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Mount Sinai has been located

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The exact spot of the giving of the Torah has been subject to controversy for generations.

Simhat Torah is a celebration of finishing the annual cycle of reading the Torah.

According to the biblical story, the Torah was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. People have mythologized this mountain. Many act as if it doesn't really exist. But Judaism is a religion grounded in history and the Jewish tradition is very specific about where this mountain is, what it looks like and what happened when the Children of Israel camped at its base some 3,500 years ago. So if it exists, where is it? According to most scholars, Mount Sinai is in the Sinai Peninsula. The Sinai Peninsula does not have an infinite number of mountains in it. It's a finite number. So, in theory, armed with the right criteria, we should be able to identify it. And people have tried.

Over the years, many candidates for Mount Sinai have been put forward. These include: Jebel Musa, the "traditional" site in Sinai, favored by Christians since the time of Queen Helena in the fourth century; Jebel Sinn Bishr, favored by Prof. Menashe Har-El and Prof. David Faiman; Helal, a mountain in northern Sinai; Jebel Serbal, a mountain in southern Sinai; Mount Karkom, in Israel, favored by Prof. Emmanuel Anati and Jebel al-Lawz, in Saudi Arabia, a favorite with Evangelical Christians and Hershel Shanks, editor of Biblical Archaeology Review.

The problem with the various Mount Sinai theories is that – for the most part – they ignore the biblical criteria. If we ignore these criteria, any mountain can be the mountain of God.

According to the prophets, idolatry was practiced on all the "high places" (II Kings 12:3). So it would not be surprising to find archaeology related to worship on many mountain tops. Put simply, there were many "holy mountains," holy to various people. Just because a mountain was a cultic site does not make it Mount Sinai. To be Mount Sinai, a mountain has to conform to the criteria given in the Torah. This immediately rules out all the mountains in Saudi Arabia.

MOUNT SINAI has to be 11 days from Kadesh Barnea (Deuteronomy 1:2). Scholars generally agree that Kadesh Barnea is Ein El-Qudeirat.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that a mass of refugees can move no more than 15 km. a day. If this is the case, Mount Sinai can be no more than 165 km. from Kadesh Barnea/Ein El-Qudeirat.

This rules out Jebel Musa, Jebel Sinn Bishr and many other candidates which are out of range.

But there are other criteria. For example, the mountain has to be 14 days from the biblical Elim. How do we get to 14 days? By simply reconstructing the biblical itinerary.

The itinerary states that the revelation at Mount Sinai happened 50 days after the start of the Exodus. This tradition is still celebrated by Jews around the world with the counting of the Omer. Every day, beginning on the first day after Passover eve, is counted with a blessing until we reach 50, at which point Shavuot is celebrated.

According to the biblical itinerary and rabbinic tradition, the tribes of Israel reached Mount Sinai on the first day of the Hebrew month of Sivan, and received the Torah on 6 Sivan.

The Torah also tells us that the children of Israel reached the Wilderness of Sin (or Tsin or Zin) on 15 Iyar i.e., 30 days after they left Egypt (Exodus 16:1). Additionally, it makes clear that the wilderness begins just beyond Elim. In other words, it took the Israelites from 15 Iyar to the first of Sivan to get from the area of Elim to Mount Sinai (i.e., 14 days).

Biblical Elim has been identified by Prof. Menashe Har-El with the modern oasis of Ayun Musa. Scholars agree that even if he's wrong about the precise location, he is right about the general area. This gives us a second biblical coordinate. Again, if we use UNHCR criteria for the mass movement of refugees, Mount Sinai has to be 210 km. from the area of Ayun Musa.

This rules out Prof. Anati's Mount Karkom in the Negev desert. Put simply, if we accept the timetable of Exodus 16:1 and 19:1 we cannot reconcile it with Mount Karkom.

The third geographical criterion provided by the Torah is that Mount Sinai has to be within sheep grazing distance from a Midianite camp. After all, Moses' encounter with the Burning Bush happens when he is grazing his Midianite father-in-law's Jethro's flock (Exodus 3:1-22). That episode occurs on Mount Sinai.

During the encounter with the bush, God says to Moses: "All of you will then become God's servants on this mountain" (Exodus 3:12). The Torah is quite clear: "Moses tended the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro, sheikh of Midian. He led the flock to the edge of the desert, and he came to God's Mountain, in the Horeb area" (Exodus 3:1).

ACCORDING TO the Talmud, Jethro was an outcast from Midian (Exodus Raba I.c). The Midianites were located in modern Saudi Arabia. So the question is: Were there any Midianite camps in the Sinai Peninsula? An archeological survey of Sinai found no Midianite presence on the Peninsula. There was one exception, however, modern-day Timna.

Interestingly, there are depictions of grazing flock on rock art in Timna. This is our only candidate for the area of Jethro's camp, and it is, as the Torah states, close to the "edge of the desert." When I consulted with Beduin in the Timna area about the distance they travel from their camps in order to graze their flocks, they told me that they travel a maximum of 15-25 km., unless there is a drought, in which case they might wander as far as 60 km.

If we use the three geographical coordinates provided by the Torah, namely: Kadesh Barnea, Elim and the only Midianite site in the Sinai desert, we are suddenly left with only one possible candidate for the Biblical Mount Sinai – a mountain called Hashem el-Tarif by the Beduin of the desert.

We can now ask the question: Does Hashem el-Tarif conform to other traditions surrounding Mount Sinai? Rabbinic sources hold that Mount Sinai is the lowest of the mountains in its region.

Hashem el-Tarif is the lowest mountain in its region. It is 874 meters high and has ancient steps carved into its side. An 80-year-old man, like Moses at the time of the revelation on Mount Sinai, could easily climb to its flat top.

The Torah writes that Mount Sinai was able to accommodate hundreds of thousands, if not millions of

Israelites (Exodus 12:37). In other words, the mountain needs a huge plateau around it, so as to accommodate a very large number of people.

Hashem el-Tarif has a huge plateau around it.

According to the Torah, Moses was asked to create a barrier – “set a boundary” – between the mountain and the people (Exodus 19:12). Hashem el-Tarif is surrounded by a stone demarcation that is visible to this day.

Also according to the Torah, Moses destroyed the golden calf, ground it “and threw the dust into a stream that flowed down the mountain” (Exodus 32:20 and Deuteronomy 9:21). Hashem el-Tarif has evidence of travertine on top of the mountain. you can readily pick up huge pieces of travertine to this day. Travertine is created by fresh flowing water.

It is written in the Torah that Moses carved the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:4).

It's clear that Moses wasn't working with hammer and chisel. Travertine is a soft stone. It also conforms to the talmudic tradition that it was transparent.

When you put travertine up to the light you can see through it. Engravings would be seen from both sides. This conforms to the rabbinic tradition.

The Torah reports that Moses spoke to the people from on top of the mountain (Exodus 19:7). Hashem el-Tarif has a natural stage and is close by a natural amphitheater creating perfect acoustics and the ability to speak to the people below from the mountain above.

The prominent cleft in which Moses hid is mentioned in the Torah. It says that there he was protected from the glory of God (Exodus 33:22). The natural stage at the end of the mountain is separated from the mountain itself by a very prominent natural cleft.

The mountain was considered holy prior to the Exodus (Exodus 3:1). Hashem el-Tarif has the highest concentration of open-air sanctuaries in Sinai.

According to the Torah, Mount Sinai is close to Mount Seir (Deuteronomy 1:2 and 33:2). To this day, the extension of Hashem el-Tarif is called “Seira.”

It is clear from the Torah that Israelites did not engage in professional mountain climbing to get to the plateau surrounding the mountain. They just stopped en route. Also, when Aaron meets Moses, it seems to be that the mountain is located close to the main roads, easily accessible to men, women, children, and the elderly (Exodus 4:27).

Hashem el-Tarif sits on the main Sinai highway routes.

Put simply, Hashem el-Tarif conforms to every one of the Biblical criteria.

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