

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Parshas Yisro

“They journeyed from Refidim and came to the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness; and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (19:2)

Why does the posuk say that they left Refidim? We already knew from the previous parsha that they were there?! Rashi quotes the Mechilta which answers that the Torah compares the departure from Refidim to the arrival at Sinai. Just as they arrived at Sinai in a state of teshuva, they also left Refidim in a state of teshuva. What is the significance of this fact?

The Netziv answers that the Jews already began to prepare for the acceptance of the Torah in Refidim, before they had even reached Har Sinai. By the time they left Refidim, they had already done teshuva and were already mentally preparing for the Torah. The lesson we can learn from this posuk is that preparation is key to any spiritual achievement. If the Jews would have just woken up one day and received the Torah without proper preparation, they would not have appreciated the Torah nearly as much and it would not have fully impacted them. Because they already began their preparations back in Refidim, they were able to truly appreciate Matan Torah.

We can implement this lesson in our own lives and reap its rewards. There is a tangible difference in one's davening if he arrives in shul before the minyan begins and is able to clear his mind first. A few minutes of preparation make a world of difference. Another example is Shabbos. There is a mitzvah for every individual to partake in the Erev Shabbos preparations. When one does not rush into Shabbos and even takes a few minutes to prepare for its arrival, he appreciates Shabbos much more. Another example is the Yomim Tovim. Every festival bears a message for us each year which we should dwell upon and absorb into our daily lives. If a person wakes up and finds that it is a Yom Tov, he will not be able to benefit fully from the tremendous spiritual potential that is contained in a Yom Tov. If a person prepares by consciously reminding himself that a Yom Tov is coming, by physically preparing for the holiday and by studying the laws pertaining to it, he will greet the Yom Tov fully prepared to enjoy it and gain from it.

The Gemara in Bava Metzia 85b tells the story of R' Chiya, who once planted flaxseed, plowed the field, harvested the plants, took the flax and wove nets, took the nets and trapped deer, slaughtered the deer and skinned

them, took the hides and treated them, made parchment from the hides, wrote sefarim on these hides and took these sefarim and taught Torah to children from them. Why did he go to such great lengths in order to create sefarim? Surely someone other than the great Torah sage could have done the manufacturing?! R' Chiya knew that the Torah study from scrolls prepared with the intent to be used for learning could not be compared to Torah study from scrolls purchased from a manufacturer. To him, the time and effort invested in the preparation for Torah study was well worth it because he knew how much it would improve the quality of the resultant Torah study. The amount of preparation invested in any act of serving Hashem greatly increases its effects on the person.

“Moses ascended to Hashem, and Hashem called to him from the mountain, saying: So shall you say to the house of Yaakov and tell the sons of Yisrael” (19:3)

Rashi explains that "the house of Yaakov" refers to the women and "the sons of Yisrael" refers to the men. R' Moshe Feinstein asks: Why was Moshe commanded to speak to the women before the men? He answers that the women preceded the men because they spend the most time with the children when they are young and imbue the children with faith and belief in Hashem. This education provided by the mother in the first few years of the child's life is very important. The Torah endures and continues from generation to generation because of the training of young boys and girls. When they get older, they are too set in their ways to develop good habits and undo the way they have become accustomed to acting in their youth. The education of children has to begin at a very young age. This basic early education primes them to learn about Torah and mitzvos as they grow older and to eagerly pursue a life of serving Hashem. The women were to be consulted first regarding the acceptance of the Torah because they would be charged with the important task of teaching the children and preparing them to learn Torah and develop good character traits.

“And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth” (19:5)

Why was the giving of the Torah preceded with this conditional statement? The Netziv explains in his sefer Haamek Davar that the giving of the Torah was like a wedding between Hashem and the Jewish people. Just as a marriage is preceded by certain conditions, as set forth in the kesuba, the marriage between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael was also governed by certain terms that had to be laid out before entering into this relationship.

The Jewish people were like Hashem's bride when he took them out of Egypt and after the Torah was given they were like His wife. This is clearly stated in the posuk in Yirmiyah (2:2), which says: "Go and call in the ears of Yerushalayim, saying: Thus says Hashem, I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your marriage, when you went after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown." This commitment had to be prefaced with an exchange of conditions that were necessary in order for the special bond to last.

“And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Children of Israel” (19:6)

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that there were two distinct commands given here. Every person should be a kohen, a leader among people. He can do this by teaching Torah or by being an example for others through his own behavior. There is also the collective responsibility to be a holy nation. The Jewish people are not meant to be a nation like all the others in the sense that our strength does not come from territory or military might. That is not the goal. Our task is to be a leader among the nations in moral character and in our devotion to Hashem. By acting in this way, we truly become a holy nation and a light unto the nations around us. Hashem separated us in order to attain holiness, which is achieved by following the dictates of the Torah. This is the communal responsibility that was given to us at Har Sinai, which is our role as Hashem's chosen nation.

“No hand shall touch it, for he shall be stoned or cast down; whether man or beast, he shall not live. When the ram's horn sounds a long, drawn out blast, they may ascend the mountain” (19:13)

Rashi says that when the shofar would sound a long blast, it would signify that the Divine Presence had departed from the mountain and ascending it would be permitted from that point on. However, as long as the Divine Presence was on the mountain, going near it was punishable by death. We have to recognize that just as the mountain itself was not holy and it lost all vestiges of holiness after Hashem left It, similarly our houses only become a source of sanctity and a resting place for the Divine presence if we make it happen. It is not the house that makes the person, it is the person that makes the house. We can bring holiness into our house, but it is up to us and will not happen by itself. One has to work hard to make his house a place permeated with Torah and mitzvos in order to bring the Divine presence and create a "mikdash me'at."

“Moshe brought the people out toward Hashem from the camp, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain” (19:17)

The Malbim explains that the word "vayisyatzvu" comes from the root "nitzav." There are two words that mean standing, "nitzav" and "omed." The word "omed" means standing on one's own whereas "nitzav" implies that one needs strengthening and willpower in order to remain standing there. The Jewish people were frightened by the thunder and lightning and smoke and they were terrified of Hashem's presence. They needed chizuk from Moshe in order to remain standing at the mountain.

Matan Torah and the revelation on Har Sinai is the basis of our belief in Hashem. The fact that Hashem appeared and spoke to an entire nation of three million people is irrefutable evidence that Hashem exists and that the Torah is true. We must remember this awe-inspiring event and remind ourselves to always keep in mind the importance of Matan Torah.

“Hashem descended upon Mount Sinai, to the peak of the mountain, and Hashem summoned Moshe to the peak of the mountain, and Moshe ascended” (19:20)

Rabbi Friedman points out that the numerical value of the word "hahar" is 210, the same number of years that Bnei Yisrael were enslaved in Egypt. This alludes to the idea that the purpose of staying in Egypt for 210 years was to merit the Torah and to reach Har Sinai. This was the ultimate goal of the slavery and the redemption. In Egypt, they learned what it meant to be a slave. This understanding was to be channeled and used to become an Eved Hashem. The experience that they went through in Egypt would help them serve Hashem.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

Shiur given by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Written by Michael Gutmann