



**“And the mountain was ablaze with fire
up to the heart of the heaven, darkness, cloud, and dense fog”**

At Har Sinai HKB”H Showed Every Jew How to Transform His Personal Darkness into a Blazing Fire Extending Up to the Heavens

This week's parsha is parshas Va'etchanan. Before repeating the Aseres HaDibros to Yisrael that HKB”H had transmitted to him, Moshe gave them a mitzvah admonishing them never to forget the incredible revelation of Matan Torah on Har Sinai. Here are the pertinent pesukim (Devarim 4, 9):

“רק השמר לך ושמור נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך, ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חיך, והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך, יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלקיך בחורב, באמור ה' אלי הקהל לי את העם ואשמיעם את דברי אשר ילמדון ליראה אותי כל הימים אשר הם חיים על האדמה ואת בניהם ילמדון, ותקרבון ותעמדון תחת ההר, וההר בוער באש עד לב השמים חושך ענן וערפל, וידבר ה' אליכם מותך האש, קול דברים אתם שומעים ותמונה רואים זולתי קול, ויגד לכם את בריתו אשר צוה אתכם לעשות עשרת הדברים ויכתבם על שני לוחות אבנים.”

Only beware and guard your soul exceedingly, lest you forget the things your eyes have beheld, and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life; and make them known to your children and your children's children—the day that you stood before Hashem, your G-d, at Choreiv, when Hashem said to me, “Gather the people to me, and I shall let them hear My words, so that they shall learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and they shall teach their children.” So you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven, darkness, cloud, and dense fog. Hashem spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you were hearing the sound of words, but you were not seeing a likeness, only a sound. He

told you of His covenant that He commanded you to observe the ten declarations, and He inscribed them on two stone tablets.

The preeminent possek, the Magen Avraham (O.C. 60, 2), brings down in the name of the writings of the Arizal that this mitzvah—to remember the revelation at Har Sinai and the receiving of the Torah—is one of four mitzvos asei a person is obligated to remember every day. The Anshi Kenesses HaGedolah alluded to them in the berachah they formulated—Ahavas Shalom—which we recite in tefilas Shacharis prior to Krias Shema. Here is what the Arizal writes in Sha'ar HaKavanos (Tefilas HaShachar, Drush 1):

Know that there are four mitzvos asei a person must fulfill every day which involve remembering. They are the four remembrances written in the Torah that involve remembering in the heart. They are: (1) Remembering the revelation at Har Sinai and the receiving of the Torah . . . It is one of the 248 mitzvos asei listed by the Ramban, z”l. (2) Remembering what Amalek did to you is the second mitzvah. (3) Remembering what Hashem, your G-d, did to Miriam, is the third mitzvah. (4) Remembering the day that you departed from Mitzrayim is the fourth mitzvas asei.

These four mitzvos asei and four remembrances correspond to four annual holidays. Yetzias Mitzrayim corresponds to Chag HaMatzos, on which Yisrael departed from Mitzrayim. Matan Torah corresponds to Chag HaShavuot, on

which the Torah was given. Remembering Amalek corresponds to Chag HaSuccos, as Chazal taught, Amalek followed and killed the stragglers, those who were not protected by the “clouds of glory”; and the “clouds of glory” are related to Succos. Remembering Miriam, who spoke slanderously of Moshe, corresponds to Rosh HaShanah. For that is when all the prosecutors and slanderers arise . . .

The first three remembrances are mentioned here, the remembrance of “yetzias Mitzrayim” is mentioned at the end of the passage of Tzitzis . . . This is their proper order: Matan Torah is alluded to when you say **“ובנו בחרת מכל עם כו’, וקרבתנו מלכנו”** לשמך הגדול באהבה. For, by means of the Torah, He drew us close and chose us from among all the other nations, and we accepted Him as King . . .

Remembering Amalek is alluded to by the words **“לשמך הגדול”**. For, as we know, because of Amalek the name of Hashem is not complete, and His throne is not complete. Hence, we pray that he will eradicate the memory of Amalek, and His name will be complete. Remembering Miriam is alluded to by the words **“להודות לך”**. For, the tongue, mouth, and lips are the instruments of speech that He created in us. We express our gratitude to Him with them, and we should not use them to speak “lashon hara,” chas v’shalom. We mention the “lashon hara” of Miriam, so that we will not follow her example.

He writes further on (Drush 8) that the remembrance of “yetzias Mitzrayim,” the fourth remembrance is associated with the passuk: **“אני ה’ אלקיכם אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים”**, which we recite in Krias Shema of Shacharis and Arvis. So, we should have in mind to fulfill this mitzvah of remembrance when reciting this passuk.

The Significance of Remembering that:

“The mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven, darkness, cloud, and dense fog”

In this essay, we wish to focus on why HKB”H demanded that we not only remember the revelation

of Matan Torah on Har Sinai but also these three specific details: (1) **“You approached and stood at the foot of the mountain,** (2) **“the mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven,”** and (3) **“darkness, cloud, and dense fog.”** Clearly, this deserves further explanation. After all, Yisrael witnessed many unbelievable phenomena at Har Sinai. For example (Shemos 19, 7): **“ויהי קולות וברקים וענן כבד על ההר וקול שופר חזק מאד”**— **there was thunder and lightning. A heavy cloud enveloped the mountain, and there was a very loud sound of the shofar.** So, why did HKB”H choose specifically these three things to be mentioned by us daily? Furthermore, how is it possible that even though HKB”H appeared on Har Sinai with a blazing fire reaching up to the heavens that there was concomitantly **“darkness, cloud, and dense fog”**?

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by introducing what they expounded in the Gemara (Shabbas 88a) on a passuk related to Matan Torah (ibid. 19, 17): **“ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלקים מן המחנה ויטייבבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רבי אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא, מלמד שכפה הקב”ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים את התורה מוטב, ואם לאו. Moshe brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d, and they stood under the mountain.”** Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: This teaches that HKB”H held the mountain over them like an upturned barrel. Then He said to them: **“If you accept the Torah, fine; but if not, your burial will be there.”** Tosafos pose an obvious question (ibid.): Why was it necessary to coerce Yisrael to accept the Torah in this threatening manner? Hadn’t they already accepted the Torah willingly by proclaiming enthusiastically (ibid. 24, 7) **“na’aseh v’nishma”**— **we will do, and we will hear?!** Tosafos answer: **Lest they recant when they see the intense fire that caused their neshamos to depart.**

On the other hand, the Kedushas Levi answers Tosafos’s question differently. At Matan Torah, Yisrael had attained a lofty spiritual level, because the Creator had revealed Himself to them with His mighty strength and glory. It was only fifty days after

"yetzias Mitzrayim," and the miraculous, supernatural feats He had performed were still fresh in their minds. They had witnessed the ten plagues visited on Mitzrayim and the incredible miracle of "Krias Yam Suf." Then, at Matan Torah, they witnessed additional magnificent feats and revelations: **"ויהי קולות וברקים... וקול שופר חזק מאד, ויחרד כל העם אשר במחנה... וירד ה' על הר סיני... וכל העם רואים את הקולות ואת הלפידים."**

Under those circumstances, it is not surprising or even so meritorious that Yisrael declared "na'aseh v'nishma." HKB"H, however, Who foresees the future, knew that times of darkness and divine concealment would come—that the darkness, cloud, and dense fog would cover the land. So, if Yisrael only accepted the Torah under the circumstances of "na'aseh v'nishma"—when they had attained such an elevated spiritual level—they might not accept and observe the precepts of the Torah under circumstances of galus. Therefore, HKB"H held the mountain over their heads in a threatening manner, so that they would accept the Torah even in situations of "hester panim"—divine concealment.

Holding the Mountain over Them Created a Situation of Darkness and "Hester Panim"

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I would like to embellish his sacred insight. Upon further reflection, it is apparent that by holding the mountain over their heads like an upturned barrel, HKB"H obscured the brilliant light that shone upon them when He descended onto Har Sinai. As it is written (ibid. 19, 20): **"וירד ה' על הר סיני אל ראש ההר"—Hashem descended onto Har Sinai to the top of the mountain.** Then, further on, it is written (ibid. 20, 15): **"וכל העם רואים את הקולות ואת הלפידים ואת קול השופר ואת ה'—and all the people could see the sounds and the flames, the sound of the shofar and the smoking mountain."**

Thus, the mountain over their heads became a barrier shielding Yisrael, who stood beneath the mountain, from the revelation of HKB"H on top of the mountain. This created a situation of darkness, cloud, and dense fog, so that HKB"H could show every Jew the

darkness and dire circumstances of galus in which they would be required to continue to observe the Torah.

I would like to add, that this fabulous insight of the Kedushas Levi is actually alluded to in the answer of the Tosafos: **"שמא יהיו חוזרים כשיראו האש הגדולה שיצתה נשמתן"**. They were suggesting that perhaps when exposed to the awful fire of the galuyos—in which myriads of Jews were killed and sacrificed themselves to sanctify His name—they would renege on their commitment to Hashem and His Torah. For, they might claim that they only accepted the Torah in a situation of geulah and revelation but not in a situation of galus, darkness, and "hester panim."

By holding the mountain threateningly over the heads of Yisrael, HKB"H concealed the brilliant light on the mountain from them and introduced them to a situation of **"חושך ענן וערפל"** simulating the darkness of the future galuyos. Then He said to them: **"If you are willing to accept the Torah"** even under these circumstances, **"fine"**; for then you will be able to survive the treacherous circumstances of galus. **"But if not, your burial will be there,"** because you cannot survive without this Torah.

HKB"H Wanted to Preclude the Claim of an Erroneous Purchase

It was essential for HKB"H to reveal this fact to Yisrael—that, unfortunately, they would have to observe the Torah even in galus and difficult, troubled times. For, in any buying and selling situation, one must do so with honesty and decency; the true condition of the item being purchased must be revealed to the purchaser. Otherwise, the purchase is invalid, because it was sold under false pretenses: **"מקח טעות"**. Therefore, there is no way that HKB"H would have given Yisrael the holy Torah at Har Sinai without revealing to them what it would entail—the future circumstances and consequences they would have to endure. Hence, we must conclude that HKB"H did, indeed, reveal to us at the time of Matan Torah that we would have to observe the Torah in situations of galus, suffering, and "hester panim."

This leads us to an irrefutable conclusion. In order that “Kabbalas haTorah” would not be considered an illegitimate sale, HKB”H held the mountain over the heads of Yisrael to obscure the brilliant light of Matan Torah. In this manner, HKB”H informed them of their situation in galus as a whole. He also revealed to each individual Jew his own personal situation of galus—all of his ordeals, battles with the yetzer, poverty, distress, suffering, and the like.

Thus, every, single Jew heard HKB”H announce: **“If you accept the Torah”** and are willing to abide by it even in situations of “hester panim,” **“fine.”** For, then you will be fulfilling the purpose and role for which you were sent down to Olam HaZeh, and you will ultimately overcome all of the difficulties, and everything will turn out well. **“But if not”**—if you are not willing to serve Hashem in situations of “hester panim”: **“Your burial will be there”**—in the oppressive darkness of galus. In other words, they were not being coerced to accept the Torah; they were merely being informed of the true reality—without Torah, they would not be able to endure in galus.

Based on what we have discussed, we can explain very nicely a teaching of Chazal in the Pesikta (Va’etchanan 21): **“פנים בפנים דבר ה' עמכם בהר, בפנים הרבה פנים נראה להם הקב"ה בסיני, בפנים זועפות, בפנים מוריקות, בפנים שמחות, בפנים משחקות, בפנים מסבירות.”** Hashem appeared to them with many different faces at Sinai—an angry face, a gloomy face, a happy face, a smiling face, a cordial (welcoming) face. It is easy to understand why HKB”H appeared to and spoke to Yisrael with a happy, smiling countenance, so to speak. But why did he appear to them with an angry and gloomy countenance?

As we have learned, HKB”H revealed to each individual Jew the situations he would encounter and have to deal with to observe the Torah. Therefore, it was necessary for Him to speak to them with many, different faces; He appeared to each individual Jew according to the situations that that Jew would have to face. Sometimes, he would appear with a happy, smiling countenance signifying situations of good and plenty. Even in those situations, they must be stalwart in their Torah-observance, so as not

to succumb to the trap of (Devarim 32, 15): **וַיִּשְׁמָן יִשְׁרוּן וַיִּכֶּסֶת—Yeshurun became fat and kicked.** At other times, HKB”H appeared with an angry, gloomy countenance foreshadowing situations of galus and “hester panim.”

The Menacing Mountain Was a Foreshadowing of the Four Galuyos

Following this line of reasoning, we will now explain why an inseparable part of the mitzvah of remembering the revelation at Har Sinai is the mitzvah to remember: **“You approached and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven, darkness, cloud, and dense fog.”** Indeed, it was spectacular; **“the mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven.”** But what is the significance of the **“darkness, cloud, and dense fog”**?

In truth, at Matan Torah, there were two contradictory realities. On the one hand, there was the magnificent revelation on Har Sinai associated with the descent of Hashem onto the mountain with the fiery Torah. As it is written (Yirmiyah 23, 29): **“הֲלוֹא כֹה דַבְּרִי כֹאשׁ נְאוֹם ה'”—is My word not like a fire, says Hashem.** On the other hand, beneath the mountain which resembled an upturned barrel, there was **“darkness, cloud, and dense fog.”** They foreshadowed the future galuyos and “hester panim” during which Yisrael would have to observe the Torah with great devotion and self-sacrifice. We can now interpret HKB”H’s pronouncement as follows: **“אם אתם מקבלים את התורה”—if you are willing to accept the Torah even in times of “hester panim”: “Fine!” But if not, your burial will be there.”**

This explains magnificently why HKB”H held the mountain specifically over Yisrael’s heads in an intimidating fashion. As we know, there are four principal galuyos—**Bavel, Madai, Yavan** (Greece), **and Edom** (Rome). This is spelled out by a Midrash (B.R. 2, 4) related to the passuk (Bereishis 1, 2): **וְהָאָרֶץ הִיטָה תוֹהוּ זֶה גִּלּוּת בָּבֶל, וּבֹוֹהוּ זֶה גִּלּוּת מִדְּיָן, וְחוֹשֶׁךְ זֶה גִּלּוּת יוֹן, עַל פְּנֵי תוֹהוּ זֶה גִּלּוּת מַמְלַכַת הָרָשָׁע שֶׁאֵין לָהֶם חֹקֵר כְּמוֹ הַתְּהוֹם.** It elucidates the second passuk in the Torah as follows: **“Tohu”**

is associated with galus Bavel, **"vohu"** with galus Madai, **"choshech"** with galus Yavan and **"tehom"** with the evil regime of galus Edom, which is like a bottomless pit. We find a similar elucidation in the Midrash (ibid. 44, 17) related to the Bris bein HaBesarim (Bereishis 15, 12): **"והנה אימה חשיכה גדולה נופלת עליו זו מדי, גדולה זו יון, נופלת עליו זו אדום."** Here, too, the Midrash associates the four elements mentioned in the passuk—**"eimah," "chasheichah," "gedolah" and "nofeles alav"**—with the four individual exiles.

Incredibly, the gematria of these four galuyos—**בב"ל** (205) – equals **ה"ר** (mountain). This explains fantastically why HKB"H held the mountain specifically over Yisrael's heads in a daunting fashion. He wanted to show them the four galuyos whose gematria equals **ה"ר**. HKB"H was conveying the message to them that if they would accept and observe the Torah even during times of exile, they would be able to endure and ultimately be released from them.

Every Jew Standing beneath the Mountain Foresaw His Personal Darkness

Let us add an important point. As explained, HKB"H taught each and every Jew how to adapt and deal with every ordeal and obstacle that he would personally encounter. Now, we know that the speech of HKB"H is more than just words; it imparts bounty and insight flowing from above to all of creation. As it states in connection to the creation of the world (Tehillim 33, 6): **"בדבר ה' שמים נעשו"—with the word of Hashem the heavens were made.** In other words, the speech and words of Hashem were instrumental in the creation of the world.

Thus, it should be clear to us that when HKB"H said to Yisrael standing beneath the mountain: **"If you are willing to accept the Torah, fine"**—those were not empty words; they imbued bounty and revelation from above downwards. Every Jew realized that even in the darkness of galus, he could still observe the Torah. This would be to his ultimate benefit, and he would be able to withstand all the ordeals in his life.

We can now comprehend why it is so important not to forget the revelation of Har Sinai. Every day, a Jew has new personal challenges. In the words of the Gemara (Kiddushin 30b): **"יצרו של אדם מתחדש עליו"—a person's yetzer renews itself against him daily.** This is liable to cause him to despair, chas v'shalom, believing that there is no way he can observe the Torah in that situation.

We will now interpret the pesukim cited at the beginning of this essay. HKB"H admonishes us: **"Only beware and guard your soul exceedingly"**—although you yourself do not actually remember, but your soul that was present at Har Sinai remembers very well! Therefore, beware: **"Lest you forget the things your eyes beheld . . . the day that you (personally, as an individual) stood before Havaya, your Elokim, at Choreiv.** Note that the passuk mentions both the names **Havaya** and **Elokim**. Now, the name **Havaya** represents midas harachamim—divine mercy—while the name **Elokim** represents midas hadin—divine justice. At Matan Torah, HKB"H revealed Himself to them with **"rachamim"**—the brilliant light—and with **"din"**—the darkness of galus. **"When Hashem said to me, 'Gather the people to me, and I shall let them hear My words.'"** In other words, Moshe was instructed to assemble all the people of Yisrael throughout all the generations. Thus, all Jewish neshamos were present at Har Sinai.

"So that they shall learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth." In other words, I will show them how to survive and observe the Torah according to **"the days that they live on the earth"**—specifically for the period of time that they will live and the challenges that they will be confronted with. **"So, you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain"** with the mountain held menacingly over your heads. You were subjected to both divine revelation and **"hester panim."** Above, **"the mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven,"** the phenomenon of divine revelation. Beneath the mountain, however, there was **"darkness, cloud, and dense fog."**

Through Torah Study We Can Dispel the Darkness and Reveal the Blazing Fire

With immense pleasure, we can now explain why it is so important to remember the phenomenal revelation every Jew witnessed at Har Sinai: ותקרבון ותעמדון תחת ההר וההר בוער באש עד לב השמים חושך ענן וערפל. Two opposite, contradictory realities were present simultaneously. On the one hand: **"The mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven"**—they experienced the extraordinary light of divine revelation. On the other hand, they were subjected to **"darkness, cloud, and dense fog."** This was meant to inform them that these negative, frightening circumstances are only an illusion, because the mountain is obscuring the extraordinary light of the revelation of HKB"H from us.

This teaches us that if we accept the Torah that was given to us on Har Sinai, we will be able to reveal the brilliant, blazing fire rising up to the heavens even in the darkness of galus. After all, the Torah is referred to as light, as it is written (Mishlei 6, 23): **"כי נר מצוה ותורה אור"—for a mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light.** We know from experience that even a little bit of light illuminates the darkness. So, all the more so, the brilliant light of the Torah possesses the power to dispel the darkness and negative aspects of life.

Accordingly, we must understand that all the darkness, cloud, and dense fog of the galuyos are

illusory. For, if we simply remove the mountain that is separating us from HKB"H, we will be privileged to see the light of the Torah ablaze up to the heart of the heavens. Furthermore, it will incinerate all of the evil forces that rise up against us, in keeping with the passuk (Tehillim 97, 3): **"אש לפניו תלך ותלהט סביב צריו"—fire goes before Him and consumes His enemies all around.** This prompted David HaMelech, a"h, Yisrael's sweet psalmist to declare (ibid. 23, 4): **"גם כי אלק בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי"—even though I walk through the valley overshadowed by death, I will not fear evil, because You are with me.**

This then is the meaning of the Mishnah (Avos 6, 3): **And only Torah is truly good, as it states (Mishlei 4, 2): "For I have given you a good teaching, do not abandon My Torah."** By means of Torah-study, we are able to drive away the darkness of galus and see the light—the **"tov"**—that is present in all situations, at all times, but may be concealed. This was the talent of Nachum Ish Gam Zu; we learn in the Gemara (Ta'anis 21a) that no matter what the situation, he always said, **"גם זו לטובה"—this, too, is for the good.** By studying Torah, which is called **"tov,"** he was able to transform every situation into **"tov"**—good. In the same way, we are capable of dispelling the darkness of galus and revealing once again what we all witnessed at Matan Torah: **"The mountain was ablaze with fire up to the heart of the heaven"**—with the coming of Mashiach ben David, swiftly in our times! Amen.

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