

# Finding the Real Mt. Sinai

*Where was the burning bush? Where did G-d give us the Torah? And most importantly, does it really matter?*

## Where is Mount Sinai?

Good Shabbos!

Prince Mohammad bin Salman, heir to the Saudi throne, is often in the news, and not always for the best of reasons. Often, we hear his name in the context of the United States's interests in Saudi Arabia—but what people don't know is that Jews, in general, also have an interest in Saudi Arabia.

And that, of course, brings us to this week's Parshah. In this week's Torah portion, we begin the Book of Shemos.

At the very center of Shemos, the most important event in the history of humanity, the Giving of the Torah, takes place on Mt. Sinai. What's interesting is that at the end of the day, we have no preserved tradition about the precise location of Mt. Sinai. It's reasonable to say that in the times of the Sages, geography and cartography were not what they are today, so the Sages didn't know how to specify the precise mountain—after all, Mt. Sinai is located somewhere in the heart of some desert, far from any human civilization. And without any unbroken human habitation in that area, there would have been no one to preserve the tradition of the location.

Despite that, across the generations, many efforts were made

to try and identify Mt. Sinai as any one of the peaks found in the various regions of the Sinai Desert and even outside it. And the most known purported location of Mt. Sinai is a mountain known in Arabic as Jebel Musa, located near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. But tourists visiting the site to climb the 750 winding steps to the top apparently don't know that their hard climb is for nothing.

As it turns out, the connection between Mt. Sinai and Jebel Musa was invented by an ancient Christian named Helena over 1,500 years ago. Helena was the mother of Constantine, ruler of the Byzantine Empire. In her sunset years, she decided to visit the Christian sites in Israel. She joined a caravan of camels making its way from Egypt to the Holy Land. One night, she was impressed by the beauty of a nearby mountain ridge and decided in her heart that it surely must be the mountain on which Moses received the Torah. Because it became known after that point as "Jebel Musa" (Arabic for Mt. Moses), the legend was born that this mountain is Mt. Sinai. The only problem is that researchers have not found any identifying detail on the mountain that might indicate that it is actually Mt. Sinai.

## **The Real Location?**

In this week's Torah portion (Shemos 3:1-2), the Torah tells us, "And Moshe was a shepherd... and he arrived at Chorev, the mountain of G-d... and an angel of the L-rd appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the thorn bush"—and the rest is history. Rashi comments: why is this mountain called "the mountain of G-d"? "In view of the [events of the]

future”—meaning, because it is Mt. Sinai, which in the future will be where the Torah is given. And so, it’s called “the mountain of G-d.”

The commentators (Ramban, Devarim 1:6; Ibn Ezra, Shemos 3:2) add to that, saying that it’s called “Sinai” based on the Hebrew word for bush, *sneh*. And where was Moshe during that time? He was in Midyan! And if that be the case, then we actually need to be searching for Mt. Sinai in Midyan, not the modern-day Sinai Desert.

So now the question is: Where is Midyan?

As far as we know, the ancient territory of Midyan is located in parts of modern-day Saudi Arabia, southern Israel and southern Jordan. Some researchers argue that not far from modern day Eilat, where Saudi Arabia almost kisses Israel, is where Mt. Sinai is located. They bring many proofs for that, and I’d like to share several of them with you:

1. In today’s Saudi Arabia, there’s a mountain that locals call “Jebel al-Lawz,” or Mt. Almond, or “Jebel Musa,” Mt. Moses. Even Josephus writes that Mt. Sinai is in the land of Midyan, outside “the city of Al-Bad” (which still exists today).

The first thing you’ll notice when you look at Jebel al-Lawz is that its upper section is totally blackened. The rock comprising the top of the mountain appears thoroughly burnt and black. It’s similar to what the Torah tells us in Parshas Yisro (Shemos 19:18), “And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the L-rd had descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the

smoke of the kiln.” So as far as some researchers are concerned, that’s proof right there that Jebel al-Lawz is in fact Mt. Sinai.

2. At the foot of the mountain, researchers also found what appears to be the remains of a giant altar bearing 12 ancient images of wagons in an early Egyptian style. The images are not found anywhere else throughout Saudi Arabia; they seem to invoke the “Sin of the Golden Calf” and the altar that our ancestors built at the foot of the mountain.
3. In the Book of Melachim I (Chap. 19), we are told how Eliyahu HaNavi came to Mt. Choreiv (which is another name for Mt. Sinai), where he entered a cave and experienced a Divine revelation. Now, Jebel Musa, near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, is not known to have caves (although there is supposedly a cave called “Moses’ Cave” at the top)—but Jebel al-Lawz in Saudi Arabia does boast a cave whose size is suitable for a human being to actually live in.
4. The most interesting discovery of all: On the western side of the mountain, on a high ridge, there is a giant boulder split in the middle. It is quite large: 59 feet tall, 39 feet wide and 20 feet deep. And when you look closer, you’ll see clear signs of water flow—which is not something you find in the middle of a dry desert. Even Josephus writes about the split boulder located there. It indicates what happened on the way to Mt. Sinai: “And they camped in Refidim, and there was no water for the people to

drink...” And then G-d said to Moshe (Shemos 17:6), “Behold, I shall stand there before you on the rock in Choreiv, and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it.” Additionally, in describing the saga of the Exodus from Egypt in the Book of Tehilim (78:15), King David uses the phrase, “He split rocks in the desert,” which according to Rashi is a reference to Moshe Rabbeinu hitting the rock—which very well may be what we are seeing in this giant boulder.

And the list of proofs goes on.

However, there are those who argue that it’s not reasonable to say that this mountain is Mt.

Sinai, primarily for the reason that the distance from the Goshen region of Egypt (from which the Jews left) to the Midyan region is over 279 miles—and from Scripture, it doesn’t seem that the distance from Egypt to Sinai was that great. And there are other reasons for why Jebel al-Lawz is *not* Mt. Sinai.

## **Do We Really Care?**

In recent years, no less than Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, otherwise known as Mohammad bin Salman, announced plans to build a massive new city around the location believed to be Mt. Sinai. In fact, there’s already an association that took upon itself the mission to try to convince the Crown Prince Mohammad to not tamper with the site and to let archaeologists continue digging and doing their work there undisturbed.

The question is: Is this really an important initiative?

Here is a story from the Midrash:

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanus was among the greatest of the Sages. In fact, he was called *Rabbi*

*Eliezer HaGadol* (Rabbi Eliezer the Great). According to tradition, his study hall was constructed “like a sort of eyelash”—meaning that it had an arched or curved shape. Rabbi Eliezer would sit in the center, upon a special stone, and his students would sit around him on the floor. The Midrash (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:3) tells us that when Rabbi Eliezer passed away, the Sage, Rabbi

Yehoshua, once walked into his study hall and kissed that stone. He then said: This stone is like

Mt. Sinai, and the person who sat on it was like the Ark of the Covenant!”

The Rebbe expressed a similar idea in a letter:

At the start of 1956, Israel’s “Sinai Campaign” conquered the lower Sinai Peninsula, damaged the Egyptian military’s infrastructure and obliterated the Fedayeen terrorist hives that infested the region. And at the time, some of Israel’s soldiers got as far as one of the mountains that some researchers identify as Mt. Sinai. One such soldier was Dr. Moshe Baharab, who was very moved by the fact that he was now meriting to (perhaps) be treading upon the place our fathers stood some 3,000 years ago—at the place where we received the Torah. So

he climbed the mountain with great emotion, arriving at the spot where (perhaps) Moshe Rabeinu stood and received the Torah.

However, upon reaching the top, in contrast to the expected rush of spiritual sensation—some lofty special spirit—he didn't feel anything. Just disappointment. It just didn't feel like it was Mt. Sinai.

After Dr. Baharab got back home from the front, he sent the Rebbe a letter in which he expressed his feelings regarding the identification of the mountain.

In a response letter, "Regarding what you wrote, that when you climbed the mountain they say is Mt. Sinai, you didn't feel that it was the mountain," the Rebbe wrote as follows: "It is certainly leaning in the direction of 'permissible' to emphasize that the entire significance of Mt. Sinai is that we received the Torah on Mt. Sinai, and this importance is when we appropriately observe the Torah, a Torah of life... which charges the Jew in all places and times" (Igros Kodesh Vol. 14, pg. 495).

At the end of the day, the fact is that Mt. Sinai did not become a holy place—and so it's not important to know exactly where it is altogether. And what we learn from this Midrash is that wherever Jews find themselves learning Torah, that place is now Mt. Sinai.

So ultimately, there's no need to gallop off to Saudi Arabia for a grand adventure—at this very Chabad center, you'll find Mt. Sinai right here.