

HE HELD THE MOUNTAIN OVER THEM: UNPACKING A CRYPTIC MIDRASH

SOURCE 1: SHEMOT CH. 19

ז וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם; וַיִּשֶׂם לִפְנֵיהֶם, אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ, יְהוָה. 7 And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD commanded him.

ח וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל-הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ, כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה; וַיֹּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הָעָם, אֶל-יְהוָה. 8 And all the people answered together, and said: 'All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.' And Moses reported the words of the people unto the LORD.

ט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעָבַת הָעָנָן, בְּעִבּוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֲמֹד, וְגַם-בְּדַבְרֵי הָעָם, אֶל-יְהוָה. 9 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and may also believe thee for ever.' And Moses told the words of the people unto the LORD.

יד וַיֵּרֵד מֹשֶׁה מִן-הָהָר, אֶל-הָעָם; וַיְקַדֵּשׁ, אֶת-הָעָם, וַיִּכְבְּסוּ, שְׂמֹלֵתָם. 14 And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their garments.

טו וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-הָעָם, הָיוּ נְכַנְיִים, לְשִׁלֶּשֶׁת יָמִים: אַל-תִּגְשׁוּ, אֶל-אִשָּׁה. 15 And he said unto the people: 'Be ready against the third day; come not near a woman.'

טז וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּהֲלִית הַבֶּקֶר, וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבָרְקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הָהָר, וְקַל שֶׁפֶר, חָזַק. 16 And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount,

מָאֵד ; וַיִּחַרְד כָּל-הָעָם, אֲשֶׁר and the voice of a horn exceeding loud; and all
בַּמַּחֲנֶה. the people that were in the camp trembled.

יִזְ וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם לִקְרַאת 17 And Moses brought forth the people out of
הָאֱלֹהִים, מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה ; וַיִּתְיַצְבוּ, the camp to meet God; **and they stood at the
בְּתַחְתִּית הַהָר.** **nether part of the mount.**

יח וְהָר סִינַי, עָשָׂן כָּלוּ, מִפְּנֵי 18 Now mount Sinai was altogether on smoke,
אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה, בָּאֵשׁ ; וַיַּעַל because the LORD descended upon it in fire;
עָשָׂנוּ כְּעָשָׂן הַכִּבְשָׁן, וַיִּחַרְד כָּל- and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke
הָהָר מְאֹד. of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked
greatly.

SOURCE 2: RASHI

בתחתית ההר. לְפִי פְּשׁוּטוֹ בְּרִגְלֵי הָהָר ; וּמִדְרָשׁוֹ שֶׁנִּתְלַשׁ הָהָר
מִמְּקוֹמוֹ וְנִכְפָּה עָלֵיהֶם כְּגִיגִית שבת פ"ח :

AT THE NETHER PART OF THE MOUNTAIN — According to its literal meaning this signifies “at the foot of the mountain”. But a Midrashic explanation is, that the mountain was plucked up from its place and was arched over them as a cask, so that they were standing beneath (under) the mountain itself ([Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:17:2](#); [Shabbat 88a](#)).

SOURCE 3: TORAH TEMIMAH:

יתכן דמדדיק מלשון ויתיצבו ע"פ מש"כ בעלי הגיון בחלוק
השמות נרדפים נצב ועמד, דנצב ענינו שעומד במקום שצריך
חיזוק והתאמצות לעמוד מחמת אימה ופחד, וכאן דכתיב ויתיצבו
דריש שפחדו מחמת כפיית ההר.

can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding. **Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written:** “The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them” ([Esther 9:27](#)), and he taught: The Jews **ordained what they had already taken upon themselves** through coercion at Sinai.

Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day” ([Genesis 1:31](#))? **Why do I require the superfluous letter *heh*, the definite article, which does not appear on any of the other days? It teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, established a condition with the act of Creation, and said to them: If Israel accepts the Torah on the sixth day of Sivan, you will exist; and if they do not accept it, I will return you to the primordial state of chaos and disorder.** Therefore, the earth was afraid until the Torah was given to Israel, lest it be returned to a state of chaos. Once the Jewish people accepted the Torah, the earth was calmed.

SOURCE 5: SEFER SHEMOT CH. 24

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה
נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע:

Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will faithfully do!”

SOURCE 6: COMMENTARY OF TOSAFOT

כפה עליהן הר כגיגית - ואע"פ שכבר הקדימו נעשה לנשמע שמא יהיו חוזרים כשיראו האש הגדולה שיצאתה נשמתן

SOURCE 7: TALMUD SHABBAT 88B

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא יצתה נשמתן של ישראל שנאמר נפשי יצאה בדברו ומאחר שמדיבור ראשון יצתה נשמתן דיבור שני היאך קיבלו הוריד טל שעתיד להחיות בו מתים והחיה אותם שנאמר גשם נדבות תניף אלהים נחלתך ונלאה אתה כוננתה ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא חזרו ישראל לאחוריהן שנים עשר מיל והיו מלאכי השרת מדדין אותן שנאמר מלאכי צבאות ידדון ידדון אל תיקרי ידדון אלא ידדון :

And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: From each and every utterance that emerged from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, the souls of the Jewish people left their bodies, as it is stated: “My soul departed when he spoke” ([Song of Songs 5:6](#)). And since their souls left their bodies from the first utterance, how did they receive the second utterance? Rather, God rained the dew upon them that, in the future, will revive the dead, and He revived them, as it is stated: “You, God, poured down a bountiful rain; when Your inheritance was weary You sustained it” ([Psalms 68:10](#)). And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: With each and every utterance that emerged from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, the Jewish people retreated in fear twelve *mil*, and the ministering angels walked them back toward the mountain, as it is stated: “The hosts of angels will scatter [*yidodun*]” ([Psalms 68:13](#)). Do not read the word as *yidodun*, meaning scattered; rather, read it as *yedadun*, they walked them.

SOURCE 8: RAMBAM, HILCHOT TESHUVA CH. 10

ל יאמר אדם הריני עושה מצות התורה ועוסק בחכמתה כדי שאקבל כל הברכות הכתובות בה או כדי שאזכה לחיי העולם הבא, ואפרש מן העברות שהזהירה תורה מהן כדי שאנצל מן הקללות הכתובות בתורה או כדי שלא אפרת מחיי העולם הבא. אין ראוי לעבד את ה' על הדרך הזה, שהעובד על דרך זה הוא עובד מיראה ואינה מעלת הנביאים ולא מעלת החכמים...

Let no man say: "Behold, I perform the precepts of the Torah, and engage myself in its wisdom so that I will receive all the blessings described therein, or so that I will merit the life in the World to Come; and I will separate myself from the transgressions against which the Torah gave warning so that I will escape the curses described therein, or so that I will suffer excision from the life in the

World to Come". It is improper to serve the Lord in such way, for whosoever serves the Lord in such way, he is a worshiper because of fear, which is neither the degree of the prophets nor the degree of the sages....

הַעוֹבֵד מֵאַהֲבָה עוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה וּבְמִצְוֹת וְהוֹלֵךְ בְּנִתְיבוֹת הַחֻקִּים לֹא מִפְּנֵי דָבָר בְּעוֹלָם וְלֹא מִפְּנֵי יִרְאַת הַרְעָה וְלֹא כְּדֵי לִירֵשׁ הַטּוֹבָה אֲלֵא עוֹשֶׂה הָאֱמֶת מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא אֱמֶת וְסוּף הַטּוֹבָה לָבוֹא בְּגִלְגָּלָהּ. וּמַעֲלָה זוֹ הִיא מַעֲלָה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד וְאִין כָּל חָכֵם זֹכֵר לָהּ. וְהִיא מַעֲלַת אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ שֶׁקָּרָאוּ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אוֹהֵבוֹ לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא עֲבָד אֲלֵא מֵאַהֲבָה. וְהִיא הַמַּעֲלָה שֶׁצִּוּנוּ בָּהּ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל יְדֵי מֹשֶׁה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר ([דברים ו ה](#)) "וְאַהֲבַת אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ". וּבְזִמְנֵן שֶׁיֵּאָהֵב אָדָם אֵת ה' אֱהָבָה הִרְאוּהָ מִיָּד יַעֲשֶׂה כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת מֵאַהֲבָה :

The worshiper because of love, engages himself in the study of the Torah and the observance of precepts and follows the paths of wisdom on no account in the world, neither for fear of evil nor in order to inherit the good; but he does the true thing because it is true, and in the end the good comes because thereof. That degree is a great degree, indeed and not every scholar attains it; for such was the degree of Abraham our father, whom the Holy One, blessed is He! called His beloved, because he worshiped not, save because of love, and it is, furthermore, the degree concerning which the Holy One, blessed is He! commanded through Moses, saying: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God" ([Deut. 6.5](#)); for, when man will love the Lord with a proper love, he will momentarily perform all of the commandments because of love.

וְכִיצַד הִיא הָאַהֲבָה הִרְאוּהָ. הוּא שֶׁיֵּאָהֵב אֵת ה' אֱהָבָה גְדוֹלָה יִתְרָה עֲזָה מְאֹד עַד שֶׁתְּהֵא נִפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְּאַהֲבַת ה' וְנִמְצָא שׁוֹגֵה בָּהּ תְּמִיד כְּאֵלוֹ חוֹלָה חֲלֵי הָאַהֲבָה שֶׁאִין דַּעֲתוֹ פְּנוּיָה מֵאַהֲבַת אוֹתָהּ אֲשֶׁה וְהוּא שׁוֹגֵה בָּהּ תְּמִיד בֵּין בְּשִׁבְתּוֹ בֵּין בְּקוּמוֹ בֵּין בְּשַׁעָה שֶׁהוּא אוֹכֵל וְשׁוֹתָהּ. יִתֵּר מִזֶּה תְּהִיָּה אֱהָבַת ה' בְּלֵב אוֹהֲבָיו שׁוֹגִים בָּהּ תְּמִיד כְּמוֹ שֶׁצִּוּנוּ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ. וְהוּא שֶׁשְׁלֵמָה אָמַר דָּרָךְ מִשָּׁל ([שיר השירים ב ה](#)) "כִּי חוֹלַת אֱהָבָה אָנִי". וְכָל שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים מִשָּׁל הוּא לְעֵנִין זֶה :

And what is the proper love? He shall love the Lord with an exceeding great and very strong love so that his soul be tied to the love of the Lord, finding himself in a constant tremor, as if he were suffering of lovesickness, when his mind is free because of love for that woman, being continuously agitated about her, whether he sitting down, or whether he is standing up, even when he is eating and drinking. More than this should the love for the Lord be in the heart of those

who love him, meditating therein constantly, even as He commanded us: "With all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Ibid.). This is what Solomon allegorically said: "For I am love-sick" (Songs 2.5). And, the whole book, Song of Songs, is an allegory on this subject.

SOURCE 9:

RAV YEHUDAH AMITAL, VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (2002)

.... Prior to their acceptance of the Torah, Bnei Yisrael were required to observe only a very few commandments, while after the revelation at Sinai they were suddenly obliged to follow all 613 – i.e., to live a life of Torah and mitzvot. **Bnei Yisrael might have regretted their commitment of "We shall do and we shall obey" when they understood how many laws would now govern every aspect of their lives. God had to coerce them so that the quantity of mitzvot would not prevent them from accepting the Torah in the first place,** and so that they would not be able to change their minds once they realized what they had taken upon themselves.

On the street I occasionally see a bumper sticker that reads, "God – We Love You." That is a truly Christian slogan. Mesilat Yesharim teaches us that the highest level to which a person can aspire, after working his way through every previous stage of spiritual development, is that of love of God. **We cannot simply point to the sticker and say, "See, we already love Him!" The desire to "love God," in the absence of a profound commitment to all of His 613 commandments, is meaningless. A person has to invest effort in "loving God," and then perhaps he will attain it.** But there can be no real love of God without observance of the mitzvot, without deep commitment to Him.

SOURCE 10: TOSAFOT SHABBAT 88A

ומה שכרת עמהן ברית יהושע לעבוד את ה' התם לא קבלו
אלא שלא לעבוד ע"ז כדכתיב יהושע כד חלילה לנו מעזוב את ה'
וכן משמע כוליה עניינא :

SOURCE 11: RABBI MOIS NAVON

The question is then: how the Jews were punished with exile to Babylon if they were not yet accountable? Tosafot (ibid.) implies that though they were indeed not held accountable for the whole Torah, they were held accountable for the one prohibition of idol worship when they entered in to the covenant with Yehoshua, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods." (Yehoshua 24:16)

Ritva (ibid.) asks, if it wasn't until the times of Yehoshua that they accepted the prohibition of idol worship, how was it that they were punished for the idol worship of the golden calf ?

I suggest that declaration naaseh v'nishmah made them accountable at the very least to worship God exclusively. For though we explained that naaseh v'nishmah was not a "complete acceptance" of the Torah, the Gemara (Shabbat 88a) teaches that it is an angelic expression of selfless unconditional acceptance of God's authority. Integrity demands that the people's act of idol worship - i.e., their explicit rejection of the authority they willingly accepted - made them culpable of Divine consequences.

To summarize: Israel accepted God's authority and were then compelled to accept His whole Torah, for which they were only held

accountable for infidelity, their complete accountability remaining contingent on their volitional acceptance.

This explanation of the Gemara is consistent with the text of the Torah when we view the nation of Israel as an individual going through the emotional developmental stages to maturation. The Midrash Tanhuma (Vet'chanan 826) refers to the Jews in Egypt as “a fetus in the womb” that God delivered. They were “born”, as it were, upon

We view the nation of Israel as an individual going through the emotional developmental stages to maturation... their exodus from Egypt, passing through the “birth canal” of the Red Sea. As such, the Jews in the desert can be likened to children in respect to their relationship with God and His Torah. They were “spoon fed” like babies from their Father in Heaven through His daily ration of manna. At any difficulty they experienced they simply cried and were immediately answered.

When children are developing, they need definitions of appropriate behavior, boundaries of acceptable action, education of right and wrong - in short, a system of morality. If children are allowed to choose of their own free will, they will choose self-gratification, they will choose based on what “looks good, feels good, tastes good.” Only when one has an appreciation of oneself and the world around - something referred to as “maturity” - can one then begin, of one’s own free will, to accept things that are not associated with self-gratification.

Jewish law and lore acknowledge the staged development of man. Jewish lore explains that until the age of maturity man has only a yetzer hara, a selfish will; and only upon reaching the age of maturity does one acquire a yetzer hatov, a selfless will. Jewish law expresses

this idea by exempting minors of culpability for any violation of the Torah. Nevertheless, both parent and teacher do demand absolute obedience to their authority, and it is to this one violation that the child can and must be disciplined. To not do so would be to abandon the child, as King Solomon wrote, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him corrects him.” (Proverbs 13:24)

So just as children have to be forced to accept a system of morality, so too did the Jews have to be forced to accept the Torah. And like a child who naturally accepts the authority of his parents, so too did the Jews accept God’s authority - through naaseh v’nishmah. And like a minor, though he cannot be held “legally” accountable for his violations, is nevertheless accountable for obedience to his parents, so too the Jews. Though not punishable for violation of all the various demands of the Torah, they were nevertheless liable to punishment for infidelity - otherwise known as idol worship.

SOURCE 12: TORAH.ORG: A CRITIQUE OF THE TOSAFOT AND INTRODUCTION OF THE MAHARAL IN TIFERET YISRAEL:

Tosafot, Shabbath 88a

He held the mountain over their heads like a bucket . Yet they already had committed to “We will do” even before “we will hear”?! (Why was it necessary to force them to do something to which they had already agreed? Imagine a contract negotiation, where, after both sides had agreed on all the clauses, one of the parties pulled a gun and threatened the other party with immediate death if he didn’t sign the contract that both had already agreed upon!) (Tosafoth gives the following answer:) He was worried that

they might retract their agreement after seeing the strong fire (the immense power of the Torah, which consumes those who violate it).

Maharal, Tifereth Yisrael, Ch. 32

This response (of Tosafot) is not clear. The merit of having willingly accepted the Torah has never ceased throughout the generations, remaining as an eternal merit for the Jewish people. Yet, what merit exists in such a forced acceptance? Furthermore, if there was concern that they might retract their acceptance, then let G-d hold the mountain over their heads when they would attempt to retract, rather than doing it in the beginning!

(The Maharal disagrees with Tosafot, and has an entirely different approach to why G-d forced acceptance of the Torah, despite the fact that there was willing acceptance.) The reason that G-d held the mountain over their heads (forcing their acceptance of the Torah) was so that the Jewish people would not say that the Torah was accepted at their discretion, implying that if they wouldn't have wanted to, they wouldn't have had to accept it. Given the nature and greatness of the Torah, it would have been inappropriate that its acceptance be at the discretion of the Jewish people. **Since the existence of the entire world is dependent on the Torah, for without Torah the entire world would return to primordial chaos, it is not appropriate for the Torah to be dependent on the choice of the Jewish people. G-d compelled and required acceptance of the Torah, since the continued existence of**

the world depends on the Torah. Without acceptance of the Torah, the world would return to primordial chaos.

Just because they had already declared “We will do and we will listen,” don’t think that it was unnecessary for G-d to hold the mountain over their heads! *Certainly the main purpose (of holding the mountain over their heads) was not to prevent retraction of their agreement to accept the Torah. Why should they retract after their declaration “We will do and we will listen?” Rather, the element of compulsion was an inherent necessity. An optional Torah which would be in the world simply because the Jewish people happened to choose it is a very different Torah than one that was in the world as an inherent imperative for the existence of the world. Therefore, G-d held the mountain over their heads as a barrel, for if they did not accept the Torah, the foundation of all existence, the world could not continue, and the barrel would turn into their grave.*