

Lessons from the Chassidische Parsha

The teachings of the Alter Rebbe in Torah Ohr and Likkutei Torah

What Matan Torah Accomplished

פרשת יתרו
Yisro 5782

In Parshas Yisro we read about the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai. Matan Torah was the defining moment in Jewish history when Hashem revealed Himself to the Jewish people face-to-face and gave them the Torah and Mitzvos.

The Torah describes in detail the sights and sounds of this world-changing experience; the mountain smoking, fire and lightning and the sound of Shofar.

One of the themes that repeats itself in the Maamarim of this week's Chassidische Parsha is the question why this was all necessary? Why do we make such a big deal about Matan Torah and why was it done with such fanfare?

Our sages teach us that even before the Torah was given, the Avos not only learned Torah, but observed the Mitzvos; not only the Biblical Mitzvos, but even the Rabbinic enactments such as Eruv Tavshilin. So what was introduced at Matan Torah that didn't already exist before?

The Alter Rebbe presents a number of answers, each highlighting different aspects of the unique quality that Matan Torah brought about. They can generally be divided into 3 Chiddushim; In the source of G-dliness that the Mitzvos elicit, where this Hamshacha (flow of G-dliness) can be drawn down and by whom.

When the Avos kept the Torah, they did so in a spiritual form. Their service was one of meditation and emotional experience. The Torah tells us how Avraham was הלך ונסוע הנגבה "He went and travelled to the Negev". The Negev is in the South, corresponding to Chesed and love. Avraham's spiritual journey took him higher and higher in his love and desire for Hashem.

At Matan Torah, the Mitzvos were given in physical form, to be performed through actions using materials from our world, such as leather for Tefillin and wool for Tzitzis. Even though this would seem to be a step-down from the deeper spiritual experience of the Avos, the inner truth is that the Mitzvos performed through physical action are infinitely more powerful and impactful.

The Zohar describes the Mitzvos as "the limbs of the King". Just as a limb of the body serves as a vessel that draws down the vitality of the Neshama into it, the Mitzvos are vessels for the Or Ein Sof and they draw this light down into the worlds.

The Hamshacha drawn down by the Mitzvos of the Avos, only affected the spiritual worlds. They were only able to draw down the Or Ein Sof into the world of Atzilus; a world that is already G-dly and naturally aligns itself with the oneness of Hashem.

But they were incapable of bringing this light down to the lower worlds which exist - or appear to exist - as separate from

G-dliness, primarily to our physical world. This was the Chiddush of the post-Matan Torah Mitzvos. The Mitzvos performed through physical actions are able to draw G-dliness all the way down to permeate and transform the physical world.

The reason this is possible is because the Mitzvos after Matan Torah elicit a higher level of G-dliness than the spiritual Mitzvos of the Avos. Their Mitzvos reached limited levels of G-dliness which are not able to shine to more spiritually distant realms.

At Matan Torah, a new dimension was introduced; the way Mitzvos are sourced in Hashem's very essential Being. Since Hashem is completely unlimited, the Hamshacha after Matan Torah is unlimited, and is able to permeate every space, no matter how low or how distant; even the physicality of our world.

This is why the Aseres Hadibros begins with the word Anochi, "I am Hashem your G-d." The pronoun "I" refers to Hashem's very essence that transcends the levels of G-dly light reflected by His different names.

Chassidus illustrates this with a parable of brick wall that collapses. The bricks which sat higher on the wall will fall further away. Likewise, the higher the level of G-dliness in its source, the lower it can come down. In reverse, the lower something appears down below, the higher its source is. This is why physical Mitzvos have the power to draw down the highest of levels.

A third difference relates to who is able to effect the Hamshacha. True connection through spiritual service is limited to unique individuals. This is why we say that the Avos kept the Torah before it was given, but not necessarily the general Jewish populace. Not everyone is capable of connecting to Hashem on the highest level through the service of emotion and meditation.

But after Matan Torah, through the physical acts of the Mitzvos, every Jew is capable of achieving this deep oneness with Hashem and drawing down His essence into the world. Whilst we may have differences on the level of the mind and heart, on the level of action, we are all equal; Tefillin put on by a simple Jew achieves the same Hamshacha as that of the greatest sage.

With this we can also understand why Hashem did not give the Torah to the angels or to the Neshamos the way they are on High in their sublime spiritual state.

Just as the Hamshacha of Hashem's essence to the lowest space of the physical world can only be achieved through the physicality of the world itself, it can only be achieved by the Neshama as it is encloded in a physical body with a Nefesh Habehamis. In this lowest space, with all of our struggles, we can reach Infinity. That is something to make a big deal about.