

Toronto Torah

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Yitro

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This issue is dedicated by Esther and Craig Guttman and Family
for the yahrtzeit of Clara Berglas בריינדל בת ישעיהו ז"ל

This issue is dedicated by Ralph and Paulette Frisch and Family in memory of
Ralph's father Zeev ben Rephael z"l, Ralph's grandfather Avraham ben Zvi HaLevi z"l,
and Paulette's mother Esther bat Shlomo z"l

Threat or Shelter?

Much of the lead-up to the giving of the Torah is choreography – who stands where, and when? According to Shemot 19:17, the people stood “*b'tachtit hahar*.” The Hebrew word *tachtit*, like the word *tachat*, would appear to suggest the bottom. Indeed, Rashi, in his first explanation of this expression, explains that “*tachtit hahar*” means, “*beraglei hahar*,” at the foot of the mountain.

However Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein observes (Torah Temimah Shemot 19:17, note 36) that the word “*tachtit*” generally refers to something that is physically underneath something else. Accordingly, “*tachtit hahar*” doesn't mean that Bnei Yisrael stood at the foot of the mountain. Rather, they stood **underneath** the mountain. So explains Rashi in his second explanation to these words – “That the mountain was uprooted and suspended above them like a barrel.” In an image that may be familiar to some of us, Bnei Yisrael **actually stood underneath the mountain**.

In his comment here, Rashi leaves out a crucial piece of information that appears in his primary source. According to the Talmud (Shabbat 88a), there's more to the story – “Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and **He said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.**” (adapted from the

Steinsaltz translation) In other words, G-d threatened the people – “If you choose not to accept the Torah, then I will drop this mountain on you and kill you all.”

This is only one version of the story, though. Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael (Shemot 19:17) has a slightly different version. It begins as the Talmudic passage began: “The mountain was uprooted from its location.” What happens next, though, is noteworthy: “They drew close and stood under the mountain... About this it says in Shir HaShirim (2:14), **‘O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, Hidden by the cliff, Let me see your face**, Let me hear your voice; For your voice is sweet And your face is comely.” (JPS translation). According to the Mechilta, the mountain over their heads is far from a threat. It seems to be much more affectionate, as though Israel is hiding itself under the rock and G-d is coaxing them out.

Is there a way to reconcile these differing narratives? Did G-d use Har Sinai as a means to coerce Bnei Yisrael to receive the Torah? Or did Har Sinai serve almost as a protective canopy over them?

An answer, perhaps, can be seen from the words of the Tur's long commentary to the Torah. He cites Rabbi Yosef Kimchi, who asks a question regarding the Talmudic version: why were the people coerced at all? According to the tradi-

Rabbi Jared Anstandig

tional timeline of parshiyot Yitro and Mishpatim, the Jews had already accepted the Torah with “*naaseh venishma*,” “We will do and we will listen.” (Shemot 24:7) Why was it necessary now to force them to accept the Torah? Rabbi Kimchi answers, “They had already accepted the Torah. And after that, He suspended the mountain over them, **to show His love of them...**” He continues, explaining that G-d was happy that Bnei Yisrael had accepted the Torah, because had they not, He would have been forced to destroy them. The world cannot exist without Bnei Yisrael accepting the Torah. By hanging the mountain over their heads, G-d was demonstrating how important it was for them to accept the Torah.

Ultimately, according to Rabbi Kimchi, both narratives can coexist. On the one hand, the giving of the Torah was a major act of love of G-d to Israel. Out of His immense love for us, He drew us out from the protective cliffs and gave us the Torah. And, at the same time, still out of His love for us, He overturned nature, hanging a mountain over our heads, so that we would understand the importance of the Torah.

May we be able to appreciate both aspects of Matan Torah – The feeling of love that G-d feels towards us, such that He gave us the Torah, and the special significance we have, that we accepted it.

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Summary

Chapters 36 and 37 present the invasion of Yehudah by Sancherev, king of Assyria. It starts with an intimidating speech by Ravshakeih, leader of an Assyrian delegation, and it concludes with the miraculous rescue of the Jewish people by Hashem. [This story is also recorded in Melachim II 18-19 and Divrei haYamim II 32, with some variations.]

In the fourteenth year of the reign of King Chizkiyahu, Sancherev captured the fortified cities of Yehudah. Sancherev sends Ravshakeih to Jerusalem, to meet with four representatives of the Jewish people and tell them to tell King Chizkiyahu that he should not fight. As Ravshakeih points out, Chizkiyahu has no one to rely on. The Egyptians are weak and unreliable. And as Ravshakeih says, Chizkiyahu cannot rely on Hashem; Chizkiyahu destroyed the Jews' personal altars and thereby reduced the options for worshipping Hashem around the kingdom. Further, Hashem Himself sent Assyria to conquer the land. In addition, Ravshakeih notes that the Jewish army is so small that even if the Assyrians would donate two thousand horses, the Jews wouldn't

find riders to use them. (36:1-10)

King Chizkiyahu's delegates beg Ravshakeih not to speak Hebrew, because they didn't want the Jews to hear this and lose hope. Ravshakeih replies that he is intentionally speaking this way because he wants the soldiers - those who will suffer the most - to hear this. Ravshakeih says that if they won't surrender, the soldiers will have to eat their excrement due to the hunger that will beset the city. Ravshakeih then speaks loudly and addresses the soldiers on the wall, "Surrender! Don't listen to Chizkiyahu, thinking that you have a chance or you will have some Divine salvation. That was the approach of other nations, and we vanquished all of them. If you will make peace with us you will benefit from your grapevines and fig trees. Otherwise, King Sancherev will possess them." (11-20)

The chapter concludes by saying that none of Chizkiyahu's representatives replies, since they were ordered not to do so. They tear their clothes and bring the words of Ravshakeih back to the king. (21-22)

Insight

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 60b) learns from this incident the obligation to tear one's clothes upon hearing blasphemy. The Talmud also says that the obligation is only if one hears this from a Jew, because if we will tear our clothes anytime we hear a non-Jew blaspheming we will tear every day. The Talmud learns from this that Ravshakeih was a Jewish apostate, and that's why Chizkiyahu's men tore their clothes.

This may explain how Ravshakeih spoke fluent Hebrew to the soldiers. This also explains a midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Esther 1058) that this conversation took place on the night of the Seder. Ravshakeih heard the people saying Hallel, and he advised Sancherev not to attack that night - a night known for its miracles. Ravshakeih knew about this because of his Jewish background.

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Siddur Insights: From History to Memory

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Dr. Oliver Sacks wrote, "If we wish to know about a man, we ask 'what is his story - his real, inmost story?' - for each of us is a biography, a story... To be ourselves we must have ourselves - possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self." (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* pp. 105-106)

Judaism is very sensitive to the significance of memory as a shaper of our identity. Professor Yosef Haim Yerushalmi contrasted this Jewish approach with the Greek approach to history: "For Herodotus the writing of history was first and foremost a bulwark against the inexorable erosion of memory engendered by the passage of time. In general, the historiography of the Greeks was an expression of that splendid Hellenic curiosity to know and to explore which can still draw us close to them, or else it sought from the past moral examples or political insights. Beyond that, history had no truths to offer, and thus it had no place in Greek religion or philosophy. If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews. It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view whose essential premises were eventually appropriated by Christianity and Islam as well. 'The heavens,' in the words of the psalmist, might still 'declare the glory of the Lord,' but it was human history that revealed his will and purpose." (*Zachor* pg. 8)

Because we see the past as meaningful today, Judaism commands us to remember many aspects of our national biography, in a range of ways. Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin (*l'Or haHalachah: Zechirah*) noted that we have mitzvot of remembering certain events via speech and deed (e.g. remembering

the presentation of the Torah), remembering halachot we cannot implement currently (e.g. remembering the practices of the Beit haMikdash), and creating reminders for our future benefit (e.g. tzitzit and reviewing our Torah knowledge).

As part of this network of memorials, Ramban (Added mitzvot aseh #7 and Commentary to Devarim 24:9) listed five formal memorial mitzvot, which we fulfill by speaking about their themes:

- Shabbat
- Our departure from Egypt
- What Amalek did to us
- How we angered Hashem with the Golden Calf
- How Hashem punished Miriam with *tzaraat*

The Ari z"l (*Sefer HaKavanot*, and cited in Magen Avraham 60:2) mentioned four memorials. Three are Amalek, Miriam and Shabbat, and he added one that Ramban did not mention: receiving the Torah at Sinai. Taking Ramban's list and the Ari's list together, we have six memorials.

Ramban stated that we must remember these events *tamid*, meaning continually. Many siddurim place these six memorials at the end of daily *shacharit*; this seems to stem from Rabbi Elazar Azkari's 16th century *Sefer Chareidim* (Mitzvat Aseh 4), in which he says we should perform them daily. We also hold an annual public memorial of Amalek with Parshat Zachor; Rabbi Isaac Osband suggests that this is because the mitzvah of eradicating Amalek has a communal component which is absent from the other memorials. (*Beit Aharon v'Yisrael* 8:1)

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Biography
Rabbi Avraham
ben haRambam
Rabbi Baruch Weintraub

Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam was born on the 28th of Sivan, 4946 (1168). His father, Rambam, was 51 years old when Rabbi Avraham was born. When young Avraham was fifteen, his father wrote about him in one of his letters:

“In worldly matters I have no comfort, aside from two things: when I learn and look at what I learn, and in my son Avraham, who was shown favour by G-d, and who was blessed from the blessings of the one after whom he is named... because he is most humble and modest among men, and that is combined with good traits. He also possesses a highly refined intellect and good nature, and surely, G-d willing, he will have a name among the greats...”

When his father passed away in 1204, young Rabbi Avraham took upon himself to continue in his father's path. He did this in the public sphere, where he became the official *Nagid* (leader) of Egyptian Jewry, administered Cairo's general hospital, and served as the king's personal physician. Perhaps more importantly, he did likewise in the spiritual realm; a major part of his work was devoted to defending his father's positions. His books *Birkat Avraham* and *Maasei Nisim* defend his father's *Mishneh Torah*, and his *Milchamot Hashem* discusses his father's *Moreh haNevuchim* (Guide of the Perplexed).

Rabbi Avraham did not limit himself to perpetuating his father's legacy; he continued to develop it, and at certain points he diverged from it. The most crucial point, arguably, is his embrace of Pietism, especially in the Sufi form he saw in the Muslim world. Rabbi Avraham claimed that this path was drawn from an early Jewish origin; therefore, following the Sufis meant reclaiming our old heritage. This approach led him to emphasize Pietism over intellect, differing from his father's way. His main book, *HaMaspik l'Ovdei Hashem* (The Comprehensive Guide for the Servants of G-d), expands on these views.

He is overshadowed by his great father, but Rabbi Avraham's influence in his generation was great. Followers of his path continued to foster a Jewish-Sufi form of Pietism for at least a century, and through his influence a large Egyptian Karaite community returned to the fold of Rabbinic Judaism.

Rabbi Avraham passed away on the 18th of Kislev, 4998 (1327).

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Weekly Halachah: When Entering/Exiting a Beit Midrash
Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

Many batei midrash place the text of a prayer to be said when entering and exiting a Beit Midrash near the entrance. Similarly, many sefarim, including standard editions of the Talmud, include this text on the opening page. What is the source of this prayer, and is it obligatory?

A mishnah records that Rabbi Nechunia ben Hakanah would recite a short prayer when entering and exiting the Beit Midrash. The Talmud elaborates on the precise texts he recited. (Note that there are several slightly different version of this text.)

Many authorities cite this practice, seemingly indicating that it is obligatory for all to recite this. Why then do many not say this prayer? Perhaps it is optional, and the Talmud was simply recording Rabbi Nechunia's practice. Some limit the obligation, contending that it is only when one is learning in order to determine practical halachah. Others suggest that our blessing of *Ahavat Olam* before Shema captures these ideas and thus takes the place of this blessing. Many modern authorities assume that it is better to recite this, but they defend the widespread practice of not reciting it.

Some authorities assume that the obligation applies even when learning alone. Others note that the language of the Talmud and many classic authorities limits it to learning in a group, especially as much of the prayer's language deals with how one's friends will react to his rulings and how the speaker will react to their rulings.

Authorities assume that it should be said only once a day. They further note that it should be recited even on Shabbat.

Some derive a principle from this law to pray for Divine help in all that one does.

(Mishnah Berachot 4:2; Berachot 28b; Rif Berachot 19a; Rambam Berachot 10:23 and Peirush HaMishnayot to Berachot 4:2; Rosh ibid. 4:12, Tur and Shulchan Aruch OC 110:8; Ritva (Shitah Mekubetzet), Meiri, Rabbi Eliezer Meir Horowitz, Petach Einayim to Berachot 28b; Aruch HaShulchan OC 110:16; Taz OC 116:8; Yalkut Yosef Hilchot Tefillah 110:16, *HaTefillah B'Kenisato L'Veit HaMidrash*, Rabbi Chaim Katan, HaMaayan Tevet 5780)

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Sefer haChinuch #13-14: The Korban Pesach Club
By Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

The Torah obligates Jews to reach out to those who are not mitzvah-observant, such as under the principle of *arevut* which establishes mutual responsibility among all Jews (Sanhedrin 43b), and with the commandment to restore their lost property, which includes spiritual loss.

Nonetheless, regarding the Korban Pesach the Torah states, “All foreigners shall not eat therefrom” (Shemot 12:43), and the Talmud (cf. Pesachim 96a) explains that this refers to people whose deeds are estranged from G-d. Per Rambam (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Korban Pesach 9:7), the exclusion is of Jews who worship idols. [For more, see Minchat Chinuch 13:2.] Similarly, the Torah excludes non-Jews who live among us, even if they are not idolatrous, and even non-Jews who have undergone circumcision. (Shemot 12:45)

Sefer haChinuch lists these exclusions as the Torah's 13th and 14th mitzvot, explaining that the Korban Pesach is not a mere ritual, divorced from spiritual meaning. Rather, this service is meant to recall our entry into the Divine covenant, and therefore we cannot share it with one who stands in opposition to all that the covenant represents. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Shemot 12:43) expanded upon this, explaining that the Korban Pesach restored the humanity of the Jewish people in Egypt, saving them from individual death and national disintegration. Only one who embraces the covenant merits this personal and national redemption.

We must emphasize that this rule is unique to the korban pesach; our current Pesach Seder does not share this status. Therefore, one should endeavor to involve all Jews in a Seder which will welcome them and offer them a meaningful experience.

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Shabbat Feb. 10-11

After hashkamah R' Yehuda Mann, Halachah from the Parshah, Clanton Park

After minchah R' Mordechai Torczyner, Gemara Ketuvot, BAYT (Milevsky Bais Medrash) (men)

After minchah Idan Rakovsky, Halachah in the Parshah, Shaarei Tefillah

45 min. after Shabbat R' Jared Anstandig, Parent Child-Learning, Shaarei Shomayim (middle school)

Sun. Feb. 12

9:00 AM R' Zev Spitz & R' Yehuda Mann, Semichat Chaver Program, Clanton Park (men): Niddah

Mon. Feb. 13

2:00 PM Idan Rakovsky, Esther: Last Week, on ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/idanrak>

7:30-9:00 PM Nusbaum Family Medical Ethics and Halachah Program: The Shoteh: The Irrational Patient
R' M Torczyner, ZOOM @ <http://tiny.cc/mtethics> / Register @ <https://torontotorah.com/cme>
CME Accredited, open to laypeople

8:30 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Weekly Halachah, Shomrai Shabbos *not this week*

Tues. Feb. 14

9:00 AM Idan Rakovsky, Tzidkat haTzaddik, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university men)

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Wisdom of King Solomon: Mishlei, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>

7:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 18), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (men)

8:15 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Shovavim Shiur (Semichat Chaver Chazarah), Clanton Park (men)

8:30 PM R' Jared Anstandig, Women's Beit Midrash, Shaarei Shomayim (university women)

Wed. Feb. 15

9:00 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Halachic Philosophy of the Rav, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university men)

10 AM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Does Judaism Believe in Extraterrestrial Life? 1 of 3
ZOOM @ <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> Register @ <https://torontotorah.com/wednesdays> *There is a fee*

7:00 PM Idan Rakovsky, Esther: Last Week, Shaarei Tefillah Congregation

8:15 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Contemporary Halachah, Clanton Park

Thurs. Feb. 16

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 30), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (women)

8:00 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Beitzah (advanced), for location: ymanntorontotorah.com

8:30 PM Idan Rakovsky, Sefer haChinuch, Shaarei Tefillah Beit Midrash Night (men)

Fri. Feb. 17

9:00 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Parshah, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university)

10:30 AM R' Jared Anstandig, R' Mordechai Torczyner, R' Yehuda Mann, Ketuvot Perek 1 *advanced*
In-person at Yeshivat Or Chaim, on ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/frishiur>

COMING UP!

Monday February 20

PARENT-CHILD BREAKFAST YARCHEI KALLAH AT BAYT: IS GIVING BLOOD A MITZVAH?
All Middle School Students and Parents Are Welcome! Register at <https://torontotorah.com/yk>

Shabbat February 24-25

SHABBATON AT SHAAREI TEFILLAH CONGREGATION
"The Mishkan and Human Creativity"

Sunday February 26

MIDRESHET YOM RISHON FOR WOMEN, AT MISHKAN AVRAHAM, 2797 BATHURST ST.
10:00 AM Rebbetzin Shira Lipner, 10:40 AM Rabbi Yehuda Mann
Open to all women, Light refreshments served