



Yisro – Spirituality Transcends Geography

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They journeyed from Rephidim, and they arrived in the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert, and Israel encamped there opposite the mountain (Exodus 19:2)

The much awaited and anticipated event unfolds in this week's Parsha. After 210 years of servitude, the Children of Israel stood at the base of Mount Sinai, ready and willing to receive the Torah. But this was not just another event – this was to be the most important, seminal event of our national existence. God Himself would speak to the people. This direct dialogical connection would serve as the foundation for the ongoing relationship between God and His chosen nation. So important was this event of Sinaitic Revelation that every Jewish soul past, present and future was present. Each and every one of us was there. Each of us said the words, “*Naaseh v'nishma, we will do and we will listen;*” each of us accepted God and pledged ourselves to the destiny of the Jewish people.

And yet, despite the importance of this event it happened in the middle of nowhere. The location of the greatest revelation has disappeared into the sands of time. Why not give the Torah in the Land of Israel? Perhaps, on *Har HaMoriah*, the site of *Akeydas Yitzchak* (binding of Isaac), the future site of the *Beis HaMikdash* (Temple)? An event of such magnitude should have occurred in a place of great holiness and importance. Why did God choose to give us the Torah in the middle of the desert?

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943, Grand Rabbi of Piacenza, Poland, who authored a number of works and was murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust) was a beacon of light for so many who were shackled in the darkness of the Warsaw Ghetto. Each and every Shabbos (when conditions allowed), the Rebbe would gather his minyan of the broken hearted and would fill their souls with the fiery and uplifting words of Torah. In a place where there was not enough to sustain the body, he made sure to help sustain the souls of his brothers and sisters. The Rebbe was murdered by the Nazi beasts, but his *drashos* live on in his sefer titled, *Eish Kodesh*. The Rebbe answers the aforementioned question in a magnificent and riveting fashion. As part of the daily Shema, we recite the phrase, “*V’Ahavta Es Hashem Elokecha B’Chol Levavicha, You shall love Hashem, your God with all of your heart ...*” Rashi explains: “*What does it mean to love God with all of your heart? Shelo Yihey Libcha Chaluk Al HaMakom; your heart shall not be divided against God.*” Rashi highlights an important dynamic. It is easy to love God when things are good. It is easy to feel a connection when God gives you what you want and life is going your way. But what happens when I am faced with challenge? What happens when I encounter adversity? How do I feel about God when life is not going according to plan? The Torah commands us to love God with all of our heart. No matter what is happening in life – I need to find a way to love my God. No matter if things are good or if they are difficult – I give my heart to Hashem. *Shelo Yihey Libcha Chaluk Al HaMakom; your heart shall not be divided against God – my whole heart is devoted to loving Hashem no matter what my personal circumstances may be.* Pause for a moment and reflect that the Rebbe was sharing these words, on Shabbos, January 7th 1940 in the Warsaw Ghetto. His congregation was comprised of broken souls who had lost so much and yet the Rebbe was telling them about the need to still love God. This is a level of emunah and connection that we can barely understand.

Rav Shapira takes this idea of Rashi a step further. He explains these words in a different way; “*Shelo Yihey Libcha Chaluk Al HaMakom – don’t let your heart deceive you and tell you that God and spirituality are tethered to any one place.*” People often think that God’s presence can only be found in certain places and among certain people. This is incorrect. God is everywhere and can be experienced anywhere. As the great Chassidic master Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said, “*People often ask, ‘Where can God be found?’ To which I often reply, ‘Anywhere you let Him in’.*” There is no question that God’s presence can be felt more acutely in some places than others. The Land of Israel is blessed with an intensity of Divine spirit that cannot be experienced or replicated in other locations; but our relationship with God and our ability to acquire and nourish our personal and collective spirituality is not tethered to any geographic location. Thus, explains the Rebbe, is why God decided to give the Torah in the middle of nowhere. Had God given us the Torah in Israel, the Jewish nation may have erroneously thought that Torah can only be experienced in the holy cocoon of our national homeland. Therefore, God gives us the Torah in the middle of a non-descript desert landscape to teach us an all important lesson. *Wherever you are – I am with you. Wherever you are – You can always connect with me. Your spirituality transcends geography and cannot be contained or limited to specific locations.* God gives us the Torah in the middle of nowhere to teach us that we can connect with Him – everywhere.

This message resonates with incredible contemporary relevance. “*Makom*” need not only refer to a geographic location – it can also refer to a situational location. There are times in life that our geographic reality is challenging. There are times in life when our life situation is less than optimal. It is important that we remind ourselves that God is accessible to us wherever we are. At times, as a result of my challenges and difficulties, I feel all alone in the desert of life. In those difficult times, I may even feel distanced from God. The Torah was given in the desert – the Torah can still be found in the desert. Wherever we find ourselves geographically and emotionally, we have the opportunity and ability to connect. No matter what the landscape of our lives may be – we have the ability to forge a meaningful and enduring relationship with the Divine.