



# When Mount Sinai Arrived in Tehran

*When the movie "The Ten Commandments" arrived in Tehran, it was an exhilarating experience for the Jewish community.*

## Movie Time

Every once in a while, Iran returns to the news cycle, whether because of the Iran deal or because of attacks that Israel carries out inside their nuclear facilities. Today, I would like share with you a different story about Iran, this one about the Jews of Iran.

In 1957, the classic movie The Ten Commandments came to Teheran, Iran's capital city. When Iranian Jews heard that there was a movie telling the story of "Moshe ben Amram," the entire community excitedly looked forward to watching the film's entire four hours.

Many families bought tickets not just for themselves but for their senior parents and even for old and ailing people. They were sure that the blessings of G-d and Moshe Rabbeinu would protect the sick and perhaps even heal them.

Now, the theater where the film was showing could hold a maximum of 1,500 movie-goers. Also, in those days, most of Teheran's Jewish adults had never been in a movie theater and had never watching a movie or TV screen in their lives. For them, going to a movie was sort of a pilgrimage.

When they got to the theater, all the Jews stood around excited and

happy. People hugged and exchanged greetings. People shouted blessings at each other from afar, and the noise was overwhelming. Most people dragged along huge baskets of food, as if they were going to a picnic.

The theater started going dark and it finally got quiet. The menfolk took out their yarmulkes and put them on their heads. They were expecting a religious experience. And then the curtain rose... and that was the only silent moment throughout the entire film.

Every time Moses appeared on the screen, the crowd shrieked, whistled, and asked Moses for blessings. Some cried out, "Moshe ben Amram, we are your atonement!" Others cried out in the traditional Sephardi saying, "If only I could be dust beneath the soles of your feet!" And every time the Pharaoh appeared on the screen, the crowd roared with boos while others shouted, "Yimach shmo v'zichro!" ("May his name and memory be obliterated," the traditional "honorific" applied to anti-Semites.)

Every new scene in the movie brought with it strong emotional reactions. Nobody could sit in their chairs for too long. Men leapt from their seats and waved fists in the air every time they got angry, and whenever they loved what they were seeing on the screen, they flashed victory signs with their hands.

Finally, the movie's intermission arrived, and the crowd was able to catch its breath and relax from the emotional experience it had just undergone. Women took out pots with food still hot from their baskets, along with thermoses filled with tea. It was in the middle of the day, and you don't skip lunch. The intermission was one hour long, and everyone took a break to eat and drink.

The second half of the film was even more intense for its viewers—because in that half of the film, Moshe went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah.

When they heard the “Voice of G-d” speaking to Moshe, several people fainted. They were sure that they were literally hearing G-d speak. Many stood up, covered their eyes (as if saying “Shema Yisrael”) and started singing various prayers. And the women were more excited than the men.

When Moshe came down from Mt. Sinai and saw the Golden Calf, the crowd was shocked. The men tore their clothing. The women pulled hair from their heads and cried out, “dust upon our heads!” The sobbing and wailing was terrible.

But all’s well that ends well—the film ended on a positive note with Moshe going back up Mt. Sinai to get the second Tablets, and the crowd was filled with joy. The women ululated (that’s the “loo-loo-loo” sound that is customary in Middle Eastern Jewish communities), families and friends hugged and kissed, and men danced in the aisles and clapped for joy because Moshe had taken pity on them. The movie theater could have easily been a synagogue on Shabbos after the morning prayers.

People left the theater exhausted but satisfied. They had now experienced “the Event at Mt. Sinai.”

## **Unconditional Love**

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

This week we read the longest parshah in the entire Torah—176 verses. Among the many lengthy subjects of this Torah portion, we find something small but important tucked away: “Birkas Kohanim,” the Priestly Blessing. G-d tells Moshe, “Speak to Aharon... thus shall you bless the Children of Israel... May G-d bless you...” (Bamidbar 6:22). And just recently, we all experienced that very blessing on Shavuos, when our Kohanim here stood in front of us and blessed us with this special blessing.

The Rebbe explains that in this blessing we find an amazing characteristic.

As a general rule, G-d's blessings come in the form of reward for keeping the mitzvos. As the Torah elsewhere says, "If you walk in My statutes... I shall provide your rains in their times."

And as we find with several mitzvos, the Torah specifies the reward for the keeping of that mitzvah. For example, with the mitzvah of honoring one's parents, the Torah says, "Lmaan ya'arichun yamechah," so that your days be lengthened. In plain English: Honor your parents, live a long life.

We also read in the Shma prayer, that if you follow G-d's words, "I shall provide the dew of your land in their times"—that's the condition. With the mitzvah of tzedakah, the Torah tells us that if a Jew gives a tenth to charity, he can expect G-d to return him "eser p'amim kachah," ten times as much.

With Birkas Kohanim, however, we find no such conditions at all. Instead, every Jew, whoever he or she may be or however one behaves, gets all the most special blessings included in Birkas Kohanim: "Yevarechicha," that your property be blessed, "V'yishmirecha," that no robbers come upon you" (Rashi there). (Sicha, Sivan 9, Hisvaduyos 5748 Vol. III pg. 445.)

## **The Last Remnant**

But there's another special element about Birkas Kohanim: We always pray for the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash and study the order of services in the Beis Hamikdash and what the Kohanim did and how the sacrifices were brought. We imagine for ourselves the choirs of the Levi'im standing on the Beis Hamikdash steps with all their musical instruments.

But all that remains in the imagination. In reality, nothing of this is left

for us.

However, there is one authentic remnant of the Beis Hamikdash experience: Birkas Kohanim. This is the one Beis Hamikdash service that remains to this day, and has remained in every place and in every generation; it's not tied to the Beis Hamikdash and not even to the Holy Land. And to this very day, it's the one mitzvah in the Torah that exists exactly as it did when the Beis Hamikdash was standing. (Sichah, motzoei Shabbos Korach, Tammuz 3, Sichos Kodesh 5738 Vol. III, pg. 9.)

If we want to experience today what Jews experienced in the Beis Hamikdash thousands of years ago, it only can be experienced through Birkas Kohanim.

In Teheran in 1957, the Jews were sure they were experiencing the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, but it was only a movie. But here with us, when our Kohanim go up to the front of the room and lovingly bless us all, we truly experience the same experience of the Beis Hamikdash.

Let us pray for the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash so that we can experience the rest of being in the Beis Hamikdash, with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!