

## Sinai vs. Shushan? Shabbat Zachor 5784

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### **Shmot 19:16–17**

**16** And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a horn exceedingly loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. **17** And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the bottom part/בְּתַחְתִּית/b'tachtit of the mount.

### **Shmot 20: 15–16**

**15** All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. **16** “You speak to us,” they said to Moses, “and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.”

### **Rashi on Shmot 19:17 (1040–1105)**

According to its literal meaning this signifies “at the foot of the mountain.” But a Midrashic explanation is, that the mountain was plucked up from its place and was arched over them as a cask, so that they were standing בְּתַחְתִּית beneath (under) the mountain itself (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:17:2; Shabbat 88a).

### **Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (likely early 3/c)**

“And they took their places”—they huddled together. This teaches that the Israelites were afraid of the winds, and the earthquake, and the thunder, and the lightning that was coming. “At the bottom of the mountain”—this teaches that the mountain was torn away from its place, and they came and stood below the mountain, as it says (Deut. 4:11): “and they approached, and they stood below the mountain.”

### **BT Shabbat 88a (~450–550)**

The Gemara cites additional homiletic interpretations on the topic of the revelation at Sinai. The Torah says, “And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; **and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount**” (Exodus 19:17). **Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said:** the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be God, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. **Rav Aha bar Ya'akov said:** From here there is a substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfill the Torah. The Jewish people can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding. **Rava said:** Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: “The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them” (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews ordained what they had already taken upon themselves through coercion at Sinai.

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### Isaiah HaLevi Horovitz, *Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Tetzaveh, Torah Ohr 48 (1611–1631)*

Our sages (Shab. 85) comment on Exodus 19, 17: "They stood underneath the Mountain," that God had threatened that if the Jewish people would not accept the Torah the Mountain would crush them to death. This proved that acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people at Mount Sinai was an act performed under duress. Not until after the decree of Haman was canceled did the Jewish people accept the Torah on an entirely voluntary basis. This is what is meant when the Book of Esther describes that *Torah*/תורה had now become *Orah*/אור, that what had previously been a burden now became like a ray of light for them. An allusion to this revolutionary change in the Jewish attitude to Torah is found in the words "and the law (religion) was really given in Shushan the capital" (Esther 3,15).

### **Esther 4:7–16**

7 And Mordecai told him (Hathach the eunuch) all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. 8 He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [He bade him] show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people. 9 When Hathach came and delivered Mordecai's message to Esther, 10 Esther told Hathach to take back to Mordecai the following reply: 11 "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days." 12 When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, 13 Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. 14 On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." 15 Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai: 16 "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!"

### Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Esther v'Chanukah 2:18 (1176–1178)*

And although all memory of ancient troubles will disappear, in accordance with the verse, "Because the former troubles are forgotten, and because they are hidden from mine eyes" (Is. 65:16), the days of Purim will not cease to be observed, as it is said, "And that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed" (Esther 9:28).