

Good Shabbos and good Yom Tov, everyone.

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May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

I want to begin this morning by wishing Mazel Tov to all of our graduates! Shavuot, *Zeman Matan Toraseinu*, is a most appropriate time to celebrate graduation. Graduation, at every age and at every level, celebrates a tremendous accomplishment, often one that took many years to achieve. But it also celebrates the world of opportunities that lies ahead. Similarly, when we celebrate Mattan Torah, we are not celebrating only the **past** achievement of receiving the Torah long ago. We are also celebrating **the world of opportunities the Torah affords us, the bright future it provides.**

The message for our graduates today is the timeless message our ancestors were to take from Har Sinai long ago... *The opportunities and possibilities before you are almost limitless. You will find success if you push yourself, work hard, take risks, ask questions, maintain an open mind, and never stop learning. And most importantly, never compromise your integrity and connection to your heritage.* Good luck to you all! We wish you much success wherever life takes you, and we look forward to watching you flourish in the years ahead...

This time of year, I like to read commencement speeches given in colleges and universities. One that stood out was an address by **William H. McRaven**, retired U.S. Navy four-star admiral, famous for his book, Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life...and Maybe the World, at MIT's online 2020 Commencement. "*If you are going to save the world, you will need to be humble. In my career I have been blessed to be around some great minds. I have seen how the brilliant men and women have helped eradicate disease, reduce poverty, create technological masterpieces, but, conversely, I have seen how the misguided geniuses, filled with conceit and convinced of their own righteousness have tampered with nature, built apocalyptic machines, dehumanized social interaction and tilted toward tyranny. If you do not approach the world with humility, it will find a way to humble you quickly. I found, in my time in the military, that no experience on earth was more humbling than combat...if you believe for a moment that you are superior, you will be humbled quickly. But if you approach every mission with a decent respect for the mountains, the rivers, the oceans and the enemy—you are more likely to succeed.*"

Humility is the character trait highlighted in many different aspects of Mattan Torah. The **Gemara in Megilla 29a** famously claims that all mountains other than Har Sinai were not fit for Torah to be given on them because they were haughty.

Moshe Rabbeinu, charged with presenting the Torah, was known as the most humble of men.

במדבר פרק יב פסוק ג (פרשת בהעלותך) (ג) וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנּוּ עֲנֵיּוֹ מֵאֲדָמָה מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה:

And the **Maharal** in his sefer, *Derech Chaim*, while commenting on the 48 characteristics necessary to acquire Torah expands on this:

דרך חיים מסכת אבות פרק ו משנה ה:הז' בענוה, ודבר זה כבר בארנו כמה פעמים כי הענוה היא סבה ראשונה לתורה, וכמו שהיה אצל משה שכל המעלות שהיו למשה לא היו סבה לתורתו רק הענוה.

The seventh, humility; it has already been explained several times that humility is the primary foundation of the Torah, and just as it was with Moshe that all the virtues that Moshe possessed were not the foundation of his Torah, only humility.

The **Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh** says that the Torah goes out of its way to note that the Jewish people camped in the desert while waiting for Mattan Torah, because the desert is the appropriate context for *kabolas HaTorah*.

אור החיים שמות פרק יט פסוק ב (פרשת יתרו) וענין ב' הוא השפלות והענוה כי אין דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא במי שמשפיל עצמו ומשים עצמו כמדבר, וכנגד זה אמר ויחנו במדבר פירוש לשון שפלות וענוה כמדבר שהכל דורכים עליו:

And the second issue is humility because no words of the Torah exist except in those who lower themselves and treat themselves as a desert, and this is the meaning of “in the desert,” meaning “humble like a desert,” a land on which everyone treads:

As the **Gemara in Eiruvim (54a)** comments:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת עירובין דף נד עמוד א אמר רב מתנה: מאי דכתיב ומדבר מתנה - אם משים אדם עצמו כמדבר זה, שהכל דשין בו - תלמודו מתקיים בידו. ואם לאו - אין תלמודו מתקיים בידו.

Rav Masna said: If a person makes himself like a desert, in which everyone can walk through and trample upon, he acquires Torah.

And as **Rashi** taught (Shemos 9:2), the Jewish people camped at Har Sinai, כאיש אחד בלב אחד, seeing beyond themselves, making room for others in their lives and worldview, a defining feature of humility.

The message for us from Mattan Torah is very clear. We, too, must humble ourselves to receive the Torah in our lives. As the **Aruch Hashulchan** explains, the Torah does not identify Shavuos as the anniversary of Mattan Torah, because Hashem does not want us to think of Mattan Torah as an experience that happened only once, long ago. **Shavuos commemorates an ongoing experience—the ongoing communication and relationship between the Jewish people and Hashem through His Holy Torah**

ערוך השולחן אורח חיים סימן תצד סעיף ב אף על פי שהתורה לא זכרה ענין מתן תורה בשבועות לפי שהתורה כשניתנה ניתנה לעד ולעולמי עולמים ואין שייך לקבוע יום מיוחד בשביל

Every day of our lives, we have the opportunity and the obligation to receive the Torah anew. And to do that we need humility.

But what is humility? Is it self deprecation? Is it thinking little of yourself? Why would that be beneficial in *kabolas HaTorah*?

There is a famous **Gemara in Sota 49b** that on the surface sounds humorous but provides invaluable insight into the true definition of humility...

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף מט ע"ב משמת רבי - בטלה ענוה ויראת חטא. אמר ליה רב יוסף לתנא: לא תיתני ענוה, דאיכא אנא.

From the time when Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died, humility and fear of sin ceased. Rav Yosef said to the tanna who reviewed the mishna: Do not teach that humility ceased, for there is still one who is humble, namely me.

And the same *Tanna*, Rav Yosef, makes another seemingly boastful statement (**Gemara Pesachim 68b**):

תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף סח עמוד ב רב יוסף ביומא דעצרתא אמר: עבדי לי עגלא תלתא. אמר: אי לא האי יומא דקא גרים, כמה יוסף איכא בשוקא?

Rav Yosef, on the day of Shavuos, would say: Prepare me a choice third-born calf. He said: If not for this day on which the Torah was given, I would have been just a regular Yosef in the marketplace?

Rav Yosef declares himself an example of humility and also announces that he is better than all the regular “Joes” in the marketplace. What is going on?

Evidently, humility is not self deprecation. It is just the opposite—an accurate portrayal of self... self awareness...an accurate understanding of who we are...human beings with the ability-- through a commitment and adherence to Torah--to be spiritual beings. The greatness of human beings lies in our ability to do things which violate our baser instincts, to rise above the animal within us. To use a term coined by the great **Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski**, a human being is not merely a “*homo sapiens*,”—

one capable of thinking--but a “*homo spiritus*” – one capable of spiritual dominance over animal instincts. And that capability stems from our intrinsic connection to Torah.

This idea is further highlighted in another **Mishna in Avos (2:8)**.

רבן יוחנן בן זכאי קבל מהלל ומשמאי הוא היה אומר אם למדת תורה הרבה אל תחזיק טובה לעצמך כי לכך נוצרת
Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai would say: If you learn a lot of Torah, do not attribute success only to yourself; for that is what you were created for. **Rav Yaakov Kulefsky**, the late Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Yisroel, used to quote the **Mabit**, who has a slightly different version of this statement. Instead of *l'kach notzarta*, his *girsu* was *b'kach notzarta*—that is what you were created with. You were created with Torah as your foundation, as a vital part of your essence; as well as your mission and path towards fulfillment. Thus, when a Jew ignores Torah, he is rejecting a part of himself...

The **Gemara in Shabbos 88a** states that we were coerced to accept the Torah.

תלמוד בבלי שבת דף פ"ח ע"א: "וַיִּתְּצֵבוּ בְּתַחֲתֵיתִי הָהָר", אָמַר רַב אֲבָדִימִי בְּרַחֲמָא בְּרַחֲמָא: מְלַמֵּד שְׁפָפָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטָב, וְאִם לֹא — שֵׁם תְּהֵא קְבוּרַתְכֶם.
The Torah says, "And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet Hashem; and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.

Rishonim are all bothered by this statement. Hadn't the Jewish people already said **Isn't forcing people to accept antithetical to the fundamental tenet of free choice?**

There are many famous answers to this question, but this morning I would like to share two answers which are less famous...but of real importance and related to the topic of humility.

The current Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, **Rav Yitzchak Yosef**, suggests the following:

ילקוט יוסף שובע שמחות א דרשות דרשה ב - מעמד החופה שווה למעמד מתן תורה: ושמעתי מהגאון ר' בצלאל זולטי זצ"ל, שביאר בדרך זו. דהנה המהר"ל חוקר בייחודם של ישראל, אם ישראל הוא עם ככל האומות, רק שנתווסף בהם ענין הקדושה והתורה...או שעם ישראל הוא עם מיוחד, ועם בפני עצמו המתייחדים בקדושתם ובתורתם. בבחינת והייתם לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש.

And I heard from the Gaon Rabbi Bezalel Zolti, zt"l, who explained in this way. The Maharal investigates the uniqueness of Israel, whether Israel is a nation like all other nations, only that we add to them the matter of holiness and Torah...Or that the people of Israel are a special people, and a people in their own right that are unique in their holiness and Torah. [Then he cites Shemos 19:6] You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

He suggests that the Jewish people are not a people like everyone else, with the addition or enhancement of Torah. Instead, the Torah is what makes us unique; it is an inextricable part of us. He says that is why there was really no choice to accept Torah, because without it we would not have begun as a nation...citing **Rav Saadia Gaon**, that which makes us the Jewish nation is the Torah.

ובזה מוסבר למה הוצרך הקדוש ברוך הוא לכפות עליהם הר כגיגית לאחר שהסכימו לקבל עליהם את התורה וכמו שאמרו "נעשה ונשמע". ..אולם ע"פ הנ"ל י"ל דכפה עליהם הר כגיגית להורות להם שאין הדבר אצליהם בבחירה, אלא זהו מהותם וייחודם לפניו יתברך, וכמו שאמר רב סעדיה גאון שאין אומת ישראל אומה אלא בתורתיה, ולכן אף על פי שהסכימו לקבל את התורה, עכ"ז הקדוש ברוך הוא כפה עליהם הר כגיגית, להורות בזה שהדבר מחוייב המציאות אצל עם ישראל, ומש"ה כשהם יורדים הרי הם יורדים עד התהום וכגורעים שבאומות.

*This explains why G-d had to hold a mountain over them like a barrel after they agreed to accept the Torah and as they said, "we will do and we will listen."... However, according to the above, a mountain was held over them like a barrel to instruct them that it was not their choice, **but that it was their essence and their uniqueness before Him would be blessed, and, as Rav Saadia Gaon said, the nation of Israel***

is not a nation except through Torah, and therefore even though they agreed to accept the Torah, G-d held over them a mountain like a barrel, to instruct that this is necessary for the people of Israel.

The **Gemara in Brachos 61b** teaches that when the Romans prohibited Torah study, Rabbi Akiva continued to study, despite the risk of his life. When a fellow Jew, Papus, asked why he put himself in mortal danger for Torah study, Rabbi Akiva answered with a parable: *A hungry fox, standing on the river-bank, called out to a fish, "Fish, why do you subject yourself to such a dangerous existence? Don't you know that a little further down the river are fishermen just waiting to catch you? Join me on the river-bank and you will be safe." The fish replied, "What you say about the risk of fisherman might be true. But if I am not immersed in the water, then surely I will die. My only chance to live is in the water despite its peril." Rabbi Akiva ended: "Just as a fish cannot live without water, we cannot live without Torah."*

Hashem coerced the Jewish people in order to transmit the understanding that we need Torah, that we cannot survive without it; that without it we are like fish without water; that it is crucial to our survival. Without the Torah, שם תהא קבורתכם, literally. This is the realization of Rav Yosef, that Torah is a necessary part of his identity, and one who understands that--and the power that lies within—is self aware; an *anav*.

Another answer to כפה עליהם הר כגיגית is suggested by **Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank** in *Mikraei Kodesh*. Humility is about knowing when you need help and having the awareness to ask for help. He claims, because the Jewish people recognized the truth of Torah in their statement נעשה ונשמע, the Jewish people asked to be coerced, because they know that sometimes it's difficult to follow through on good intentions. מקראי קודש [פסח ג': סי' ל"ו] הכפייה שכפה הקב"ה הר כגיגית היא לא נגד יסוד הבחירה מפני שמעצמם בקשו שיכפה עליהם. *The coercion imposed by G-d by a mountain like a barrel is not against the foundation of choice, because they themselves sought to be forced.*

הנה ברש"י דברים (ל"ג, ג') מבואר שעם ישראל בקשו מהקב"ה שיכפה עליהם הר כגיגית, שכתב שם על הפסוק והם תכו לרגליך וז"ל "והם ראויים לכך שהרי תוכו עצמן לתוך תחתית ההר לרגלך בסיני. והטעם שבקשו כן אע"פ שאמרו נעשה ונשמע מרצונם, יתבאר על פי דברי התוס' שבת שם ד"ה כפה עליהם הר כגיגית שכתבו: ואע"פ שכבר הקדימו נעשה לנשמע שמא יהיו חוזרים כשיראו האש הגדולה שיצתה נשמתו, והיינו שמשום כך בקשו שיכפה עליהן הר כגיגית מהחשש שלא יהיו חוזרים כשיראו האש הגדולה וכו'.

Rashi on Deuteronomy (33:3) explained that the Jewish people asked Hashem to hold a mountain over them like a barrel. He explains the Pasuk לרגליך וז"ל "and they placed themselves into the bottom of the mountain at your feet at Sinai. And the reason that they asked to be forced, even though they said "naaseh venishma" of their own volition, was for fear that they would change their minds when they saw the great fire, etc, and challenging times ahead.

Tehillim 119:67, David Hamelech discussed the role of humility in accepting Torah.

תהלים קי"ט:טז) טרם אענה אני שגג וְעָתָה אֶמְרָתְךָ שְׁמֵרָתִי:

Before I was humbled I went astray, but now I keep Your word.

The **Radak** explains that it is humility that allows us to incorporate the message of Torah into our very being. It is about seeing beyond ourselves and reaching out to Hashem for help, knowing our life fulfillment is dependent on Torah, that humility allows us to be transformed by Torah.

רד"ק תהלים פרק קיט פסוק סז: טרם אענה. הוא ענין כניעה, כמו (ישעיה לא, ד): ומהמונם לא יענה. אמר, טרם הכנעני והייתי חוטא, שוגג הייתי, כי לא הייתי פונה אל מצותיך ואל אמרתך, ולא הייתי נותנם על לב לזוכרם.

We are about to recite Yizkor, when we think of loved ones who are no longer here with us. We are here to honor them and their memories, and to continue the precious legacy of the Torah our ancestors bequeathed to us—through the lives they lived, the *mesirus nefesh* they showed, and the values they represented--and to better appreciate all the blessings we have, and to commit to use our time on this earth to the fullest. Let us think about the past and be humbled by the deep commitment of those who worked so hard to keep the flame of Torah and Yiddishkeit alive; to transmit their values to us. Let us honor them today by honoring who we really are; committing to make the Torah real in our lives...and live each day appreciating and cherishing every moment...and living lives of purpose and meaning...amen.