

Geulas Yisrael 101

Shavuot: Is Torah In Israel "Different"?

Thousands of years ago, we stood underneath a fiery mountain, attentively listening to the directly revealed voice of Hashem. No religion has ever, or will ever, lay claim to a direct encounter between an entire nation of three million strong and the Creator of the universe. Har Sinai was the seminal moment of Jewish faith and religion.

Strangely, this celebrated encounter with Hashem was staged in a barren desert landscape. Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to conduct this meeting in a more elegant and palatial setting?

Lessons for Torah study

Chazal point to the numerous guidelines for Torah study which are distilled within the metaphor of a desert. For example, an unfenced desert allows free passage, as opposed to a delicate garden which is shielded from human intrusion. Similarly, Torah study demands extraordinary humility and only an accepting person, who tolerates the trespass of others can fully absorb the word of Hashem.

Secondly, Torah is endowed in a desert, which is an ownerless site, suggesting that Torah is not the province of any one particular group. No human being or faction hosted the delivery of Torah, and none can claim a monopoly over Torah knowledge.

Finally, a stark and barren desert highlights that Torah study cannot be relaxed or cavalier. Mastering the infinite and uncontainable word of Hashem demands relentless intensity and, typically, comes at the expense of the extravagant luxuries normally associated with city life. The cost of Torah excellence is often a barebones and spartan "desert" lifestyle.

These three lessons of Torah study all justify its delivery in a desert, but they don't explain why the chosen desert was located outside the land of Israel. Evidently, scheduling Matan Torah specifically in Sinai projects a different Torah message: Torah is non-geographical and can be studied and practiced anywhere, even outside of Israel. Torah is a cosmic encounter with the eternal word of an unfathomable G-d, and has little to do with location. As the gemara (Berachot 6a) reassures

ומנין שאפילו אחד שיושב ועוסק בתורה ששכינה עמו - שנאמר: בכל המקום
אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא אליך וברכתך

the Shechinah attends any incident of Torah study, wherever and whenever it occurs.

Preserving Torah's Independence

During two pivotal entries into galus, the geographical autonomy of Torah was underlined. During the initial stage of our first exile, a cadre of surpassing Torah scholars was relocated from Yerushalayim to Bavel, establishing a Torah hub which lasted well over 1500 years. Bavel would ultimately host the greatest surge of Torah study in history- the development of Torah sheba'al peh. Conditions in Israel proper remained too austere and too grueling for the flourishing of the oral Torah, whereas the calm valleys of Bavel and Persia provided a more serene backdrop for this phenomenal expansion. The Talmud Yerushalmi, compiled in Israel, pales in comparison to the Talmud Bavli, reflecting the degraded state of the Jewish imagination operating under duress in Israel. Even before our first galus concluded, Torah was already firmly entrenched in Bavel, its future residence outside of Israel.

During our second exile, during the Roman siege, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai negotiated the surrender of Yerushalayim in exchange for the relocation of the High Court of the Sanhedrin. Though the Sanhedrin relocated to a different site in Israel, this barter set the stage for the portability of Torah. Rabbi Yochanan swapped "location" for Torah. Our religion was now transportable, able to be carried anywhere.

As the gemara (Berachot 8a) remarks: מיום שחרב בית הצמקדש אין
להקב"ה בעולמו אלא ד' אמות של הלכה בלבד

Though we were expelled from Israel, Torah never required a location or a specific "place". It merely required an inner four cubits of divine logic.

To showcase Torah's geographical independence from the land of Israel, it was delivered in a remote desert, outside of Israel,

Is Torah in Israel Different?

Yet, Torah study in Israel is still distinct and still different from Torah studied elsewhere. The amora, Rabbi Zeira, in particular, sensed the superiority of Torah in Israel, and emigrated to Israel, despite the

disapproval of his Rebbi, Rav Yehuda who banned it. Evidently, for Rebbi Zeira, Torah in Bavel was inferior to the purer Torah in the land of Hashem. Seeking to purge himself of the impure Torah of Bavel, he fasted 100 days prior to his arrival in Israel. Finally, Rebbi Zeira coined the well-known adage **אין תורה כחכמת ארץ ישראל** claiming that the atmosphere of Israel enables greater access to divine wisdom. His observation echoes a midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 16:4) which reports

אין תורה כחכמת ארץ ישראל,

affirming that Torah wisdom in Israel is superior.

Unfortunately, throughout our troubled history, as we were scattered amongst the nations, we rarely had the opportunity to fully explore this unique blend of Torah in Israel... until now.

Torat Eretz Yisrael

Over the past 150 years, renewed Jewish sovereignty in Israel has raised the question of whether Torah study should be updated. Rav Kook in particular, believed that, with our national and historical return, a new Torah study or “*torat eretz yisrael*” should be developed. He wasn’t specific about *how* this should be accomplished, but his repeated messaging did inspire an entire school of thought supporting a transformed Torah study in modern day Israel.

One suggestion is to study Torah in Israel a more contoured fashion, with less give and take, less questioning and less disputation. Supernatural inspiration in the land of Israel should expedite the process, enabling more consensus opinions and precluding the need for extended debate or elliptical analysis. Outside of Israel there was greater need for argumentation and for dialectics, whereas in Israel, the experience is more direct and straight forward.

A different modification of Torah study in Israel would seek to fuse various disciplines of Torah into one integrated whole. Traditionally, legal Talmudic inquiry study was kept distinct from Kaballah or from Midrash, as their respective logic and their ground rules of analysis are so different. Combining these dissimilar fields would distend their inner logic and would constitute, as the Chatam Sofer warned, a prohibition of Kilayim.

Perhaps, now that we have resettled Israel and live under the direct presence of Hashem, who is indivisible, we should similarly unify the various strands of His torah into one incorporated fabric.

A third opinion of Torat Eretz Yisrael wants to better apply Torah to our more expansive Jewish horizons. Living in Israel, we finally experience a holistically Jewish environment, and we also aim to spiritualize our culture, our politics and our society at large. Shouldn't we also explore the impact of Torah upon this broadened Jewish totality? Shouldn't we think about how Torah is expressed in all sectors of the modern Jewish experience, rather than confining it to study halls or to legal halachik applications for daily life?

Enhancement, Not Replacement

My Rebbe, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein was very cautious about these changes, strongly opposing any alteration of Torah study, adhering instead the classic "internal" analysis of Torah. Talmudic debate as serpentine as it appears, isn't a function of disrupted analysis, but instead generates multiple approaches to a Talmudic concept, each of which contain elements of a larger divine truth. Streamlining the process splices off segments of this broader divine truth.

Similarly unifying diverse areas of Torah study can wreck the internal logic of each respective field. Talmudic calculus is completely different from the mysticism of Kaballah.

Finally, stretching Torah for social and political commentary undermines the internal self-sufficient relevance of the eternal word of Hashem. Torah need not comment upon broader society or enjoy contemporary applications to attain relevance.

Moreover, the very prospect of altering Torah study can invite broader dangers such as antinomianism, or the false but seductive notion that, in a redeemed state, normative halachik practice is no longer binding. If Torah study changes why shouldn't mitzvot? Torah and mitzvot are each immutable, and any notion of adjusting them to our new reality can subverts their eternal inalienability.

As time passes, we will probably reach a balanced calibration. We should continue to study Torah in its classic manner, but gradually become

sensitive to additional hues and tints which never surfaced in Bavel, but have emerged now that we have returned to the land of Hashem. Religiously, historically and even intellectually we cannot overhaul Torah study. We can, however, add layers to the ever-evolving word of Hashem, especially when it flows through His land.

Torah was delivered in a desert, but it has now come home to Israel.