

SINAI IN JEWISH THOUGHT AND TRADITION

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The Sinai Peninsula has left an eternal imprint on the history of the Jewish people. In the barren wastes of its desert the People of Israel received the Torah and became a nation. In one form or another, many of the fundamentals of Judaism can be traced to the sojourn of the People of Israel in this desert. Most of these fundamentals, however, exist independently of any particular geographic location and could have been imparted in a different setting.

There are, however, traditions in Judaism which are implicitly connected to the desert. The background of these traditions is for the most part the Biblical narrative, since there was hardly an active Jewish settlement in the Sinai in the post-Biblical periods, and few Sages visited the area. There are, moreover, no halachic discussions which deal solely with the Sinai. The post-Biblical traditions do not necessarily reflect an actual physical acquaintance with the area, but rather an acquaintance rooted in Biblical tradition.

The Desert

Many traditions stress the unpleasant characteristics of the desert and the difficulties that are encountered there. Josephus, in describing the events after the Exodus from Egypt writes that:

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The country was absolute desert, devoid of anything for their sustenance, while the scarcity of water was extreme; not only could the soil furnish nothing for man but it was even incapable of supporting any species of beast, being in fact sandy and without a particle of moisture propitious to vegetation (Josephus, *Antiquities*, III:1 ff.)

The conditions were so difficult that the Midrash wonders why anyone would wish to enter this desert. Thus, commenting on Exodus 18:5 — “And Jethro Moses’ father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the *wilderness* where he was encamped at the mountain of God” — The Midrash states:

“Scripture expresses surprise at him. He was dwelling in the midst of the splendor of the world and yet was willing to go out to the desert, a place of desolation where nothing is to be had” (*Mekhilta Yitro*, Sec. —*Amalek*, Chapter I, p. 192, ed. Horovitz-Rabin)

Travel in the desert, therefore, depended on being accompanied by an expert who was well versed in the hidden sources of water. The account of the fantastic travels of the third-century Talmudic Sage Rabbah bar Bar Ḥana in the Sinai stresses this fact:

Rabbah bar Bar Ḥana related “we were travelling in a desert and there joined us an Arab merchant who, by taking up sand and smelling it, could tell which was the way to one place and which was the way to another. We said unto him, —‘How far are we from water?’ He replied, ‘Give me some sand’. We gave him and he said unto us, ‘eight parsangs.’ When we gave him again later, he told us that we were three parsangs off. I changed it; but was unable to nonplus him.” (Baba Bathra 73b).

All of the above being the case, why did the People of Israel leave Egypt and proceed to sojourn in the desert? The Bible itself provides an answer to this question. If the People of Israel should have to engage in war along the course of the direct route through the land of the Philistines, their convictions might be shaken and they might seek to return to Egypt (Ex. 14:17–18). During the course of the centuries additional answers were provided. These answers take on a new and important meaning in light of anti-Semitic propoganda in the ancient world which sought to debase the Jews on account of the Exodus itself.¹ The answers provided in the ancient and medieval periods fall into four basic categories: a) the desert and the Torah; b) the desert and the inhabitants of Canaan; c) the natural characteristics of the desert; d) miracles and the desert.

Those in the first category explain that the sojourn in the desert allowed the People of Israel to freely immerse themselves in Torah studies before entering Canaan.² Those in the second make use of traditions that the inhabitants of Canaan sought to destroy their land in order to make it less hospitable for the People of

1. See, for example, Josephus, *Contra Apion*, 1:85ff.

2. See, for example, *Mekhilta Beshallah*, Sect. *Va-yehi Beshallah*, Introduction, p. 76, ed. Horovitz-Rabin.

Israel and therefore God decided that they should give the land a chance to rejuvenate itself.³ The answers in third category, popular in philosophic circles, state that the bleak nature of the desert and the difficulties encountered there provided both an opportunity for introspection and a preparation for the hardships still ahead.⁴ Certain scholars of mystical thought identified the inhospitable terrain of the desert with the realm of evil and the Zohar even states that the People of Israel were sent into the desert in order to vanquish this realm. Unfortunately, the People of Israel sinned and were themselves defeated by these powers.^{4a} The fourth category stresses that the sojourn in the desert provided God with ample opportunities to bring about numerous miracles in order to win over the people and to prove the veracity of the Torah⁵.

The desert may have been the optimum environment for the study of the Torah but it is still necessary to determine why the desert was chosen as the site for the giving of the Law. Once again the nature of the desert provides the key:

The Torah was given in public, openly, in a free place. For had the Torah been given in Palestine, the People of Israel would have said to the nations of the world—you have no share in it. But now that it was given in the wilderness, publicly and openly in a place that is free for all, everyone wishing to accept it could come and accept. (*Mekhilta, Yitro*, Sect. *de-baHodesh*. Chapter 1, p. 205)

The Torah was given in the wilderness of Sinai precisely because the Sinai belonged to no one and thus any nation could have likewise accepted the Torah. The desert then made the decision of Israel to accept the Law that much greater.

Mt. Sinai

The most prominent site in the post-Biblical traditions is Mt. Sinai. In Second Temple literature, there is a marked tendency to stress and even to expand the sanctity of the site, and to praise the nature of the mountain. The Book of Jubilees mentions it, together with the Garden of Eden and Mt. Zion, as one of the holiest sites in the world.⁶ Josephus stresses the height of the mountain, claiming that it was the highest mountain in the area and even so quite fertile.⁷ Josephus also describes a pre-Mosaic popular belief that the site was holy.⁸

3. *Mekhilta, Ibid.*: Exodus Rabbah 20:16.

4. Josephus, *Antiquities*, II; 322; Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:24 (pp. 499–500, ed. Pines).

4a. See J. Dan, "The Desert in Jewish Mysticism — The Kingdom of Samael," *Ariel*, 40 (1976), 38–43.

5. *Mekhilta*, loc cit. (n. 2 above), p. 77; Philo, *De Decalogo*, 15–17.

6. Jubilees 8:19, Cf. also *Ibid.*, 4:26.

7. *Antiquities* II:265. Cf. BT Baba Bathra 73b–74a. The Arabs of the pre-Islamic age also seemed to have had a similar tradition about the area.

8. *Antiquities*, III:72–76.

Surprisingly, these motifs are not found in Talmudic literature and that literature in fact goes almost out of its way to stress the very opposite — the inconsequential nature of the mountain:

Rabbi Jose says — It is not the place that honors the man but it is the man who honors the place. We find it thus in connection with Mt. Sinai. As long as the Shekhinah dwelt thereon the Torah declared — ‘neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount’ (Ex. 34:3). But once the Shekhinah had departed there, the Torah said, ‘when the ram’s horn soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount’... (Ta’anit 21b)

There was no intrinsic holiness in the mountain. The holiness in this tradition is dependent on the presence of God.

Why then did God choose to reveal himself on Mt. Sinai? One tradition maintains that the famous mountains like Mt. Tabor and Mt. Carmel came before God and asked to be chosen for this privilege. They were rejected because they had been the site of pagan worship. Only Sinai was free from this taint.⁹ Another tradition maintains that it was the very unimportance of Mt. Sinai that was critical:

“A man’s pride shall bring him low” (Prov. 29:23). The reference here is to Mt. Tabor and Carmel which, coming from the end of the world, acted proudly, saying, ‘We are lofty and upon us will the Holy One, blessed be He shall give the Torah’. “But he that is of a humble spirit shall attain to honor” (Ibid.). Such was Sinai, which humbled itself saying, ‘But I am low’, and because of this the Holy One blessed be He set glory upon it, and the Torah was given upon it. Indeed, it earned the honor of having the Holy One blessed be He come down upon it and stand upon it (*Pesikta Rabbati*, Chapter 7).

The medieval Biblical exegetes continued this trend. This development, however, can be explained by the different historical circumstances pertaining to the different periods. Thus, the Second Temple period literature which accentuated the characteristics of the mountain should be seen as part of the attempt to portray the events of the Exodus in a positive light for the Greco-Roman world. The later negative motif can be seen as a result of the developing Christian tendency to adopt for itself sites holy to Judaism, and in this case Mt. Sinai. In the course of the Byzantine period the area was dotted with monasteries and churches. Christian pilgrimage to Sinai also became quite extensive.¹⁰ The Jews, however, never undertook pilgrimage en masse to the area and even individual pilgrimage does not seem to have the rule. The condition of Mt. Sinai, at least in Jewish eyes, is

9. Genesis Rabbah 99:1 (p. 1271, ed. Theodor-Albeck).

10. See R. Devreese, “La Christianisme dans la Péninsule Sinaitique, des Origines à l’Arrivée des Musulmans,” *Revue Biblique*, 49 (1940), 205–223. On Christian pilgrimage to the Sinai see the itineraries of ps. Antoninus and of Egeria in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, Vol. CLXXVI. Cf. also A. Negev, “The Inscriptions of Wadi Haggag, Sinai”, *Qedem*, 6 (1977).

stated in the words of Rabbah b. Bar Ḥana, the lone Jewish scholar whose travels in the area have been recorded: "He said unto me, 'Come, I will show you Mt. Sinai.' When I arrived I saw that scorpions surrounded it and they stood like white asses." (Baba Bathra 74a).

Many of the traditions concerning Mt. Sinai and other sites deal with the meaning of the name. Much of the Talmudic and medieval material is in fact no more than an attempt to understand the etymology of a particular site. Some of the etymologies are etiological and the connection to the geography of the site becomes quite loose. R. Kahana, for instance, connects the word Sinai סיני with שנאה (*sin'ah*) the hatred which descended from the mountain to the rest of the world because they did not accept the Torah.¹¹ Others sought to connect the word Sinai with the burning bush, סנה (*sneh*), the apparition which Moses saw on Mt. Horeb, which tradition identified with Mt. Sinai.¹²

There was also a tendency to ascribe to Mt. Sinai additional names which were then examined in light of their etymologies. As mentioned above, most of the traditions of this sort had little to do with desert geography. Thus, the mountain is also called the Mount of the Lord because the Lord sat there in judgment and the Children of Israel received there His yoke.¹³ The name of Mt. Horeb was given because destruction, חורבן (*hurban*), descended from there to the nations.¹⁴

This tendency extended to the Rabbis' treatment of the entire Sinai Desert — מדבר סיני:

It has five names: The desert of Zin, meaning that Israel was given commandments (*misvot*) there; the desert of Kadesh, where the Israelites were sanctified (*nitkadshu*); the desert of Kedemoth, because a priority (*kedumah*) was conferred there; the desert of Paran, because Israel multiplied (*paru*) there; and the desert of Sinai, because hostility (*sin'ah*) toward idolaters descended thereon. (BT Shabbat 89a).

Here, the lack of the Rabbis' sense of geography, particularly in regard to Sinai, becomes quite clear. The desert of Kedemoth, for instance, was in the area of Moab and can in no way be connected to the Sinai. Many of the traditions of the Rabbis and the Biblical exegetes on Mt. Sinai and the desert must be understood in light of the comment of the Tosaphist R. Isaac b. Samuel (d. 1185) on the above tradition, "It was all one great desert." Over the course of time the geographic distinctions were blurred almost beyond recognition.

11. BT Shabbat 89a.

12. Moses of Narbonne on Maimonides, *Guide*, I:66.

13. See *Tanḥuma*, Buber, Numbers 4a; *Tanḥuma* Numbers 7; Exodus Rabbah 2:4.

14. Exodus Rabbah, *Ibid.* See also BT Shabbat 89a.

Sites in the Desert

The Rabbis and Biblical exegetes dealt with additional sites in the Sinai. Most of the sites were likewise connected with the sojourn of the People of Israel in the desert. If, however, a strong grasp of geographic reality was lacking in the treatment of Mt. Sinai, this was more so the case with less important sites. The Rabbis, though, were not unaware of this problem: For Moses did not know how to write the itinerary of travels, until the Holy One, blessed be He, provided a hint. (*Midrash ha-Gadol* on Numbers 33:2)

The desert of Shur (Ex. 15:22), for instance, was dealt with in a varied fashion. Some traditions sought to describe Shur in keeping with desert traditions¹⁵, while other sources admitted that they had no idea at all where this desert was.¹⁶ Other traditions made a feeble attempt at etymologies which had little to do with the desert.¹⁷

Traditions regarding desert sites were often diametrically opposed to one another, just as was the case with the Mt. Sinai traditions. Thus Elim, the site of the twelve springs and seventy palms (Ex. 15:27), was a quite pleasant site according to Philo.¹⁸ Josephus, however, was completely of the opposite opinion: "...for the palms, numbering no more than seventy were dwarfed and stunted through lack of water, the whole place being sandy" (*Antiquities*, III:9ff.) The Rabbis, like Philo, stressed the positive¹⁹, while the major Biblical exegetes disagreed among themselves.²⁰

The less Biblical material on a site, the more difficult the post-Biblical traditions became. Hazeroth (Deut. 1:1) is identified, for instance, with the revolt of Korah²¹, the feeling of the quail²², the site where Miriam went into seclusion after having contracted leprosy²³ and with adulterous activities.²⁴ Many of these events were identified with other sites in different traditions.

The lack of information concerning these sites was not a great concern for the Rabbis and exegetes. A late tradition states that in the future redemption of

15. *Mekhilta, Beshallah*, Sect. *Vayasa'*, Chapter I, p. 153.

16. Exodus Rabbah 24:4.

17. See Exodus Rabbah, *Ibid.*; Philo, *Questiones et Solutiones in Genesis*, III:27.

18. *De Vita Mosis*, I, 188.

19. *Mekhilta*, *loc. cit.* (n. 15 above), p. 159.

20. See the comments of Abraham ibn Ezra and Nahmanides on Exodus 15:27.

21. Deuteronomy Rabbah 9 (p. 6, ed. Lieberman). See also Rashi on Deuteronomy 1:1.

22. Avot d'Rabbi Nathan, Version A, Chapter 34.

23. Pseudo-Jonathan on Numbers 33:17.

24. Avot d'Rabbi Nathan, *loc. cit.*, according to the version of Tam ibn Tahya (1475-1542) in *Tumat Yesharim*.

Israel, a second opportunity will be afforded to the People of Israel to re-acquaint themselves with these sites.²⁵

Sinai and the Boundaries of the Land of Israel

The question of boundaries was of the utmost importance in ancient Israel. An exact knowledge of boundaries was necessary to delineate the areas in which the “commandments dependent upon the land” were operative and, similarly, to avoid contracting ritual uncleanness upon leaving the borders of Israel.

The longest description of halachic boundaries is found in the “baraita of Boundaries” and also appears in the recently discovered and published Rehov inscription.²⁶ There has been much discussion as to the particular historical period which is reflected by these boundaries, but for the purpose of Sinai, the question is not important.²⁷ The texts stress the northern boundary points and the few references to the south seem to indicate a line from Petra to Ashkelon, thereby excluding the Sinai from the halachic boundaries. The only possible way to include part of the Sinai within the halachic boundaries would be to interpret the problematic phrase which appears toward the end of the *baraita*, “the great roadway which goes to the desert”, as referring to the route used by the People of Israel from Egypt and through the Sinai to Canaan.²⁸ This, however, is far from the universal opinion regarding this phrase.

There is, moreover, a degree of controversy regarding the inclusion of the Sinai in the ideal or future borders of Israel. The discussion centers around the verse in the Biblical description of Israel’s southern border: “And the boundary shall turn from Azmon to the Brook of Egypt, and its termination shall be at the Sea” (Num. 34:5). Those who interpret the “Brook of Egypt” as being the Nile can include at least the Northern Sinai within the boundaries.²⁹ Others, however, interpret the phrase as Wadi el-Arish and thus the Sinai is excluded from the boundaries.³⁰

Not every Biblical exegete, however, always differentiates between the different types of boundaries, nor do they all draw their boundary lines with the exactitude

25. Commentary of Bahya on Numbers 33:2.

26. For a general description of the baraita see Z. Safrai, “The Rehov Inscription,” *Immanuel* 8 (1978), 48–57. See also the detailed study of Y. Sussmann, “The ‘Boundaries of Eretz-Israel,’” *Tarbiz* 45 (1976), 213–257.

27. See the literature cited in Sussmann, above.

28. See Sussmann, p. 245, n. 228.

29. See, for example, Ps. Jonathan and Ps. Yerushalmi *ad loc.*

30. See the translation of Saadiah Gaon of the Pentateuch, on Numbers *ad loc.* For a complete list see *Encyclopedia Talmudica*, II, col. 206, nn. 236, 239.

of cartographers. There are those who thus include Sinai within the boundaries of Israel and usually succeed in finding some sort of Biblical justification.³¹

Summary

The Sinai made its indelible mark on Jewish History during the period of the Exodus. The great importance of the events which took place there should have guaranteed the place of Sinai in Jewish thought, and even though we cannot expect exact geographic traditions in ancient and medieval literature, there certainly should have been a continuing development of new traditions based on the desire to visit and settle in the area. As we have seen, this was not the case. Jewish pilgrims did not flock to the Sinai; there were no permanent Jewish settlement, and synagogues or Jewish memorials were not built. We have tried to point out the reasons for this phenomenon and to briefly examine the way in which this most unique area entered Jewish thought and tradition.

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31. See, for instance, Judah ha-Levi, *Kuzari* II:14.