

Receiving the Torah on Shavu'ot

Tosafot ([Shabbat 88a](#)), commenting the Gemara's statement that Hashem suspended Har Sinai over the Jewish people, demanding that they receive the Torah, ask how this statement is consistent with the Torah's account of the people accepting the Torah willingly, highlighted by their stating "Na'aseh ve-nishma, we accept and we shall hear," ([Shemot 24:7](#)). How can the Gemara claim that the people were compelled to accept the Torah, when we see clearly from the Torah's account that the people accepted the Torah willingly?

Tosafot themselves give one answer to this question, and we will see a few others as well. Tosafot answer that while the people accepted the Torah, they would not have withstood willingly the power of the "Great Fire" (based on [Devarim 5:21](#), 18:16). They would have recoiled from the power of the revelation, and therefore they needed to be forced to stick to their decision.

In other words, the people had no trouble with the concept of mitzvot per se. They were able to handle the seven mitzvot given to all humanity, as well as the mitzvot they received at Mara (see Rashi, [Shemot 15:25](#)), such as the mitzvot of Shabbat and honoring parents. These would have been a manageable corpus. But the intensity of the entire Torah, the all-encompassing lifestyle that it demands, would have been too much without the commitment that comes from being coerced. The all-encompassing mitzvot such as "You shall be holy" ([Vayikra 19:2](#)), "You shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of Hashem" ([Devarim 6:18](#)), "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ([Vayikra 19:18](#)), "You shall cling to Him" ([Devarim 10:20](#)), would not have been kept simply out of voluntarism. They needed Hashem to force them to accept this tremendous commitment. The same holds true for the study of Torah, but we will get back to that later.

A second answer is given by the Maharal (Tiferet Yisrael, 16; Gur Aryeh, [Shemot 19:17](#)). He explains that the people's observance of the Torah cannot be based simply on voluntarism and good will. It needs to be based on coercion, on commitment, on worship of Hashem; one must keep mitzvot because one is obligated to do so, and not simply because one desires it.

Many people, especially in recent years, approach the Torah based solely on a spirit of voluntarism. They want to fulfil those parts of the Torah that "speak to them," and operate without this feeling of commitment. This is what the Gemara's statement that "Hashem suspended the mountain over them" comes to teach us: Torah can only be fulfilled properly through a sense of absolute commitment to the word of Hashem, and not by doing just what one wants to do.

A third approach can be seen in the Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 3). While the Jewish people accepted the written Torah willingly, they needed to be coerced to accept the oral Torah. The general principles of the Torah are very appealing; they are easy to accept. But the vast details of the Halakha were not accepted willingly, and needed to be forced upon the people. To take just one example: Shabbat - what could be a more beautiful idea? But it also means that you can't go to the beach. For that you need coercion.

The Rambam (Moreh Nevukhim 3:26) explains that while we can give rational explanations for the mitzvot in a general sense, we cannot do so for the details of the mitzvot. Why, asks the Rambam, were these details given? "Letzoref bahem et ha-beriyot, to purify mankind." The details of mitzvot are not supposed to be understood; they are meant to be fulfilled out of commitment to the word of Hashem. For this to be accomplished, you need this notion of "He suspended the mountain over them."

Each of these ideas is quite applicable today. Some people are afraid of the power of Torah. A student enters the Yeshiva and may be afraid that he will get too "caught up" in the learning. He has plans to go to university, to get a job; he does not want Torah to get in the way. He needs to overcome this fear, and become involved in Torah. That is not to say that he cannot get a job afterward, but everyone should try to be a talmid chacham, a Torah scholar, even if he will be a professional in some other field.

The idea of absolute commitment is obviously crucial nowadays. This requires no explanation.

The same holds true for fulfilling the details of mitzvot even if we do not understand them. In order to fulfil these charges, we need to work very hard. It is not a simple task to live up to the responsibility of the all-encompassing mitzvot mentioned earlier. People want everything to be easy. For example, there is a bumper sticker I have seen which I find very troubling: "We love You, Hashem!" Is love of Hashem such a simple matter that it can be put on a bumper sticker? This is not the approach taken by Gedolei Yisrael, by our great Torah giants throughout the ages – not by the Ba'al Shem Tov, not by the Rambam, not by the Maharal, to name but a few. Why does the Rambam go into such detail about the mitzva of the love of Hashem? Apparently, the people who affix bumper stickers are wiser than he, for they find love of Hashem to be a simple matter. In reality, though, a person needs to work constantly to improve his love of Hashem. It should not be cheapened by a simple slogan on a bumper sticker. The love of Hashem is a lifelong mission, to be attained only after much striving.

Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov