment demonstrates the individual greatness of the farmer: this individual will of his to do what is right to help the poor in the seventh year. Here, the greatness of the owner declares, “This is me as an individual doing what is right, no matter how difficult it is.” Thus, the person who keeps *shmitta* combines the greatness of the individual—*gadlus ha’adam*—with the modesty of the individual—*shiflus ha’adam*.

This combination of *yeish* and *ayin*, of being something and of being nothing, produces the incredible *shmitta*, the sabbatical year. Therefore, the Shem Mishmuel explains, this particular *mitzva* was emphasized at Sinai, the great-little hill upon which the Torah was given. There we learned how to be something and nothing at the same time. We learned to be individuals and part of a collective, how to be both proud and humble. This is the secret of the *mitzva* of *shmitta*.

We must work very hard to attain this goal in some way. We must strive with all of our energy to achieve the greatness of the collective Jewish People as well as the greatness of each and every Jew as an individual.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Why was the Torah given at Har Sinai?
2. What are the roles of the individual and the collective in the view of the Torah?
3. Explain the Chassidic concept of *yeish* and *ayin*.

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## EXERCISES

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1. Formulate a rule to balance pride and humility.
2. Practice your rule for a week and note the results.
3. If you're not satisfied with the results, try a different strategy. Repeat steps 1, 2, and 3.

# *Answers and Exercises*

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