

# Our Heritage: Coercion or Choice?



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On Shavuot we celebrate receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai in the Jewish year 2448, corresponding to 1313 BCE. This Shavuot, explore some fascinating insights into whether our heritage is coerced or a choice and consider how this subject relates to issues of citizenship in the lead up to a General Election. Whether you enjoy discussing current affairs or delving into Jewish texts from their original sources, this learning card provides thought-provoking material for all teenagers to study and talk about.

Tribe helps young people to explore their heritage by producing a range of creative educational publications throughout the year.

Chag Sameach.

**Rabbi Eli Levin**

Tribe

## 1) Account of the Jewish people *willingly* accepting the Torah

Exodus chapter 24 verse 7

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' וַנַּעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע:

Then he (Moses) took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken *we will faithfully do!*”

## 2) Account of the Jewish people being *forced* to accept the Torah

Exodus chapter 19 verses 17 - 20

וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם לְקִרְיַת הָאֱלֹקִים מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְּצֻבוּ בְּתַהֲתִיתַי הָהָר:

Moses led the people out of the camp towards God, *and they took their places at the bottom of the mountain.*

וְהָרַס יְסִיבֵי עָשָׁן כָּלֹּ מַפְיֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו הִי בְּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עֲשָׁנוֹ כְּעָשָׁן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁן וַיִּחַרַד כָּל-הָהָר מְאֹד:

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֹזֵק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יִדְבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹקִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל:

The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.

וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל-הַר סִינַי אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא ה' לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר  
וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה:

The LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up.

**Talmud Shabbat page 88a**

The Gemara cites interpretations on the topic of the revelation at Sinai

וּיְתִיצְבוּ בַתְּחִתִּית הַהָר א"ר אַבְדִּימִי בַר חַמָּא בַר חַסָּא מְלַמֵּד שְׂכַפָּה  
הַקַּב"ה עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הַהָר כְּגִיגִית וְאָמַר לֵהֶם אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים  
הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטֵב וְאִם לֹא שֵׁם תֵּהֵא קְבוּרַתְכֶם.

The Torah says, "And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the bottom of the mountain." (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that **the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.**

א"ר אחא בר יעקב מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא.

Rav Acha bar Ya'akov said: From here there is a substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfil the Torah. The Jewish people can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding.

אמר רבא אעפ"כ הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש דכתיב (אסתר ט, כז)  
"קימו וקבלו היהודים." קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Achashverosh (during the Purim story), as it is written: "The Jews established, and accepted upon themselves" (Book of Esther 9:27). This means that the Jews established willingly what they had already accepted upon themselves through coercion at Sinai.

## Talking Points:

- There are conflicting views as to whether the Torah was accepted at Sinai willingly or under threat.
- According to the Talmud, it took almost 1000 years after the Torah was given at Mount Sinai for the Jewish people to affirm their willing acceptance of it during the era of the Purim story.



### 3) Rabbi Lord Sacks: Judaism & Windsor Castle share something in common

In the year 2000, Rabbi Sacks presented the St. George's Lecture at Windsor Castle in the presence of the Duke of Edinburgh. Here is an extract from his speech:

“I try to imagine what it must be like to inherit a building like Windsor Castle. To live in such a place, so steeped in history, is to want to know that history – how this building came to be, and why... Learning this history would be more than simply discovering facts. Because I had inherited the building it would be my history. I would not have chosen it. It would have chosen me. Inescapably, though, I would have entered into a set of obligations, a moral relationship with the past and the future. I would be part of the story of the castle and its heirs. The very fact that it was still here, still dominating the landscape, part of the historic legacy of Britain, would tell me something of great significance to my life. I would slowly realise that generation after generation of the kings and queens of England had endeavoured to preserve the castle and hand it on intact to future generations. They had vested their hopes in those who would come after them, that they too would do the same. And now it had come to me, I would know beyond doubt that I too was morally bound to protect it, and that if I failed to do so I would have betrayed the trust of those earlier generations, as well as failing to honour my responsibility to England as a whole.

Jews, will never own buildings like Windsor Castle. We are not that kind of people. But we own something that is, in

its way, no less majestic and even consecrated by time. The Jewish castle is built not of bricks or stone, but of words. But it too has been preserved across the centuries, handed on by one generation to the next, added to and enhanced in age after age, lovingly cherished and sustained. As a child I knew that one day I would inherit it from my parents, as they had inherited it from theirs. It is not a building but it is, nonetheless, a home, a place in which to live. More than it belongs to us, we belong to it; and it too is part of the heritage of mankind.”

## Talking Point:

- Rabbi Sacks suggests that we don't choose our heritage. In the same way that the royal family is hereditary, when one is born Jewish their heritage is attached to them automatically. Could this be considered coerced Judaism? Rabbi Sacks believes that we must value our heritage as a treasure, opportunity and responsibility rather than a burden. What do you think?

## 4) Should voting or actively abstaining be compulsory? (Excerpt from BBC News)

The right to vote is the most fundamental tenet of democracy and yet millions do not exercise it. So should that right be made into a duty?

The senior politician, David Winnick, is one of a number of politicians supporting more radical moves to get people voting. He argued, “if we want our democracy to flourish,





common sense dictates we should do what we can to get far more people to participate in elections than do at the moment.”

Mr Winnick wants the UK to consider a system similar to that in Australia, where people who do not vote, or at least express their intention to abstain, are fined. He insists his proposals do not constitute compulsory voting as such. Those who have religious or other objections would be able abstain but they would be required to register their abstention by contacting their electoral office in advance or doing so in person at the polling station.

“Don’t we all have obligations?,” asked Mr Winnick. “We all have to pay local and national taxes and if we drive we pay road tax...we can’t opt out and we don’t want anyone to opt out. Is that an infringement of civil liberties?”

“I don’t see why it should be argued that if there is a civic obligation to vote and being able to abstain there should be attack on the grounds that our civil liberties are being undermined.”

But critics say such an idea is alien to British democracy with its unwritten constitution and its more ad-hoc approach towards the concept of citizenship.

## **Talking Points:**

- Should voting in a General Election be compulsory?
- As Jewish citizens of a country should we feel duty bound to protect its heritage?



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