

בהר סיני

THE TORAH IS OFFERED TO THE NATIONS

The *Gemara* (*Shabbos* 89•) asks: why was *Har Sinai* — Mt. Sinai — given that particular name? The reason given is that at the time the Torah was presented at *Har Sinai*, a hatred descended upon the nations. The words “*Sinai*” and “*sinah*” — “hatred” — bear a close resemblance to one another. Rashi (*ibid.*) suggests that the hatred was directed from Hashem toward the nations because they had rejected the Torah.

As a prelude to *Kabalah Hatorah*, Hashem caused great natural disturbances in the world: “The mountains skipped like rams; the hills like young rams. What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn backward?” (*Tehillim* 114:4,5; see *Metzudas David*, *ibid.*). Immanuel Velikovsky (*Worlds in Collision*) cites sources from various ancient cultures that indicate that at the period of *Kabalah Hatorah* volcanoes were erupting, and mountains were receding and being built all over the world. According to the old Tibetan traditions, the highlands of Tibet were flooded in a great cataclysm, and terrifying comets caused great upheavals. Ancient Chinese history records that the sun did not set for a number of days, the forests were set on fire, and vermin filled the country. A high wave “reaching the sky” poured over the face of the land and swept water over the mountain peaks. The Mexican historical records tell of how the mountains in every part of the Western hemisphere simultaneously gushed lava. Mountains swelled under the pressure of molten masses and new ridges arose. The tribes of British Columbia tell: “Great clouds appeared . . . such a great heat came, that finally the water boiled.” The Indian tribes of the more northern Pacific coast of America insist that the ocean boiled. The profile of the land changed in a catastrophe, new valleys were formed, mountain ridges were torn apart, new gulfs were cut out, ancient heights were overturned and new ones sprang up. The Mayan relate that mountains rolled and were removed, and great and small mountains moved and shook. The Hindus depict the cosmic catastrophe: “The whole world breaks into flames. All the peaks of mountains . . . crumble and disappear in the sky. The flames of fire rise up and envelop the heaven.” The primitives of Africa, in the eastern and western provinces of the continent, tell about the collapse of the sky. The tradition of the aborigines of western Brazil states that: “The lightnings flashed and the thunders roared terribly and all were afraid.” The aborigines of Paumotu in Polynesia relate that the earth was submerged into the ocean, and they reported the strange sighting of a heavenly body. The Finnish historical records indicate that there were disturbances in heaven; they thought that the support of the sky had given way. Velikovsky gives many other examples of the recorded fear of many other nations who witnessed the great natural disturbances occurring during the seven weeks between *Kerias Yam Suf* and *Kabalah Hatorah*.

They felt that the end of the world was imminent as a result of these phenomena. This is also alluded to in the Song of Devorah:

הרים נזלו מפני ה' זה סיני

The mountains melted at the presence of Hashem, this was at Sinai... (*Shoftim* 5:5).

Hashem desired to awaken the world from its complacency and alert mankind to the spectacular gift He was going to bestow upon *Klal Yisrael*. He desired that the nations should in some way join with *Klal Yisrael* in accepting Hashem's Torah. If they desired, they could become *gerei tzedek*—converts—as did the *Eirev rav* (See Rabbi Berliner and/or Rav Kook editions of old *girsas* of Rashi, *Shemos* 12:38). Or at the very least, they could have become *gerei toshav* (Gentiles who have accepted the Noachide laws). This upheaval in nature was designed to shake them from their contented state of mediocrity and galvanize them into achieving greatness. According to the *Gemara* (*Avodah Zarah* 2:) Hashem peddled the Torah “to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it until He came to *Klal Yisrael*, who received it.” Each nation had a personal objection to a particular ethical principle of the Torah, and on the whole they remained disinterested. The nations' curiosity though were peaked by the disturbances, and they were moved to approach their great men for an explanation of these events. *Chazal* indicate that there were at least three great men of world-class stature who understood what was occurring at that time: Yisro, Iyov and Bilaam (*Sotah* 11•; *Sanhedrin* 106•). Yisro, the spiritual leader of Midian, renounced idolatry, and called upon his countrymen to do likewise. He was denounced and derided (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:32). Iyov was a righteous gentile and prophet (*Bava Basra* 15:) who resided in the land of Utz. He was in the company of other righteous individuals (*Bereishis Rabbah* 49:9), but was ineffectual in spiritually uplifting his generation. Bilaam, who resided in Arum, was the greatest of them all. He was actually also a *Navi* of Hashem (*Sanhedrin* 106•), one of seven Gentile prophets (*Bava Basra* 15:), and he was almost but not quite an equal of Moshe *Rabbeinu* (*Sifri Devarim* 34:10; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:1). It was Hashem's intention that Bilaam bring His message to the nations (*ibid.*). At the time of this upheaval of nature, all the nations sent him representatives to determine what was happening. Perhaps Hashem was consigning another flood to the world? Was Hashem demanding something of them? Were they required to do anything? Did they perhaps commit some transgression against Hashem? “Relax,” Bilaam said to them, “Hashem has a precious gift in His treasury, which He wishes to bestow upon His children” (*Zevachim* 116•). End of story. He could have convinced them to take some proactive course on behalf of Hashem. Moreover, they themselves could have persisted in their inquiries and curiosity to effect a change in their lives. But it was not to be: in the midst of this earth shattering tumult they were content to just return to their everyday mediocre existence. The nations had a great opportunity, and they ignored it.

Upon rejecting the Torah, the nations incurred Hashem's wrath. Every human being is invested with a fundamental potential for greatness. Man was created with an element of Divinity.

ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים

And [Hashem] breathed into his [man's] nostrils the breath of life (*Bereishis* 2:7).

Hashem, so to speak, breathed into man a part of His own greatness (Ramban *ibid.*). The nations had an opportunity to experience this greatness by bonding in some fashion with *Klal Yisrael*. They elected not to exercise their potential. At *Kabalas Hatorah* the nations are blamed for not rising above the “dust of the ground” (*Bereishis* 2:7), for not being interested in associating with Hashem’s Torah. Hence, the hatred.

Similarly, the gentile residents of the *yeshivah* town of Mata Mechasia are severely criticized by the Sages (*Berachos* 17:). Mata Mechasia housed a formidable *yeshiva* all year round, but twice a year the *Yarchei Kalah* was established there. During the *Yarchei Kalah* the city was inundated with thousands upon thousands of people from the neighboring regions who desired to spend some time learning Torah. The city was then so crowded that people literally slept in the streets; nevertheless the enthusiasm for Torah reached a fever pitch. The gentiles are criticized for living in such a wonderful Torah environment and yet remaining indifferent to it. If an opportunity presents itself to man, man is expected to utilize it. Ignoring circumstances in which one can activate his potential is reason enough for scorn.

The Rambam (*Igeres Teiman*) offers another interpretation of “a hatred descended upon the nations.” The idolaters now became jealous of *Klal Yisrael*’s new elevated status. Moreover, the hostility displayed by the various nations and by their monarchs throughout the generations, against *Klal Yisrael*, was a result of their enmity of our superior position. As a result of that hatred, they sought to harass, decimate and destroy *Klal Yisrael*. The *Ein Yaakov* (*Shabbos* 89•) points out that to the gentiles, *Klal Yisrael* became the most despised of all the nations. Certainly both interpretations of “hatred” are accurate.

Rashi (*Bava Kama* 38•) explains that as a result of the nations’ rejection of Hashem’s “peddling” efforts, they lost legal right to materialistic possession. For example, if a Jew’s ox gores a Canaani’s ox, there is no culpability (see Maharatz Chi’us *ibid.*). Punishment for rejection of the Torah was that their possessions are now legally the property of *Klal Yisrael*. Man only needs materialistic support if he is to use it for the acquisition of spiritual gain. If, however, he rejects the importance of spiritual achievement, he has no need for materialistic benefits.

Prior to *Matan Torah* all men were considered equal. Avraham *Avinu* shared his hospitality with all comers (*Bereishis* 18:2), all men were equally important. After *Matan Torah* the concept of *matanas chinam* — gratuitous gift — no longer exists. *Klal Yisrael* proffers gratuitous gifts to “*achicha bemitzvos*” — “your brother in commandments” — but not to the nations. *Klal Yisrael* no longer represents regular nationhood; it is now a nation of superior beings ordained by a spirituality that soars far above the rest of mankind.

מי כעמך ישראל, גוי אחד בארץ

Which nation is like Israel, a unique nation in the world (*Shabbos Minchah Shemoneh Esrei*).

The other nations of the world are supporting actors on the stage of history, while *Klal Yisrael* is the lead actor and always occupies center stage.

ספינות הבאות מגליא לאספמיה, אינן מתברכות אלא בשביל ישראל

[Even something as innocuous as] a ship traveling from France to Spain is only blessed for the benefit of *Klal Yisrael* (*Yevamos* 63•).

Whether it is recognized or unrecognized by mankind, the fact remains that *Klal Yisrael* is at the center of every world activity. It might sound chauvinistic to the unenlightened ear, but anything that happens anywhere on the planet occurs only because of the impact it has on *Klal Yisrael*, Hashem's central world figure.

By accepting the Torah, by accepting a contractual obligation to Hashem, *Klal Yisrael* thereby relinquished its independence. The most cherished possession of man is his autonomy, his ability to determine his own fate without interference from any outside force. Mankind likes to feel that it is in control of its own destiny. In this vein, *Klal Yisrael* was initially fiercely protective of its intellectual integrity, of its own mind, so to speak; but at *Har Sinai*, *Klal Yisrael* turned over its independent mind to the greater Mind of Hashem (see Rav Kook, *Igros Rayah* 36). *Klal Yisrael* now assumes the honored designation:

כי עבדי הם

“For they are My slaves” (*Vayikra* 25:42).

כי לי בני ישראל עבדים עבדי הם אשר הוצאתי אותם מארץ מצרים

“For unto Me the children of Israel are slaves, they are My slaves, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt” (*ibid.* 55).

At the same time, they are also referred to as:

בנים אתם לה' אלקי'

You are children to Hashem (*Devarim* 14:1).

חבבים ישראל שנקראו בנים למקום, חבה יתרה נודעת להם שנקראו לו בנים

Beloved is Israel for they are called children of Hashem. It was an act of special favor that it was disclosed to them that they are called children [of Hashem] (*Pirkei Avos* 3:14).

Both terms of endearment are operative simultaneously (*Kidushin* 36•; *Sifri*, *Devarim* 32:5; see *Bava Basra* 10•).

Hence, it is apparent that the events surrounding Sinai were a turning point in world history. Next to the actual creation of the world, Sinai stands as the single most spectacular event of all time. It has determined the relations between Hashem and man, and the relationship between the nations and *Klal Yisrael* for eternity.

aA