

The Rebbe's Discourses

Published for Sedra Ki Tisa 18 Adar I 5782, 19 February 2022¹

OWNING THE TORAH

WHEN DOES TORAH, OR ANY ASPECT OF JUDAISM, BECOME OUR OWN? When we have in some sense risked something for its sake, left our comfort zone in order to study Torah or keep a Mitzva. We see this from the Rebbe's discussion of a dramatic discourse delivered in 1927 by the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak, in the Central Synagogue in Moscow.

The discourse focuses on a passage in the Talmud (Shabbat 88a) which presents the idea that at Mount Sinai the Jews were 'forced' to accept the Torah². A Talmudic rabbi asks: isn't this an excuse for not keeping the Torah laws? Another responds that we fully accepted the Torah at the time of the Purim story.

The Rebbe discusses this:

Sinai was a time when the Jewish people were on an exalted spiritual level, participating in a unique revelation of the Divine. From every direction G-d's words 'I am the L-rd your G-d' were heard; the entire world was still, not a bird chirped nor flew. There was a global sense of abnegation before the Infinite. By contrast the time of the persecution by Haman was one of threat and desolation. His terrible decree against the Jews applied throughout the vast Persian empire so there was no-where the Jews could flee. So how could Purim, rather than Sinai, be the real moment of accepting the Torah?

¹ *Vekibel Hayehudim 5727*, published in Dvarmalchut Ki Tisa 5774.

² The Talmud presents the idea that 'G-d held the Mountain over them like a barrel and said: if you accept the Torah, well and good, if not – here will be your graves!'. Chassidic teachings elsewhere explain this idea in terms of the atmosphere of euphoria and spiritual uplift which prevailed at Sinai, which precluded a more considered commitment to accept Jewish Law.

The answer as given in *Torah Or* by Rabbi Shneur Zalman is that on Purim the Jews showed readiness for self-sacrifice for Judaism. They refused to convert to Haman's religion, which – according to Kabbalistic sources - would have been a way to escape the decree of destruction. Their dedication to G-d aroused His mercy. When the Megilla states 'On that night the sleep of the King was disturbed' it refers both to Ahasuerus, and *lehavdil* to G-d. This was in response to the self-sacrifice of the Jews.

When King Ahasuerus couldn't sleep, and therefore was entertained by hearing a recital of the annals of his rule, he was reminded that Mordechai had saved his life and had not yet been rewarded. This is the turning point in the Purim story. This event and the following denouement of the story are an expression of G-d's arousal on behalf of the Jewish people, responding to their self-sacrifice.

In order to clarify this, the Previous Rebbe explains in his discourse that there are three main sections of the human body: the head, body, and legs. Although the legs and feet are the lowest part, they are vital because they carry the whole body and even the head. So too with the Jewish people as a whole.

This is indicated in a verse in which Moses is describing the Jewish people: 'six hundred thousand feet of the people, among whom I dwell'³. Considering the Jewish people as a unit, their 'feet', the lowest level, have a special significance, which is able to make 'I', *Anochi*, the Divine, dwell within them. *Anochi* signifies the revelation of Keter, Crown, within the attribute Wisdom, which is the attribute of Moses. Hence the feet have the power to reveal the Divine at an exalted level. What is meant by the 'feet'? The most basic Jewish power within a person: the power of self-sacrifice, or of total commitment.

This shows the special quality of the time of Exile, especially in our generation which is 'on the heels of the Messiah', meaning the lowest aspect: legs, feet, heels. For at such a time there are incredible concealments of the Divine, persecutions and threats: but it is specifically then that the power of Mesirat Nefesh, self-sacrifice for Judaism, is revealed. For Mesirat Nefesh links with a person's Faith, Emunah, beyond his or her rational mind, beyond any level of understanding.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak explained that the main focus of the Emunah of the Jewish people is at the level of the 'Radiance which Surrounds the Worlds', the transcendent level of G-dliness⁴. The Immanent level of the Divine, which 'fills

³ Numbers 11:21.

⁴ Chassidic teachings describe two aspects of Divine radiance/energy. The Immanent aspect of the Divine, termed the Radiance which fills the worlds, gives life to every detail in existence. But higher than that is the transcendent level, termed the Radiance which Surrounds the Worlds, which gives a closer link to the Divine. This is the source of the Commandments of the Torah.

the worlds' and gives them life and existence, can be grasped by the minds of the Jewish people, almost as if they can see the Divine life-force. Hence, in relating to this level of the Divine, one does not need Faith. One is simply aware of G-d. By contrast in the case of the transcendent radiance, which surpasses Reason – for that one needs Emunah. Self-sacrifice for Judaism, Mesirat Nefesh, likewise reaches towards the transcendent level of the Divine.

In 1927, speaking from the Bima in the brightly-lit packed Central Synagogue in Moscow, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak presented this idea, exhorting people to have Mesirat Nefesh, self sacrifice, for Judaism, in practical terms. In particular, to teach Torah to their children (which was forbidden by Soviet law). Even outside in the street, people were aware that an extra-ordinary event was taking place⁵.

How does this apply to us now, living in comfort, with virtually complete freedom to practice Judaism?

We too need to show self-sacrifice for Torah study. We should strive to the utmost to see that Torah reaches those Jews who are ignorant of it, and especially children. Further, when an advanced scholar spends his time presenting Torah study sessions on a relatively simple level, or instructing children, this might also be considered self-sacrifice. For, on account of the time he spends teaching others, he is not then able to study at his own more advanced level⁶. Nonetheless this is vitally important for our time.

This self-sacrifice makes us fully 'receive' the Torah. It was given at Sinai and passed down through the generations. But when do we actually receive it and make it our own? When we have self sacrifice for it.

In this task we are helped by the Moses of our time. The role of Moses was to impart spiritual strength to the Jewish people, and this role is continued by the line of spiritual leaders which extends from him to the present. They give us the strength to have self-sacrifice for the Torah, making it truly our own, and thus also to bring about the further revelations of the inner dimension of the Torah which will take place in the time of the Messiah. Even now, the 'spreading of the fountains' of the inner dimension of Torah gives us a foretaste of the Torah which will be revealed in the time of the Messiah. May this be very soon!

[Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care](#)

⁵ The discourse refers to a letter recording the impressions of a Jew who witnessed the event. See *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5711 p.195ff.

⁶ The Rebbe emphasizes in the discourse that a person should strive to study at the highest level possible. Hence, we infer, the teacher should also make every attempt to find time to study at his or her own advanced level.