



## SHAVOUT

Shavuot Day 1

SHAVOUT> US Embassy In Jerusalem, North Korea, and Iran: It All Began At Sinai

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## US EMBASSY IN JERUSALEM, NORTH KOREA, AND IRAN: IT ALL BEGAN AT SINAI

### ABSTRACT

Headlines tell a powerful tale. These headlines were foretold by the events at Sinai, 3330 years ago.

**“Iran vs. Israel: Is a Major War Coming?”** So asks a May 14 headline in *The Atlantic*.

**“Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned,”** goes the May 8 *New York Times* headline.

**“Religion A Large Presence As U.S. Embassy Opens In Jerusalem,”** announces the May 14 *National Public Radio* (NPR) headline.

**“Trump announces June 12 summit in Singapore with North Korean leader, U.S. prisoners released,”** reads the May 10 *Washington Post* headline.

3330 years ago G-d offered the Torah to the children of Esau (the West) and the children of Ishmael (the East). They rejected the deal. The Jews, bridge between east and west, accepted the Torah at Sinai.

Sinai built a bridge between heaven above and earth below. Sinai, and we the Jewish people, contain the power to build the bridge between the Western countries, with the United States at it helm, and the East, represented by the volatile Iran.

Sinai is relevant today more than ever.

Perhaps these headlines are signs of a bright future.

## 1. Headline News

The days and weeks leading up to Shavuot have seen major geopolitical shifts and global changes. The full picture is could be gleaned trough the headlines of the popular press:

**“Iran vs. Israel: Is a Major War Coming?”** So asks a May 14 headline in *The Atlantic*.

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These major events are shaking and changing the world. You merely have to open any news outlet or Google any of these current event topics to find a plethora of opinion, reports, and analysis on said subjects. From right-wing accolades to left-wing criticism, from pro-Israel support to anti-Zionistic rhetoric, from Trump lovers to Trump haters, the pundits are out in full force.

Such full force that it's all too easy to get caught up in the hoopla and conversation and fail to see the bigger picture.

## 2. The Big Picture

The bigger picture stretches back some 3330 years to the day, when a fledgling nation stood at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Yes, the end of the Iran deal, the brewing conflict between Israel and Iran trying to entrench itself in Syria on Israel's border, the move of the United States embassy to Jerusalem and formal acknowledgement of the Jewish People's capital city, as well as the thawing of diplomatic relations with North Korea – all these events, and many more – all hint at a realization of something that began 3330 years ago today.

We read: *G-d came from Sinai shone forth to them from Seir and made an appearance from Mount Paran. From the holy myriads, He brought the fire of a religion to them from His right hand. Although there is love for nations, all Your holy ones are in Your hand. They follow Your footsteps and uphold your word.*<sup>1</sup>

Rashi quotes the Talmud<sup>2</sup> to explain this verse. *From Seir* refers to the children of Esau, and *Mount Paran*, refers to the children of Ishmael. G-d offered the Torah to both the West and the East – the children of Esau, the ancestor of the Western/Christian world, and the children of Ishmael, the progenitor of the Arab/Muslim world. They both rejected it.

G-d then offered it to the Jews who accepted it: *Although there is love for nations, all Your holy ones are in Your hand. They follow Your footsteps and uphold your word.*

And as the next verse states, *The Torah that Moses commanded us is a legacy for the congregation of Jacob.*

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 33:2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Avodah Zara 2b.

### 3. Current Events That Are 3330 Years Old

Why did G-d offer the Torah to these other nations? Clearly there is some deeper story here – which can teach us the meaning and significance of major events unfolding today with the descendants of the Esau, Ishmael and Jacob – the Western World, the Arab/Muslim World and the Jews?

Let us further explore this fascinating Talmud, which tells us that our actions are witnesses that testify on our behalf for posterity.

The Talmud describes a “trial” that will happen in the “future to be” (referring to the Final Redemption of the entire world, a time of peace and harmony, a world where G-d will be at ‘home’ in our material world).

G-d will invite all those who served G-d with Torah to “come and receive their reward.” The nations of the world arrive for their reward. First come the two most prestigious and powerful empires the Roman Empire followed by the Persian Empire. Each describe their great achievements in commerce, travel, entertainment, etc., explaining how their contributions allowed for Divine service, and facilitated Jews to study Torah. G-d rejects their arguments, stating that their achievements were for their own sake, not for any higher purpose. “Are there among you those that disseminated Torah?” G-d asks them. G-d concludes that there are none, hence the nations are not deserving of any reward.

The same will transpire with every nation. Each will argue that they should merit reward for their temporal achievements which also benefited the spiritual – from which Israel derived benefit – and their claims will be denied.

“Why are the Romans and Persians explicitly mentioned by name as opposed to the other nations that are not mentioned separately?” The Talmud answers: “For these regimes will endure until the arrival of Moshiach.”

The Talmud then continues to relate how the nations will attempt to defend themselves against G-d’s charge that they did not involve themselves in Torah. Briefly, the Talmud suggests three different arguments the nations will proffer.

First, that they were never offered the Torah. This is refuted by the fact that the nations were indeed offered the Torah – as we just quoted, “*G-d came from Sinai shone forth to them from Seir [territory of Esau, father of the Romans] and made an appearance from Mount Paran [land of Ishmael, father of the Persians]*” – and they did not accept it.

The second claim would be that since the nations never received the Torah, they were not responsible for it. This too is an unacceptable defense, because in this very contention lies their refutation. For G-d will ask them: “Why, in fact, did you not accept the Torah in the first place.”

Finally, the nations’ defense will be that G-d did not coerce them to accept the Torah as He did the Jews, implying that had G-d coerced them, they too would have received the Torah and followed its precepts. G-d

replies: “The first will inform us” – “Your level of commitment to the first set of commitments – the seven universal Noachide Laws of civilization – will inform us whether you indeed would have observed the Torah had I coerced you to accept it.” “Since you did not fulfill the seven Noachide precepts, it is evident that you would not observe the Torah’s commandments.”

The nations continue to appeal by asking what evidence is there that the Jewish people were meticulous in their observance of Torah. After a series of back and forth arguments, the evidence finally comes from the nations themselves who bear witness to the Jews’ commitment. Nimrod bears witness that Abraham was G-d fearing, Laban bears witness that Jacob was ethical, etc.

Finally, the Talmud concludes that the nations request that G-d give them another chance to accept His commandments. And G-d gives them the chance. And adds, that it is only through your effort and preparation today that you can merit reward tomorrow. “If you do not prepare food before Shabbat, what will you have to eat?”

The relevance of this narrative today is powerfully evident. We are witnessing today the struggle of nations stemming from Esau – the Roman/Christian/Western world, and Ishmael – the Arab/Muslim world, and their confrontations are deeply related to Israel and the Jews, children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This struggle can truly be understood only by retracing its roots. The story of Abraham and his children, and then the story of Sinai seven generations later tells us how these battles all began.

## 4. The Future Past

G-d offered the Torah to the great nations/religions of the world. The children of Esau and the children of Ishmael rejected it on grounds that they could not comply with some of Torah’s laws.<sup>3</sup> Instead, these people – who encompass all nations – went on to build powerful empires that made important contributions, but also wreaked great destruction on the world.

Their rejection at Sinai is the root of all our conflicts today. Yet the solution lies in the very offer that the nations rejected. Why would G-d offer the nations the Torah surely knowing that they would reject it?<sup>4</sup> The Zohar explains that it was to redeem the Divine ‘sparks’ embedded among the nations. Furthermore, the offer to the nations was actually a way of implanting in them the quality that will ultimately emerge at the end of days when the entire world will serve G-d in unity, “I will turn to the peoples a pure tongue that all shall call upon the name of G-d and serve Him with one consent”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See also Zohar III 192b. Mechilta Yitro 20:2. Sifri and Rashi Deuteronomy 33:2.

<sup>4</sup> See the Tzemach Tzedek, Ohr HaTorah p. 1840, on the verse in Deuteronomy.

<sup>5</sup> Zefaniah 3:9. Maimonides. Mishne Torah, Laws of Kings end of chapter 11.

G-d's dialogue with the nations in the "future to be" comes to bring closure to this unresolved 3330 year old rejection. All the material achievements of nations and regimes must be permeated with a higher, Divine purpose. They must pave the way to bring the Divine wisdom and will (Torah) into this world.

And indeed, we are witness to this process. Just think of the establishment of the United States 242 years ago – the first ever institutionalized government based on the Torah principles of justice and virtue and the Seven Noachide laws, first advocated by Abraham, "father of all nations,"<sup>6</sup> and then formalized at Sinai.

The USA was built on these Sinai principles – the idea of a people-controlled government (instead of a monarchy), the idea of redistributing wealth to help the needy, the idea of religious tolerance, the idea that life has purpose and destiny. And perhaps above all, and the foundation of them all – the idea of human equality by virtue of us all being created by G-d, as declared in the opening of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

I strongly recommend you read two important books on this topic: *On Two Wings*, by Michael Novak, and *The Hebrew Republic*, by Eric Nelson. After reading these books you will come away appreciating the unbelievable revolutionary impact Sinai, the Jews and Torah had on shaping modern civilization.

And ever since 1776, these Sinai principles have only spread and proliferated around the world, with more and more nations embracing these foundational principles – the basis of a healthy, thriving and cooperative, civilized world.

With this historical backdrop and context, let us now ask ourselves the question about current events:

Is it possible that the developments with achieving peace of the West with North Korea part of the ongoing redemption of the children of Esau and the West? And are the newfound alliances between Israel and the Sunnis Muslim world, Saudi Arabia and its allies, perhaps a path to Ishmael's descendants finally embracing Sinai, 3330 years later?

Is the regime in Iran at the brink of disintegrating, making way for a transformation of the Persian Empire to a benevolent and peaceful regime?

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 17:4-5.

## 5. Israel, Bridging Ishmael and Esau

At Sinai the world changed. For the first time the human race was given the opportunity to bridge heaven and earth – to fuse spirit and matter. Until that point there existed an invisible wall between the transcendental and the material. A decree, a schism separated between above and below. “That which was above could not descend below, and that which was below could not ascend above.”<sup>7</sup>

Sinai opened a door, never again to be closed, that allows mortals in a material world to become Divine. It gave us the power to spiritualize the material, and to make our lives sacred, not just ethical.

This was no small event.

That is why Sinai did not come easily. The nations of the world could not accept – nor understand – how one can bridge the two worlds. They therefore rejected the Torah at the time. Even the Jewish people did not reach Sinai effortlessly. Twenty-six generations of hard work, culminating with the terrible Egyptian slavery, was necessary before the people would be ready for Sinai.

This struggle between heaven and earth has many manifestations, including the battle that we so often have witnessed between religion and secularism. If you are a firm believer how do you deal with the secular world? According to the two-abovementioned options you either have to wage a holy war against the secular, or you basically embrace the secular with limited sanctity.

Therein lies the essential root of the religious wars waged throughout history. Recognizing secular heresy as an enemy, the Christians and later the Muslims, engaged in aggressive battles with the forces they perceive as threatening.

These battles actually began in the home of Abraham. Abraham, father of all nations, was the one that began the process, which was consummated at Sinai, of discovering and embracing the method of integrating the Divine and the mundane. Yet this effort encountered many challenges, including the difficulties with his son Ishmael. “He [Ishmael] will be a wild man. His hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him.”<sup>8</sup> It came to a point that Ishmael had to be banished from Abraham’s home.

This battle only intensified in the home of Isaac, son of Abraham, in the struggle between the twin brothers, Esau and Jacob. “Two nations are in your womb. Two governments will separate from inside you. The upper

<sup>7</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Vaeirah 15. Shemot Rabba 12:3.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 16:12.

hand will go from one nation to the other. The greater one will serve the younger.”<sup>9</sup> The brothers are diametrically different characters. Esau is a “skilled hunter, a man of the field.” “Jacob was a wholesome man, who sat in the tents”<sup>10</sup> – a scholar who dwelled in the tents of study.

The battle between Esau and Jacob represents the battle between the material and the spiritual, a struggle that would only be resolved at the end of times.

What was the core of Ishmael and Esau’s difficulties, one that would later cause their children to reject the Torah, while the children of Jacob were embracing it?

Chassidic texts explain that the problem was rooted in balance. Ishmael (son of Abraham) was an archetype of abundant chesed (love) without the discipline of gevurah (judgment and discretion). Esau (son of Isaac) was an extreme of gevurah without the sensitivity of chesed.

Jacob, by contrast, was tiferet. Tiferet is beauty – harmony within diversity. Tiferet has the power to fuse love and discipline into one symmetrical unit. Tiferet possesses this power by introducing a third dimension – the dimension of truth, which is neither love nor discipline and therefore can integrate the two. Truth is accessed through selflessness: rising above your ego and your predispositions, enabling you to realize truth. Truth gives you a clear and objective picture of yours and others’ needs.

Jacobs’ children were educated with this Tiferet balance. They thus were ready for Mattan Torah, to receive the Torah at Sinai, which is called Tiferet. This is why we don’t find the Jewish people embarking on any religious war against heretics, or converting the nations of the world to Judaism. Conversion is actually dissuaded in Jewish law. When you are a person of Tiferet – secure in your own beliefs; aware that all humans were created in the Divine image, and one need not be Jewish to serve G-d; maintain a perfect equilibrium between love and discipline; absolutely confident that the sacred and the secular can be integrated with the Divine, and that this integration will come to fruition; lacking any fear that evil may be more powerful than good – then you can maintain the highest standard of spiritual integrity without resorting to killing or terrorizing others to conform to your beliefs.

Ishmael and Esau lacked this balance. Unbridled love and untempered discipline, even if they are driven for a good cause, ultimately become aggressive forces of destruction. Too much undisciplined love spoils a child and can create a monster, like too much rain that floods and destroys the fields. Unlimited judgment and severity, without underlying love, becomes tyrannical.

Thus, at Sinai the children of Ishmael and Esau were not yet prepared to receive the Torah. But their time would come, and come it did. Maimonides writes that by the mysterious ways of Divine Providence, Christianity and

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 25:23 and Rashi.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 27



Islam helped pave the way for the Messianic age by acquainting the world with the principle of Messiah, the Torah and mitzvot. As time would pass their beliefs would continue to refine and mature.

In the centuries that followed Esau and Ishmael's descendants would go through their growing pains in learning how to balance religious beliefs and daily life. This would not be an easy process; history is witness to the devastation and bloodshed wreaked by this journey. But slowly, slowly, Sinai would seep into the fibers of all people. The process concludes with the refinement of the last two powers, Edom (Esau) and Ishmael, which leads to the Messianic age – a world where there is no more destruction and terror and all children of Abraham serve the One G-d of Abraham in peace and harmony.

After years of tyranny the Western/Christian world has finally bred countries like America that champion the fundamental principles of Sinai: All people are created equal with inalienable rights and freedoms. The children of Esau have come to embrace the teachings of Abraham, formalized at Sinai.

## **6. Conclusion: Heed The Call, Seize The Opportunity**

How fascinating it is that thousands of years ago Moses, in his final parting words, opens his closing blessing to the people with the vision for the entire world: G-d came from Sinai shone forth to them from Seir and made an appearance from Mount Paran. Moses, 3330 years ago, stated clearly that the Torah would shine forth to all the nations of the world – to the nations of Esau and Ishmael, which encompass all the others.

True, at the time the nations were not yet ready to embrace the Torah's values. Yet the seeds were planted, and have worked their way and seeped into the fiber of existence everywhere.

That was then. Now, 3330 years later the time has come for these and all nations to face G-d once again, and this time embrace G-d's law – to reconnect to the commitment of Abraham, “father of all the nations,” that was consummated at Sinai.

As we celebrate the holiday of Shavuot, when we commemorate and relive the giving of Torah at Sinai 3330 years ago, what more appropriate message is there for each of us and for the world today. We are called upon to declare: Let us make our peace with Sinai.

The nations of the world must and will embrace their legacy — to integrate G-d into their lives, teach G-d's laws to their children and infuse spirituality into all systems. Jews must fulfill their calling of being a “light unto nations,” bringing Sinai and its teachings to all.

G-d knocked on the door once over three millennia ago. G-d has been waiting ever since. Religions and faiths have been born in the interim and have been going through their growing pains. Some have brought untold devastation to the world. Each has undergone its own 'market corrections' and reality checks.

Today, as the nations – especially Esau and Ishmael – confront the world and each other, with Israel as usual in the middle, G-d's 3330-year knock resonates louder than ever.

G-d is calling to all nations of the world – including, North Korea, Syria, Iran, Russia, the USA, Europe, and all the countries in all continents.

Are we listening? Are we responding?

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