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The first Sedra this week is called "at the mountain". This is especially appropriate before the festival of Shavuot, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah. Everybody knows that the Ten Commandments were given by G-d on Mount Sinai. But why Mount Sinai in particular?

The Midrash tells us that Mount Sinai was not the highest and most splendid mountain. In fact it is described as being the lowest of all the mountains which might have been chosen. Nonetheless, G-d chose Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah in order to teach an important message: to tell us that humility is a prerequisite to the learning of Torah.

Torah comes from G-d. When hearing an instruction from the Torah, we need the ability to listen. This is a rare quality: usually our own ego gets in the way. We hear our own ideas, not what the Torah is saying. Humility is the step beyond our ego, a mood of selflessness, which makes us receptive to the Torah. Thus we say at the end of the daily Amidah prayer "May my soul be to all as the dust - open my heart to your Torah".

A Chassidic comment on this idea goes a step further. Surely, if the emphasis is on humility, why choose a mountain at all? Wouldn't the message have been more keenly felt if the Torah were given on a flat plain, or even better, in a valley? This puzzle is explained as follows. While humility is important, there are also many occasions in Jewish life when a more determined and forceful approach is demanded. Personal self-sacrifice, steadfastness in the face of ridicule or contempt, the readiness to suffer for Judaism (as Jews in Communist Russia did for many years) are responses that are sometimes required.

It is interesting that right at the beginning of the Code of Jewish Law comes the statement "Do not be embarrassed by mockery and ridicule". If one were to waver in observance of a Jewish law simply because of the derisive criticism of others, there would soon not be much observance of Judaism left at all!

So one needs both qualities: humility and strength. The ability to listen, and also the firmness to be able to stand up against the current. Both qualities are expressed in the image of Mount Sinai at the beginning of the Sedra (1).

THE MONTH OF SIVAN: This Shabbat we make a special blessing for the new month which is coming: the month of Sivan. This month of the Giving of the Torah has a special quality. On the first of Sivan the Jews reached Mount Sinai. Rashi tells us that while generally there was bickering and argument among them, then they were at peace with each other, in preparation for receiving the Torah. Today too, through unity and love we will achieve the ultimate revelation of the coming of Moshiach, bringing peace to the whole world. [1. Based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's Likkutei Sichot, vol.2 pp.276-279. By Dr. Tali Loewenthal, Director of Chabad Research Unit, London - ChabadOnline.com]

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When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall rest a sabbath unto G-d (25:2) Taken on its own, this verse seems to imply that "a sabbath unto G-d" is to be observed immediately upon entering the Land. But in practice, when the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel they first worked the land for six years, and only then observed the seventh year as the shmittah (sabbatical year)--as, indeed, the Torah clearly instructs in following verses. The Torah is telling us that a shmittah is to both precede and follow our six years of labor: to follow it on the calendar, but to also precede it---if not in actuality, then conceptually.

We find a similar duality in regard to the weekly seven-day cycle. The weekly Shabbat has a twofold role: a) It is the day "from which all successive days are blessed"--the source of material and spiritual sustenance for the week to follow. b) It is the "culmination" of the week--the day on which the week's labors efforts are harvested and sublimated, and their inner, spiritual significance is realized and brought to light. But if every week must have a Shabbat to "bless" it, what about the week of creation itself? In actuality, G-d began His creation of existence--including the creation of time--on Sunday, which is therefore called the "First Day." But our sages tell us that there was a primordial Shabbat which preceded creation--a Shabbat existing not in time but in the mind of G-d as a vision of a completed and perfected world.

Therein lies an important lesson in how we are to approach the mundane involvements of life. True, we begin with the material, for in a world governed by cause and effect, the means inevitably precede the end. But what is first in actuality need not be first in mind. In mind and consciousness, the end must precede the means, for without a clear vision of their purpose to guide them, the means may begin to see themselves as the end. The spiritual harvest of a Shabbat or shmittah can be only achieved after a "work-week" of dealing with the material world and developing its resources. But it must be preceded and predicated upon "a sabbath unto G-d" that occupies the fore of our consciousness and pervades our every deed. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

For they are My servants, whom I took out of the land of Egypt; they cannot be sold into slavery (25:42) At the time of the Exodus, G-d made freedom the inherent and eternal state of the Jew. From that point on, no power or force on earth can subvert our intrinsic freedom. (Maharal) chabadonline.com

In The Desert

In the desert there are no office buildings or factories. So if you lived in the desert, chances are you wouldn't have a job. There'd be no boss bossing you, and no underlings under you. In the desert there are no town or neighborhoods. No old money, no new money, no social climbers and no social climbed-overs. In the desert there aren't even any department stores or groceries. You'd eat manna from heaven and wear the same pair of shoes for forty years.

That is why, say our sages, G-d gave us the Torah in the desert. Had He given it to us on Wall Street, He would have had to decide whom to appoint to the board and who should retain a controlling interest. Had He given it to us in the Holy Land, He'd have had to decide if He wants it in religious Jerusalem, mystical Safed or hi-tech Tel Aviv. Or perhaps He'd have preferred a Marxist kibbutz or even a neo-Zionist settlement?

G-d wanted no shareholders in his Torah, no corporate structure, no social or political context. In fact, no context whatsoever. Just us and the Torah. Wouldn't it have been great to stay in the desert? But as soon as G-d was sure that we've gotten the message--that we understood that the Torah is not the product of any particular age, environment or cultural milieu, and that it belongs, absolutely and unequivocally, to each and every one of us--he sent us to the cities and the towns of His world, to its farms and marketplaces, to its universities and office buildings. He told us that now that He's done His part, it's up to us to make His Torah relevant in all these places and in all these contexts. Still, its nice to come back to the desert once in a while. At least for a visit. (By Yanki Tauber, Editor Chabad Online Magazine - chabadonline.com)

THE COMMAND "YOU SHALL REBUKE" (1) IS PRECEDED BY THE WORDS "YOU SHALL NOT HATE YOUR BROTHER," FOR THIS IS A PRECONDITION FOR THE REBUKE. THE TORAH CONTINUES, "...AND YOU SHALL NOT ASCRIBE SIN TO HIM," FOR IF THE REBUKE WAS INEFFECTUAL, YOU ARE CERTAINLY THE ONE RESPONSIBLE, FOR YOURS WERE NOT WORDS COMING FROM THE HEART. FOOTNOTE: (1) VAYIKRA 19:17. (FROM REBBE'S HAYOM YOM IYAR 26)

Bonding breeds bonding. When you bond in one area of your life, it helps you bond in other areas.

Exercise for the day: Begin bonding with a new person or experience you love by committing designated time each day or week to spend together constructively.

From: A Spiritual Guide to the counting of the Omer