

## Reliving Sinai Every Day

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One of the most precious and magical qualities of our holy Torah is that it doesn't matter how many times you read it—each year it opens up to you from a new perspective. One little phrase or sentence that passed unnoticed the last time you encountered the text can, when read again, change the entire meaning of the parashah.

Parashat Ki Tavo opens with Moses addressing B'nei Yisrael: "The Lord your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul. You have affirmed this day that the Lord is your God, that you will walk in His ways, that you will observe His laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey Him" (Deut. 26:16–17). During my years at JTS, one of the themes that always captivated me was the mystical understanding of the concept of time in the Torah. That is why my attention was immediately drawn to this quote. The specific timeframe "this day" occurs twice here and is repeated multiple times in the parashah. What does "this day" mean? Or rather, when is "this day"?

One interpretation is that Moses was referring to the specific day when he delivered his final speech captured in the book of Deuteronomy. The final book of the Torah opens with "these are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan" (Deut. 1:1), and then the entire speech of Moses is revealed to us. We can immediately understand that "this day" is referring to the day when Moses charged the people of Israel, saying, "Observe all the instructions that I enjoin upon you this day" (Deut. 27:1).

This understanding makes perfect sense in the context of the book of Deuteronomy. But could it be true that the

laws and rules were enjoined upon the people of Israel only on the day of Moses's final speech?

During the annual reading of the Torah cycle, we learn about the wonders and miracles that happened to B'nei Yisrael in the desert after they left Egypt, and we know that during the revelation on Mount Sinai, described in the book of Exodus, we already accepted the commandments of God: "All the people answered as one, saying 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do'" (Exod. 19:7–8).

A similar question emerges further on when we read, "Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of the Lord your God" (Deut. 27:9). Didn't we learn that God already affirmed at Mount Sinai that the people of Israel are His treasured people, "a kingdom of the priest and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6)?

These questions didn't pass unnoticed by our sages, who held the keys to many secrets of the Torah. Rashi in his commentary writes, "The Lord your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules. They should always seem as new to you as on the day you were first commanded to observe them." This short commentary brilliantly shifts the direction and meaning of the verse. "This day" is not when Moses delivered his speech—it is "this day" that is happening right now. And it is not addressed to the people of Israel who witnessed the speech, but to you—the reader. God is your God, who commands you, today, to observe the laws and rules written in the Torah. It is today, right now, while reading the verses from the Torah, you become one of the people of the Lord your God.

Why is it important that commandments should always seem as new? Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger (1847–1905, Poland) teaches us that when we read the Torah or pray or perform mitzvot out of habit, this weakens our ability to see God in this world. He compares habits with the darkness that covers up the inner light, the presence of God in each thing. However, it is within human power to renew our connection to God. “It is within the power of a human to light up the darkness. God commands you find this day, the revelation of light”. He continues, “One should always be prepared to receive and listen closely to the words of God. The voice of that is in everything since each was created by God’s utterance and has the power of divine speech hidden within it. This is the hidden light that we are told to find” (Sefat Emet, Commentary to Ki Tavo 2:3).

Now we can understand the verse “the Lord your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules” as follows: we exist constantly in the presence of God, who each day renews the world, the work of Creation. It was not once in the past but “this day”—today—that the laws and rules are enjoined upon us. Each time we accept in our hearts and souls the commandments of God, not out of habit but sincerely, as if they are new to us, we can hear the words of God telling us, “Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of the Lord your God.”

The idea of constant renewal of our covenant with God not only can inspire us and infuse our daily activities with a sacred meaning but also underscores our active participation in this renewal. God is not the only one renewing creation “this day” and every single day; we are doing so as well. By consciously affirming that God is our God and accepting the commandments, we cause God to affirm our covenant. As it says: “You have affirmed this day that the Lord is your God, that you will walk in His ways, that you will observe His laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey Him. And the Lord has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His

treasured people who shall observe all His commandments” (Deut 26:16–18).

How precious this text becomes when we can understand and feel that the Torah is talking to every single one of us directly “this day.” Our existence and our conscious choices matter in this world. We are able to renew our covenant and reveal the light of God hidden in everything. Today you become the people of the Lord your God because today you showed that you indeed desire to hold fast to the Holy One.