

**In lieu of a Parsha page, I am sending out a copy of my article in this week's Yated  
Ne'eman. Have a wonderful Shabbos and Yom Tov**

**THE ULTIMATE JOURNEY:  
OUR ANNUAL RETURN TO HAR SINAI**

**By Rav Yaakov Feitman, Kehillas Bais Yehudah Tzvi, Cedarhurst**

Shavuos is the most humble of *Yomim Tovim*. Nowhere does it state specifically that the Torah was given on this day. *Har Sinai* is the most humble of mountains and this Yom Tov does not have a single mitzvah to call exclusively its own. And yet, on one level, it is the most important of days. Everyone knows that on Pesach we must imagine that we have just relived the event we are celebrating. However what is less well known is that we must do the same on Shavuos. The *Medrash (Pesikta Zutah, Vaeschanan)* states emphatically that “a person must see himself as having received the Torah on *Har Sinai*.” The *Hagadah* boasts thousands of commentaries so we have quite a solid idea how to mentally transport ourselves to the exodus in ancient Egypt. However, this lesser known mandate has few *meforshim*, leaving us to fend for ourselves. What indeed does it mean to imagine ourselves at Sinai? Is learning Torah all night sufficient? What eternal messages are embedded in the actual event, other than the content and mitzvos we received?

One answer may be found in a *maamar* by my *rebbe*, Rav Yitzchok Hutner *z"l*. He cites (*Pachad Yitzchok, Shavuos* 8) the *Ramban (Devarim 4:9; Sefer Hamitzvos*, end No. 2) that the injunction “lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld” refers to *Mattan Torah* itself, not the details of the Torah. The *Rosh Yeshiva* explains that at *Har Sinai*, certain phenomena accompanied the giving of the Torah. These included “the thunder and the flames, the sound of the shofar and the smoking mountain” (*Shemos* 20:15). These seemingly peripheral “side-effects” actually changed *Klal Yisrael* significantly, as the *posuk* continues “so that awe of Him shall be upon your faces so that you shall not sin.” The *Mechilta (Shemos* *ibid*) teaches that “what we gained from that cataclysmic event is the midah of *bushah*.” In other words, from that moment on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan 2448, every one of us has an aversion to sin. Our souls have been forged in the crucible of Sinai and will never again fall into iniquity without first experiencing acute shame and mortification. That is one of the gifts of *Mattan Torah* for

which we should feel eternal gratitude. Imagining that we have returned to Sinai means re-experiencing that transformation and its spiritual aura every single Shavuos.

On another level, returning to *Har Sinai* reinforces our understanding that learning Torah is unlike any other endeavor. The *Gemara* (*Shabbos* 88b) relates that *Klal Yisrael* literally died with each one of the commandments. The *Alshich* explains that this was a “death by Divine kiss” which we experienced with each one of the *Aseres Hadibros*. Ten times we died and were resurrected, to teach us that every single connection with the Torah provides entirely new life and sustenance. On the other hand, we must feel that to the extent that we are lacking any part of the Torah, we are not fully alive. The story is told of Rav Simcha Kessler, one of the early *Roshei Yeshiva* of *Ponovizh litze'irim*, who had undergone surgery and was convalescing at home. He went for a three week post-op checkup, wherein the surgeon gave him a clean bill of health. “May I return to give my *shiur* in the Yeshiva?” Rav Kessler inquired. The doctor responded easily “Why not? It’s been three weeks.” However, Rav Kessler was still uncertain. He did not return to Yeshiva, but invited a few *talmidim* to his home to attempt a *shiur*. After a few moments, he had to stop, telling the *bochurim* that he would try again in a few days. What happened? Was the surgeon wrong or was Rav Kessler mistaken? Actually, neither, for a *shiur* in *Toras Chaim* is different than an academic lecture. The *Rosh Yeshiva* knew that every *shiur* is like *Mattan Torah*. Even if he doesn’t pass away during the *shiur*, G-d forbid, his strength is totally expended, the burning fire of the Torah consumes all until the Torah restores one’s vigor again. However, if a person is sick, who knows if this will happen, as the *Rosh Yeshiva* soon discovered. Indeed, at the *shiva* for Rav Kessler, some years later, his children revealed that when their father returned home after a *shiur*, his clothing were so soaked by the sweat of his exertions that he had to change completely. That and only that is the way to replicate *maamad Har Sinai* and to remember that the Torah is not like other subjects and teachings.

The power of returning to Sinai is so great that even the “side benefits” are available today to those who take this day seriously. A man who was very sick with a dreaded disease asked Rav Yosef Sholom Elyashiv zt”l for a *segulah* – an amulet or other mystical cure –for his illness. It was close to Shavuos and the great *Posek* advised the man to listen carefully to the *Krias Hatorah*. He gently told the patient that since all those

who were ailing received a complete cure at *Har Sinai*, he, too could be cured if he listened with complete trust in Hashem. Additionally, the *Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashonoh 4:8)* teaches that on Shavuos one can obtain total forgiveness for all his sins since the goat which is offered on this day, unlike all other goat offerings, does not say “*lechatas* – for a sin offering.” This is because, the *Yerushalmi* concludes, “on this day, if we accept the yoke of the Torah Hashem considers it as if we have never sinned.” Now, let us imagine. On Rosh and Yom Kippur we receive atonement going *forward* but on Shavuos we can actually wipe out all improper actions retroactively with the power of *Mattan Torah*.

Rav Yitzchok Koldetzky relates a beautiful story from Rav Elyashiv’s early years in Eretz Yisrael. When he arrived with his father, Rav Avrohom, there were very few Yeshivos in Yerushalayim. The best *bochurim* would go to learn in one of those *Botei Medrash* and the weaker ones went to work. Rav Avrohom, know as the Humeler Rov, felt very badly for these young men who were left bereft of any Torah study so he founded a Yeshiva which he named *Tiferes Bochurim*, which was later led by his illustrious son. Rav Avrohom would gently wake these young men up at 3:00 A.M., learn with them until 7:00, daven with them and send them off to work. However, at 2:45 A.M. he offered them words of *chizuk* and sang with them a Yiddish song. The words were (in translation): “When you learn for an hour, you sew a nice garment, but when you learn for two hours you add ornaments and flowers. When you learn for three hours, you taste Gan Eden.” Rav Y.S. Elyashiv loved to sing this song, explaining that it was a metaphor for Torah learning. When you begin a *sugya*, it is difficult to understand. After two hours, it begins to take shape and some comprehension sets in. After three hours, there is a new *Mattan Torah* and the *talmidim* bond with Hashem Himself. At that moment they begin to appreciate that “it is more precious than pearls and all your desires cannot compare to it” (*Mishlei 3:15*). Perhaps this is why we learn through the night, for in the third hour we return to Sinai and once again receive the Torah directly from Hashem.

Finally, our annual trip back to Sinai has the capability of granting every one of us the serenity which often eludes us. The *Medrash (Shemos Rabbah 29:9)* recounts the absolute silence which reigned during *Mattan Torah*: “No bird chirped or fluttered its wings, animals did not utter a sound, even the angels did not recite

Kadosh...the sea did not move, no creature spoke...the world was silent.” That silence, paradoxically balanced the powerful sounds mentioned earlier of the thunder and the sound of the shofar. Why indeed was there a cosmic alternation between roaring sound and the tranquility of silence? Perhaps the answer lies in the uplifting saga of Rav Yechezkel Abramsky’s triumph over the evil Russian K.G.B. The long arm of the Communist secret police had captured the author of the *Chazon Yechezkel* and was subjecting him to its particularly diabolical form of interrogation. At one point, to bring the Rav to “confession,” a soviet expert in breaking his victims screamed incessantly at him for several hours. However, it was to no avail. Rav Abramsky maintained his composure and responded with incredible equanimity. Finally, it was the Russian ogre’s turn to lose his self-control. “How can you remain so calm in the face of my shouting?” the exasperated interrogator demanded. “Most people give in long before this and tell me whatever I want to hear,” he concluded. Rav Abramsky answered unperturbed, “I am not bothered by your screaming for I have heard louder and more powerful sounds.” By now, the Russian was beside himself. “Who in the world can shout louder than me” he literally whined. Rav Abramsky responded simply, “The sounds I heard at Sinai are more powerful than anything you can provide and they soothe and mollify all other sounds coming at me.”

*Har Sinai* taught us when to speak and when to be silent, when to rage against evil and when to absorb the sounds of *kedushah* and divine wisdom. Since those sounds are eternal, revisited annually on Shavuot, we too, can maintain our equilibrium no matter what befalls us. If we prepare ourselves properly, our sojourn back to Sinai can provide us with all the spiritual nourishment we require to deal with all that life has to offer. Let us go back to Sinai and bring the gifts of the mountain back with us.