

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT YITRO - Standing Together At Sinai - One People, One Heart

Teachings of the Desert

A careful analysis of how the Jewish people prepared themselves for the most immense moment in the history of our nation, the Acceptance of the Torah (*Kabbalat HaTorah*), provides essential insights for our own approach to Torah study.

The verses describing *Kabbalat HaTorah* begin with a seemingly entirely superfluous detail: 'And they travelled from Refidim and they encamped in the desert' (19:2). Even a casual reader of the verses before and after this verse would understand this information without it being spelt out. The commentators, therefore, derive that this verse is hinting to the connection between the way this journey was conducted and the event of *Kabbalat HaTorah* that happened after it.

Following this theme, the Midrash finds deep significance in the fact that the Torah was given in a desert, and draws three parallels between the idea of a desert and the manner in which the Torah can be received not only on a national level but also by individuals. Firstly, a desert belongs to no one. Just as anybody can access the desert, so too, the Torah does not belong to any particular group within our people. No matter our background or our previous experience in learning, the Torah is ours to connect to. Secondly, a desert is barren and empty of all comforts.

Torah learning, too, requires us to clear out our lives of the clutter it contains and prioritise time for connecting to our heritage. Thirdly, a desert seems to have no end. When we learn Torah, we must approach it with humility to appreciate its limitless potential.

Philosophies of Connection

This verse also seems to place a particular emphasis on the journey from Refidim to Mount Sinai. Rashi explains that just as they had left Refidim in a spirit of repentance for their improperly presented complaints over the insufficient water supply (see Shemot, chapter 17), so too they arrived at Mount Sinai in a spirit of repentance. According to the Netziv (Rabbi Naf-tali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, d. 1893), this idea of moving and growing is a further lesson in the way we should approach the Torah. In matters of spirituality, the more we exert ourselves to prepare for them, the better we will absorb them. To illustrate his point, he cites the well-known story from the Talmud of Rabbi Chiya, who would not only expend singular efforts to teach children Torah, but would actually prepare nets to hunt deer to prepare their hides, with which he would make the scrolls he used in his classrooms. He knew that the energy and effort that went into this project would increase the sanctity of the parchments and would thereby make a greater spiritual impression on his students.

Another connection to Refidim can be found in the singular form of the verb '*vay-ichan* — and the nation camped opposite the mountain'. The allusion here is that the nation readied themselves to accept the Torah in peace and harmony, with a unified aim.

In contrast, however, the beginning of the same verse refers to the nation in the plural form when it describes their leaving Refidim, indicating an atmosphere of strife: '*Vayisu meRefidim* —



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And they travelled from Refidim'. What happened between Refidim and Mount Sinai to initiate this change in attitude?

Rav Shlomo Wolbe (d. 2005) delves into the nature of the sin at Refidim. After witnessing the incredible miracles of the Exodus, the Jewish people found themselves in the desert with an insufficient water supply. Justifiably, they were concerned, but instead of building on their new-found closeness to Hashem, they asked, 'Is Hashem within us or not?' (Shemot 17:7). Certainly, argues Rabbi Wolbe, these great people contemplated carefully the nature of their recent experiences, but their attitude was not correct. Sometimes, a person can involve themselves in a thought process that stimulates spiritual engagement; a true Torah thought, for example, can be the catalyst to spawn a relationship with Hashem. At Refidim, however, their questionings were superficial philosophical reflections that pulled them away from Hashem rather than brought them close.

The resultant encounter with Amalek led them to recognise their shortcomings. Thus, when they came from there to Mount Sinai, it was with a common aspiration of searching for a moral code and law that would guide every aspect of their lives.

Studying anything is exciting and dynamic, but when we study Torah, our ultimate aim is not theological investigation for its own sake, but to deepen our faith and connection to Hashem through our heritage.

To Hear is to Believe

All too often, when the Jewish people receive an outsider's perspective on our nation, it is negative. In *Parshat Yitro*, however, we find a rare example of an outsider who heard about the happenings of the Jews and was inspired to make a positive change: '*Vayishma Yitro ... Vay-ichad* — Yitro heard ... and he rejoiced'. According to some opinions, Yitro joined the Jewish people after he heard about *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

But the truth is that it was not only he who heard about this momentous event. Indeed, the Midrash relates that all the kings of the world felt something cataclysmic happening and were concerned that they would once again perish in a flood. Seeking guidance, they consulted the prophet Bilaam who reassured them that they had nothing to fear, and that Hashem was giving the Torah to His people. Reassured that they were safe, the Midrash continues, the kings returned home.

Yitro was the one world leader who truly listened to what was happening. He was inspired to understand and make changes, and for this reason, he is associated so strongly with the Parsha of *Kabbalat HaTorah*. As Rabbi Sacks would often remark, 'We are a religion of the ear, not of the eye'. The eye can deceive us; the seeming clarity of our vision can lead us to make hasty conclusions. The ear, on the other hand, is our tool to listen, internalise and think things through. When a person is able to absorb something properly, their ability to transform their own perspective is so much greater.

**Next Week: Parshat Mishpatim -
The Legacy of Personal Responsibility**