

FIRST DAY SHAVUOS 1991
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

We read in the Torah about how the Jewish people came to Mount Sinai. It says, "And they travelled from Refeeteem and they came to the dessert of Sinai." What difference does it make where they came from? Why does the Torah have to tell us that they came from Refeeteem? What happened at Refeeteem that was so important that the Torah had to say that before they came to Mount Sinai they had been at Refeeteem? What's more, we know that King David is intimately connected with the holiday of Shavuos. We learn how he was born on Shavuos and how he died on Shavuos. Why do we stress so much the fact that King David is part of this holiday? What's more, we learn also about Moshe Rabbeinu on this holiday. We learn how it was only Shavuos that Moshe was put into the bullrushes, the reeds along the Nile. We learn how Moshe was born on the 7th day of Adar and his mother was able to hide him for 3 months and then she had to place him in the Nile hoping against hope that somehow he would be rescued. That is, of course, one of the reasons why we put greenery in the synagogue on Shavuos because this reminds us of the bullrushes and reeds in which Moshe was placed, but why is Moshe intimately connected with the holiday of Shavuos? Shavuos is the time of the giving of the Torah. Of course, we can understand how Moshe is more connected to this holiday than Doveed HaMelech because it was to Moshe Rabbeinu that the Torah was given, but why the connection with David, and why do we mention here that they travelled from Refeeteem?

If we look at what happened at Refeeteem perhaps we can understand. We can understand why the Torah mentions it because at Refeeteem is where Amalek came and fought with Israel, that Amalek came and attacked the weakest link of the Jewish people, the stragglers, the people who came from the Tribe of Dan. These were people, the rabbis say, who were still idol worshippers many of them and they were outside the clouds of glory. And Moshe said to Joshua, "Choose for us men and go out and fight against Amalek and tomorrow I will stand at the head of that hill and the staff of G-d will be in my hand." And Joshua did as Moshe told him to fight against Amalek, and Joshua weakened and defeated Amalek and his people according

to the sword. We see here that at Refeeteem an important event happened, that the Jewish people had to physically fight an enemy who had attacked them.

The rabbis tell us that there were two conditions that the Jewish people had to meet before they were able to receive the Torah, one of which was that they had to have families. That is why they had to be counted, to make sure that they had families because without a family you cannot appreciate the Torah and you cannot live the life the Torah demands because it is only in a family that we can learn that the spiritual is more important than the material, that relationships are more important than things. There is also another prerequisite for the Jewish people before they could receive the Torah and that is that they had to have a concern for the poor and the helpless. They had to be willing to stand up and defend the poor and the helpless, even if this would take physical force. That, of course, is another reason why it was so important that the Jewish people be liberated from Egypt because as long as they were in Egypt they had no power to defend the weak and the helpless, and they had to have this ability to help the weak and the helpless if they were actually to receive the Torah and keep it correctly. That, of course, is, too, why the State of Israel is so important to us today because only in the State of Israel do we have the power to protect the people who are weak and helpless. It was only Israel who could make an Entebbe. It was only an Israel that could help save Russian Jewry by throwing open its gates. It is only an Israel that can protect and provide an airlift for Ethiopian Jewry. It is only Israel that could have saved the Jews of Yemen or the Jews of Iraq or the Jews of Morocco, so we see that the prerequisite for Torah is the concern of Jews for the weak and the helpless, even those who may have been idolators, but we must help them and save them. We must be concerned not only with the weak of our people but with the weak of all peoples.

That is why Moshe's name is so intimately connected with this holiday, not just because it was to him that the Torah was given because, after all, on Shavuos it is the Ten Commandments which were given to the whole people that we specifically remember, but also because he was the defender of the weak and the helpless. When he went out to see his brothers and he saw that an Egyptian was beating up a Jew, beating him to death mercilessly, and the reason for that was, according to the medrash, because he had first raped the man's wife and was caught in the act and did not want any witnesses. Moshe came forward and he slew the man. Later on, too, when Moshe fled to Midian and the reason some rabbis say he fled to Midian was because he saw some Jews quarreling amongst themselves and he could not understand that, so he went to Midian and he saved the daughters of Jethro from the shepherds who were stopping them from getting water from the well. He again sprang to action because he could not see the weak and the helpless depressed and put upon. Too, that was also the trait of King David. He was willing to stand up to Goliath, to a giant many times his own size. He was not able to see him taunt the weaker armies of Israel. We see that David's traits were the same, to preserve and help the weak of his own people. In fact, even when Saul was chasing him and he had to make an alliance with a Philistine king he never attacked his own people. He feigned madness rather than to do that. So a prerequisite of receiving the Torah was a concern for the weak and helpless and downtrodden. If a Jew does not have this concern for the weak and helpless and downtrodden and oppressed then, rest assured, he cannot keep the Torah. No matter how many mitzvahs he thinks he is keeping he is not keeping them correctly unless he also has this concern for the helpless and the weak and the downtrodden and the persecuted, not just of the Jewish people but of all people.

That, of course, is why today we are happy to salute the Jewish War Veterans post in Houston because they, by their sacrifices and there have been many, many

Jewish soldiers who have been killed fighting for the United States in the last 80 years fighting the just wars of the United States. Maybe some of the wars before 80 years were not just but the First World War, the Second World War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War were all just wars. They were to help the downtrodden and those who were persecuted who suffered from aggression, and they truly deserve our respect. We can rest assured that as long as there are Jewish young men and women who are willing to sacrifice themselves to preserve freedom but more especially to make sure that the downtrodden and persecuted and oppressed are liberated, that rest assured that they will be fit receptacles for the Torah and they will make sure that the Jewish people lives. We hope that our young people will not be called upon to sacrifice themselves for freedom and for the downtrodden and oppressed because there will not be any, that the aggressors will soon learn their lesson, but if the need arises we can rest assured that our young people will respond in great numbers because they know that preceding the Torah is the requirement that we must always be concerned about the helpless and the downtrodden and be willing to come to their aid. In fact, it is a Jewish law that if you see someone pursuing another person with a knife that you are to save the person who is being attacked, even if that means that you have to kill the person who has the knife. In America self-defense is a right. You can waive it if you want, and the Mennonites and Quakers say you should not defend yourself, but in Judaism when we see people attacking others, innocent people, we have to protect these innocent people if we have the power. Since we can protect other people's lives we can protect our own as well. It is not a right but an obligation. Therefore, in order for the Jewish people to accept the Torah we had to fulfill this obligation. That, of course, is why it says they came from Refeeteem. Let us all hope and pray that we will not be called upon to fight aggression because there will be no aggression, but if there is aggression that our young people are ready to respond to the challenge. Amen.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a young man who was coming out of the PX. He was walking very quickly and was not watching where he was going and he knocked somebody down. The person picked himself up, wiped himself off, and looked at the young man square in the eye and said, "Private, do you know who I am?" The private said he did not. The man said, "I am General Eisenhower, the General Commander of all the Allied Forces in Europe." The private looked at him and said, "Sir, do you know who I am?" Eisenhower said no and the private said, "Thank G-d!" and ran away into the darkness.