

Parsha Ponders

VeZos HaBeracha | October 20, 2019 | 21 Tishrei 5780

The rejected gift¹

ויאמר יקוק מסיני בא וזרח משעיר למו הופיע מהר פארן וגו'

He said: "Hashem came from Sinai, shined forth from [Mount] Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran..."²

In the last *parsha* in the Torah, Moshe gave each of the tribes a final blessing. Before these blessings, he describes the Torah itself and how the Jews accepted it. It says that Hashem "came" from Mount Sinai, having "shined forth" from Mount Seir and "appearing" from Mount Paran. We've all heard of Mount Sinai. That is where the Torah was given to the Jews, who gladly accepted it. What is Mount Seir and Mount Paran referring to? Mount Seir is usually associated with the descendants of Eisav³, and Mount Paran is usually associated with the descendants Yishmael⁴. Picking up on this, the *Midrash* explains⁵ the verse to be describing a historical backdrop to the accepting of the Torah.

Hashem went to each of the nations and offered them the Torah, not just the Jews. He offered it to the descendants of Eisav. They asked what was in it. Hashem told them an example: "Don't murder"⁶. They said we're very sorry, but that's what we specialize in. We're not interested. Hashem offered the Torah to the descendants of Yishmael. They asked what was in it. Hashem told them an example: "Don't steal"⁷. They said that this is what they're all about, and declined. Hashem offered the Torah to the descendants of Moav. They asked what was in it. Hashem told them an example: "Don't commit adultery"⁸. They responded that they were steeped in illicit relations. They couldn't accept. Only the Jews accepted the Torah, without even asking what was in it⁹.

However, there's a major problem with this *Midrash*. How can we understand the responses of the nations of Eisav, Yishmael, and Moav? They told Hashem that they can't or won't accept the Torah, as it forbids things they aren't interested in keeping. But murder, theft, and adultery are forbidden to Jew and non-Jew alike¹⁰! Even if they didn't accept the Torah, they would be forbidden from committing these acts. How does their response make sense?

A possible explanation¹¹ is they misunderstood a basic concept. There are some *mitzvos* which were given to mankind before the Torah was given. Some of them were repeated again at Mount Sinai, when the Jews were given the Torah. However, some of them weren't repeated. The rule is that the *mitzvos* which were taught before Sinai, and repeated at Sinai, are obligatory for Jew and non-Jew alike¹². Examples of this rule include the above *mitzvos* against murder, theft, and adultery. If a *mitzvah* was taught before Sinai, and **not** repeated at Sinai, the *mitzvah* is exclusive to the Jewish people. An example

¹ Based on Meshech Chochmah to Deuteronomy 33:2

² Deuteronomy *loc. cit.*

³ See Genesis 33:8,9

⁴ See *ibid* 21:21

⁵ Sifrei Devarim § 343. See Targum Yonasan to Deuteronomy *loc. cit.*

⁶ Exodus 20:13

⁷ The *Midrash* *loc. cit.* uses the verse from *ibid*, but a more accurate verse would have been Leviticus 19:11

⁸ Exodus *loc. cit.*

⁹ Exodus 24:7

¹⁰ Sanhedrin 56b; Mishneh Torah *Hilchos Melachim* 9:1

¹¹ For another interesting explanation, see <https://torah.org/learning/pirkei-avos-chapter1-18b/>, from the teachings of Rav Yochanan Zweig of Miami

¹² Sanhedrin 59a

of a *mitzvah* that wasn't repeated at Sinai is the prohibition against eating the sciatic nerve¹³. Consequently, this *mitzvah* is only for the Jewish people¹⁴.

The descendants of Eisav, Yishmael, and Moav, seemingly made a simple mistake. They knew that murder, theft, and adultery were forbidden by the Torah, before Sinai. However, they thought these *mitzvos* would only be taught once. Since they wouldn't be repeated after Sinai, they wouldn't be forbidden to non-Jews. They would only be forbidden to whichever nation that accepted the Torah. Therefore, by rejecting the Torah, they were in essence permitting their lifestyles. They would never become forbidden from murder, theft, or adultery¹⁵.

Of course, they made a colossal mistake. These prohibitions were indeed repeated at Sinai. This made them forbidden for Jew and non-Jew alike. Whether they accepted the Torah or not, they were forbidden from continuing their lifestyles. When Hashem told them what was in the Torah, He didn't intend to dissuade them from accepting it¹⁶. It would have seemed that He chose to mention exactly the *mitzvah* they would struggle with. Perhaps this was to scare them off? Quite the contrary. He was informing them that regardless, these things were forbidden. Accepting the Torah would be an opportunity to improve. The Torah could be used as a tool to work on oneself, such that these crimes would no longer be enticing. They would no longer be insurmountable¹⁷. However, they grossly misunderstood Hashem's intent. In the end, the Torah became the exclusive gift to the Jewish people. They understood its worth, and use *Simchas Torah* as an opportunity to express their gratitude for it.

Chazak Chazak VeNischazek!

¹³ [Genesis 32:32](#)

¹⁴ The *gemarra loc. cit.* (in one answer) says that the *mitzvos* of procreation ([Genesis 9:7](#)) and circumcision ([ibid 17:9](#)), while they were taught before Sinai and were repeated after Sinai, also fall under this rule. They are only obligatory for Jews. This is because they were repeated only to teach specific novel laws, but not to reintroduce the command. Therefore, they are not really considered "repeated" at Sinai (see there)

¹⁵ [Rav Kupperman](#), in his commentary on the [Meshech Chochmah](#), explains that the simple way to read the *Midrash* is that the responses of the nations were their excuse why accepting the Torah would have been too hard. They were too steeped in their lifestyles to change. However, the [Meshech Chochmah](#) explains the *Midrash* that their responses revealed their logic for rejecting the Torah. By not accepting it, it was (in their minds) permitting their lifestyles

¹⁶ As is the commonly understood way to read the *Midrash* ([Rav Kupperman](#))

¹⁷ [ibid](#)