**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**"He Held the Mountain over Them"**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital**

Adapted by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The well-known Gemara (Shabbat 88a) tells us that God coerced the Jewish people into accepting the Torah by suspending Mt. Sinai over them "like a cask."  Why was this necessary? After all, they themselves declared, "We shall do and we shall obey"! The Maharal explains that God forced them to accept the Torah because it is the foundation of the world; there is no world without Torah. For this reason, the Torah is a necessity and has to be imposed; without it, the world would revert to chaos.

When observant people are questioned as to why they keep the commandments, they very seldom answer, "Because we are obligated to." People today do not sufficiently emphasize the element of obligation in relation to mitzvot.  Instead, they prefer to fulfill the Torah's requirements out of a sense of "connection," rather than as an "obligation." What the Maharal teaches us is that there is no world without Torah, and therefore we observe the Torah because we must.  We must not lose sight of the element of obligation, and must develop a sense of the ontological dependence of the world on the Torah.

However, we may also offer another answer as to why God coerced the nation. Prior to their acceptance of the Torah, Bnei Yisrael were required to observe only a very few commandments, while after the revelation at Sinai they were suddenly obliged to follow all 613 – i.e., to live a life of Torah and mitzvot. Bnei Yisrael might have regretted their commitment of "We shall do and we shall obey" when they understood how many laws would now govern every aspect of their lives. God had to coerce them so that the quantity of mitzvot would not prevent them from accepting the Torah in the first place, and so that they would not be able to change their minds once they realized what they had taken upon themselves.

On the street I occasionally see a bumper sticker that reads, "God – We Love You." That is a truly Christian slogan. Messilat Yesharim teaches us that the highest level to which a person can aspire, after working his way through every previous stage of spiritual development, is that of love of God. We cannot simply point to the sticker and say, "See, we already love Him!" The desire to "love God," in the absence of a profound commitment to all of His 613 commandments, is meaningless. A person has to invest effort in "loving God," and then perhaps he will attain it. But there can be no real love of God without observance of the mitzvot, without deep commitment to Him.

These answers to the question of God's "coercion" express profound messages for our spiritual lives. Firstly, there is the fact that we are obligated in Torah, and observance of its commandments is not dependent upon understanding or "feeling connected"; rather, it is a matter of commitment and necessity.

Secondly, there must be an understanding that Jewish religiosity is inextricably bound up with fulfillment of the commandments.

Thirdly, in order to draw close to God one has to delve deeply into Torah, without fear of the "great fire" that one encounters upon such intense exploration. These three ideas are messages that each of us can bring into his religious life, accepting them and conducting himself accordingly.

(This sicha was delivered on Shabbat parashat Bamidbar 5762 [2002].)