

Overturning A Mountain of Tradition

An ancient story teller uprooted Mount Sinai and held it threateningly over the people of Israel:

They stood beneath the mountain (Exodus 19:17). Said Rav Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa, This teaches that the Blessed Holy One vaulted the mountain over them like a barrel and said to them: If you accept the Torah well and good, and if not, there will be your graves.

The Talmud presents this jarring story side by side with imaginative love-at-first-sight Sinai stories gilded by the Song of Songs, adorned by divine presence and by angels who descended to crown Israel and to celebrate. But this story teller resisted the embellished stories of God and Israel's mutual love. He insisted upon uprooting the plain meaning of the verse, *They stood beneath the mountain*, in order to say that Israel was compelled by threat of death to accept the Torah.

Rav Avdimi's story elicited surprise from another colleague: *Said Rabbi Ahah bar Ya'akov, This story is a strong indictment against Torah!* But in so lifting the mountain, Rav Avdimi uncovered a foundational truth: Torah is the single story that tells Israel into being. Without Torah, Israel could not exist. At the very least, Israel could not be the people of *this* book. The story of the uprooted mountain is a story of necessity—a *compelling* story.

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, offers another jarring story about Israel compelled to live with Torah:

*When God left the earth he forgot the Torah
at the Jews' and since then they look for him
and cry after him, you forgot something, you forgot, in a loud voice
and others think that this is the prayer of the Jews.
And ever since they strain to find hints in the Bible
as to the place he might be found as it says, Seek the Lord where he is to be found,
Call upon him when he is close. But he is far.*

Set between the phrases *God left* and *God is far*, Amichai portrays the **leaving** of the Torah at Sinai, not the **giving** of the Torah. God did not give the Torah; he forgot it at the Jews' camp in Sinai. Torah is an accidental possession, and the inadvertent recipients feel compelled to return it.

Like Rav Avdimi, Amichai overturns a mountain of tradition and exposes a characteristic of Israel's life with Torah that, ironically, appears conventional and pious; namely, Israel learns Torah in order to find God. The act of learning and seeking is intense, unending, and prayer-like.

The story teller and the poet agree: Torah is a compelling force in Israel's life. God might be threatening or God might be indifferent and far, but Torah is close.