

Parsha Ponders

Yisro | February 4, 2021 | 23 Shevat 5781

True humility¹

וירד יקוק על-הר סיני וגו'

And Hashem descended on Mount Sinai...²

This week's *parsha* contains the dramatic, historic event of the revelation at Mount Sinai. 600,000 men over the age of twenty³, as well as women and children, had an encounter with the Divine. Hashem lowered His presence, so-to-speak, on Mount Sinai, and uttered the Ten Commandments. Our Sages are bothered⁴: Why Mount Sinai was given the privilege of hosting this event? There are hundreds of thousands of mountains in the world. The Torah could have been given on Mount Everest. Or on Mount Kilimanjaro. Why was Mount Sinai singled out? They tell us that Hashem specifically chose Mount Sinai because it is the lowest of the mountains. Any lower and it wouldn't even be called a mountain. This was to teach the Jewish people that Torah can only be acquired if someone is humble and of meek spirit⁵.

However, this answer isn't fully satisfactory. There's something a person could still ask. If the point was to convey to the Jewish people the desirability of meekness, why did Hashem choose a mountain in the first place? Why not a hill? Or a flat area? Or better yet, a valley? Very nice that Mount Sinai was the smallest of the mountains, but the message seemingly would be clearer from something even shorter!

From here, we learn an even more important lesson. True, humility is a very cherished and desired trait. It's something that we should all strive for. But what is real, genuine humility? Let's take someone with zero talents. They have nothing going for them. They have no positive qualities. Could we really call it humility if they aren't full of themselves? They have nothing to be proud of! This type of person would be symbolized by a flat area, or even a valley. Hashem didn't want to convey to the people to be like a valley. This isn't true humility.

Rather, humility is someone who has talents, someone who has positive qualities, and yet, they aren't full of themselves. They don't give themselves credit. They realize that their talents come from Hashem. Someone who really is high, like a mountain, and yet doesn't pride themselves on it, is truly humble. This can only be symbolized by a mountain. But not just any mountain. The lowest of mountains. Mount Sinai showed the Jewish people what true humility is. If you have something to be proud of, but you don't let it go to your head, that's tremendous character. Only someone with such a trait of humility is able to truly grasp and master the Torah.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on a teaching of [Menachem Mendel of Kotzk](#), known as the [Kotzker Rebbe](#). This teaching appears in various forms in different sources. One source is [Me'ir Einei Yesharim](#) to [Numbers](#) 12:1, brought in [Emes MiKotzk Titzmach](#) § 638 (although with a different wording). I'm not sure what the original source is

² [Exodus](#) 19:20

³ [Ibid](#) 12:37

⁴ [Sotah](#) 5a. See also [Midrash Tehillim](#) (Buber ed.) 68:17 and [Megillah](#) 29a

⁵ I couldn't find a source for this. [Sotah](#) *loc. cit.* just says that we should learn from Hashem, Who chose the smallest of the mountains. [Rashi](#) *ad. loc.* explains that we should love meekness