

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Yitro

In this week's parsha G-d gives the Torah to His people. The Jewish Nation, standing as one at the foot of Mount Sinai, hears the Voice of G-d. It was this awesome event at Sinai, with all the privileges and responsibilities that came with it, that defines us as the Chosen People.

The Midrash tells us that G-d offered the Torah to all the nations of the world, but they rejected it. He offered it to the descendants of Eisav and they asked Him, "What does the Torah say?" G-d replied, "Do not kill." They said they weren't interested. He offered it to the descendants of Yishmael and they asked Him, "What does the Torah say?" G-d replied, "Do not steal." They said they weren't interested. This went on with nation after nation, until G-d finally offered it to the Jews.

The *Sefat Emet* (Rebbe of Ger, 1847-1905) asks an interesting question. Was it fair that, when G-d offers the Torah to each nation, He reveals to them the law that they would have the most difficulty with, but when it came to the Jews, G-d didn't tell them anything? Maybe if G-d had revealed to the Jews the one law that they would have the most difficulty with, the Jews would have also rejected the Torah. With his original perspective, the *Sefat Emet* asserts that G-d did, in fact, reveal that one most challenging Torah concept to the Jews before giving them the Torah. G-d told the Jews that they were not permitted to touch the Mountain.

It is the nature of the Jewish soul to thirst for closeness to G-d. In our legitimate desire to forge a personal path to Heaven we are in grave danger of getting spiritually lost. We cannot trust our passion for holiness and our love of G-d to guide us faithfully. G-d tells us to stay away from Mount Sinai. We may not even touch it (Shemot 19:12). This is the greatest challenge for a Jew. We cannot run wherever our thirst for spirituality leads us. Rather, we must be constrained and directed by an awe of G-d. When we are in awe we recognize that we'd better just stand back. If we have awe as our guide, then we won't go where we don't belong, and we won't get lost.

"There was thunder and lightning...Mount Sinai was all in smoke because of G-d's presence that had come down on it in fire...The entire mountain trembled violently. There was the sound of a rams horn, increasing in volume to a great degree..." (19:16,18). Couldn't G-d give us the Torah a little more quietly? Why the fanfare? The Torah itself provides the answer. "Moshe said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. G-d only came to raise you up. Awe of Him will be on your faces and you will not sin'" (20:17). G-d gave the Torah in a way that would instill awe in the Jewish People.



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The function of awe is definitely not limited to inhibiting sin. There is another crucial role that it plays. Awe of G-d is indispensable for the study of Torah. The Prophet Yeshayahu states, "Awe of G-d is its (i.e., Torah's) storehouse" (Isaiah 33:6). Rabbi Chaim Volozhner in his classic *Nefesh Hachaim* elaborates on this theme. "The degree to which Man is able to amass and preserve the wealth of Torah is in direct proportion to the size of the storehouse of awe that he has prepared within himself" (chap. 4, sec. 5). In other words, awe is the only operating system that can read and store Torah. If we lack the appropriate fear and wonder when we attempt to comprehend the Mind of G-d with the study of His Torah, then maybe, G-d forbid, we are not engaging in the study of Torah at all. The activity of Torah study is the process through which G-d speaks to us, and if we lack awe then we aren't going to be good listeners. A prerequisite to receiving Torah is a heart filled with awe.

The experience at Sinai was not only for the Jews of old, it was also for us today. "Take heed and watch yourself very carefully, so that you do not forget the things your eyes saw. Do not let [this memory] leave your hearts all the days of your lives. Teach your children and your children's children about the day you stood before G-d your Lord in Horeb. It was then that G-d said to me, 'Congregate the people for Me, and I will let them hear My words. This will teach them to be in awe of Me as long as they live on the earth, and they will also teach their children'" (Devorim 4:9-10). Here we have a bona fide Biblical mitzvah to remember Sinai and to teach it to our children. By recreating the Sinai experience in our minds and in the minds of our children, we can utilize it as an effective tool to inspire within us an awe of G-d (Ramban).

G-d Himself dreamed after Sinai, "If only their hearts would always remain this way, in such a state of awe..." (Devorim 5:25). It seems that G-d knew that this wasn't going to be easy. Rabbi M.C. Luzzatto stated the obvious when he observed that, without any effort on our part, we cannot expect that awe of G-d will enter our hearts by itself. We are awed and humbled before G-d by the thrilling memory of the Sinai experience. Only in such a state can we properly receive the Torah, our faithful guide to life.

Shabbat Shalom!

