

Yisro

The Secret of Successful Relationships

The Jew encamped opposite the mountain

Shemos 19:2

Mount Sinai was chosen because it is the shortest mountain in its region. This is to teach us humility.¹ The Torah, like water, will always leave the higher place and drip to the lower place.² But why is this so? Why is humility the prerequisite for having the Torah rest upon a person?

The very first commandment given to the Jewish people, as a nation, was that of following a calendar based upon the moon.³ It was later that same month that they merited leaving the land of Egypt. There must be a connection between the mitzvah that was given to the Jewish people as a prelude to their redemption, and that very redemption. Each month, when we prepare to announce the coming of the new moon that following week, we beseech Hashem, “He who performed wonders for our ancestors, redeeming them from slavery to freedom, may He also redeem us soon...” But what is the meaning of this connection? Why does our relationship with the moon have anything to do with redemption?

The moon started out the same size as the sun.⁴ The sun and moon shared one crown. But, two kings cannot share one crown, as the moon explained to Hashem. Hashem told her that she was correct, and then told her, “Go make yourself smaller.” The only way that the world would be able to function would be with only one large luminary and one small one. The moon was chosen to be the smaller one. The Jewish people are likened to the moon.⁵ Just as the moon makes itself small, so do the Jews. “It is not due to your great numbers that Hashem desired you from among the nations, rather, because you are the smallest of all nations.”⁶ Is the fact that the Jewish people are not numerous a valid reason for choosing them? The Talmud explains that “you are the smallest” actually means, “you are the ones who makes yourselves small.”⁷ Hashem desires the Jews because they are humble. To the fellow who is arrogant, Hashem says, “He and I (*ani vihu*) can not live in one place.”⁸ Arrogance is something that keeps man away from Hashem. It is not easy to live with a higher truth than one’s own psyche. The ability to sacrifice what one wants in favor of what one truly believes is not something that the haughty man can do. The humble man can truly say, “I do not understand or feel this at the moment, but I know that sometimes I am not the final arbiter.” The most

1 Sotah 5a

2 Taanis 7a

3 Shemos 12:2

4 Chullin 60b

5 Bereishis Rabbah 8; see Sukkah 29a. See also *Afikei Yam* of R. Isaac Chaver to Moed Kattan 12a.

6 Dvarim 7:7

7 Chullin 89a

8 Sotah 5a

important prerequisite for a relationship with G-d, and a commitment to truth, is humility. Humility is what allows G-d, as it were, room to join us.

When we bless Hashem for the new moon, we connect to the message of the moon, and the message of the Jewish people. This, explains Rabbi Yechezkel Weinfeld, is why blessing the new moon is just like a meeting with Hashem's presence, the Shechina. The Talmud tells us that just as at the Red Sea, the Jewish people saw the divine, and said, "*Zeh keli vianveihu*," (this is my G-d and I will glorify Him), so does one receive that level of revelation when blessing the new moon.⁹ For, when we act with humility, we can then connect with Hashem. The word *vianveihu* – and I will glorify Him – which the Jews recited when they saw Hashem at the Red Sea, is, in fact, a contraction of the words in the expression "*ani vibu*."¹⁰ Hashem says the arrogant man and I cannot live in the same place, and the words used to express this were *ani vibu*. But when there is humility, then man can dwell together with Hashem.

According to the *Sefer Hachinuch*, the reason that we cannot eat any chametz on Pesach is because chametz represents arrogance.¹¹ Matzah and chametz are essentially the same. Their difference lies in the bread being a blown-up version of matzah. On Pesach, we are taught to be humble, for this was the most essential ingredient in our relationship with Hashem. Rambam¹² tells us that although every characteristic has its time and place, arrogance is an exception. There is no time or place for arrogance whatsoever. Just as there can be no chametz at all on Pesach, not even a speck, so can there be no arrogance. As R. Nachman bar Yitzchak said regarding arrogance in the Talmud,¹³ "None of it, not even one bit." The Midrash tells us that the punishment of the arrogant man is that he will be burnt with fire.¹⁴ We burn our chametz in fire, and hopefully, our arrogance along with it. The humble man can leave Egypt, and only he can receive the Torah.

But there is another reason why humility is essential for the Sinai experience. R. Shlomo Ganzfried¹⁵ explains that humility is the prerequisite for harmony among people. When the Torah describes the Jews' encampment at Sinai, it does so in a peculiar way. It tells us in the singular form that "the Jew encamped opposite the mountain,"¹⁶ rather than in the plural. Our Sages teach us that this is because at that moment, the Jews were so united that they were as one man, with one heart.¹⁷ The Torah was not given in the Land of Israel, but rather in a desert, to retain peace; for, had the Torah been given in Israel, each Tribe would have desired that the Torah be given in their own portion, causing ill will among Jews. This unity among

9 Sanhedrin 42a

10 Shabbos 123b, see Rashi.

11 *Sefer Hachinuch* 117; he does not quite tie it in to Pesach there, in what is possibly one of the most fascinating pieces in the entire work, but those who followed him have done so.

12 *Yad Hachazakah*, Hilchos Deos 2:3. The same is asserted by the Rosh in the beginning of his *Orchos Chaim*.

13 Sotah 5a

14 Vayikra Rabbah 7:6

15 Author of *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* in his *Apiryon* to Bamidbar

16 Shemos 19:2

17 Mechilta, quoted by Rashi, ad loc.

Jews is what makes us unique.

Each morning, we thank God, “that You did not make me a *goy*.” Colloquially, we refer to a Gentile as a *goy*. But that seems to make little sense. After all, a *goy* in Hebrew literally means a nation. In fact, the Jewish people are, themselves, called a *goy* throughout Scripture. There were those who suggested changing the words of the prayers. R. Shlomo Kluger,¹⁸ however, explained that each *individual* Gentile is called a “*goy*.” While the Jewish people are collectively one nation, each Gentile is a nation unto himself. The Midrash¹⁹ teaches us that when the Torah refers to Yaakov, all seventy people with him are referred to as one soul, one *nefesh*. But when the Torah refers to Esau, says the Midrash, though he only had six people with him, they are called separate souls, *nefashos*. We thank Hashem for creating us as a nation, united and together. We do not simply live as individuals, and form a coalition by necessity. We live together because we are one unit, one people. One *goy*. Each morning, we thank Hashem that He did not make each one of us a *goy* unto ourselves.

This unity began at the foot of Mount Sinai, when Hashem told us that we were to be His *goy kadosh*.²⁰ We were together at that moment, as one man with one heart.

In order to properly keep the Torah, we must be unified. There are several levels on which this must be understood. The first is a practical level. R. Shmuel Falkinfeld, the great giant of the eighteenth century, explains a story involving Hillel.²¹ The Talmud²² tells us that a fellow came to Hillel asking to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one leg (“*al regel achas*”). Hillel replied by quoting him the Aramaic equivalent of “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” then he added, “the rest is simply commentary – Go and learn it!” R. Falkinfeld explained: We are taught that each of the 613 commandments corresponds both to one part of the human body and one part of the human soul.²³ The part of the soul can only be perfected if that mitzvah

18 *Haelef Licha Shlomo*, 34. See also commentary of Netziv, *Haamek Davar* to Bereishis 20:4, on the words, “*Hagoy gam Tzaddik tabarog*,” which he renders, “Would you kill me just because I am a *goy*, even if I am a completely righteous?”

19 Vaykira Rabbah 4:6

20 Shemos 19:6

21 *Beis Shmuel HaAcharon* to Shemos. See *Yismach Moshe* to Shemos, 121b, where he quotes this and elaborates, as well as *Divrei Yoel*, Bamidbar, p. 19. A similar assertion is made by Ben Ish Chai (*Halachos Shana Rishona*, Vaera). See also *Shoma Shlomo* to Malachi pp. 679–681 (by R. Shlomo Kluger to Haftaros, published with *Chochmas Hatorah* to Parshas Toldos), where he explains that although one person can rarely fulfill the entire Torah, by living in *Shalom* (harmony) with other Jews, he connects to others and then, as one fellow fulfills one mitzvah properly while another does a different mitzvah, and so on, all of them thus fulfill the entire Torah in that way. See also *Tehillos Yisrael* on Tehillim, p. 462, by the same author. See also the introduction to *Beis Elokim* of the Mabit, and the comments of *Divrei Shaul* (quoted by *Yalkut Hegershumi* to Brachos 17a) to explain why women require the merit of their children and husbands to receive their rewards, since they do not have *arevus* and thus cannot fulfill their mitzvos through others.

22 Shabbos 31a

23 This is a common theme among the students of the Arizal. See, for example, R. Chaim Vital’s *Shaarei Kedusha* at great length. See *Kisvei Arizal*, *Shemen Sasson*, *shaar* 15, *Shaar Hazivugim*, 3:9; *Shaar Hamitzvos*, 1a and Sheloh, *Torah Shebiksav*, Ki Teitzei 87:3. See also *Maharsha* to Shabbos 152b. See also *Reishis Chochmah*, *Shaar Hayirah*, ch. 13, where he discusses why reincarnation is necessary if Gehinom is also an option. There, he

is performed, and one's soul is reincarnated again and again until each mitzvah is fulfilled, and thus, his soul is fully developed, spiritually. This man was asking Hillel, "How can I keep the whole Torah in one shot?" (*Al regel achas* can also mean, "in one occasion," just as we call the three important occasions of the year the three "*regalim*.") What bothered this fellow was that if one is not a man, woman, Kohen, Levi, etc., all at once, he cannot perform every single commandment! There are also mitzvos that only the king can perform. So, what is the solution? Hillel replied, "Love your neighbor as yourself." When you connect to the Jewish people, and become one unit with them, then you are also performing the mitzvos that they are performing. There are women within the Jewish people, Kohanim, and kings. If you love your neighbor as yourself, said Hillel, you can then connect to all the other people, and then you can truly fulfill the entire Torah.²⁴

On a practical level, we cannot fulfill the Torah unless we are humble, as we just saw. But there is more. You see, it is hard to truly relate to others and have a relationship with them when we do not respect them. When we cannot see the fact that there are so many ways in which others are better than us, how can we be at peace with them? When one person tells his friend, "You have a great singing voice; it is almost as good as mine," he has not truly respected that man. It may be a great compliment, depending upon how great the voice of the fellow offering the compliment was. But it is not a sign of respect. It is when we can see the greatness that others have, and truly appreciate its uniqueness to them, and how the specific greatness of the other person is not present in us, that we can truly respect others and have a real relationship with them. As long as a man is arrogant, and sees everyone else as slightly less than himself, he cannot truly relate to them.²⁵

The Torah was given on a small, humble mountain so that those receiving it would also be humble, because if they were not humble, they could not be united. And if they were not united, then the Torah could not be fulfilled.²⁶ Not only on a practical level, as R. Falkinfeld explained, but on a deeper level as well. The message that the Jewish people have imparted to mankind and their affect on this world are not things that could have come about via individuals alone. It is an incontestable historical reality that the Jewish people have endured the longest as a people. No other group has lasted as long, nor remained relevant for as long. The message of the Torah was not meant to die, but without the Jewish people in unison, it could not survive. In order for Hashem to entrust the Torah with the Jewish people, they had to be unified. "As one man, with one heart."

explains that Gehinom can only cleanse, but cannot add anything to the person, and thus, to complete more, he is forced to return to this Earth. See there for a detailed discussion of Gehinom, as well as the even worse pain of reincarnation.

24 A nearly identical approach is expressed by Ben Ish Chai in *Halachos Shana Rishona*, Parshas Vaera.

25 See also the comments of Chida in *Maris Haayin* (Avos 4:1) as well as in *Kikar Laaden*, where he explains the dictum, "Who is wise? He who learn from every man," to mean that humility is the way to retain one's wisdom, for one's ability to learn from others in a humble way is the key to his being able to listen to God, and truth, in a humble way.

26 See also *Peleh Yoetz*, s.v. *achdus*, where R. Papo asserts that God will only rest His presence among the Jewish people provided they are unified. He elaborates there a great deal.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that Hashem, Himself, acts humbly! It seems strange, but the Talmud²⁷ tells us, “Wherever one can find the greatness of Hashem, right there he can find His humility.” Ramban tells us that the reason than man cannot be arrogant is because Hashem created him. Only Hashem can be arrogant: “Hashem has reigned, His cloak is arrogance.”²⁸ When one is arrogant, says Ramban, he steals the cloak of Hashem.²⁹ We are not responsible for our strength, talents or looks. It all comes from Hashem. The classic *mussar* works carry this theme when discussing humility. So why on earth does Hashem act humbly? If humility is what we do in response to Hashem’s greatness, what is He doing being humble?!

When Hashem came to Mount Sinai, He came with just a few of His multitudes of angels.³⁰ He didn’t bring them all. Why not? Sinai was the big one! Hashem does not always choose to reveal Himself to man, but here, He finally was! – So why be humble? Why did He not bring out all of His angels? The answer is that we would not have been capable of handling that kind of exposure. What Hashem showed us at Sinai nearly killed us, and that was just a drop in the bucket. We must know that we are so small that we cannot truly see Hashem. Whatever we see is just a taste. Hashem’s greatness is just a cloak.³¹ Hashem is humble, because if not for that, we would have no relationship with Him whatsoever.³² The Talmud tells us that whenever you see Hashem’s greatness, you are, in fact, seeing His humility, for if you could see any greatness, that means that He made Himself a lot smaller than He is just so that you could see it!

Hashem humbly came to a humble mountain, to give the Torah to a humble people. The prerequisite for any relationship is humility. Without humility, we cannot let Hashem in. Without humility, we cannot connect to others, and we will not fulfill the Torah without them. And without humility, Hashem cannot show Himself to us. Even Hashem acts humbly, for instance, when He took the Torah from Heaven, and gave it up to mankind, forging the most powerful, incredible relationship between Himself, His people and His Torah.

27 Megillah 31a

28 Tehillim 93:1

29 *Iggeres HaRamban*

30 Rashi to Dvarim 33:2

31 See also the comments of Sfas Emes (Beshalach 5664) to Shemos 15:1, “*Asbira labashem ki gao gaah*,” (...for he is extremely haughty). He explains that, in fact, it means, “His greatness is far beyond anything that we can conceive of as great.”

32 I subsequently found this explanation offered by R. Yosef Chaver, the son of R. Isaac Chaver, in his Haggadah, *Zeroah Netuyah*, p. 114.