

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXXIV: Bamidbar (Num. 1:1–4:20)

Essay 2. The names “Sinai” and “Horeb” refer to the punishment of the nations

מדרש 'ונידבר ה' אל-משה במדבר סיני', זה שאמר הכתוב "משפט יהוה רבה" אמר רבי מאיר משל את הצדיקים בדירתם ואת הרשעים בדירתם, את הצדיקים בדירתם "במרעה טוב ארעה אתם", ואת הרשעים בדירתם "ביום רדתו שאולה" וכו' "כפתי עליו את-ההום" וכו'. מקשים העולם מה ענין פסוק "ונידבר ה' אל-משה במדבר סיני" עם פסוק "משפט יהוה רבה" ועם דרש זה של ר' מאיר, ועוד על גוף הדרש של ר' מאיר קשה למה דוקא המשילם בדירתם ומה תועלת בנה.

There is a **Midrash** (Num. Rabbah 1:1) on the verse, **“The L-rd spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai . . .”** (Num. 1:1). The Midrash states: **“This is the meaning of what is written, ‘Your justice is like the great deep’ (Ps. 36:7). Rabbi Meir said: There is a parable that the righteous are in their dwelling and the wicked are in their dwelling. The righteous are in their dwelling, ‘I will feed them in good grazing land’ (Ezek. 34:14) and the wicked are in their dwelling, ‘On the day it went down to Sheol, I caused a mourning, I closed the deep over it’ (Ezek. 31:15).”**

The world asks (1) what is the issue that connects the verse, “The L-rd spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” with the verse, “Your justice is like the great deep,” and (2) what connects the first verse with this explanation of Rabbi Meir. Also, on the whole of the explanation of Rabbi Meir, it is difficult to understand why he specifically made them rulers over their dwelling and what the benefit of that terminology is to us?

וניש לומר דאיתא בפרק ט' דשבת מאי "הר סיני"? שירדה שנאה לאומות העולם עליו. אמר ר' יוסי בר' חנינא נמשך שמות לש לו מדבר ציון — שנצטוו וכו'. ומה שמו? "חורב" שמו. ופליגא דר' אבהו, דאמר "הר סיני" שמו. ונלמה נקרא שמו "הר חורב"? שירדה חורבה לאומות עליו.

It can be said that it's brought in the ninth chapter of tractate Shabbat:

As Rav Chisda and Rabba, son of Rav Huna, both said: **What** [is the reason it is called] **Mount Sinai** [סיני]? [Because it is] **a mountain upon which hatred**

* English translation: Copyright © 2021 by Charles S. Stein.

[*sina*] [שִׁנְאָה] **for the nations of the world descended** [because they did not accept the Torah]. **Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: It has five names.** (1) **The Zin Wilderness**, [because] the Jewish people were **commanded** [*nitztavu*] [נִצְטָווּ] in it; (2) the Kadesh Wilderness, [because] the Jewish people were sanctified [*nitkadshu*] [נִתְקַדְּשׁוּ] in it; (3) The Kedemot Wilderness, [because the] ancient [*keduma*] [קְדוּמָה] [Torah, which preceded the world] was given in it; (4) The Paran Wilderness, [because] the Jewish people were fruitful [*paru*] [פָּרוּ] and multiplied in it; (5) the Sinai Wilderness, [because] hatred descended upon the nations of the world on it [on the mountain on which the Jewish people received the Torah]. **And what is** [the mountain's true] **name? Horeb** [הוֹרֵב] **is its name. And that disputes** [the opinion of] **Rabbi Abbahu, as he said: Mount Sinai is its name. And why** [according to Rabbi Yosei] **is it called Mount Horeb?** [Because] **destruction** [*churba*] [חֻרְבָּה] **of the nations of the world descended upon it.**

- Shabbat 89a–89b

והקשה הרי"ף שם מאי בינייהו? לדרוש הרי סיני שמו, ולמה נקרא שמו הרי חורב, שיִרְדֵּה חוֹרְבָה לאומות, או לומר הרי חורב שמו, ולמה נקרא הרי סיני, שיִרְדֵּה שִׁנְאָה לאומות. ועוד דגימא תרנייהו הרי סיני על שיִרְדֵּה שִׁנְאָה, והרי חורב על שיִרְדֵּה חוֹרְבָה. ומירץ דִּירְדֵּה שִׁנְאָה הוא שִׁנְשָׁנָאוּ האומות על שלא קבלו התורה, ויִרְדֵּה חוֹרְבָה הוא שִׁנְטָלוּ גִזְרֵי דִין ועונש על זה, ומאן דִּאֵמַר סיני שמו סבירא ליה שִׁנְחָרְבוּ ומפל שִׁנְשָׁנָאוּ, ומאן דִּאֵמַר חורב שמו סבירא ליה שִׁנְשָׁנָאוּ אֲבָל חוֹרְבָה לא הִיָּה, עכ"ל.

The Rif¹ asks there, what is the practical difference? To explain that Mount Sinai is its name; and then why is its name also called Mount Horeb—because of the destruction of the nations of the world? Or to say that Mount Horeb is its name; and then why is it also called Mount Sinai—because hatred for the nations descended upon it? Also, both are said, Mount Sinai because hatred descended, and Mount Horeb because destruction descended.

The solution is that the descent of hatred [came] because the nations were hated as they didn't receive the Torah, and the descent of the destruction [came] because judgment and punishment were imposed upon the nations for this. The one, i.e., Rabbi Abbahu, who says that Sinai is its name, is of the opinion that they were destroyed for not accepting the Torah and nevertheless that they were also hated for this refusal. The other one, i.e., Rabbi Yosei, who says Horeb is its name, is of the opinion that they were hated for this refusal but not destroyed.

¹ This is not the earlier and more famous “Rif” [Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103)], but rather Rabbi Josiah ben Joseph Pinto (c. 1565–c. 1648), Syrian rabbi and preacher, a disciple of Rabbi Chaim Vital. His sefer, *Me’or Enayim* (Part One: Venice 1643; Part Two: Mantua 1743) was a commentary on Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib’s “*Ein Yaakov*,” a compilation of Aggadic material from the Talmud, and both parts are now commonly printed together with the *Ein Yaakov*. See *Me’or Enayim* (Venice 1643), page 62b.

וטעם מתלוקת זה יש לומר דתלגא במתלוקת אחר, שפכתבנו לעיל בפרשת יתרו על מאמר הנ"ל שאם ישראל קבלו את התורה ברצון, אז אין האומות יכולים עוד להחזיק בה, שהרי מתחלה סלקו ידיהם ממנה וישראל זכו בה מיד הם לבדם. אלא שאם ישראל לא קבלוה ברצון, אלא שאחר כך קיימוה, עדיין היו יכולים אף האומות לחזור ולזכות בה. ומאן דאמר שיגדה שנהא, לפי שהם קבלוה ברצון, ומאן דאמר שיגדה חורבה, מפני שלא חזרו לזכות בה ולקיימה כמו שעשו ישראל.

The reason for this disagreement is to say that it depends on another disagreement, for we wrote above for parshat Yitro (essay 16) on the article above that if Israel had accepted the Torah willingly, then the nations would no longer have been able to hold onto it, for from the start, they removed their hands from it, but Israel alone merited it immediately. Rather, if Israel had not received [the Torah] willingly, rather only afterward they fulfilled it, then the nations would still have been able to go back and merit it.

This refers to the dispute over whether Israel accepted the Torah willingly or not. On one hand, Shabbat 88a discusses the verse:

“ ‘And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet G-d; and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount’ (Ex. 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: [the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Acha bar Yaakov said: From here is a substantial caveat to [the obligation to fulfill the] Torah.” I.e., the suggestion is that Israel did not accept the Torah willingly.

On the other hand, at Ex. 24:7, we read that the people said, “All that the L-rd has spoken, we will do and we will hear it.” I.e., the suggestion is that Israel accepted the Torah willingly, agreeing to fulfill the commandments even before hearing the details.

Regarding the **one who says that hatred descended**, Rabbi Yosei, it was **because [Israel] received [the Torah] willingly**. Thus, the nations didn't have a second chance to accept the Torah, and should be hated for their initial refusal, but not punished for it. Regarding the **one who says that destruction descended**, Rabbi Abbahu, it was **because** Israel did not receive the Torah willingly, and so the nations had a second chance to go back and claim it for themselves, but **they didn't return to merit it and to fulfill it as Israel did**. Thus, not only were they hated for their initial refusal to accept the Torah, but destruction descended because they didn't seize the second chance to claim the Torah for themselves.

ונחזי אנו בשלמא בכל המקומות שהיה מצנה ישראל על איזו מצנה נחא לומר שם סיני, שהרי במתן תורה נזכר זה השם של סיני למר פדאית ליה ולמר פדאית ליה. וכל המצות נאמרו בסיני, אבל בכאן, שאינו מדבר בענין שום מצנה רק כדי לקבל מנין בני ישראל בנדאי שיש לו להזכיר שם העצם דנקא. ומדהזכיר סיני שמע מינה שנה הוא השם העצם שלו האמיתי וזה חורב הוא שם התואר, ונקרא פה לפי שיגדה חורבה לאומות שלא קבלוה מתחלה ואף לא חזרו לזכות בה כמו שעשו ישראל. וזה שאמר הפתוב "נהגוים חרב וחרבו", שתי חרבנות.

We see, granted, that every place that Israel was commanded on some mitzvah, it's fine to say the name of “Sinai,” for the giving of the Torah is remembered by this name of

“Sinai,” whether according to one Sage, Rabbi Abbahu, as he holds, that Sinai was the mountain’s actual name, or according to the other Sage[s], Rav Chisda and Rabba, son of Rav Huna, as [they hold], that it was called Sinai as an adjective, because hatred for the nations descended there, as they didn’t receive the Torah.

All the commandments were said at Sinai, but here at Num. 1:1, “The L-rd spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai,” where it does not speak about any commandment, but where Sinai is only mentioned in order to know where the children of Israel come from, then certainly it’s appropriate to use the precise noun. From the mention of Sinai here, we learn from it that this is its true noun, and Mount Horeb is only an adjective, and it’s called thus because the destruction descended to the nations that didn’t receive [Torah] from the start and didn’t even return to merit it as Israel did. This is what Scripture said, “For the nation or the kingdom that does not serve you shall perish; such nations shall be utterly destroyed [*charov yecheravu*] [הָרַב יַחֲרַבו]” (Isaiah 60:12), two destructions, i.e., the root of *charav* [destruction] is duplicated for emphasis.

ולפי זה שפיר קאמר המדרש הדא הוא דכתיב "משפטא תהום רבה", דמדהזכיר דנקא נשם סיני ילפינן כמאן דאמר שיירדה חורבה וזהו "משפטא תהום רבה".

According to this, we have the answer to the first question. It’s fine that this midrash says “This is the meaning of what is written, ‘Your justice is like the great deep,’ that from the fact that [Num. 1:1] specifically mentions the name “Sinai,” we learn in accordance with the one who says that hatred and destruction descended upon the nations for their refusal of Torah, and this is the meaning of “Your justice is like the great deep.”

ואתי שפיר נמי הדריש של רבי מאיר, שנהרי לשון חורבה שייה בבתים ובדירות ולא באנשים והיכן היא חורבה זו והלא יש להם בתים ועצירות הרבה? משום הכי קאמר משל את הרשעים בדירתם פלומר שיבוא הזמן שיהיו כל הבתים שלהם חורבה ולא יהיה להם אלא התהום שיודרו בו, ולהפך משל את הצדיקים בדירתם "אני ארעה" וכו'.

As for the second question, the explanation of Rabbi Meir is also fine, referencing the dwellings of the righteous and the wicked, for the language of “destruction” [*chorba*] [חורבה] is relevant to homes and dwellings and not to people, and where is this destruction, for don’t [the nations] have many houses and towns?

Because of this, as it says, there’s a parable of the wicked in their dwellings, as if to say that a time will come that all of their houses will be destroyed, and they will have nothing other than the deep in which they will dwell, and to the contrary, the parable of the righteous in their dwellings, “I will graze My flock, and I will let them lie down—declares the L-rd G-d” (Ezek. 34:15).

* * *