



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHAVUOT > Day One

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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May 24, 2015  
Shavuot - Day One

**The Origins of Sinai**



## Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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SHAVUOT > Day One > Why Sinai?

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### ABSTRACT

Sinai is perhaps the most formative event in the history of the world. But what does the word ‘Sinai’ mean?

Even though Sinai signifies a geographic location, its name surely has meaning. Even in the English language, names of locations are not arbitrary; they are connected to some factor, feature or event that caused this particular location to be called by its name. This is certainly the case for Hebrew names, which reflect the core soul of the location called by that name.

The name Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim*) is a portmanteau of two Hebrew words, *yirah*, meaning ‘awe’ or ‘vision,’ and *shalaim*, meaning ‘peace’ or ‘completeness.’

Tel Aviv, literally meaning ‘Hill of Spring,’ was chosen from Ezekiel 3:15: *Then I came to them of the captivity at Tel Avivo, that lived by the river Chebar, and to where they lived; and I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.*

New York was named after the English Duke of York and Albany (and the brother of England’s King Charles II) in 1664 when the region called New Amsterdam was taken from the Dutch.

So, how did Mount Sinai, the place where the Torah was given this very day 3327 years ago, receive its name and why? Simply speaking, would it not make sense to call it Mount Torah?

The plot thickens when we realize that Sinai comes from the word *sinah*, meaning hostility or animosity. What could possibly be the connection between the beauty of the Torah at Sinai and the (seemingly) ugliness of hatred?

The answer, like Sinai itself, will change your life.

## WHAT'S YOUR MOUNTAIN?

### 1. Natural Life (Joke)

A little woman called Mount Sinai Hospital. She said, "Hello, is dis Mount Sinai?"

"Hello, darling, yes it is Mount Sinai."

"I'd like to talk with the person who gives the information about the patients. But I don't want to know if the patient is better or doing like expected, or worse, I want all the information from top to bottom, from A to Z."

The voice on the other end of the line said, "Would you hold the line, please, that's a very unusual request." Then a very authoritative voice came on and said, "Are you the lady who is calling about one of the patients?" She said, "Yes, darling! I'd like to know the information about Sarah Finkel, in Room 307." He said, "Finkel. Finkel. Let me see. Farber, Feinberg, Feinstein - Finkel.

Oh yes, Mrs. Finkel is doing very well. In fact, she's had two full meals, her doctor says if she continues improving as she is, he is going to send her home Tuesday at twelve o'clock.' The woman said, 'Thank God! That's wonderful! She's going home at twelve o'clock! I'm so happy to hear that. That's wonderful news.'" The guy on the other end said, "From your enthusiasm, I take it you must be one of the close family."

She said, "What close family? I'm Sarah Finkel! My doctor don't tell me nutting!"

### 2. Celebrating Sinai

In addition to being a prominent hospital in Manhattan's Upper East Side, where one fictional inpatient Sarah Finkel is committed, Mount Sinai is also the place where God gave the Torah to the Jewish people, the divine mandate and blueprint for life, so that they may know and teach the world how to live a life driven by the divine purpose of our being, and how to bring soulful light into every particle of existence.

That event, it just happens to be, occurred exactly 3327 years ago on this day. The giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, *Har Sinai*, is what we celebrate today on the festival of Shavuot.

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### 3. To Name A City

The name Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim*) is a portmanteau of two Hebrew words, *yirah*, meaning 'awe' or 'vision,' and *shalaim*, meaning 'peace' or 'completeness.' The Midrash tells how these two words were fused into one: *Said the Holy One, blessed be He, "If I call the place Yireh like Abraham did, the righteous Shem will complain. However if I refer to it as Shalem, the righteous Abraham will complain. Rather, I will call it Yerushalayim, and that name will contain the way it was called by both of them: Yireh Shalem."*<sup>1</sup>

"Tel Aviv, literally meaning 'Hill of Spring,' was chosen from the Hebrew title of Theodor Herzl's book *Altneuland* ("Old New Land"), translated from German by Nahum Sokolow. Sokolow took the name from Ezekiel 3:15: *Then I came to them of the captivity at Tel Aviv, that lived by the river Chebar, and to where they lived; and I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.* This name was found fitting as it embraced the idea of the renaissance of the ancient Jewish homeland. *Aviv* is Hebrew for 'spring,' symbolizing renewal, and *tel* is an archaeological site that reveals layers of civilization built one over the other."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bereishit Rabba 56:10.

<sup>2</sup> <http://blog.eteacherhebrew.com/traveling-in-israel/the-source-and-meaning-of-the-name-tel-aviv/>

For an American example, “New York was named after the English Duke of York and Albany (and the brother of England’s King Charles II) in 1664 when the region called New Amsterdam was taken from the Dutch.”<sup>3</sup>

So, how did Mount Sinai, the place where the Torah was given this very day 3327 years ago, receive its name and why? Simply speaking, would it not make sense to call it Mount Torah?

#### 4. To Name A City

The Talmud discusses the name Sinai:

One of the Rabbis asked R’ Kahana: “Perhaps you have heard what Mount Sinai means?”

“The mountain whereon miracles (*nissim*) were performed for Israel,” he replied.

“Then it should be called Mount Nisai?”

“Only it means the mountain whereon a happy omen (*siman*) took place for Israel.”

“Then it should be called, Mount Simanai?”

Said he to him: “Why don’t you visit the academy of R’ Papa and R’ Huna the son of R’ Yehoshua, who make a study of the homiletics (*aggadah*)? For R’ Chisda and Rabba the son of R’ Huna both said, ‘What is Mount Sinai? The mountain whereon there descended hostility (*sinah*) toward idolaters.

And thus R’ Yosi son of R’ Chanina said: It has five names: The Wilderness of Tzin, meaning that Israel were given commandments there; the Wilderness of Kadesh, where the Israelites were sanctified;

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.statesymbolsusa.org/symbol-official-item/new-york/state-name-origin-state-quarter/origin-new-york>.

the Wilderness of Kedemoth, because a priority (*kedumah*) was conferred there; the Wilderness of Paran, because Israel was fruitful (*paru*) and multiplied there; and the Wilderness of Sinai, because hostility toward idolaters descended thereon. What was its real name? Its name was Chorev. Now they disagree with R' Avahu, For R' Avahu said: its name was Mount Sinai, and why was it called Mount Horeb? Because desolation [*churbah*] to idolaters descended thereon.<sup>4</sup>

It seems strange to call the place of the giving of the Torah, the most enlightened and transformative event in the history of existence, by the name Sinai, rooted in the word 'hatred'?! Hatred is actually antithetical to the entire Torah: Maimonides writes<sup>5</sup> the entire Torah was given to bring peace in the world. The Torah is a Torah of love (*Torat chesed*), light (*Torah ohr*) and life (*Torat chaim*). Why in the world would the name of the place of Torah's giving be Sinai, which means... animosity and hatred (*sinah*)?!

The question is compounded by the fact that the Talmud first considers in its *hava aminot*, conjectures, positive meanings of Sinai – Sinai from the term miracle (*ness*), or omen (*siman*); why then is the Talmud's *maskana*, the concluding bottom-line meaning of Sinai associated with such a seemingly negative meaning?

The answer provides us with a very powerful life transforming lesson from Sinai.

## 5. Mounting Pressure

In the inner dimension of Torah, the Chassidic masters tackle this question and explain:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Shabbat 89a-b.

<sup>5</sup> Mishne Torah, end of the Laws of Chanukah.

<sup>6</sup> Torah Or 67c-d; Ma'amarei Admor HaZaken 5567, pp. 151-152; Or HaTorah, Yitro, p. 2975; Sefer HaMa'amarim 5633, vol. 1, pp. 293 ff; Sefer HaMa'amarim 5655, pp. 88 ff; Sefer HaMa'amarim 5732-5733, pp. 341ff; Sefer HaMa'amarim 5734-5735, pp. 87 ff; Sefer HaMa'amarim 5737, pp. 244-251; Sefer HaMa'amarim 5747-5751, pp. 393 ff.

Sinai provided an unprecedented crystal-clear moral clarity in the paths of right and wrong. Just as it is important to know what constitutes healthy behavior, it is equally – if not even more – vital to know what unhealthy behavior to avoid. The blessing of Sinai – with the Torah given at Sinai – was to be absolutely clear not just what to love and pursue, but also what to despise and avoid.

Hence, the Ten Commandments at Sinai include both positive mitzvot and negative ones – *asei tov* and *sur m'rah*, what to do and what not to do.

A parable can help us understand.

A father was preparing his maturing child to enter the hostile and challenging world. “After years of being nurtured and protected in our home, said the father, “soon you will be leaving your secure home and venturing into a world that poses many difficulties, many trials and tribulations.”

“You see,” continued the father, most people in the material world are driven by self-interest, and in this “dog eats dog” world where any follow the rule of the “selfish gene” (paraphrasing radical atheist, Richard Dawkins, book) is “survival of the fittest,” people can hurt and abuse you as they greedily pursue success.

“I therefore will teach you,” said the father, how to pursue a life of virtue and compassion, not to succumb to the ‘way of all flesh’ who pursue their own needs.” And the father proceeded in educating his child how to live a meaningful life driven by higher purpose.

Armed with this knowledge, the child, who by now was a full blown adult, left home and entered the fray. But in time he was unable to cope, and was hurt by others, to the point that he forgot what his father had taught him, and became just like them – a self-centered individual, primarily driven to preserve his own survival.

What went wrong?

His father had taught him what path to pursue, and all its virtues, but he never taught him what path to avoid, and all its vices. It's like giving someone directions to a priceless treasure, but only telling them what paths to take, without teaching them what outfalls to avoid.

True education – and true direction guidance and direction – consists of knowing not only what roads to travel on, but also what roads to stay away from.

Every one of us can relate to this concept. Love and hate are both necessary to thrive. Just as we love health, we despise illness and disease. Just as we love nice clothes, good food, and beautiful homes; we are hostile to discomfort, displacement and broken objects.

The Torah at Sinai infused existence with the ability to transcend our self-centric material superficiality, which is the wont of all biological creatures, and be repulsed (Sinai from the word *sinah*) by anything antithetical to kindness and goodness.

The giving of the Torah at Sinai changed the world; it transformed human consciousness, empowering a material universe, which is selfish on its own, to internalize spiritual selflessness, and be repelled and disgusted by petty narcissism.

Not unlike a healthy body fighting against a threatening infection, and is hostile toward disease, and tries to weaken that disease, at Sinai, the body of the world became hostile – *Sinah* – to everything that defies the Divine light that shines within every one of us. At Sinai we were sensitized and immunized against all forms of spiritual, emotional and psychological ailments.

This is why the Torah was given on a mountain called Sinai (and in the wilderness called Sinai, *Midbar Sinai*), because Sinai created a consciousness and health – a sensitive nerve – that allowed the Jewish people and the world to loathe and combat everything cynical and dark.



## 6. The Lesson

The lesson in Sinai is far reaching: We must teach ourselves and our children not just what is right and beautiful, and why we need to embrace this path of light. But also what pitfalls we need to avoid, and why selfishness and greed, and all other vices, are not befitting the dignity of our sacred souls and mission in this world.

For a garden to thrive and blossom the gardener needs to do two things: 1) seed, nurture and water the garden, till the earth and ensure that it has all its nutrients. But the gardener also needs to 2) weed the garden and take care that predators and other harmful forces do not consume and destroy the garden and its flowers or the field and its crops.

It's simply not sufficient to do the former and not the latter. You can do everything possible in the positive side of cultivating the garden, but if you don't protect it from destructive elements all your positive work can go in vain.

Our lives, our homes, our children, are like gardens. And we are their gardeners – the stewards charged and blessed with “serving and protecting” (*l'ovdoh u'leshomroh*) the garden (as described in Genesis when God creates and places the human being in the Garden of Eden),<sup>7</sup> to serve with the positive mitzvot and protect with the negative mitzvot.

In the garden we have two trees – the “tree of life” to eat from, and the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” to avoid.<sup>8</sup>

Then the human transgressed and ate from the tree of knowledge, toxifying the world in the process. Until Sinai, when we were cleansed from the toxins.<sup>9</sup>

As gardeners of our lives, homes and children, we need to teach them both the virtues of the “tree of life,” as well as the vices of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil,” what, why and how to avoid the dangers and hazards of this selfish world.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:15.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 2:16-17.

<sup>9</sup> Talmud, Shabbat 146a.

We need to teach them to love health and at the same time to be repulsed by the unhealthy, repulsed not by people who behave in unhealthy ways, but by the unhealthy entity itself, to the point that our children should develop a second nature to simply be disgusted by anything that hurts another. In other words, not just to know that something is wrong, but actually feel it in your bones, to the extent of being emotionally sensitized to not be indifferent, but naturally nauseated by dishonesty, duplicity and all forms of inappropriate behavior.

## 7. Priorities? (joke)

As soon as Moses is given the Ten Commandments by God on the top of Mount Sinai, he immediately takes them down to show his people. After much discussion with his elders, Moses is asked to go back up Mount Sinai to ask God for clarification of an important issue. So although tired, Moses once again makes the long and hard trek to the top of Mount Sinai. And there, by the burning bush, he kneels and prays to God.

“Oh Mighty God, King of the Universe,” prays Moses, “your people have asked me to raise a very important question with you relating to the Ten Commandments.”

“And what is this important question that my people ask of me?” asks God.

“Oh mighty God,” replies Moses, “they have instructed me to ask you whether the Ten Commandments are listed in priority sequence.”

## 8. In Consequential (Conclusion)

At Sinai, with the revelation of Truth, the highest ideal was established, the true reality emerged, and with that – a natural hostility towards everything false was born.

It's like a human body that is ailing suddenly meets the elixir, the cure of life. Suddenly the body's heightened sensitivity becomes hostile to the infectious disease, to the ailment.

Imagine reaching such a level of care and compassion where anything hurtful is utterly rejected (Sinai).

Shavuot, when we connect to Sinai and the Torah of truth, everything else becomes inconsequential.

Chag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom!

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