

Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

Parashat Yitro: The Mountain – A Window to Heaven

In Denmark, where I grew up, there are no mountains at all. It is a totally flat country. When, as a teenager, I was searching for truth I found Denmark and Danish people very square and straight but without spiritual heights. I noticed that people from mountainous even just hilly countries seemed more spiritual. So I developed this somewhat original anthropological theory, that the personality of different people is affected by the nature in which they live. Flat countries like Denmark produce ‘flat’ people, whereas people who live in the mountains tend to be more connected to the spiritual realm. At this time, before having found my truth in Torah, I revered the spirituality of the East. It, therefore, made perfect sense to me that the saints living in the Himalayan Mountains were so much more spiritual than the Danes from the green flatland. I attributed my feeling out of place in Denmark to the lack of mountains for my spiritual yearning. As soon as I finished high school, I was out of there, on my journey climbing the mountains in search of truth. Sure enough, I found myself learning Torah in Diaspora Yeshiva on Mount Zion from 1980-1987! Today, I live in the heart of the Judean Hills, surrounded by mountains on all sides, with the greatest mountainous view from my dining room panoramic window, and my spacious backyard. No wonder I feel at home here in spiritual Bat Ayin! This week’s *parasha* confirms the theory of my youth linking spirituality to mountains. The most spiritual event of world history took place at Mount Sinai. At the Revelation of Sinai, when G-d gave the Torah to the Children of Israel, the great meeting point between G-d and us was nothing other than a mountain.

The Mountain of Life

The word *har/har* – mountain appears exactly 18 times in this week’s *parasha*, which incidentally begins with chapter 18 of the book of *Shemot*. 18 is the most well known number in Jewish numerology, corresponding to the Hebrew letter *yud* (10) and *chet* (8) spelling out the Hebrew word *chai* – life. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that the word ‘mountain’ is mentioned 18 times in preparation for and in connection with receiving the Torah – the Tree of Life. The mountain appears first in our *parasha* when Yitro leaves his honorable abode to journey into the wilderness to learn Torah from Moshe (*Shemot* 18:5 with Rashi). How did Yitro know where to seek Moshe? The mountain where G-d spoke with Moshe was already well known. This is where Hashem originally revealed Himself at the burning bush when Moshe was shepherding Yitro’s flock on the Mount of G-d (*Shemot* 3:1). Here, Hashem told him, “The sign that I have sent you, is that when you have brought the Jewish people out of Egypt, you shall serve G-d on this mountain” (*Shemot* 2:12). Moshe then showed Yitro the mountain where G-d would give the Torah. Moshe treasured this place camped there in love and anticipation of G-d’s revelation (*Ohr HaChaim*). Yitro, moreover, had heard from Moshe that the mountain of G-d was the most suitable place to receive Divine inspiration, something he too desired very much (*Emek D’var*).

Going Up to the Mountain of G-d to Convert

Not only Yitro, the most well known convert, came to the mountain to receive Torah. Actually, according to the *Zohar*, the mountain is symbolic of conversion of the soul. This concurs with the fact that the word *הַר*/*har* – mountain shares the same numerology with the word *בַּגֵּר*/*ba'ger* – among the convert (*Shemot* 12:19). The mountain is the place for converts to gather to convert as it states, “Many nations shall go and say, ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of Hashem’” (*Yesha'yahu* 2:3). Since the mountain of G-d is a place where gentiles convert, it is written that Yitro came “to Moses into the wilderness.” “To Moshe,” to proselytize and bring gentiles under the wings of the Shechinah. ““Into the wilderness,” they would come. For the mountain of G-d is for converting the soul, to receive there the *nefesh* (soul) of the convert. The time will come when the other nations will strive to come under the wings of the Shechinah and say, “...let us go up...” All nations of the world are associated with descent, but those who cleave to the Holy One, blessed be He, will achieve an ascent. Therefore, it is written, “Let us go up.” (*Zohar* 2:69b).

Mountain of Humility and Peace

The Torah emphasizes that Israel camped facing the mountain. “When they departed from Refidim, and came to the wilderness of Sinai, they encamped in the wilderness; and there Israel encamped before the mountain” (*Shemot* 19:2). The word *רַפִּידִים*/Refidim can be unscrambled to become *פְּרִידִים*/Peridim (divided). Thus, the Torah is teaching us that they departed from being divided and encamped before the mountain like one person with one heart. This is why the word “encamped” is written in the singular language (Rashi). The particular place of Mount Sinai is what caused Israel to unite. Honor seeking and pursue of power causes all strife in the world. Therefore, when the children of Israel saw that although Mount Sinai is the lowest of all the mountains, Hashem desired it the most, they then realized how Hashem chooses the lowly. This is what inspired them to become humble and make peace between them. It was not the solitude of wilderness that did it, this is why the plural language is used when describing that they arrived and camped in the wilderness. This teaches us that while in the wilderness they were still disputing. It was only when they faced the mountain that the singular language denoting unity is used. Thus, it was the specifically the mountain that brought them peace (*K'li Yakar*).

Meeting Point between Heaven and Earth

It was from the mountain that Hashem called to Moshe to ascend (*Shemot* 19:3), and it was on the mountain that Hashem descended before the eyes of the entire nation of Israel (*ibid.* 11). Because of the great holiness of the Mount, Hashem warned the people not to come too close and not to touch the mountain or its edge (*ibid.* 12). On the day of the giving of the Torah the mountain became filled with “thunder and lightning. A thick cloud was on the mount, and the sound of the Shofar kept getting louder; and all the people in the camp trembled” (*ibid.* 16). Even the mountain itself trembled when Hashem descended upon it in fire and smoke (*ibid.* 18). Sometimes on a misty day, when I look out of my window, blankets of moving clouds envelop the mountains. It is an awesome sight, and I stand with my eyes glued to my glass-door feeling magnetized. Here in the mountain we live in the clouds. Even if they are not the Clouds of Glory, they still radiate a glimmer of the place where heaven and earth meet.

Dwelling on the Mountain

Hashem's descending upon the mountain was a culmination of the process of Hashem's desire to return to abide in the lower world. From the beginning of Creation Hashem desired a dwelling place below as it states, "...walking in the garden toward the cool of the day; (*Bereshit* 3:8). When Adam and Chava were expelled from the Garden of Eden due to their sin, G-d's presence receded to the first heaven. When Kain killed Hevel, He withdrew to the second heaven, and through the sin of the generation of the Flood, the Tower, Sodom etc. He retreated all the way to the seventh heaven. However, when Avraham came and performed Hashem's will, He returned to the sixth heaven, Yitzchak brought Hashem down to the fifth heaven, Ya'acov to the fourth, the tribe of Levi to the third, Amram to the second and Moshe to the first heaven. When the Children of Israel stood together to receive the Torah with one heart, Hashem went all the way down to ten handbreadths of the earth, as it states, "Hashem descended on Mount Sinai (*Shemot* 19:20). He made an opening in the heavens facing Sinai and he entered the head of the mountain inside of this window, while its legs were standing on the earth. This is the meaning of "I came to my Garden, my sister my bride" (*Song of Songs* 5:1). "At the time of the giving of the Torah, I finally arrived at my resting place that I had desired from the beginning of Creation to dwell in the lower world" (*Ba'alei Tosfot, Shemot* 19:20). After discovering all this, I understand my infatuation with mountains much better. I certainly am happy to live in here in the Mountains of the Judean Hills.



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