

SIDRA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

When Moses first approached the Israelites about accepting the Torah, their response was almost too good to be true: "Whatever G-d says we will obey" (Shemot 19:8).

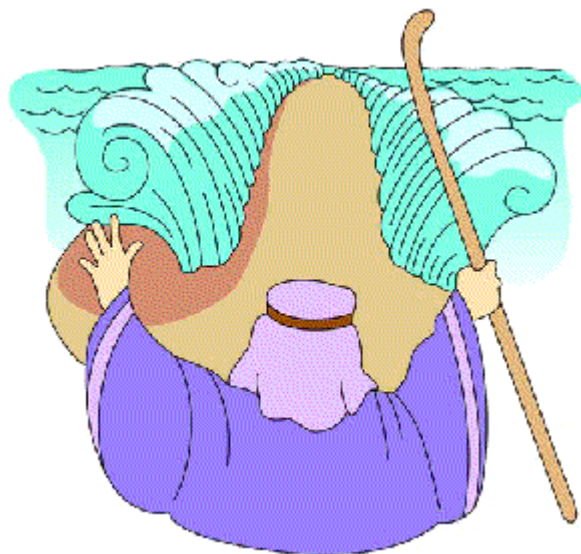


The Talmud (Shabbat 88a) records a critical assessment of Israel for its rash acceptance of the Torah before even hearing its demands. Indeed, knowing how Israel disobeyed so many of its laws so soon after, that criticism would appear most valid.

We are all familiar with the Midrash that before G-d gave Israel the Torah He offered it to the other main peoples of the East. They, in turn, rejected it on the grounds that its prohibitions, either against murder, theft or immorality, would make their lifestyle unbearable. When G-d finally got around to offering it to Israel, without a moment's hesitation they shouted, "Whatever G-d says we will obey".

Now, although 'we do not probe a Midrash,' we may wonder why the prescient G-d bothered to offer the Torah to all the other nations first, knowing full well their response! Why did He not approach Israel first, as a just reward for their loyalty and enthusiasm, as well as to avoid the rebuffs of the other nations?

Perhaps the whole point of that Midrash was that it was precisely because G-d does foresee the future that He was unhappy with Israel's rash response, and did not, therefore, approach her first. Israel's promise - soon enough broken - to observe all the laws before even listening to their content was a childish response. It was even less than childish, since children have a natural curiosity, which, according to this Midrash, Israel did not display.



So two messages unfold from this Midrash: First, that G-d does not wish to occupy the role of Spiritual dictator, coercing us to accept His Torah. He would rather that we spend our life studying, plumbing the depths of, and becoming inspired by it, so that we may reach the stage when, with proper conviction and enthusiasm, we can affirm, 'Whatever G-d says we will obey.' Secondly, that it is rash to imagine that we can fully observe the entire Torah. Our ancestors couldn't do it, and neither can we. It is important, therefore, for those who are considering embracing the religious life not to be overwhelmed and deterred by the number of mitzvot that confront us. Rather should they set themselves realisable targets, and realistic challenges. The Torah was given on a mountain. It takes time and preparation to climb a mountain. It is not attained in one stride.

There is, however, another, apparently conflicting, Midrashic rider which states that, following the rebuff of the other nations, G-d coercively suspended Sinai over Israel's head, saying, 'If you accept the Torah, fine; If not, here will be your grave!' This conflict can actually be resolved chronologically, on the assumption that once Israel had verbalised its voluntary agreement to accept the Torah, the covenant was sealed. From then on, G-d was entitled to demand total national compliance.