

Where Is Mount Sinai?

Category: Holidays, Shavuot

How to find Mount Sinai in your own life.

The Missing Sites

Does anyone know where Mt. Sinai is? Has anyone ever been there? I have seen several pictures of mountains that are supposed to be Mt. Sinai but how can you be sure it's the real one?

I once saw a stone that was said to come from Mt. Sinai. The proof was that the natural designs on all sides of the stone were engravings of bushes. Since the first time Moses spoke to G-d was in the burning bush on Mt. Sinai, this stone must certainly be from there.

Still, I remain skeptical, that is, until someone will find pieces of the broken tablets or perhaps the sandals that Moses took off when he first saw the burning bush.

Doesn't this seem strange? Mt. Sinai is mentioned sixteen times in the Torah. Every child knows its name. Schools, shuls and hospitals are named for it. It's the place where mere mortals saw G-d face to face, yet we have no idea where it is. On the other hand, the Temple Mount, never mentioned by name in the Torah, is the single most famous place on earth.

The Torah tells us something unique about the mountain's holiness. During the giving of the Torah, the Jews were commanded not to touch it, but afterwards, "At the sound of the blast of the Shofar, they can ascend this mountain." This means that after G-d's presence left Mt. Sinai, the place did not retain any holiness. No holiness remained in the spot where G-d gave us the Torah. Why?

The same question can be asked about the gravesite of Moses. Do you know where it's located? Does anyone?

In just a few moments we will be reciting the Yizkor. Many people whose parents are deceased have the custom to visit their gravesites. This custom dates back to

when our forefather Jacob buried his beloved wife Rachel at the side of the road leading to Bethlehem. He foresaw that his descendents would one day be led into exile along that very road and they would stop by the gravesite of their great-grandmother Rachel and beseech her to pray to G-d for mercy on their behalf.

Also, Caleb, one of the twelve spies sent into Canaan, visited the gravesites of our forefathers and prayed for the strength to resist the pressure from the other spies.

This has been the custom of Jews throughout our nation's history, until this very day, when thousands of Jews visit the gravesite of the Rebbe to pray there and to have their prayers answered. This is why we know where our forefathers and all the great leaders of our nation are buried.

Yet curiously, the gravesite of Moses, the single greatest prophet and leader our nation ever had, is not known. Why should we Jews not be able to go there and to pray for all of our needs as we have been doing at the gravesites of all the other great men of our history?

The Icons

Everyone knows the famous first sentence of the Pirke Avot, the ethics of our fathers, "Moses received the Torah at Sinai..." There are countless Jews named Moshe. There are even a few named Sinai. Our sages used the name Sinai to describe scholarship and greatness. Those two names are iconic among Jews.

The Talmud relates that after Rebbe passed away they needed to choose a new head for the Yeshiva in Pumbedita, Babelonia. The leaders could not decide between two candidates Rabba and R' Yosef. Rabba was known for "uprooting mountains", meaning his method of learning was deep and sharp. R' Yosef, on the other hand was known as "Sinai" for he had a phenomenal fluency in the teachings and in the tradition of our people dating all the way back to Mt. Sinai.

Not knowing whom to choose they sent a delegation to the Yeshivot in Jerusalem asking "who is better, the Mountain Uprooter or Sinai?" The response was, "Sinai is better, for the people need clear rulings more than deep understanding."

We find a similar story about the great sage R' Eliezer ben Hyrcanus; in his

yeshiva there was one stone that was designated for him to sit on. Once the sage R' Yehoshua entered the Yeshiva and kissed R' Eliezer's stone. He said, "This stone is like Mt. Sinai and the one who sits upon it is like the Ark of the Covenant." Again, the name Sinai is used in relation to scholarship and greatness.

The sages would do the same with the name Moshe. R' Safra once turned to Rava and said, "Moshe, you have spoken well!" By this he meant to imply that Rava was to his generation as Moses was to his. The same applies to the leader of every generation. As the Zohar states, "Every generation has an extension of Moses" i.e. its own "Moses" who would teach it and lead it in the ways of the Torah.

The Real Reason

Perhaps this is why we don't know the exact place of Mt. Sinai and the site of Moses' grave. G-d did not want Mt. Sinai and Moses' gravesite to become tourist attractions or even a place for yearly pilgrimage for faithful worshipers. Rather, whenever any Jew studies Torah, the place where he is studying becomes Mt. Sinai and he reveals the Moses within him, as explained in Tanya, "Every Jewish soul contains a spark of Moses."

It is as the Talmud explains: "It is not the place that brings honor upon the man. Rather it is the Man who brings honor upon the place. As we saw at Mt. Sinai; when G-d's presence rested upon her, even the animals were to be kept away from her. But when G-d's presence departed, 'the people may ascend the mountain'.

We are about to say Yizkor in memory of our parents. Of course, we all know that children say Kaddish to honor their parents' memories. It is also a known custom to give charity in the merit of their departed souls. But did you know that it is a custom to study Mishnah for a departed loved one? The reason is, because the Hebrew word "Mishnah" has the same letters that make up the word "Neshamah," soul.

Therefore, as we stand for Yizkor and want to do something special to honor the memory of our parents I would like to make a suggestion. What better way to honor one's parents, on the day that the Torah was given to us, than to resolve to study Torah in their honor. And when you study in your Mom or Dad's honor, their souls in heaven join you in your study and as you read the holy words of the

Torah, they will read it right along with you.