

From Sinai To Yerushalayim

There is great significance to the fact that God gave us the Torah in the desert and not in Yerushalayim, the capital of the Land of Israel. One midrash hints to the fact that if the Torah was given in the Land of Israel one might think that these two great gifts are bound together in the sense that when the Jewish people no longer merited to live in the Land that they would then be exempt from observing the Torah.¹ The desert setting, then, is a crucial reminder for the universal relevance for Torah – no matter where Jews are they can and they must learn and observe the Torah.

However, we should be careful from making this important observation cloud our vision about the ideal location of Torah. Even as Torah can uplift our diaspora communities, still the midrash states that the ideal and most natural setting for Torah is in the Land of Israel. And this statement is specifically true about Yerushalayim, “from where halachik teachings emanated to the Jewish people.”²

This ideal link between Sinai and Yerushalayim is demonstrated by Tehillim chapter 68. The chapter begins by describing God’s might in saving the Jewish people from their enemies. Dovid then transitions to discuss the awe-inspiring and fearful nature of the God’s revelation at Sinai: “The earth quaked, even the heavens dripped; this is Sinai, because of God, the God of Israel.”³ Similarly, a few verses later we read, “God's chariot is twice ten thousand times thousands of angels. The Lord was among them at Sinai in His holiness.”⁴ God’s might reverberated throughout the world when He descended at Sinai.

¹ Mechilta de-Rebbi Yishmael, Yitro, parshat Amalek, parsha 2. See footnote 9 in https://www.mayim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Yitro_65.pdf.

² Ta’anit 16a.

³ Tehillim 68:9

⁴ Ibid, 68: 18. Translation is from Chabad.org.

However, the chapter does not conclude on this note. Rather, it transitions to describing how the Jewish people and the nations of the world will ultimately see God's might emanating from Yerushalayim:⁵

Your God has commanded your strength; show this strength, O God, which You have wrought for us. From Your Temple, which is over Yerushalayim, kings will bring You tribute... You are feared, O God, from Your Sanctuary; the God of Israel-He gives strength and power to the people; blessed be God.

This transition from Sinai to Yerushalayim, indicates that Tehillim is hinting at a process. Yes, God originally appeared in the desert. Yes, there is great significance to the Torah of the diaspora. But the ideal process is for God and the Torah to travel from the desert to the Land of Israel and rest in Yerushalayim. That is God's final abode and from there He gives "strength and power" to His people and to the entire world.⁶

⁵ Ibid, 68:29-30, 36.

⁶ This idea was inspired by Rabbi Baruch Wieder's remarks in the opening session of the worldwide VaYichan learning program, available at <https://youtu.be/ygHRQPMvDLk>.