

The Greatest Good the World has Ever Known

We are on the eve of celebrating — and on some level, reliving — the most cataclysmic event in the history of mankind. The festival of Shavuot is when the Jews stood at Mount Sinai and said “naaseh v’nishmah,” through which they received Divine Revelation. Each year when this festival arrives, along with it follows the question: Why?

Rabbi Tzadok Cable

Why is the Revelation at Sinai the most cataclysmic event in the history of mankind? Every religion has its own “book”; why is the revelation of our “book” so central to all of world history? The Chovos HaLevavos writes in Chapter 5 of the *Shaar HaBechinah* that the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai was the single greatest infusion of goodness, for all of humanity, that there has ever been and will ever be in history. We also know that Torah is referred to as the “good counsel” — *lekach tov nasati lachem*. It is the one truly good counsel that the world has. It is this good counsel that not only endows the Jewish people with goodness, but all of Creation. This event is what put the Jewish people on the map of world history. It is what transformed us as a people into a *mamleches kohanim* and a *goy kadosh*. It made us into a people who would constantly impact human history.

What is so good about Torah, and what gives it such broad impact and significance? The Ramban understands that the translation of the Hebrew word *tov* (usually rendered as “good”) is more properly “established forever.” The “good” of the Torah is certainly tied to its eternal relevance and its unchanging and immutable value. There is a well-known *midrash* that before the Almighty came to Mount Sinai to give the Torah to the Jewish People, He first offered it to the nations of the world, who all rejected it for reasons of their own — namely, that killing, stealing, or illicit relations were part of their creed.

There are numerous difficulties with this *midrash*. First, was it possible for these nations to say yes to this offer, or is this *midrash* just teaching us through this interplay that

the nations of the world couldn’t possibly receive Torah?

Another problem is the answer they gave. At no point do we have on record that the official legal or moral code of any of the nations of the world permitted killing, committing illicit relations, or stealing at will. These prohibitions were always accepted as basic tenants of morality that must be upheld. There may have been circumstances or situations which warranted certain responses, such as defending one’s honor, or simply surviving at the brink of impoverishment, but that wouldn’t have been classified as murder or thievery to them.

Furthermore, when the Almighty came to give the Torah to the Jewish People, they simply responded “naaseh v’nishmah” without asking questions. Were the Jewish People lacking intellectual sophistication? Did they suffer from narrow-mindedness, and thus lacked the breadth and the courage to ask, “Let us know what is contained within this Torah before we accept it?”

Resolving Friction with the Supernal Will

Rav Yaakov Weinberg, *ztz”l*, the *rosh yeshivah* of Ner Israel, explained this *midrash* in a contemporary light. If the Almighty giving the Torah is something that is going to objectively benefit all of humanity, then it makes perfect sense for Him to go to these other nations to offer it to them as well. Even if Torah and mitzvos were not meant to be kept by all of humanity in their entirety, they are nevertheless relevant to all of humanity.

Also, the response of these nations was really just characteristic of basic human nature. What was the choice they were being offered at the time? They of course knew that they had their own definitions of thievery and murder,

for which they had designated certain punishments. However, they were being offered a new perspective on morality — absolute, as opposed to relative. The response of the nations was then quite clear: “We can only be comfortable working with our own definitions of morality. If we accept upon ourselves as binding the absolute definitions of these precepts, we will be in a state of constant internal friction with the Supernal Will.”

According to this approach to the *midrash*, what sets the Jewish People apart, then and for all time, was that in that crucial moment in world history, they made the most sublime commitment that human beings are capable of. The Jews knew that the Almighty was coming to present them with His immutable definitions of morality. They also knew quite well that these definitions would fly straight in the face of their own human nature, and that they were potentially committing themselves to a life of anxiety and inner turmoil in order to keep his Torah. However, they said “naaseh v’nishmah” anyway.

Their commitment was to constantly make the necessary effort to live according to the Will of the Almighty, even though it may go against their nature. They had the clarity and the foresight to realize that the alternative was futile. To turn away from making this commitment was tantamount to admitting permanent defeat, to live as our raw physical nature would dictate. We would be forever bound and defined by our limitations. To ask the question, “Can you let us know what is written in it before we accept it?” is one step too late. It is the response of one who thinks we are bound to behave according to our nature, and that therefore our morals need to be flexible, to change to fit the circumstances.

Why is Torah good for all of humanity? Ultimately, the greatest good for the world is to

be penetrated with immutable guidelines for living an ethical and moral life, and with the knowledge that we as human beings can succeed at upholding them. Whether humanity chooses to turn away, or to take this fact seriously, they are only changing their position and orientation relative to this reality. The constant rejections, attacks, and mockery that the Torah has faced day in and day out for millennia only stand to change humanity’s orientation to it, but they can never stamp it out. They can never make it inherently irrelevant.

This is the ultimate good. The Almighty has changed our world forever. The Jews have embraced this book of life, this source of pure absolute good. They have made it their legacy to study the full depths of the Torah’s teachings and pass on the traditions. But underneath it all, what these links in the chain of tradition have passed on to us is that even now nothing has changed. This is true even while scientists are on the frontier of discovering the secrets of matter, curing many of the world’s diseases, and cloning new creatures. Yes, through it all, nothing has changed. The Almighty’s will and His wisdom have penetrated this world forever, and will never stop being relevant.

The Gemara, in *Shabbos* 88b, teaches that when the Almighty uttered “*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*,” a fragrance from the Garden of Eden filled the whole world; and again when He uttered, “You shall not have any other gods before Me.” What could our Sages be alluding to with this reference to the Garden of Eden? Perhaps in light of what we have discovered, this is not so far-fetched.

What was the single most outstanding difference between the initial perception of Adam HaRishon in the Garden of Eden, and his perception after he ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Adam HaRis-

hon was so lofty that he was able to naturally perceive the absolute moral and ethical codes of the Almighty. He had no inner pull or inner drive to go in another direction. He experienced no friction internally when faced with the clarity of the Supernal Will in Creation.

At Mount Sinai, the Jewish People said “naaseh v’nishmah.” We committed to keep the Will of the Almighty wholly and completely, even if it would go against our nature. For a moment we were back in the Garden, bound in complete internal unity with the Will of the Almighty.

The Maharsha on this *gemara* in *Shabbos* 88b explains that even within the Jewish People, there were three different groups of reactions to the Revelation at Sinai. The first group was shaken by the Revelation, and thus needed the fragrance of the Garden of Eden to arouse them. People in the second group were thrown backwards twelve *mil*, and were escorted back by the angels. The third group was so overwhelmed by the experience that they actually died and needed to be revived with the “Dew of Resurrection.”

The Maharsha explains that the factor that determined which of these three different reactions people had was how strong they were. He is clearly referring to different levels of spiritual strength. In other words, there were different levels within the Jewish People in terms of how much they had overcome their physical nature and begun to live with the integrity of maintaining their true spiritual loftiness. The three levels correspond to: people who are essentially material in their orientation; people who are motivated both by the material and mundane, as well as by spiritual matters; and those who were only motivated by spiritual matters,

and their physical material component is nullified to the agenda of the soul.

The spiritual level of the people determined how the experience impacted them. The more spiritually integrated, the easier it was to absorb the Divine Revelation.

One of the central opportunities of personal growth available on this festival is to deal with the fact that we are simultaneously physical beings as well as lofty spiritual beings. This is why the Gemara says that on Shavuot, all the Sages agree that we not only need to pray and learn, but also eat and drink. However, where we are standing on the spectrum of the three levels of physical-spiritual integration, mentioned above in the Maharsha, will very much determine how the magnitude of our Kabbalas HaTorah will hit us if we take it seriously.

One way or another, as Jews, we all say “naaseh v’nishmah,” because we know that special secret: the greatest good that the world could ever know is that the Almighty revealed His will in it. The Maharal (*Tiferes* ch. 37) understands that this is one of the reasons why the first words of the Revelation at Sinai were “*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*.” The structure and syntax of this statement is such that it conveys much more than a historical event. The statement “I am G-d your Lord” is not something that was said at Mount Sinai; it is a statement, made by the Infinite Being who is beyond time and space, that is constantly penetrating and permeating our finite world.

May we merit hearing that voice once again this Shavuot, and be forever changed and impacted by the magnitude of its eternal importance. ■

The author is a rosh kollel at Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem