

Defeating a Faceless Enemy

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“In the Third Month of the Exodus of Bnei Yisroel from Mitzrayim, on this day, they arrived in the wilderness of Sinai” (Shemos 19:1)

Rashi, in Maseches Rosh HaShanah (11b) comments that the astrological sign for the “Third Month”, or Sivan, is Gemini – twins. Yalkut HaGershuni further explains that this is symbolic of the need for the Jewish nation to be united together in brotherhood and friendship in order to receive the Torah. The Torah cannot be given to an isolated individual for it is impossible for a secluded individual to observe all the commandments of the Torah. The communal construct seems to be woven into the very fabric of our people serving as a prerequisite for fulfilling the collective tenets of the Torah.

Throughout our history, though we’ve faced existential persecution on many occasions, it is rare that we’ve faced an enemy who has subtly tore at the communal fabric that binds us together and the infrastructure that has enabled us to persevere. For example, Haman, and similarly Hitler, sought to exterminate the Jewish people entirely. The Y’vanim of Chanuka fame endeavored to eradicate our faith. Never have we been forcefully isolated from each other, each Jew from another. In fact, just the opposite as in many instances we were confined together, such as in the ghettos of the 1930’s and early 1940’s.

Today, we are facing a subtle, faceless enemy. While we are distracted by the health and economic impacts of the virus and its global response, COVID-19 has the potential to pose an existential threat to our nation like never seen before. By forcing us into seclusion, the virus has begun to uproot the tangible and fundamental perpetuating force that is at the very core of our nationhood – our communal interactions. Whether it be daily minyanim, face-to-face chavrusa learning, hachnasas orchim, widespread bikur cholim visits, communal influence on increased Torah observance, or even shidduch dating and simchas, these are the scaffolding that have maintained our community for thousands of years, but yet were essentially quashed in an instant just after Purim a few months ago.

Upon arriving at Har Sinai, *“Yisrael encamped there opposite the mountain”* (Shemos 19:2). Rashi hones in on the use of the singular⁷ to describe the encampment of the Jews, saying, “K’ish ehad, b’lev ehad – as one person with one heart”. This in contrast to all other encampments in the midbar where Bnei Yisrael argued.

What specifically about their time at Har Sinai motivated Am Yisrael to subjugate their differences and come together as one – the acceptance of the Torah?

⁷ The pasuk here uses the singular form “va’yichen – and he encamped”, whereas earlier in the same pasuk the plural form was used to describe Bnei Yisrael’s actions: “va’yisu – and they journeyed”, “va’ya’vo’u – and they arrived”, “va’ya’cha’nu – and they encamped”

Rav Yeshaya Zimmerman suggests there are two types of experiences that can inspire a person to overcome his own desires and even his needs so that he can devote himself to something far greater. The first is the influence of a great person. The strength of that person's character incites those around him to follow in his footsteps, regardless of their previously identified agendas. At Har Sinai, Am Yisrael was to be in the presence of G-d – what greater character could there possibly be?

The second experience is the perception of a great truth. Hereto, what greater perception of truth could there be than that of the Torah? The Maharal, in his work, the "Nesivos Olam", articulated that the universe was created according to the mandate of the Torah. Planets, gravity, electrodynamics, the nature of the cell, and energy all follow the principles and laws laid out in the Torah. The Gemara in Masesches Shabbos (87b) points out that the universe was created for the sake of the sixth day – the sixth of Sivan – when the Torah would be given.

While the effects of the Coronavirus may have removed the "trappings" of Jewish communal life, many distractions of everyday life have also been similarly minimized or removed. Thus, as Jewish families across the globe have been quarantined at home, we've been able to distinguish between and reflect upon the noise of contemporary society and the Torah values that we hold dear. Without daily commutes, we've been able to dedicate more time to regular Torah study. The mass global proliferation of Torah over the internet has exploded in response. Our community has grown hungry to return to daven with a Minyan, while in the interim we've realized how meaningful our davening itself can be. Our family relationships have been strengthened. These are just a few examples of how we've each grown closer to HaKadosh Baruch Hu and have strived to perceive the Torah's greater truth.

When we are all, individually and collectively, able to focus on that greater truth - the Torah and our underlying purpose in life of growing closer to HaKadosh Baruch Hu - we are able to overcome both the absence of our supportive communal infrastructure and the devastating impacts of the Coronavirus.

This sixth of Sivan, let us return to our Sinaitic roots and metaphorically gather at the foot of the mountain, to recapture the experience when we, Am Yisroel, stood as one person with one heart, k'ish echad b'lev echad, in the presence of G-d and his Torah. Emboldened by that strength, together, we will defeat this faceless enemy.

Based on Divrei Torah learned from my Rebbe, Rabbi Ben-Zion Rand, in his sefer, "Birkas Moadecha, A Yom Tov Digest" (Feldheim, 2019).