

Potomac Torah Study Center

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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Dr. Erica Brown, Scholar-in-Residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, is the guest scholar next Shabbat at the 22nd Annual Herbert Lieberman & Ruben D. Silverman Memorial Shabbaton at Beth Shalom Congregation in Potomac, MD (February 28-March 1, 2025). The Lieberman and Silverman families dedicate this week's Devrei Torah in memory of Herbert Lieberman and Ruben D. Silverman.

May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May Israel, with the support of the U.S. government, find a way to force Hamas to release the remaining hostages and bodies of victims of their brutality as soon as possible. May 5785 initiate a period of peace and security for Israel and Jews throughout the world.

Parshat Yitro opens (chapter 18) as Moshe's father-in-law hears of God's great interventions for B'Nai Yisrael and takes Moshe's wife and sons with him to reunite at the base of Har Sinai. However, chapter 17 ends with B'Nai Yisrael at Refidim, and they do not depart for Har Sinai until later and do not reach the base of Har Sinai until Sivan (19:2). Moshe's reunion with his family, including Yitro, therefore must take place after the Revelation – and thus chapter 18 is out of chronological order. (I discussed the likely reason for moving chapter 18 in my introduction two years ago.)

What is so important about Yitro's reunion with Moshe that the Torah moves it out of chronological order? The most common answer I have seen (and discussed in the past) is that chapter 17 ends with Amalek's attack – the reaction of one group of non-Jews to B'Nai Yisrael leaving Egypt. Yitro demonstrates a very different response, a non-Jewish (Midianite) priest thrilled for the Jews leaving Egypt and about to receive a direct message from God. By moving Yitro's reunion to come directly after Amalek's attack, chapter 18 fits thematically to contrast B'Nai Yisrael's interactions with members of two nearby non-Jewish nations living near them. Chapters 17 and 18 are models for B'Nai Yisrael on how to relate to evil and good from neighboring nations.

This year, I would like to discuss *Who Are You Moshe Rabbeinu?*, a compelling article by Rabbi Itiel Gold, a psychologist and alumnus of Yeshivat Har Etzion. I obtained the article from the Har Etzion archives, but it is also easily available on the Internet by searching the author and name of the article. Rabbi Gold observes that B'Nai Yisrael seem not to have accepted Zipporah, Moshe's foreign (Midianite) wife, and they also consider Moshe to be a foreigner, because Paro's daughter adopted him and raised him in the palace. Moshe is in a difficult situation, because at best B'Nai Yisrael consider him to be Hashem's representative while Moshe wishes to become a representative of the people to Hashem.

The Jews do not completely trust Moshe as their representative. (The people seem not to realize that a recently freed slave would not be effective negotiating with Paro.)

Yitro arrives and almost immediately realizes that Moshe and Zipporah both need to interact socially with B'Nai Yisrael so the people and Moshe's family can all relate comfortably with each other. Yitro therefore arranges a large dinner to celebrate God's gifts for the people and invites the heads of the various tribes and other VIPs to interact with Moshe and his family. Everyone comes and enjoys the meal – except Moshe. Yitro discovers that Moshe spends all day and night every day meeting with people who have questions for God, and Moshe judges disagreements for many hours each day. Given that schedule, Moshe does not finish his work early enough for a social meal.

Yitro's next intervention is to recommend a judicial system to make Moshe's workload manageable. If God approves, Moshe should train judges for minor matters; higher level judges for initial appeals; and reserve only the most important not yet determined cases to go on to Moshe for final decisions. This model, the prototype for judicial systems for most countries even today, has the advantage of showing the people that Moshe is on their side and is their representative taking issues up from the people to God to resolve.

Rabbi Gold's analysis demonstrates how Yitro's suggestions meet the psychological needs of Moshe, Zipporah, and B'Nai Yisrael. The people come to meet Moshe and his family, see them as their representatives, and understand that Moshe is working very long hours to help the people understand and obtain help from God. With this system newly in place, the people have a method to help them understand and learn how to meet Hashem's demands. B'Nai Yisrael do not all learn and trust either Moshe or God completely for some time, but at least they have an intelligent method to learn better how to follow the mitzvot.

So far my discussion focuses on how we are to live and relate to each other, God, and non-Jews in a civilized world. Israel, however, has been dealing with a world of evil – murderers capturing and torturing our people, sending weapons aimed at destroying lives and property, and encouraging hatred among non-Jews all over the world. Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander asks how "we balance the imminent threat to the lives of our brothers and sisters in captivity with the prospect of harm to any or many of us when convicted murderers go free?" Rabbi Brander's answer is that the Torah gives us a road map directing us toward values by which we wish to live. Meanwhile, the Israeli and American governments support our people in fighting evil as necessary to bring the fighting to an end.

Our prayers help. On Tu B'Shevat, I received an email from Kiryat Arba informing us that The Mor family of Kiryat Arba have received a sign of life from their son, hostage Eitan Mor. As we continue to pray for Eitan Avraham ben Efrat and all the hostages, may the news about Eitan Mor be a sign that Hashem is listening and working to bring better news to our people. As we continue to perform more mitzvot, pray to Hashem, and oppose evil in the world, may conditions for our people improve. May we also teach our children and grandchildren more lessons from the Torah.

Note: in writing these words, I recall anti-Semitic attacks on my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, such as his getting arrested and spending time in jail for petitioning for Soviet Jews in front of the Soviet Embassy and spending all day in shul on Yom Kippur after high school thugs pelted him with raw eggs while he walked to services. In contrast, one of Rabbi Cahan's closest friends was a minister with whom he co-taught a Bible course for many years (with some services at Har Shalom and others at the Lutheran Church). Hopefully all of us can remember many episodes of positive interactions with non-Jews as well as any anti-Semitic incidents.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful

organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Late news from Kiryat Arba on Tu B'Shevat: The Mor family of Kiryat Arba announced that they have received a sign of life from their son, hostage Eitan Mor who was kidnapped to Gaza during the October 7 massacre while saving lives. The community of Kiryat Arba requests that we all take a moment now to pray for Eitan Avraham ben Efrat and all the hostages.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Eitan Avraham ben Efrat (see above), Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Haftarat Parshat Yitro: Of Angels and Humans

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * 5785 / 2025
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

This week's OTS for You (Devrei Torah) has been dedicated in loving memory of Irving I. Stone z"l on his 25th yahrzeit. May his memory be a blessing.

When Yishayahu experiences revelation in our Haftarah for Parshat Yitro, angels feature prominently in his vision of the divine realm, surrounding the throne upon which God sits while bestowing words of praise — “*The world is full of your glory*,” they declare — words we say in the daily recitation of Kedusha. The angels exist in a world that is perfect and flawless, where they can declare with certainty that God’s glory is manifestly present in every corner of reality.

It is for this reason that Yishayahu feels so uncomfortably out of place in the heavenly abode. As he shares with the angels, “*Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of impure lips, and I live among a people of impure lips; yet my own eyes have beheld the Sovereign God of hosts*” (Yishayahu 6:5).

Coming from our tainted and flawed world, the prophet feels unworthy of the perfect vision of the angelic chorus, until an angel purifies his lips to allow him to speak in the name of God.

This discrepancy between human and angelic perspectives plays a central role in Chazal’s account of the giving of the Torah, albeit in an entirely different vein. While no angels appear in the Torah’s version of the story, our Sages recount that at Sinai too, Moshe encounters conflict between himself and the angels.

But in Moshe's case, that discrepancy highlights why God must hand over the Torah to the Jewish people. The angels, noticing Moshe's arrival in the heavens, protest the divine plan to give the Torah to Moshe. They challenge God: How could so sacred a text, a reflection of the divine mind, be given to human beings? Yet rather than respond, God invites Moshe to address Him and the angels himself:

Master of the Universe, the Torah that You are giving me, what is written in it? God said to him: "*I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage*")Exodus 20:2(. Moses said to the angels: Did you descend to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? God said to him: "*You shall have no other gods before Me*")Exodus 20:3(. Moses said to the angels: Do you dwell among the nations who worship idols that you require this special warning?

Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "*Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it*")Exodus 20:8(. Moses asked the angels: Do you perform labor that you require rest from it? Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? "*Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain*")Exodus 20:7(, meaning that it is prohibited to swear falsely. Moses asked the angels: Do you conduct business with one another that may lead you to swear falsely?

Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "*Honor your father and your mother*")Exodus 20:12(. Moses asked the angels: Do you have a father or a mother that would render the commandment to honor them relevant to you?

Again Moses asked: What else is written in it? God said to him: "*You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal*")Exodus 20:13(Moses asked the angels: Is there jealousy among you, or is there an evil inclination within you that would render these commandments relevant? Immediately the angels agreed with the Holy One, Blessed be He, that He made the right decision to give the Torah to the people,)Shabbat 88b(

Sure, up in the heavens there is a perfect domain, an angelic realm where all is pure and flawless. But that's not what the Torah is for. The Torah is meant to guide us here in our world, where we are sinful and fearful and jealous, where we have complicated relationships and layers of pain and endless confusion. We are not angels. We humans were never meant to live in the heavens, and neither was the Torah. Even if our prophets can envision the heavens, our job is to face the life we've been given here on earth.

The gaping abyss between the heavens and the earth feels especially wide nowadays. The current hostage/prisoner swap entails decisions none of us would ever have wanted to make.

How do we balance the imminent threat to the lives of our brothers and sisters in captivity with the prospect of harm to any or many of us when convicted murderers go free?

How do we weigh the terror of the hostage families and the grief of the bereaved families, along with the swirl of anguish, fear and uncertainty each and every one of us holds at this juncture?

We face questions that angels could never dream of, challenges that seem to obscure the glory of God that we continue to believe, despite everything, fills the earth. And it is precisely for these moments that we have been gifted the Torah; to offer us guidance in the face of crisis. I dare say that even in moments in which belief is difficult or impossible the Torah remains a road map directing us toward the values by which we wish to live.

And in so doing, may we be blessed by the words spoken by Yitro in our parsha: "*If you do this — and God so commands you — you will be able to bear it; and the entirety of this people will return to its place in peace*")Shemot 18:23(.

* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more

information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Yitro: The Discernment of Outsiders

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

Can someone from the outside see better than those on the inside?

The word that introduces and is the catalyst for Yitro's advice to Moshe is *va'yar*, to see: – *Moshe's father-in-law saw.* ”)Exodus 18:14(This seeing is not merely observing. When Moshe later implores Yitro to stay with the people, he says “*And you will be for us as eyes.* ”)Numbers 10:31(. Clearly, there is something in the seeing of Yitro that is not accessible to the people themselves.

Yitro's seeing is one of discernment. As an outsider, he was able to see something that Moshe could not. Moshe, working from within a system, took the system for granted. He didn't even realize that he was operating within any system at all! It was reality as he knew it.

David Foster Wallace famously gave the following parable to illustrate this point:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How's the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the heck is water?”

An outsider however, or perhaps a wise old fish, knows of other systems, knows that there is both water and dry land. He knows that there are systems in which one takes all the responsibility on himself, and those in one delegates authority and responsibility. This is the וירא of discernment.

At the beginning of the Exodus story, we encounter another “*וירא*” which is likewise the catalyst for significant action. It is the וירא of Moshe, himself an outsider to the slavery and suffering of the Israelites. He encounters an act of oppression: “*and he saw the Egyptian smiting the Hebrew.* ”)Exodus 2.11(. Moshe's “*seeing*” was the discernment of an outsider. The Israelites themselves knew that they were being oppressed, but just took it as the reality of their lives. An Israelite being beaten? Just another day at the office. Moshe, however, was outraged. He saw the indignity of their treatment, the injustice of enslavement. And this discernment, and his acting upon it, led to all the events that eventually culminated in the redemption of the people from slavery. Because he, and eventually they, could realize that another reality was possible.

What, then, was Yitro able to discern, what was the essence of his advice to Moshe? Two things. First, not just to delegate, but to know what to delegate. To understand what the role that you are meant to do, and what is the role that others can do.

Yitro spells out to Moshe what his unique task is. Moshe is to bring the people to God: “*You shall represent the people before God, and bring their words to God.* ”)Exodus 18:19(. As a leader you must internalize and represent the struggles and success, the yearnings, complaints and desires, that people have in their relationship to God. You must bring the people close to God. Alongside this, you must bring God to the people. “*you shall tell them the mitzvot, and the way the path they must go on, and the actions that they shall do.* ” The other stuff – the judging of the people – leave that to others. Know what your unique role is and focus solely on that.

This is an essential message for all of us, not just for religious leaders. As a student of mine said, “*There are things that have to get done in the world. Very important things. My task is to know what are the ones that I must do, and what are*

the ones that must be done, but not by me." This plays out in terms of our lives and in terms of our work. We can get caught up in a million things, but a good manager will say, "Hey, your time is valuable. We don't pay you to do all this busywork. Let someone else do that. You focus on what you can uniquely contribute to the company."

Yitro's second discerning was – surprisingly – about Torah itself, and was key in preparing the people for receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai. He was, in essence, saying to them:

"You are about to get all the mitzvot, the thundering commandments from God, followed by scores of mitzvot and civil laws in Mishpatim. You are about to be terrified by God's commanding voice, and respond – "We will do and we will listen." But as someone coming from outside this world of Divine commandment, I have something to tell you: A religious life is not limited to observing the specific and concrete mitzvot.. Moshe, teach them the laws and the mitzvot," – yes, but also "teach them the path on which they should walk."

The Rabbis)Baba Kamma 100a(tell us that "*the path*" refers to gemilut chasadim, bikkur cholim, and burying the dead. It is a life lived with care and concern for others. And observe not just the action, but "*the act as it should be done*" – acting beyond the letter of the law, guided by the spirit of the law.

This is our job in life. First, to be able to step outside our bubble and to be able to ask ourselves: What are we assuming to just be the way things are, when alternatives are genuinely available? If we're having trouble taking this stance from the outside, we can bring in somebody who can help us. We can hire a coach to help us see differently, to tell us what other possibilities exist, and to guide us as to what we are doing right, where we are using our talents most effectively, and where we are going wrong. And an outside can help us identify when we are paying so much attention to the concrete acts that we are doing, that we are losing sight of the bigger picture. We are doing the acts, but not as they should be done.

This was the advice that Yitro, as an outsider, was able to give. And from a religious perspective, as a precursor to Matan Torah, the advice of bringing values and human connection into our life of mitzvot is a one that we, as insiders, can so often lose sight of. Let us never forget the need for the discernment of an outsider, and the enduring advice of Yitro.

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives.

Drasha: Yisro: Man Over Moses

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1998

Parshas Yisro begins by relating how impressed its namesake, Yisro, (Jethro) is upon hearing the amazing events that transpired to the nation led by his son-in-law, Moshe. He decides to convert to Judaism. Yisro sends word to Moshe that he will soon be arriving at the Israelite camp. Yisro wants Moshe to leave his post and greet him in the desert before he arrives at the Israelite camp. The Torah tells us that Moshe did go out to greet Yisro: "the man bowed and kissed him and asked the peace of his dear one." (Exodus 18:8)

Rashi is bothered by the ambiguity. "Who bowed to whom? Who kissed whom? Who was the one to make the gesture? Was it Yisro, the father-in-law, who kissed Moshe, or did Moshe, the son-in-law, leader of millions of people, run to greet his father in-law a Midianite priest, and bow and kiss him?"

Rashi quotes the Mechilta which refers us to Bamidbar (Numbers 12:3) where Moshe is called "the man Moshe" obviously the words, "the man bowed and kissed him" in our portion must mean that same man – Moshe.

Why, however, did the Torah choose a seemingly convoluted way to tell us that Moshe prostrated himself before his father-in-law? Would it not have been easier to tell us that “Moshe man bowed and kissed him and asked the peace of his dear one”? Why did the Torah use the words “the man” and send us to the Book of Numbers to learn who “the man” was?

Last year my brother, Rabbi Zvi Kamenetzky of Chicago, tried to contact a friend who was vacationing at Schechter’s Caribbean Hotel in Miami Beach, Florida. After about 15 rings, the hotel operator, an elderly, southern black woman, who worked at the hotel for three decades politely informed my brother that the man was not in the room. “Would you like to leave a message?” she inquired.

“Sure,” responded Reb Zvi, “tell him that Rabbi Kamenetzky, called.”

The woman at the other end gasped. “Raabbi Kaamenetzky?” she drawled. “Did you say you were Raabbi Kaamenetzky?” She knew the name! It sounded as if she was about to follow up with a weighty question, and my brother responded in kind. “Yes.” He did not know what would follow. “Why do you ask?”

“Are you,” asked the operator, “by any chance, related to the famous Rabbi Kamenetzky?”

There was silence in Chicago. My brother could not imagine that this woman had an inkling of who his grandfather, the great sage. Dean of Mesivta Torah Voda’ath to whom thousands had flocked for advice and counsel, was. She continued. “You know, he passed away about ten years ago at the end the wintah?” She definitely had her man, thought Reb Zvi. Still in shock, he offered a subdued, “Yes, I’m a grandson.”

“YOOOU ARE?” she exclaimed, “well I’m sure glad to talk to ya! Cause your grandpa — he was a real good friend of mine!”

My brother pulled the receiver from his ear and stared at the mouthpiece. He composed himself and slowly began to repeat her words, quizzically. “You say that Rabbi Kamenetzky was a good friend of yours?”

“Sure! Every mornin’ Raabbi Kaaamenetzky would come to this here hotel to teach some sorta Bible class)It was the Daf-Yomi.(Now my desk is about ten yards from the main entrance of the hotel. But every mornin’ he made sure to come my way, nod his head, and say good mornin’ to me. On his way out, he would always stop by my desk and say good-bye. Oh! Yes! He was a great Rabbi but he was even a greater man. He was a wonderful man. He was a real good friend of mine!”

The Torah could have told us the narrative an easier way. It could have told us that Moshe bowed before, and kissed Yisro. It does more. It tells us that it was a man who kissed Yisro. True, it was Moshe that performed those actions. But they were not the actions of a Moses, they were the actions of a mentch!

Often we attribute acts of kindness, compassion, and extra care to super-human attributes of our sages and leaders. The Torah tells us that it is the simple mentch that performs them. Inside every great leader lies “the man.” Little wonder that the words “and the man Moses” that Rashi quotes from the Book of Numbers begin a verse that fits our explanation quite well. The verse reads “and the man Moses was the exceedingly humble, more than any one on the face of the earth.”)Numbers 12:3(It was the man Moses, who was exceedingly humble, more than any one on the face of the earth.

Good Shabbos!

From my archives.

Shabbat: A Covenant and a Vision: Thoughts on Parashat Yitro

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

“...for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it”)Shemot 20:11(.

“And you shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day”)Devarim 5:15(.

After the exodus from Egypt, Moses led the people of Israel to Mount Sinai where they experienced God's revelation of the *“Ten Commandments.”* At this special moment between God and Israel, the commandments are remarkably universal in tone. They reflect basic ideas of faith and moral behavior. Even the Sabbath is presented in universal terms as a remembrance that God created the world (including all people, not just Israel) in six days and rested on the seventh day.

This universal tone was captured in a statement by Rabbi Yohanan: *“When God's voice came forth at Mount Sinai, it divided itself into 70 human languages, so that the whole world might understand it”*)Shemot Rabbah 5:9(. Indeed, many non-Jews revere the *“Ten Commandments”* and view them as cornerstones of human civilization. Religions other than Judaism also have their Sabbaths.

When Moses recounts the *“Ten Commandments”* in Devarim, he rewords the passage about Shabbat. Instead of referring to God's resting after the six days of creation, Moses refers to God's having redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses wants the children of Israel to focus on their intimate covenant with God who redeemed them from servitude.

So Shabbat is both universal and particular. It is relevant to all humanity but also has particular meaning for the people of Israel. The dual nature of Shabbat is reflected in how the Torah enjoins Israel to keep Shabbat:

“The children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day He ceased from work and rested”)Shemot 31: 16-17(.

The passage describes Shabbat as a sign between God and the children of Israel. We would have expected the Torah to root the covenant in God's having redeemed Israel from Egypt — as in Moses' version of the Ten Commandments in Devarim. But the Torah grounded the covenant in the recognition of God's having rested on the seventh day of creation — as in the Ten Commandments recorded in Yitro. At first glance, this seems like a non sequitur; but a deeper message is intended. The children of Israel are to remember and observe Shabbat with two dimensions in mind: a unique covenant with God and a universal message for humanity.

Shabbat is a sign of God's covenant with Israel. We observe Shabbat in a way that distinguishes this day qualitatively from the other days of the week. We dress differently, eat differently, pray differently; we refrain from many weekday activities. Shabbat is a spiritual oasis, refreshing and renewing our bodies and souls. Every Shabbat-observant Jew experiences God's covenant with the children of Israel in a direct, intimate and all-encompassing way.

But Shabbat also expands our religious vision. It is not only a unique covenantal day for the people of Israel; it is a reminder of the Creator of the universe, of all humanity. To be a full “shomer/shomeret Shabbat” we not only must observe the Shabbat rituals; we must also remind ourselves — and humanity at large — that God is our Creator, that all human beings are creatures of One God, that life has ultimate meaning. We celebrate Shabbat as a sign of our covenant with God but also as a prod to work for *“a world that is fully Shabbat-like.”*

The Torah's teachings on Shabbat are particular to Israel and universal to humanity. Our ideal Shabbat incorporates both components — covenantal observances and grand religious vision.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its winter fund raising period. Thank you.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3318>

Remembering Abraham Lincoln: A Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Until 1968, Americans celebrated February 12 as Abraham Lincoln's birthday and February 22 as George Washington's birthday. These commemorations were then replaced with Presidents' Day on the third Monday of February. This was widely perceived as a downgrading of American veneration of Lincoln and Washington.

With the growing pressures for egalitarianism and multiculturalism, it was to be expected that great national heroes be cut down to size. After all, they were flawed human beings, not much better or different from ourselves.

In his perceptive book, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, Dr. Barry Schwartz traces the dramatic drop in Lincoln's prestige, especially since the 1960s. He writes: "Ours is an age ready to live without triumphal doctrine, an age in which absolutes are local and private rather than national, a post-heroic age in which national greatness is the epitome of the naive and outmoded." (p. 191). In the post-heroic era, it has become fashionable to focus on the flaws of American society and the evils of American history. Our heroes have now tended to be athletes and entertainers rather than singularly great political figures. Indeed, to identify a public figure as "great" is to invite a barrage of criticism from the politically correct opposition, stressing that person's numerous sins and shortcomings.

Those of us who spent our childhoods before the mid to late 1960s are still the biggest fans of Lincoln. Those whose childhoods were in the late 1960s and later were less likely to study about the great Abraham Lincoln that we knew: the common man born in a log cabin who went on to become one of America's great Presidents; the man of homespun wit and wisdom; the President who saved the Union; the President who emancipated the slaves; the President who was deeply religious in his own special way. As children, we learned not just to respect Lincoln, but to see in him a quality of excellence to which we ought to aspire. Lincoln's greatness was an inspiration; he represented the greatness of America and the American dream.

We need to remind ourselves: Greatness does not entail having all the virtues and strengths; greatness does not depend on external pomp and glory. Greatness, like the eternal light in our synagogues, needs to be steady, to give light, to inspire from generation to generation. It is futile to argue that Abraham Lincoln – or any human being – was absolutely perfect and without shortcomings. Yet, this does not negate the possibility of human greatness, any more than it would be to negate the greatness of the eternal light because it was not a larger, stronger light. A great human being is one whose life offers a steady light and inspiration to the generations, whose words and deeds have had profound positive impact on others, whose existence has helped transform our world into a better place.

Abraham Lincoln was a great man with a lasting legacy to his country and to the world. His spirit is well captured in the closing words of his second inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1865:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

It is a pity that Presidents' Day is simply treated as a day off from school or work; or a day for special sales. Wouldn't it be far more valuable for our society if children actually stayed in school and learned about Washington, Lincoln and other great Presidents? Wouldn't it be more sensible for all Americans to spend some time during the day to learn about, read about, think about the Presidents who helped make the United States a bastion of liberty? To squander the significance of Presidents' Day is to further erode respect and appreciation of the Presidents...and the highest values of American life.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/remembering-abraham-lincoln-blog-rabbi-marc-d-angel>

Yisro: Big Commandments ##

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Dedicated in Memory of Mr. David Rhine Sholomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l.

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel

Dedicated in Loving Memory to Chana Chaya bat Sarah, Mrs. Helen Grazi A'H, by the Grazi Family

When Moshe ascended the mountain to learn the Torah, Hashem gave him a gift to bring back to the Jewish people. Besides the gift of Torah, Hashem gave Moshe the Luchos, two tablets of precious stone, inscribed with the Aseres HaDibros, the Ten Statements. The first five of the Statements are easily distinguishable from the second five. They are Mitzvos between us and Hashem, including belief in Hashem and Shabbos observance. (Honoring parents is included in the first five because Hashem declared that parenting is a partnership with Him. *"If you honor your parents, it is as if you honored Me."*) The second five are Mitzvos between a person and his fellow man. These are Mitzvos that guide us in our interpersonal relationships.

The Mabit (Beis Elokim 12) maintains that the writing on the Luchos covered the entire stone. Thus, the second five statements of interpersonal Mitzvos, which have some very short statements, were written in much larger letters to cover the entire stone. What is the significance of Hashem writing the interpersonal Mitzvos in very large letters?

One approach is that Hashem wanted to alert us to the fact that the system of Torah is not only interested in the G-dly, religious things. Hashem is also interested in how we conduct ourselves in our interpersonal lives. Judaism is not just about what we do in shul, but also how we act in our homes, businesses, and in the marketplace. This is a beautiful insight regarding interpersonal Mitzvos; they illustrate that Torah is a full life experience.

But the insight about interpersonal Mitzvos really goes much deeper.

When we first consider interpersonal Mitzvos, we might think that these Mitzvos are areas that we and the common man of the world have in common. When we deal with the first set of five, we recognize that we are different. After all we worship differently and have a different day for our Sabbath. But in our interpersonal laws we might think that we are all the same. We all prohibit murder; we all prohibit immoral activity. Perhaps this is why Hashem made the interpersonal Mitzvos loom in very large writing on the Luchos. It was to say, *"The greater gift I am giving you — the Mitzvos that I will write in big, bold letters — is the gift of interpersonal Mitzvos."*

What is so special about the interpersonal Mitzvos of the Torah?

Let us consider them one by one.

Don't Murder – At first glance this seems like a Mitzva in which we would find commonality with the people of the world. It is smart to legislate "No Murder," because each person and their family gets protected. But when we realize that the Torah teaches "No Murder," not just as a societal reciprocity thing, but as an intrinsic truth, we realize this is very different than what the common man would legislate. Consider, for example, the topic of mercy killing/ euthanasia, where the patient approves death or the donation of vital organs, and the Torah still says that we may not murder.

Don't Commit Adultery – Here too, we might have expected a universal value that is embraced even by the common man. Yet, recent history teaches us that the sacred nature of marriage resonates with people, but only to a point. What happens when people or society consent to immorality? Torah law says that immorality is wrong, even if it gets the public press' consensus. Morality is an intrinsic truth. Even if many people agree to change the standards the Torah, the Torah standards of fidelity and morality remain.

Hashem chose to write the interpersonal Mitzvos in very large letters as if to say, "*Look, this is my bigger gift to you. Your laws of murder and adultery are different and far more elevated than what the common man would consider. Don't think that you need Torah just for the G-dly Mitzvos and Shabbos, and that the interpersonal ones you would have figured out on your own. On the contrary, it is the interpersonal Mitzvos as commandments with intrinsic holiness that are My biggest gift to you.*"

This principle is especially noticeable by the last of the Aseres HaDibros where the Torah declares, "*Do not be jealous of your fellow.*" The Torah goes well beyond prohibiting theft. The Torah prohibits coercive business practices and even instructs us to overcome our knee jerk emotions of jealousy, to ascend to a higher calling. Similarly, the Torah standard instructs us not to take revenge, and even not to use our speech in a vindictive way through Onaas Devorim, Richilus, or Lashon Horah. "*Bonim Atem LaHashem Elokeichem – You are children of Hashem,*" and are expected to look out for each other's good.

The Chofetz Chaim is a person who lived by this higher calling. On one occasion a thief stole the candlesticks that were on his table. When the Chofetz Chaim realized what happened he ran after the thief. When the students saw the Chofetz Chaim running, they joined the chase. But to their surprise, when the Chofetz Chaim neared the fleeing thief, instead of catching him, they heard their beloved Rebbe call out, "*I am Mochel – I forgive! I grant you the candlesticks as a complete gift.*"

As they caught their breath from the chase, the students marveled at the kindness of their Rebbe. But then they asked, "*If Rebbe really wanted to forgive the thief, why couldn't Rebbe just forgive him from the comfort of the home? What was the reason to catch up with him?*"

The Chofetz Chaim replied, "*Had I forgiven him from my dining room table he would have been forgiven, but he would still think that he was a thief. I would not have truly fulfilled my obligation in the situation. I needed to chase him to let him know.*"

The Torah view on interpersonal relationships is not just civil cooperation, to live together. The Torah urges us to a higher calling. Interpersonal Mitzvos are not just what the common man would have legislated. Interpersonal Mitzvos are our precious heritage, a special gift from G-d, etched out in big, bold letters for us to see.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos,

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching.

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Yisro – Don’t Forget The Basics

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer* © 2021

The Ten Commandments are the essence of our bond with G-d. It is the pact through which we accepted to become His nation for all time. They include the fundamental concepts of our belief in G-d, respect for G-d, respect for others and for justice. Our rabbis teach us that all of Torah in its entirety is contained within the Ten Commandments given at Sinai.

)See Rash”i Shemos 24:12(

In this vein, we find a fundamental principle which lies at the core of many mitzvos in the fourth commandment, the mitzvah of Shabbos. Hashem told us, *“Remember the Sabbath day to make it holy.”*)Shemos 20:8(. The Ramban explains that this mitzvah follows directly from the previous mitzvahs. The first three of the ten commandments encapsulate our belief and respect for G-d. The first is to recognize that G-d is the Creator who understands all that happens and is all-capable, as demonstrated through our Exodus from Egypt. The second is to recognize that He is the One and Only G-d and to honor Him alone. The third is to show Him the great honor and distinction of respecting even the mention of His name.

After Hashem establishes and defines our responsibility to recognize and respect Him, we are then commanded to make a sign and a constant reminder to ourselves that He is the Creator of all. This, says the Ramban, is the mitzvah of Shabbos, which is a reminder of how Hashem created the world in six days.

The Ramban here is presenting Shabbos in a different light than we usually hear it. Shabbos is usually presented as our testimony to the world that we recognize the world has a Creator. It is the day Hashem rejoices over creation itself, and we are joining in His celebration. The Ramban, however, is saying that Shabbos is not just a celebration and is not just a testimony for others – it is a reminder to us ourselves that there is a Creator. Having a weekly reminder of such a basic concept seems unnecessary. Most reminders of historical events, such as Pesach and Shavuos, remembering the Exodus and the Giving of the Torah respectively, happen once a year. We don’t spend the whole year thinking about them. By celebrating the anniversary of the event, we remember it and pass on the legacy to future generations. Why is Shabbos different that we need a weekly reminder for the most well-known and basic concept of all?

The Ramban takes this new concept even further. He says that the mitzvah to remember Shabbos is to remember Shabbos every single day. As we go through our week, we should recognize every day as a weekday and distinct from Shabbos, which is designated as a holy day. He concludes by saying, *“by remembering Shabbos always, we will remember creation at all times, and we will acknowledge at all times that the world has a Creator, and that He commanded us in this sign as it says, ‘for it is a sign between Me and you’*)Shemos 31:13(. *And this is a great foundation in the trust in the Almighty.”*

To understand this Ramban, consider one who goes shopping to buy food for dinner. On the way to the store, he hears that an old and very dear friend is in town and eagerly takes a detour to see his friend. Catching up with his friend, the time flies and exhilarated he returns home, never having gone to the store. In life, there are many things that excite us and bring us enjoyment and can distract us from our immediate goals.

The Ramban is teaching us that the first three commandments require us to understand that our recognition of G-d and connection with Him is the essence of life. This is the beginning and first steps of our pact with G-d. Through this recognition, we elevate the world and deepen our connection with G-d. Yet, it is so easy to get involved in our daily pursuits and life’s activities and lose focus on our recognition of G-d and connection with Him. To maintain this

awareness we need constant reminders. Shabbos, as well as many mitzvos, help us to maintain this focus in everything we do, living a life connected with G-d.

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Yitro: All You Need is Love

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

Of all the original and weird interpretations to Biblical verses I have had the ill fortune to hear, the first prize goes to a member of the Free Masons lodge in Bogota, Colombia, who during a lecture on the Ten Commandments and the Essence of Judaism, raised his hand with a comment. We are all familiar with the text, he said, and I think that it is about time we move beyond the literal meaning of *You shall not kill.* When I asked for his interpretation he gave it as *killing is impossible.* His rationale was that the Torah was given to a primitive society that needed such a prohibition, but in our modern day and age, there is no need for it, and therefore it should be read as saying that killing is impossible because it annihilates only the body, but the soul lives forever. I thanked the learned man for his insightful comment)and made a mental note to keep as far away from him as possible(but answered that unfortunately, man has not changed that much. Deep inside, we are still driven by the same fears, anxieties, urges and ambitions that moved our forefathers millennia ago. What have changed are the external conditions: better police force, social norms and ubiquitous media prevent many perpetrators from carrying out their crimes. However, those who do succeed, have modern technology to enhance their murderous attacks with horrific results. No, mi amigo, I had to conclude, not only the literal meaning is the only valid one, but it is needed now more than ever because of the easy access of criminals and sociopaths to very potent weapons. That encounter took place 20 years ago, but with each passing moment, the need for the ancient warning of the Torah is validated as the prohibition itself is being violated. The Boston marathon attack)the week Rabbi Ovadia was writing(was a grim reminder of what man is capable of doing for no reason but hatred – hatred toward life, joy and happiness – which permits criminals to plan and carry out heinous crimes, destroying lives and families. We hear daily of similar atrocities, but we shrug them off as a natural event in a war zone)Iraq, Afghanistan(, conflict zone)Israel, India(or political tension)Tibet, Spain, Ireland(– violence we do not expect it to happen here. Officials and officers, citizens and clerics have vowed to respond with resilience and might, but they cannot eliminate all violent attacks on humans.

While sometimes we feel as if there is no hope of eliminating violence in our world, there is one thing we can do. We can teach ourselves, our kids and our neighbors the whole Torah. It is a very short text, but it takes a lifetime to learn and incorporate. If all of mankind would adhere to the Torah, we would feel as safe in Mombasa and Kabul as we do in... where, actually? Maybe Antarctica! It would be a tedious and hard process, and we might not reap the fruits ourselves, but if we succeed in influencing even a handful around us to do so, the impact will be tremendous as it will reverberate around the globe.]editor's note: here Rabbi Ovadia proposes God's plan in seeking a new world plan with Avraham Avinu.[The entire

Torah is found in this week's Parasha: *"Love the other as you love yourself."* That, according to Hillel the Elder, is the whole purpose and the whole meaning of the Torah, because if I am able to love myself and appreciate the life given to me, than not only will I refrain from committing acts that jeopardize it, but I will want to enhance the lives around me. But then I will have to stop and think that the Torah commands me to love myself not for selfish reasons but to help others. If we would be able to create an ever widening circle of giving and supporting, emotionally and spiritually as well as economically, those around us who need it, even if they are the "Other," then this circle of Hessed, of loving kindness will keep on growing. People will have to realize, with time, that to be a good Jew, a good religious person, and a good citizen of the world, we must do ourselves good and share it with others.

This proposal does not mean letting crooks go free or dropping all cautionary measures, but while justice is pursued, let us build a world based on love and understanding, and then maybe the sixth commandment will be understood: *"it is*

impossible to kill" because there will be no human being on the face of this planet who will consider taking the life of another person to be feasible. And then, of course, Mashiach will come!

Shabbat Shalom.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>**. The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

Be the Only -- A Path to Sanity

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

"Don't be the best. Be the only" may be some of the most valuable advice I've ever heard. After all, the "best" is a fantasy – a wisp of the wind that changes definition depending on the context. If you open a pizza parlor, can you really ever say that you make the "best" pizza? You may like it the best, but everyone has different preferences, and there will never be a consensus on which is the "best." Trying to be the best is a way to drive ones self mad trying to meet an impossible ideal.

Instead be the only. Make pizza in a way that no one around you is doing. If no one is making a thin crust, be the only thin crust in town. Focus on your uniqueness, and you will stand out and corner your own market. One can always use uniqueness to make a contribution to the world. And uniqueness differentiates your shop from the New York Style pizza place around the block.

Pizza metaphor aside, this policy applies to any area of life, including business, rabbinics, craftsmanship, etc. Find a way to contribute in your unique way.

It's the message of the 10th commandment – not to covet anyone or anything another person has. The Ibn Ezra points out that a mature individual knows that whatever another person has comes from him doing his own unique mission. So there's no reason for you to covet or be jealous because you have a mission that's separate than his. Focus on what you bring to the table rather than outdoing and/or trying to take what another has, and you'll find a much deeper satisfaction waiting for you.

Shabbat Shalom,

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah

Yitro: The Date of Matan Torah

On what day was the Torah revealed to Israel? The majority opinion is that the Torah was given on the sixth day of Sivan. Rabbi Yossi, however, disagreed, arguing that the Torah was given on the seventh of Sivan)Shabbat 86b(.

What is the essence of this disagreement? What is the significance of the date of Matan Torah?

Perfecting Creation

Rav Kook explained that the Sages were debating the fundamental goal of the Torah. The sixth and seventh of Sivan correspond to the very first sixth and seventh days in history — the sixth and seventh day of Creation.

Most of the Sages associated the Siniatic revelation with the sixth day of Creation, the day that mankind was created. This connection indicates that the primary objective of the Torah is to complete that act of Creation — the birth of humanity. The goal of Torah is to perfect humanity, to recreate it in a holier, purer form.

Rabbi Yossi, on the other hand, wanted to stress an even higher goal of the Torah. For after the Torah has made its mark on mankind and its ideals have been internalized in the human heart, it will then take root into the innermost soul of the world, uplifting and refining the entire universe.

In terms of this ultimate goal of the Torah, it is fitting that the Torah be revealed to the world on the seventh day, the concluding day of Creation. Through the seventh day, the Torah is linked to the true culmination of Creation — the Sabbath, the day of ultimate perfection and rest.

)*Silver from the Land of Israel*. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. IV on Shabbat 86b)9:17(.(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/YITRO61.htm>

Yitro: The Structure of the Good Society (5775, 5782)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

In the House of Lords there is a special chamber used as, among other things, the place where new Peers are robed before their introduction into the House. When my predecessor Lord Jakobovits was introduced, the official robing him commented that he was the first Rabbi to be honoured in the Upper House. Lord Jakobovits replied, “*No, I am the second.*” “*Who was the first?*” asked the surprised official. The chamber is known as the Moses Room because of the large painting that dominates the room. It shows Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai. Lord Jakobovits pointed to this mural, indicating that Moses was the first Rabbi to ever be honoured in the House of Lords.

The Ten Commandments that appear in this week’s parsha have long held a special place not only in Judaism but also within the broader configuration of values we call the Judeo-Christian ethic. In the United States they were often to be found adorning American law courts, though their presence has been challenged, in some states successfully, on the grounds that they breach the First Amendment and the separation of church and state. They remain the supreme expression of the higher law to which all human law is bound.

Within Judaism, too, they have always held a special place. In Second Temple times they were recited in the daily prayers as part of the Shema, which then had four paragraphs rather than three.]1[It was only when sectarians began to claim that only these and not the other 603 commands came directly from God that the recitation was brought to an end.]2[The text retained its hold on the Jewish mind nonetheless. Even though it was removed from daily communal prayers, it was preserved in the prayer book as a private meditation to be said after the formal service has been concluded. In most congregations, people stand when they are read as part of the Torah reading, despite the fact that Maimonides explicitly ruled against it.]3[

Yet their uniqueness is not straightforward. As moral principles, they were mostly not new. Almost all societies have had laws against murder, robbery, and false testimony. There is some originality in the fact that they are apodictic, that is, simple statements of “*You shall not,*” as opposed to the casuistic form, “*If ... then.*” But they are only ten among a much

larger body of 613 commandments. Nor are they even described by the Torah itself as “*Ten Commandments*.” The Torah calls them the asseret ha-devarim, that is, “*ten utterances*.” Hence the Greek translation, Decalogue, meaning, “*ten words*.”

What makes them special is that they are simple and easy to memorise. That is because, in Judaism, law is not intended for judges alone. The covenant at Sinai, in keeping with the profound egalitarianism at the heart of the Torah, was made not as other covenants were in the ancient world between kings. The Sinai covenant was made by God with the entire people. Hence the need for a simple statement of basic principles that everyone can remember and recite.

More than this, they establish for all time the parameters – the corporate culture, we could almost call it – of Jewish existence. To understand how, it is worth reflecting on their basic structure. There was a fundamental disagreement between Maimonides and Nahmanides on the status of the first sentence: “*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*.” Maimonides, in line with the Talmud, held that this is in itself a command: to believe in God. Nahmanides held that it was not a command at all. It was a prologue or preamble to the commands.]4[Modern research on ancient Near Eastern covenant formulae tends to support Nahmanides.

The other fundamental question is how to divide them. Most depictions of the Ten Commandments divide them into two, because of the “*two tablets of stone*”)Deut 4:13(on which they were engraved. Roughly speaking, the first five are about the relationship between humans and God, the second five about the relationship between humans themselves. There is, however, another way of thinking about numerical structures in the Torah.

The seven days of Creation, for example, are structured as two sets of three, followed by an all-embracing seventh. During the first three days God separated domains: light and dark, upper and lower waters, and sea and dry land. During the second three days He filled each with the appropriate objects and life forms: sun and moon, birds and fish, animals and man. The seventh day was set apart from the others as holy.

Likewise the Ten Plagues consist of three cycles of three followed by a stand-alone tenth. In each cycle of three, the first two were forewarned while the third struck without warning. In the first of each series, Pharaoh was warned in the morning)Ex. 7:16; Ex. 8:17; Ex. 9:13(, in the second Moses was told to “*come in before Pharaoh*”)Ex. 7:26; Ex. 9:1; Ex. 10:1(in the palace, and so on. The tenth plague, unlike the rest, was announced at the very outset)Ex. 4:23(. It was less a plague than it was a punishment.

Similarly, it seems to me that the Ten Commandments are structured as three groups of three, with a tenth that is set apart from the rest. Thus understood, we can see how they form the basic structure, the depth grammar, of Israel as a society bound by covenant to God as “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*.”)Ex. 19:6(

The first three – no other gods, no graven images, and no taking of God’s name in vain – define the Jewish people as “*one nation under God*.” God is our ultimate Sovereign. Therefore all other earthly rule is subject to the overarching imperatives linking Israel to God. Divine sovereignty transcends all other loyalties)no other gods besides Me(. God is a living force, not an abstract power)no graven images(. And sovereignty presupposes reverence)Do not take My Name in vain(.

The first three commands, through which the people declare their obedience and loyalty to God above all else, establish the single most important principle of a free society, namely the moral limits of power. Without this, the danger even in democracy is the tyranny of the majority, against which the best defence is the sovereignty of God.

The second three commands – the Sabbath, honouring parents, and the prohibition of murder – are all about the principle of the createdness of life. They establish limits to the idea of autonomy, namely that we are free to do whatever we like so long as it does not harm others. Shabbat is the day dedicated to seeing God as Creator and the universe as His creation. Hence, one day in seven, all human hierarchies are suspended and everyone, master, slave, employer, employee, even domestic animals, are free.

Honouring parents acknowledges our human createdness. It tells us that not everything that matters is the result of our choice, chief of which is the fact that we exist at all. Other people's choices matter, not just our own. "*Thou shall not murder*" restates the central principle of the universal Noahide Covenant that murder is not just a crime against man but a sin against God in whose image we are. So commands 4 to 7 form the basic jurisprudential principles of Jewish life. They tell us to remember where we came from if we are to be mindful of how to live.

The third three – against adultery, theft and bearing false witness – establish the basic institutions on which society depends. Marriage is sacred because it is the human bond closest in approximation to the covenant between us and God. Not only is marriage the human institution par excellence that depends on loyalty and fidelity. It is also the matrix of a free society. Alexis de Tocqueville put it best:

"As long as family feeling is kept alive, the opponent of oppression is never alone." Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abridged with an introduction by Thomas Bender (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), I:340.

The prohibition against theft establishes the integrity of property. Whereas Jefferson defined as inalienable rights those of "*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*," John Locke, closer in spirit to the Hebrew Bible, saw them as "*life, liberty or possession.*"⁵ Tyrants abuse the property rights of the people, and the assault of slavery against human dignity is that it deprives me of the ownership of the wealth I create.

The prohibition of false testimony is the precondition of justice. A just society needs more than a structure of laws, courts and enforcement agencies. As Judge Learned Hand said, "*Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.*"⁶ There is no freedom without justice, but there is no justice without each of us accepting individual and collective responsibility for "*telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*"

Finally comes the stand-alone prohibition against envying your neighbour's house, spouse, slave, maid, ox, donkey, or anything else belonging to your neighbour. This seems odd if we think of the "*ten words*" as commands, but not if we think of them as the basic principles of a free society. The greatest challenge of any society is how to contain the universal, inevitable phenomenon of envy: the desire to have what belongs to someone else. Envy lies at the heart of violence.⁷ It was envy that led Cain to murder Abel, made Abraham and Isaac fear for their life because they were married to beautiful women, led Joseph's brothers to hate him and sell him into slavery. It is envy that leads to adultery, theft and false testimony, and it was envy of their neighbours that led the Israelites time and again to abandon God in favour of the pagan practices of the time.

Envy is the failure to understand the principle of creation as set out in Genesis 1, that everything has its place in the scheme of things. Each of us has our own task and our own blessings, and we are each loved and cherished by God. Live by these truths and there is order. Abandon them and there is chaos. Nothing is more pointless and destructive than to let someone else's happiness diminish your own, which is what envy is and does. The antidote to envy is, as Ben Zoma famously said, "*to rejoice in what we have*")*Mishnah Avot* 4:1(and not to worry about what we don't yet have. Consumer societies are built on the creation and intensification of envy, which is why they lead to people having more and enjoying it less.

Thirty-three centuries after they were first given, the Ten Commandments remain the simplest, shortest guide to the creation and maintenance of a good society. Many alternatives have been tried, and most have ended in tears. The wise aphorism remains true: When all else fails, read the instructions.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] See *Mishnah Tamid* 5:1, *Brachot* 12a.

]2[We do not know who the sectarians were: they may have included early Christians. The argument was that only these were directly heard by the Israelites from God. The other commandments were given indirectly, through Moses)see Rashi to Brachot 12a(.

]3[Maimonides, *Responsa*, Blau Edition, Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1960, no. 263.

]4[Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, positive command 1; Nahmanides, *Glosses ad loc.*

]5[*The Two Treatises of Civil Government*)Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988(, p. 136.

]6[Learned Hand, "The Spirit of Liberty," "I Am an American" Day" ceremony)Central Park, New York City, 21 May 1944(.

]7[The best book on this subject is Helmut Schoeck's *Envy; A Theory of Social Behavior*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:

]1[Why have the Ten Commandments become so important within Judaism?

]2[Can you find any other themes that group commands together within the Ten Commandments?

]3[Why is envy considered by Rabbi Sacks to be a 'meta-command,' standing separate from all the others?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/yitro/structure-good-society/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

Yitro: Life Lessons From the Parshah: Torah Is for Imperfect People

By Rabbi Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l * © Chabad 2025

The parshah of Yitro contains one of the most — if not the most — special sections in the entire Torah: the Aseret Hadibrot, the Ten Commandments.

Rabbi Saadia Gaon, the brilliant 10th-century Talmudic scholar, philosopher, and Jewish leader, teaches that all 613 mitzvot are encompassed within the Ten Commandments, and he traces each one back to its source.

Taking it a step further, the Zohar teaches that the very first word of the Ten Commandments, the "I")Anochi(in "I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt,"¹ encompasses the entire Torah.

What kind of word is Anochi? I'm a simple guy from New Jersey. I know that the Hebrew word for "I" is "Ani." If I wrote the Ten Commandments, which I didn't, I would have started with the word Ani.

What language is Anochi? What is its origin? At first, I thought it was Spanish. But the surprising answer, found in the midrash Yalkut Shimoni, informs us that Anochi is an Egyptian word!

How is it possible for the word Anochi to be of Egyptian origin? How can it be that the word that encompasses the entire Torah, and the word that denotes God's essence, is of the language spoken by the most morally bankrupt civilization at the time?

It's Personal

We are taught that every Jewish soul that has ever and will ever come into this world was present at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. G d gathered every man, woman, and child of the Jewish faith and said, *"I am the Lrd your Gd Who brought you out of the land of Egypt."* If G d wanted to impress everyone, why didn't He say, *"I am the Lrd your Gd who created heaven and earth?"* That's much more impressive.

While *"Gd Who created heaven and earth"* is indeed impressive, it has very little to do with each of us on a personal level. When I hear *"Gd Who took the Jewish people out of Egypt,"* that's personal; that's about me.

It is especially personal when considering the teaching of the Mishnah that, *"In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt."*² The Hebrew word for Egypt – *"Mitzrayim"* – also means boundaries and limitations. We all have our own constraints, things that hold us back, box us in, chain us down. These limitations can be externally imposed or self-created.

But, G d promises us: *"I took you out of Egypt once; I can also take you out of your own Egypt."* We are connected to the One G d — Anochi — and we can do anything we set our minds to; there's nothing we cannot accomplish.

Dialogue in Heaven

The Talmud recounts a fascinating dialogue between G d, Moses, and the angels when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to heaven to receive the Torah.³

The ministering angels protested to G d, saying, *"This beautiful, concealed thing [Torah] You desire to give to one of flesh and blood?! You are giving it to a human being?!"*

G d turned to Moses and said, *"You answer them."*

Moses was terrified!

"Are You kidding? They're going to breathe on me and consume me with their fiery breath!"

G d replied, *"Don't worry about it. Grab ahold of My throne of glory and it will protect you. But I want you to respond to the angels."*

And so Moses responded, *"The Torah states, 'I am the Lrd your Gd Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.' Angels, did you ever live in Egypt? Were you slaves to Pharaoh? You were not. So, what do you need the Torah for?"*

Moses continued, *"The second commandment says, 'Do not have any other gods before Me.' Do you live amongst nations of the world who worship idols that you would learn from them?"*

"What else is written in the Torah?" continued Moses, *"Remember the day of Shabbat to keep it holy.' Do you work all week that you need to rest on Shabbat? Do you get tired? 'Do not take Gd's name in vain?' Will you, angels, ever be asked to swear in court? Do you engage in business dealings? 'Honor your father and mother.' You have no father or mother! 'Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal.' Do angels ever become jealous? Do angels have an evil inclination?"*

"The Torah is not for you," concluded Moses.

With that, the angels conceded, praised Moses, and even presented him with gifts.

Clearly, not only is Torah also for imperfect people, it is primarily for those of us who struggle, who are tempted, and who may sometimes fall short.

Always With You!

The Rebbe explained that in Moses' first words to the angels he stressed the Anochi, the Egyptian word. "I — Anochi — am G d Who took you out of the land of Egypt."

G d was telling the Jewish people:

"I remember you in Egypt. I know what it is to be human. I know what it means to have temptations, to face trials and tribulations. I know what it is to feel boxed in, limited. Anochi! I'm not using Lashon Hakodesh, the Hebrew tongue, where everything is rosy and holy and perfect. I am using an Egyptian word. I was with you in Egypt, and I am with you now! I created the evil inclination, and I created Torah as its antidote.⁴ This Torah I am giving you will arm you with the ability to transcend your limitations and overcome your personal difficulties."

Eternally Relevant

As we read the portion of the Ten Commandments, it's crucial to internalize that they encompass the entire Torah, which serves as a blueprint for life.

One might question the relevance of Torah today, asking, "*Why are you wasting your time with that?*" In truth, however, Torah is the only thing that remains relevant, both today and always. Everything else is transient.

Imagine a doctor using 19th-century medicine or a judge applying outdated laws in a modern courtroom. A computer from a decade ago is considered a dinosaur. Science, technology, the "*conventional wisdom*" ... everything evolves, but Torah remains unchanged; it is eternal.

And Torah is the best prescription for a happy life. When you leave a Torah class and share what you learned with your spouse, friends, or children, everyone around you will be uplifted.

Everything In Perspective

Is it always easy to adhere to the Torah? Certainly not. Take the 10th commandment, which states, "*Do not covet.*" What should you not covet? "*Your neighbor's house, wife, servant, ox, donkey, and everything your neighbor has.*"⁵

How can we truly observe this commandment? What if my neighbor has a nice car? What if he has a Maserati?! I wish I had a Maserati!

Here's something I heard many years ago and have shared often: The final words of the Ten Commandments are "*Do not covet...[everything your neighbor has.*"

Having enumerated house, spouse, servants, and animals, what does the Torah add by saying, "*and everything your neighbor has?*" What else is left?

The answer lies in a beautiful teaching, a lesson we would all do well to bear in mind.

People constantly feel pressured to "*keep up with the Joneses*" (or the Schwartzes, or the Cohens). We tend to think that the other guy has it all and the grass is greener on the other side.

But before bemoaning the fact that you don't have what your neighbor has, it's important to understand that you don't know the whole story. You know the car and the house, but you don't know the troubles. You have no idea what goes on behind closed doors — one's relationship with their spouse, one's relationship with their children, the audit or the investigation one is dealing with. You have no idea of the "tzuris" — the troubles — your neighbor may be experiencing, G d forbid.

So before you say, "*Why can't I be like the other guy?*" think about something my mother, Rebbetzin Miriam Gordon, of blessed memory, would always say, echoing what Jewish mothers and grandmothers have been saying for generations: "*Everyone thinks the neighbors have it made, but if every family's 'package' was hung out in public and G d ordered that we each pick one, we would all run to pick our own. After seeing what the neighbor has to deal with, we change our minds! He can keep his fancy car, and he can keep his troubles.*"

The truth is we'd rather not have "*everything our neighbor has.*"

With that in mind, we can return to the first words of the Ten Commandments, Anochi, the knowledge that G d gave the Ten Commandments to human beings fresh out of Egypt. Each day, we must tap into our Divine connection to transcend our limitations and achieve freedom from our personal exile. Empowered by the eternal Torah, may we continually ascend higher in our partnership with G d, utilizing our talents to make His world a better place. May we truly merit to see a world of perfection, with the coming of our righteous Moshiach, may it happen speedily in our days! Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Exodus 20:2.
2. *Pesachim* 10:5.
3. *Shabbat* 88b.
4. *Kiddushin* 30b.
5. Exodus 20:14.

* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6292899/jewish/Torah-Is-for-Imperfect-People.htm

Yitro: Free Choice

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky *

G-d told the people not to approach Mount Sinai, upon which the Divine presence would rest, during the Giving of the Torah.

Free Choice

No hand may touch it, for if one does[he will be stoned and cast down. Whether animal or human, he will not live. When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may]again[ascend the mountain.)Ex. 19:13(

The open revelation of G-d's presence on the mountain temporarily suspended the people's free choice since they could not deny G-d's existence or concern. Once the Divine revelation ended, there was room again for doubt or even rebellion. Thus, the blast signaled the return of free choice and independence of action.

It is precisely because of this independence that our accomplishments count. If there were no alternative to devotion to G-d, it would have little significance. When there is no motivation from heaven, we must muster our own initiative.

The sanctity that G-d infused into the physical world at the Giving of the Torah was superimposed and therefore fleeting. In contrast, the sanctity that we infuse into the world comes from within the world itself, and is therefore permanent. Moreover, G-d created the world for this very purpose.

G-d led the people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As the Egyptians caught up with the people at nightfall, the pillar of cloud hid the light of the pillar of fire from the Egyptians, leaving them in darkness and the Jewish people in the light.

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d grant a decisive victory over our enemies.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Deed and Creed

The parsha of Yitro records the revolutionary moment when God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, entered into a mutually binding agreement with a nation, the Children of Israel, an agreement we call a *brit*, a covenant.

Now, this is not the first Divine covenant in the Torah. God had already made one with Noah, and through him all of humanity, and He made another with Abraham, whose sign was circumcision. But those covenants were not fully reciprocal. God did not ask for Noah's agreement, nor did He wait for Abraham's assent.

Sinai was a different matter. For the first time, He wanted the covenant to be fully mutual, to be freely accepted. So we find that – both before and after the Revelation at Sinai – God commands Moses to make sure the people do actually agree.

The point is fundamental. God wants to rule by right, not might. The God who brought an enslaved people to liberty seeks the free worship of free human beings.

God does not act toward His creatures like a tyrant. *Avodah Zarah* 3a

So at Sinai was born the principle that was, millennia later, described by Thomas Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence, the idea that governors and governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." God wanted the consent of the governed. That is why the Sinai Covenant was conditional on the people's agreement.

Admittedly, the Talmud questions how free the Israelites actually were, and it uses an astonishing image. It says that God suspended the mountain above their heads and said, "If you agree, well and good. If you don't, here will be your burial." That is another topic for another time. Suffice to say that there is no indication of this in the plain sense of the text itself.

What is interesting is the exact wording in which the Israelites signal their consent. To

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repeat: they do so three times, first before the Revelation, and then twice afterwards, in the parsha of Mishpatim.

Listen to the three verses. Before the Revelation:

All the people answered as one and said, 'All that God has spoken, we will do [na'aseh].'
Ex. 19:8

Then afterward: Moses came and told the people all of God's words and all the laws. The people all responded with a single voice, 'We will do [na'aseh] every word that God has spoken.' Ex. 24:3

He took the Book of the Covenant and read it aloud to the people. They replied, 'We will do [na'aseh] and we will hear [ve-nishma] all that God has declared.' Ex. 24:7

Note the subtle difference. In two cases the people say: all that God says, we will do. In the third, the double verb is used: na'aseh ve-nishma. "We will do and we will hear, (or obey, or hearken, or understand)." The word *shema* means 'to understand', as we see in the story of the Tower of Babel:

"Come, let us descend and confuse their speech, so that one person will not understand another's speech." Gen. 11:7

Now note that there is another difference between the three verses. In the first two cases there is a clear emphasis on the unity of the people. Both phrases are very striking. The first says: all the people answered as one. The second says, The people all responded with a single voice. In a book that emphasises how fractious and fissiparous the people were, such declarations of unanimity are significant and rare. But the third verse, which mentions both doing and listening or understanding, contains no such statement. It simply says: They replied. There is no emphasis on unanimity or consensus.

What we have here is a biblical comment on one of the most striking features of all in Judaism: the difference between deed and creed, between *asiyah* and *shemiyah*, between doing and understanding.

Christians have theology. Jews have law. These are two very different approaches to the religious life. Judaism is about a community of action. It is about the way people interact in their dealings with one another. It is about

bringing God into the shared spaces of our collective life. Just as we know God through what He does, so God asks us to bring Him into what we do. In the beginning, as Goethe put it, was the deed. That is why Judaism is a religion of law, because law is the architecture of behaviour.

When it comes, however, to belief, creed, doctrine, all the things that depend on *shemiyah* rather than *asiyah*, understanding rather than action: on this Judaism does not call for unanimity. Not because Judaism lacks beliefs. To the contrary, Judaism is what it is precisely because of our beliefs, most importantly the belief in monotheism, that there is, at least and at most, one God. The Torah tells us in Bereishit about creation, in Shemot about redemption, and in this week's parsha about revelation.

Judaism is a set of beliefs, but it is not a community based on unanimity about the way we understand and interpret those beliefs. It recognises that intellectually and temperamentally we are different. Judaism has had its rationalists and its mystics, its philosophers and its poets, its naturalists and its supernaturalists: Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva, Judah Halevi and Maimonides, the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov. We seek unanimity in halachah, not in aggadah. Na'aseh, we act in the same way, but *nishma*, we understand each in our own way. That is the difference between the way we serve God, collectively, and the way we understand God, individually.

What is fascinating is that this well-known feature of Judaism is already signalled in the Torah: in the difference between the way it speaks about na'aseh, "as one," "with a single voice," and *nishma*, with no special collective consensus.

Our acts, our na'aseh, are public. Our thoughts, our *nishma*, are private. That is how we come to serve God together, yet relate to Him individually, in the uniqueness of our being.

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Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Who is a Jew

"You have seen what I have done to Egypt... And now, if you will surely hearken to My voice and observe My covenant...then you will be for Me a kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation..." (Exodus 19:4-6)

In effect, the drama of the Exodus and its aftermath have transformed Israel from a family to a nation-religion, from Bet Yisrael to Am Yisrael. But how do we define the 'Am'[1]? Are we a nation, are we a religion, or are we an amalgamation of both?

In truth, one of the most agonizing problems facing the Jewish people of Israel as well as the Diaspora, an issue which can potentially tear us asunder and make a mockery of the Jewish Federation slogan "We are one," is "Who is a Jew." From a technical, legal perspective, this question expresses itself in the requirements for conversion, the ramifications of which impinge on who qualifies for automatic Israeli citizenship under the "Right of Return," an Israeli law that provides automatic citizenship for any "Jew" who desires to live there. This law was enacted as an obvious and proud reaction to the tragic situation in the 1930s and 1940s, when Jews were sent to the gas chambers because virtually no existing country would relax their immigration rules and allow the would-be refugees a haven from Nazi persecution. In a far broader way, however, the "Who is a Jew" controversy speaks volumes about "what is Judaism"; after all, the necessary criteria for entering our fellowship will pretty much define the cardinal principles of that fellowship.

The sages of the Talmud, as interpreted by Rabbi Yosef Karo's sixteenth-century code of Jewish Law, set down three criteria for male conversion, with the latter two forming the criteria for female conversion: circumcision, immersion in a mikva, and acceptance of the commandments (Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, 268:3).

The casting off of the foreskin connotes the removal of gentile-dom, the separation of the Jew from the licentious practices (especially in the sexual realm) which characterized the pagan world (interestingly enough, the sages saw women as "naturally circumcised.")

Ritual mikva immersion symbolizes rebirth – after all, the fetus is encompassed in fluid and birth is presaged by the "breaking" of the mother's "waters" – into a new family-nation. (A similar ritual was adopted by Christianity in the form of baptism.)

The acceptance of the commandments signals the entry into a religion, a faith community

bound together by common adherence to a system of ritual, moral and ethical laws. With this understanding it becomes clear that we are a nation as well as a religion, a nation with a separate language, culture and homeland and a religion with a unique code of law defining our prayer rituals, feasts and fasts, lifecycle celebrations, and ethical behavior.

Fascinatingly enough, the Bible records just such a process of development, a "national conversion," as it were, in the Torah portions in the middle of the book of Exodus. In the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites separated themselves from the Egyptians, the Egyptian enslavement, the Egyptian concept of slavery as a societal norm, and the immoral Egyptian lifestyle. The Bible suggests that the Jews expressed this removal from "Egyptiandom" with circumcision, since the Paschal lamb sacrifice could only be eaten by males who were circumcised (Ex. 12:48). The Midrash explains precisely when the circumcision took place. The Bible provides for the Israelite preparation for the Exodus, commanding each household to take a lamb on the tenth of Nissan, to guard the lamb until the fourteenth of Nissan, and then to sacrifice the lamb to God (their disavowal of Egyptian idolatry, since the lamb was one of the Egyptian gods) and place its blood on their doorposts. On the night of the fifteenth they were to eat the lamb – their first Seder – and then exit from Egypt.

Asks the Midrash: why take the lamb on the tenth and wait until the fourteenth to sacrifice it? The Midrash answers that the male Israelites were to have themselves circumcised, and by merit of the twofold blood of the sacrifice and the circumcision they would be found worthy by God to be freed from Egypt (Ex. 12:6, Mechilta and Rashi ad loc.). Indeed, in Temple times, a convert was expected not only to have himself circumcised, but to bring a sacrificial offering as well (Maimonides, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 13:1).

The ritual immersion of the Israelites took place right before the revelation at Sinai, either when God commanded Moses to see that the people "be sanctified and their clothing be washed" (Ex. 19:10, see Maimonides, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 13, 2-3), or when the Israelites jumped into the Reed Sea before it split ("and the children of Israel entered into the midst of the waters on the dry land..." [Ex. 14:22]).

And of course, the acceptance of the commandments came following the Decalogue and the subsequent legal code, but as a prerequisite to the confirmation of the eternal covenant between God and Israel: "... And the entire nation responded with one voice and declared, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we shall do and we shall internalize'" (Ex. 24:3,

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7). Indeed, prior to the formula of acceptance, the Bible not only recorded the Ten Commandments as well as the major civil and ritual laws, but also outlined the eventual borders of the Land of Israel which the Jews would occupy (Ex. 23:20-25).

In effect, therefore, the Israelites were accepting both Jewish nationality and Jewish religion. We came to be bound together ('am' contains the same letters as the word 'im', which means "together") by common genes, land and destiny as well as by a unifying system of laws, values and lifestyle.

Now, does this mean that a person can only convert to Judaism if he/she lives in our Jewish homeland and is observant of all of the commandments? Perhaps the book of Ruth suggests that this be the case, having Ruth say to Naomi, "Where you shall go [to your homeland Israel], there shall I go; your nation shall be my nation, your God [religion] shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16). However, since the Babylonian expulsion of the Jews from Israel (586 BCE), a majority of Jews have lived in the Diaspora – even during the Second Commonwealth. Hence, the rabbis accepted even converts living in the Diaspora. And many religio-legal decisors have also ruled that although acceptance of commandments is a necessary prerequisite for conversion, there is no requirement to teach all of the 613 commandments with their respective rabbinic injunctions and enactments; indeed, the Talmud merely requires "several of the more stringent laws and several of the more lenient laws," specifically mentioning the laws of the Sabbath, kashrut and tithing (charity to the poor).[2]

There is nevertheless a general consensus amongst the rabbinic authorities that circumcision for males, and ritual immersion and a general acceptance of commandments for both males and females, are clear and absolute requirements for conversion. After all, becoming Jewish is not merely an acquisition of a new garment; it is a commitment which connotes sacrifice, a willingness to share a national destiny of yearning for Zion and perfecting the world (tikkun olam) and participating in a tradition of faith and habitual norms which have united Jews from Ethiopia, Yemen, Jerusalem, New York and Melbourne for 4,000 years. And it was these very requirements which the Israelites fulfilled at the very dawn of their history.

[1] The Hebrew letters ayin and mem may form a word translated as "with," "together," or 'collective.'

[2] See Yevamot 45b-47a

Spilling Wine Like Water Is a Positive Omen for the Home

In Hilchos Havdalah (Orach Chaim 296), the Ramo cites a custom of spilling out some of the Havdalah wine on the floor before concluding the Borei pri hagafen bracha to avoid the problem of "kos pagum". (This is not a widely practiced custom.) ("Kos pagum" means the kos (cup) of wine on which a ritual blessing is recited cannot be a kos from which someone previously drank.) The Ramo explains the reason for this custom: "For we say that any house in which wine is not spilled like water does not possess a 'siman bracha, 'so we do this as a sign of blessing at the beginning of a new week."

The Taz comments on this Ramo "Ayn l'zeh peirush!" (This is inexplicable.) First of all, the whole concept of "kos pagum" only applies to a kos (or bottle) from which someone previously directly drank some wine. Furthermore, it is not an appropriate practice to start reciting a blessing and then pour the wine on the ground. There is no greater shame to a bracha than this! As written, this comment of the Ramo makes no sense whatsoever.

The Taz therefore prefers the practice he found recorded in the sefer Yesh Nochalin, to fill up the cup prior to Havdalah such that it flows over the side of the wine goblet. In other words, you fill the kos so full that it spills over onto the ground. This is the intended siman bracha symbolism of wine spilling like water.

The Taz clarifies the concept of "a house in which wine is not poured out like water": The chachomim (rabbis) are not advocating pouring out wine as if it was water. That would be baal tashchis (the prohibition against wastefully destroying). There is no baal tashchis on water, but there is baal tashchis on wine! It is incomprehensible that we should be taught to spill out good wine as if it were water.

Rather, the Taz notes that the statement "any house in which wine was not poured like water will not see signs of blessing" is written as a "b'dieved" (after-the-fact) expression. If they were advocating a positive practice then it should have said "any house where they do not pour wine like water..." Rather, the intended lesson is "when something gets broken in your house, don't lose your temper!" In other words, if you have an expensive bottle of wine in your cabinet and your child spills the bottle of wine out, don't make a federal case out of it. Such an incident should not cause you to lose your temper.

The chachomim were not only talking about a bottle of wine. Children break things, your wife breaks things, you yourself break things.

Don't get so upset about these kinds of things. Even if you suffer a loss from the incident, accidents happen. The wine spilled, the glass broke, the china chipped, the crystal shattered. Don't cry about it. People's natural instinct is to get angry about such matters, therefore the chachomim, hoping to counteract this gut reaction stated: Any house in which wine is not (unintentionally) spilled out like water will not see siman bracha. That is the proper attitude to have when something spills, breaks or gets damaged. It is a bad omen if wine spilling causes more trauma in a house than water spilling.

This is what the Gemara (Sotah 3b) means: "Rav Chisda said 'Anger in a house is like a karya worm to sesame seeds. '(Just as the worm consumes the sesame, anger destroys the house – it will cost you money!) Chazal are saying: If a person loses his temper over things that happen in his house, he will be impacted by financial loss. The loss is not merely the value of what broke or was damaged. If you lose your temper at home, the Ribono shel Olam will punish you in other ways as well."

What is the "midah k'neged midah" (measure for measure) here? I saw the following suggestion in the sefer, B'Zos Yavo Aharon: When someone breaks something in a household and the owner sustains damage, if the owner is a true believer, he will recognize that HaKadosh Baruch Hu wanted this to happen. The Almighty wanted him to suffer a loss. Therefore, why is he getting angry? At whom is he getting angry?

A person may get angry at his child or at his wife, but it is not really the child or the wife who was the ultimate cause of this loss. They are merely a tool in the hand of the Almighty. If a person was a true ma'amin, he would say, as did Dovid HaMelech (King David): "He (Shimi ben Gerah) is cursing (me) because Hashem said to him 'Curse Dovid'. Who can then say 'Why did you do this?'" (Shmuel II 16:10). Our attitude must be that Hashem wants me to need to replace the glass pitcher or the crystal or the china or whatever it is. This loss came about from the yad Hashem, so why are you getting angry?

It must be that you are getting angry because you think you are in charge. You think that you call the shots. You think that you determine your profit and loss for the year. The Ribono shel Olam says "I will show you, and I will bring poverty to your house, because you are not really a believer in the source of your financial stability. "Therefore, if a person does not lose his temper over such things but rather calmly accepts them as 'bashert' (it was meant to be), such emunah will be a siman bracha because as a reward for such faith, the

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Ribono shel Olam will replace the loss suffered.

This is really what the Aseres HaDibros (Ten Utterances or Commandments) are all about. The Aseres HaDibros begin with the mitzvah of emunah (belief in G-d): "Anochi Hashem Elokecha" (I am the L-rd your G-d) who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery." (Shemos 20:2) They end with the mitzvah "You shall not covet your neighbor's house..." (Shemos 20:14).

Anochi Hashem Elokecha is emunah in theory. We all subscribe to that. But emunah in practice is "You shall not covet your neighbor's house." What does it mean to covet your neighbor's house?

It is his house. "I would like such a house. I would like such a car. I would like such a wife. I would like such money. I would like such children. I want that..." This mitzvah is emunah in practice: It is the belief that I already have exactly what the Ribono shel Olam wants me to possess. Hashem does not want me to have that house. He does not want me to have that car. He does not want me to have THAT. I already possess what I need. I don't possess what I don't need.

This is why the language of the Orchos Chaim l'haRosh is that the entire body of Torah law is included in the Aseres HaDibros. The Aseres HaDibros are the "avos" (primary categories) as in "Avos Melachos" (by the laws of Shabbos) and "Avos Nezikin" (categories of damage, as spelled out in Tractate Bava Kamma). The Aseres HaDibros are the "avos" of the entire Torah. The Orchos Chaim further says that if the entire Torah is included in the Aseres HaDibros then the final mitzvah of the Aseres HaDibros is "You shall not covet" to teach us that someone who transgresses "Lo sachmod," transgresses the entire Torah. The entire Torah comes down to four words: Lo sachmod beis ray'echa (You shall not covet your neighbor's house).

This cannot just be lip service. We need to truly believe that everything emanates from the Ribono shel Olam – including all our material wealth and possessions, our good times and our bad times, our profits and our losses. They are all from Him. A person with such deeply-held emunah will never be angry.

In reverse, the lesson of the Taz is that any house in which wine is spilled like water (in other words, that has the attitude that it is as if the wine that spilled is only water, so it is nothing to get upset about) will see a siman bracha as a result of its true emunah.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Is it possible to see sounds? From Parshat Yitro we learn that the answer is, yes.

Immediately after the Torah tells us about the extraordinary encounter that the nation had with Hashem at Mount Sinai, when the Ten Commandments were given: 'Vechol-ha' am ro'im et-hakkolot' – 'the entire nation saw the sounds'.

What can this mean? I believe we can gain some insight into this, from a Bracha which we recite every single morning.

Upon waking up, we thank Hashem, 'Poke'ach Ivrim', for opening the eyes of the blind.

That is because while we are asleep, we cannot physically see as we usually would and therefore, we appreciate the opportunity to see what is in front of us, from the moment that we open our eyes.

But there is a sad question that is asked in Halacha: If a person unfortunately is blind, should they recite this Bracha – 'thank you God for opening the eyes of the blind'?

The Mishnah Berurah tells us that the answer is yes and there are two possible reasons.

The first is that the blind person is thanking Hashem, for the sight that other people have, because they can assist the blind person.

Or there is a second reason – that it is because the term 'Poke'ach Ivrim' does not literally mean, 'who opens the eyes of the blind', but rather, 'who enlightens the blind'.

The word 'Poke'ach' comes from the term 'Pe-keach', which means to be bright, to be perceptive, to understand what is happening – and that is what this Bracha is for.

'Poke'ach Ivrim' means, we thank Hashem for enabling us to appreciate the depth of what is in front of us, in the way that we say in English, 'I see what you mean.' And this doesn't necessarily mean that you physically have vision.

That is the reason why a blind person should say this Bracha and that explains what happened at Mount Sinai.

The nation saw the sound, such was the depth of their spiritual experience, that they could perceive everything that was in front of them. The truth of Hashem. The truth of the Torah He was giving to us.

Our prayer therefore is, that throughout the future, may Hashem bless us and our future generations, so that we likewise, will always

be able to see the sounds – to perceive, to understand and to internalise the greatness of the truth of Hashem and the commandments that He gives us.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

A critic who is also a counselor Ruhama Gebel-Redman

I write these words in days of great pain and bloodshed, when war rages strong; days of national introspection; days when the highest of prices are paid and the lives of the very best of our men and women are being sacrificed.

These stormy days of war came upon us on the festival of Simchat Torah, the day we started the weekly Torah reading anew, from the Book of Bereishit. And lo and behold, we are already deep into the Book of Shemot and the battles have not yet ceased. The Torah portions we are currently reading evolve around the concepts of Redemption, Exodus and the story of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness; the story of a nation of slaves setting out to an unknown land; a great national voyage of self-discovery and self-determination, whereby a sovereign nation is born, one which undertakes the mission of spreading the word of God in the world – a mission that entails lifelong responsibility. As the Israelites wander through the scorching wilderness, they are, as yet, a set of tribes bound together in one great nomadic camp. In fact, it is a strange camp of people: a congregation plowing through the turbulent terrain in search of its destiny; all the while, raising its eyes towards the horizon where lies the Promised Land, and where it hopes to live as a real nation.

As our own current war rages on, there are many ways to connect to all that is happening, and numerous points of interface through which one can log on, as it were, in order to make sense of all that is happening.

But getting back to the days of the desert, at the head of this camp of former-slaves, one plagued by uncertainties and great quandaries, stands a unique leader: Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe is an unparalleled figure, both in stature as well as in vigor.

In our portion, Moshe's father-in-law Yitro pays a visit to the Israelite camp at a delicate time. The Israelites – a mass of liberated slaves – have just left Egypt, and have not yet formed a clear identity. In fact, the objective of the journey through the desert is, as yet, unclear to most of the wandering Israelites. Similarly, Moshe's leadership, still in its initial stages, is somewhat vague, as it gradually molds into shape. The Midrash describes this precarious state of affairs, "Moshe was a novice in prophecy". Although the Torah attests to the fact that "they [the people] believed in God and

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Moshe his servant", they had not yet achieved the level of "and they shall believe in you forever", for they had not yet witnessed the great Divine Revelation of the giving of the Torah. They were, at that moment, in an uncertain state, in a wilderness; led by a novice-leader paving a new way for himself and his people.

At this precise moment, Yitro appears, bringing with him Moshe's wife and children and a heap of good advice.

An encounter of this kind is bound to lead to an intergenerational crisis within the family. I would even venture to say that, at least through a modern-day perspective, the most natural, and even justified, outcome of such a meeting can only be an explosive one.

In our times, it is commonly accepted that when a father-in-law comes to visit his son-in-law on the job, the latter having recently taken on a new position, such a visit would hardly be perceived by the son-in-law as an opportunity for growth; rather, it would be seen as an act of criticism or condescension on the part of the father-in-law. Moreover, if the older father-in-law dared to offer advice pertaining to the son-in-law's working methods or level of efficiency – such advice would probably not be taken kindly, to say the least, and would most likely cause a big blow-up between the two family members. In light of this, Yitro's successful visit is all the more wondrous. Especially when another instance of criticism directed towards Moshe – by Korach and his congregation – ended in catastrophe, the loss of lives, and great social upheaval.

What was it then that made Yitro's visit such a success? What turned this episode of critical advice into a trigger factor in Moshe's tremendous growth as a leader, a judge and God's direct messenger who spreads His word? What was it about this encounter that initiated productivity rather than destruction? Was it the specific timing, or was it, perhaps, the unique relationship that had already existed between these two great personas? Or maybe it was Yitro's rich life experience as Priest of Midyan? Or the latter's pleasant conduct and outstanding character? Alternatively, might it have been Moshe's inherent humility and his infinite attentiveness? How might we explain the phenomenal success of this encounter?

"And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moshe sat to judge the people; and the people stood about Moshe from the morning unto the evening. And when Moshe's father-in-law saw all that he did to the people, he said: 'What is this thing that thou doest to the people? Why sit thou thyself alone, and all the people stand about thee from morning unto evening?' And Moshe said unto his father-in-law: 'Because

the people come unto me to inquire of God; when they have a matter, it cometh unto me; and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and I make them know the statutes of God, and His laws. 'And Moshe's father-in-law said unto him: 'The thing that thou do is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee; for the thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone.' [Shemot 18: 13-18]

Yitro arrives at the Israelites' camp in wake of the rumors he had heard. This is precisely the man he was: He hears, he hearkens and he acts without delay.

Moreover, he does not come alone, but brings Moshe's family with him to the desert, and becomes fully present in the moment "—And Yitro rejoices" at all he hears of the great salvation God had brought upon the nation. He brings offerings to the Lord and gives respect to all the elders of Israel by immersing himself in the experience. All this happens on the first day of his visit.

"And it came to pass on the morrow". One morrow is not like the other. This is not the morrow of the Sin of the Spies when the people wake up and realize the enormity of their sin. On this particular morrow we see how insights are internalized and immediately implemented; we are witness to a transformation from listening mode to action mode. As Rashi so aptly interprets "—this is the morrow following Yom Kippur." After a day of bonding, full-fledged presence, observation and learning, comes the morrow, when the previous day's teachings are processed and pondered upon.

As to the fact that Yitro's advice was so readily accepted, it seems most probable that this was due to the latter's respectful and respecting presence; his attentiveness and curiosity on the first day of the visit; his immersing himself completely into the Israelites' experience and rejoicing with them at all that had transpired; his sitting down to eat with the elders of Israel and Aharon. It is this entire array of engaging action on Yitro's part that set into motion a readiness to listen and to hearken on Moshe's part.

As educators and educational leaders, we should be asking ourselves: How does Yitro see Moshe the judge? Through which prism is Yitro observing his son-in-law? When does Yitro pose the question as to Moshe's working methods?

Yitro understands that he is an external factor to this new "desert-space", despite his vast knowledge and rich experience as the Priest of Midyan. He therefore takes a day to learn, observing the proceedings at hand silently.

Only when evening falls, and the day's activities come to a close, does Yitro venture to ask about how administrative decisions are taken; how Moshe passes judgement; what Moshe's priorities are and what his daily schedule looks like. But the first thing Yitro does is show empathy. This is followed by curiosity. And only then – upon the firm foundations of empathy and benevolent curiosity – does Yitro step into the shoes of the critic, offering the perspective of a life-long leader with rich experience in public service.

Yitro is careful with his phrasing and says to Moshe: "Why sit thou thyself alone? And all the people stand about thee from morning unto evening?" The Torah itself, it appears, adopts the same attitude when it describes Moshe in the previous verse thus: "And Moshe sat to judge the people; and the people stood about Moshe from the morning unto the evening."

While the Torah renders a factual description of Moshe's work day, Yitro – using the exact same words – offers advice as to such a work's day value, and says: 'The thing that thou do is not good" and goes on to explain that leadership has to be exercised wisely with long term planning and efficiency.

What becomes very apparent is that the ability to listen to constructive criticism and accept it, is contingent upon the listener's full belief that the critic is "on his side" and has the former's good in mind, as well as the success of his mission.

It is true that Moshe is also a humble man who knows how to accept words of criticism, but this does not detract from Yitro's wisdom when it comes to offering constructive criticism:

"If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people also shall go to their place in peace."

And Moshe's reaction: "So Moshe hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said."

It follows then that Yitro's visit to the wilderness, at a very delicate time, when the Israelites are metamorphosing into a nation, turns into a great learning curve and an opportunity for growth which stems from Yitro's extensive experience as leader. Yitro turns from potential critic to a well-meaning counselor who gives priceless counsel, thus adding another crucial layer to Moshe's character as leader.

And, thus, in virtue of Moshe and Yitro's heedfulness, their mutual empathy and curiosity – both Moshe and the people "go to

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their place in peace" and all ends well. Even if Yitro, as some commentators claim, ultimately went back to Midyan, both the People of Israel as well as Moshe underwent a positive change as a result of Yitro's visit. The reason being that the entire encounter was one of quiet observation and wise and attentive discourse. It was a beneficial educational process conducted with mutual respect and the engagement of both parties.

One might equate the turbulent days in which we find ourselves to the days when we wandered through the desert as Israelite tribes on the way to becoming a nation in its land. Now, too, we are on a journey of introspection, while fighting a war for our physical and spiritual survival against a cruel and barbarous enemy. Despite the heavy price we must pay, we raise our eyes towards the horizon and forge ahead, engaging in action as well as in prayer. May God help and protect us, and may this journey prove to be fruitful, such that we emerge all the stronger, more united and with greater clarity of vision.

There are many leaders in the field, and many who take responsibility as the storm rages on and the battles continue; individuals who recruit themselves to the mission at hand – no matter how grueling it is – and continue to infuse life and spread light. These leader-figures include our educators – men and women who serve as an anchor during these difficult times, creating a blessed routine which builds the next layer of our national and social consciousness.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yakov Haber

Hearing and Derher-ing

"And Yisro, the priest of Midyan, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that G'd had done for Moshe and for Israel, His nation, that he took them out of Egypt" (Shemos 18:1). Rashi (combining two views mentioned in Mechilta) comments on the first words of the verse, "Vayishma Yisro - and Yisro heard" - " מה קרייתם ייסר ולחמת מלך שמעה מה וא" What hearing (news, events) did he hear (about)? The splitting of the sea and the war of Amaleik." The commentaries ask several questions. If the verse explicitly states that Yisro heard "all that G'd had done," why does Rashi focus only on two of those events. Furthermore, on the phrase "all that G-d had done," Rashi presents a different list: the falling of the man, the well (water from the rock), and the splitting of the sea. Why does this list differ from the first list?

Many note that the verb S-M-A, roughly translated as "hear," has several meanings in its usage throughout Tanach:

to biologically hear, 2) to accept or obey (listen to) and 3) to understand.[1] [Yiddish captures two of these meanings with similar words: *herr* = hear and *derher* = insight or idea.] Based on these multiple meanings, the commentaries (see Mizrachi, Gur Aryeh) explain that the first Rashi is not explaining what Yisro heard about; this is explicitly stated in the verse that he heard all that Hashem did for the Jews and that he took them out of Egypt. [This last point, referencing biological hearing, is perhaps Rashi's point in his second comment.[2]] Rather, the first Rashi is asking what motivated Yisro to come join the Jewish people, namely, based on the third meaning of "shema," what caused him to understand that something particularly unique occurred motivating him to journey to his son-in-law and ultimately convert to the Jewish religion.[3] Similarly, Zohar (quoted by Sheim Mishmuel) asks: "Did (only) Yisro hear and not the whole world? Is it not written (in the Song of the Sea), 'Nations heard and were troubled!' (Shemos 15:14) Rather, the [people of the] whole world heard and were not broken. [By contrast, Yisro] heard and was broken and submitted to the Holy One blessed be He and drew near to His fear." All others only heard; Yisro heard and understood the implications of these earth-shattering events obligating him to make drastic changes to his life.

The Midrash (Shemos Rabba 27:9) comments on Yisro's "hearing": "Listen to the word of G'd..." (Yirmiyahu 2:4). This is what is written (Yeshayahu 55:3), "Listen and your soul will live!" How dear Israel is that He [Hashem] encourages them! He said to them, "If a person falls from the roof, his whole body gets bruised. The doctor visits him and gives him a bandage for his head, his hands, his legs and all of his limbs. He is all bandages! I (G'd) am not like that. Rather, a man has 248 limbs and the ear is one of them. If the whole body is sullied with sins, but (only) the ear listens, the whole body receives life." "Listen and your soul will live!" (Yeshayahu ibid.) That is the meaning of "Listen to the word of G'd, O House of Jacob!" (Yirmiyahu ibid.) So you find with Yisro that through listening he merited life since he listened and converted as it is written, "And Yisro ... heard all that G'd did to Moshe and to Israel His nation, etc."

My great Rebbe, the founding Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, Rav C. Y. Goldwicht zt"l (Asufas Ma'arachos, Mishpatim, "Nishma v'Na'ase" [4]) explains the reason that specifically Yisro taught us the power of listening. Rav Goldwicht raises a contradiction between the famed dual commitment of Klal Yisrael at the giving of the Torah of "na'ase v'nishma - we will do and (then) hear" - implying great initial commitment and fear of G-d even before receiving the specific commandments - on the

one hand and the phrase "v'shamanu v'asinu - we will hear and do" (Devarim 5:20), in the opposite order: first listening then doing, presented by the Torah in Moshe's review of the events of Mount Sinai, on the other. Rav Goldwicht answers that the commitment present initially at Har Sinai was not something that all would be able to accomplish. Indeed, even the commitment of the generation which received the Torah did not last and was shortly followed by the cheit ha'eigel, the sin of the Golden Calf. However, Hashem forgave the Jewish people and gave them a second set of luchos. This represented the kabbalas haTorah of the ba'al teshuva, one who needs inspiration before he can make intense commitment. He needs to "hear" before he can do. Yisro, the first convert to the Jewish people l'sheim shamayim (unlike the eirev rav), serves as the paradigm of the proper use of shmi'a, not just hearing but listening and understanding the implications of world events and/or study leading to transformation and commitment. By parallel, the journey of the ba'al teshuva begins by not only studying and experiencing but being receptive to understanding and internalizing their implications.

Rav Goldwicht further quotes the Gemara (Pesachim 50b) that a person should always engage in Torah and mitzvos even for an ulterior motive since such activity will ultimately lead to learning and performing commandments only for the sake of Heaven. This implies that all Jews, not just baalei teshuva and converts, need a dose of pre-hearing, or inspiration, in order to eventually reach the exalted level of lishma implied by the commitment of na'ase v'nishma. Thus, the ladder of religious growth consists of initial inspiration, followed by intense commitment to the totality of Torah - its values and requirements, culminating with additional study only fully accessible and retainable with prior commitment which in turn continually deepens that commitment.

Hashem is always communicating to us, providing opportunities for inspiration - through the messages contained in Torah and through the messages he sends to us in our individual and communal lives. Our own generation, so used to relative stability, has witnessed massive cataclysms in just the past decade in world and Jewish history. It behooves all of us not to follow the example of the rest of world in the piercing words of the above-quoted Zohar to just hear but not listen and understand but to follow Yisro's example to internalize and understand as well. The call of the hour is certainly to come closer to Hashem Yisborach minimally by making incremental changes for the better in our life's activities and priorities in order to facilitate greater closeness to Avinu Shebashamayim and enhanced commitment to His service![5]

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[1] Rav Y.D. Soloveitchik zt"l advocated having in mind the third definition when reciting the Shema twice daily since the accepted view of the Sages - as opposed to that of R. Yehuda who insists that the reciter hear the words of Shema - is that the word "Shema" teaches that its recital may be "בכל לשון שאתת שמע" - in any language you understand."

(Heard from Mori v'Rabi Rav H. Schachter shlit"a.)
[2] See Mizrachi as to why the war against Amalek is not mentioned in the second Rashi.

[3] See Gur Aryeh, Be'er Yosef and others for

insights as to why these specific two events inspired Yisro to join the Jewish people. Also see Mizrachi, Gur Aryeh and others as to why the other opinion in the Mechilta that Yisro heard about the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai was omitted by Rashi.

[4] See there for a magnificent, much more elaborate presentation than the small excerpt presented here. Also see the insightful article by Dr. Benny Gezundheit, an alumnus of Yeshivat Har Etzion, available here:

[לעומת-וغمצע-נעשה ועיבנו-רשותנו](https://etzion.org.il/he/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/)

[5] See also Inspiration, Application and Preservation for further elaboration on these themes and for techniques for applying inspiration to our lives.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

Join the Winning Team

And Yisro, the chieftain of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that G-d had done for Moshe and for Israel, His people, that HASHEM had taken Israel out of Egypt.
(Shemos 18:1)

And Yisro...heard: What news did he hear that [made such an impression that] he came? The splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek. — Rashi

What a great testament to the greatness of Yisro! He came to join the Jewish People after hearing the incredible news about the miraculous exodus from Egypt. He decided to become part of the Jewish Nation. What could be more noble!? Now, wait a second! I thought that we don't accept converts in the times of Moshiach. (Yevamos 24:B) We're not looking for fair weather fans that jump on board when we've won the world championship. It's too late by then. You have to join during the struggling years and tough times to be considered a true devotee. How can we not suspect Yisro's motive here and at least pause to wonder about his sincerity?!

Now, was Yisro the only one that heard about these events? No! The whole world was affected by the splitting of the sea. Everyone was aware that HASHEM was doing battle for the Jewish People. During the Shira, the Song at the Sea, they sang, "Peoples heard, they trembled; a shudder seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Then the chieftains of Edom were startled; [as for] the powerful men of Moab,

trembling seized them; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted. (Shemos 15:14-15)

It would seem that the rest of the world was quaking in their boots. They were beyond frightened by the implications of HASHEM taking up the cause of the Jewish People and granting them supremacy.

So, now the question is, what was their next move? Why didn't they all run into the desert and join the Jewish People like Yisro? The Meor Einayim says that there is "hearing" and there is "hearing". Some only hear the words but fail to act while others, few others, understand the import of the message, take it to heart, and respond responsibly.

When a fireman or a Hatzala member gets a call, they jump into action without hesitation. They know what that alarm, what that signal means. Everyone else watches them or shrugs their shoulders or ignores it altogether. It's not speaking to them.

When Avraham Avinu was visited with these words from HASHEM he too went immediately into action mode, "...Lech Lecha – Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you..." (Breishis 12:1) The Ramban asks an almost obvious question on these initial words. Why is there no explanation why HASHEM is talking to him? Suddenly, he is in the spotlight of history. Sure, we have loads of information in the Oral Torah about Avram's youth and his search for G-d, courageously destroying idols in his father's shop, and his willingness to go into a fiery furnace rather than submit to idolatry. These events are not explicitly spelled out. Why was he worthy of being spoken to by HASHEM?

The Sefas Emes offers a stunning explanation to this question. He quotes a Zohar that states, "Woe to those people who sleep in their caves, while Avraham Avinu of Blessed Memory, heard and accepted." The Sefas Emes sees a profound implication in that Zohar. He says that those words "Lech Lecha" that launched our national mission, were not only said to Avraham. It was announced then and is announced constantly ever since to everybody, and this was the great praise of Avarham that made him worthy. The fact that he heard and responded makes it as if HASHEM was speaking only to him.

Many, in their caves, are not in the listening mode. Some hear but are unresponsive. Avraham heard and was responsive. HASHEM is saying to the whole world constantly to keep moving, begin, do better, come closer, but that message is only for those who hear it well and respond responsibly.

When Yisro heard about the splitting of the sea and there was still fierce opposition from Amalek, while everyone else is still on the sidelines, he understood, "the game is not over yet". Then he decided, he better join the winning team.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Timely in Teshuvah

By Rabbanit Shira Smiles

Am Yisrael continue their journey from Egypt through the Sinai desert. The Torah tells us that they left Refidim and came to Har Sinai (Shemot 19:2). Yet we already know the Jews were coming from Refidim. As we are aware, nothing is repetitive in Torah, what information is being added here? Rashi explains that just as Bnei Yisrael approached the area of Har Sinai in a state of teshuvah, likewise, when leaving Refidim the people were engaged in teshuvah. Rashi's explanation leaves us a bit perplexed. If they already did teshuvah when leaving Refidim, why did they need to do teshuvah once again when coming to Har Sinai? Further, why is teshuvah at this juncture so crucial?

The Netziv in his commentary HaAmek Davar, explains that preparation is fundamental when advancing in holiness. As the Jewish people were about to experience the most quintessential event of their lives, it was not sufficient to prepare themselves upon arriving at Har Sinai, the groundwork needed to be laid before that.

Rav Weissblum in He'arat Derech, notes that before doing any mitzvah, one should ask two important questions; first, "what am I about to do?" Second, "For whom am I about to do this?" These questions enable us to achieve the proper mindset and allow the mitzvah to be truly experienced, not simply be a series of meaningless motions. To the extent one prepares, one connects more deeply and fully.

Our frame of mind creates all the difference. The Gemara recounts the story of Rabbi Chiya's extensive efforts to ensure that the Torah would not be forgotten among the people. Rabbi Chiya sowed flax seeds. He used the flax to make nets to trap deer, from the deer hides he made parchment on which he wrote the Torah scrolls. Rabbi Chiya was personally involved in the entire process to guarantee that the scrolls from which the Torah was to be taught would be infused with the proper intentions. It is said in the name of the Gra that if the members of a shul would be careful to focus their intentions in preparing the materials for the building and concentrate completely on the holy task of building the shul, then all the tefillot said in that shul would have perfect kavanah. The Gra notes that it is for this reason that many Tana'im and Amora'im would learn and teach outdoors

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under trees. They knew they could not ensure that the houses and buildings were built with the most perfect intentions and did not want less than impeccable energy to affect the purity of their learning.

The core element of teshuvah is being mindful and focused. Am Yisrael understood that to access the realm of kedushah they must immerse themselves in preparation. Teshuvah is not a one-time affair, we must be in a constant state of working and improving ourselves. Is it any wonder we have the beracha of teshuvah in our davening 3 times daily? This is the key to a life of kedushah; an awareness that this is the type of life we live.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

The Strange Fate of The Fifth Commandment

Standing fifth in that eternal list of Ten Commandments, is the statement: KABEID ES AVICHA VE'ES IMECHA, "Honor thy father and thy mother." This commandment is perhaps the most well-known of all. No child grows up without hearing those words brandished at him at one time or another. Even those who believe in little else accept this MITZVAH. And the Rabbis equated the honoring of parents to the honor one must accord G-d.

And yet, its fate has been a strange one. The history of this commandment has been one of oscillation or shifting from one extreme to another. In ancient Sodom, that hot-bed of wickedness, parents were regarded as surplus chattel, and when no longer able to do work, they were disposed of. A world reeking with such a Sodomite attitude had to hear and obey "Honor thy Parents." Centuries later, the situation was reversed. Parents became so important that children were neglected and maltreated. So much so, that the Rabbinic council at Usha some 1800 years ago had to pass a formal law requiring parents to support their children until they were at least 13 years old. And a maid-servant of Rabbi, Rabbi Judah the Prince, a gentle maid who was a scholar of the Law and whose opinion was highly valued by our Sages, had to declare as an offense, punishable by excommunication, the corporal punishment of grown-up children. Coming closer to our own times, we have had a similar swinging of the pendulum from one extreme to another. In the Victorian Era the father was the absolute and autocratic chief of the family. He was a ruthless dictator whose rule was uncontrolled and frequently inhumane. To such people one did not have to say "Honor thy father and mother." One had, rather, to recall the ruling of AMSA DE'BEI REBBE, the gentle maid-servant of Rabbi Judah the Prince.

In our own days, we have swung back to the other extreme. A new force has emerged in modern family life, completely replacing the parents as the central authorities of the family. The child has come into his own as the undisputed despot and pint-sized tyrant whose word is law, whose every whim and wish is sacrosanct and whose authority rests on the New Bible of American Family Life, which is that new

book child psychology and how to raise your baby without conflicts, complexes, neuroses or maladjustments. Raised with this mistaken attitude or deference and cringing on the part of his parents, the modern child can never really respect his elders. And our generation, therefore, must hear, as it never has heard before, the clear enunciation of the words "Honor thy father and mother."

But the honoring of parents is no mere mechanical act. Far from being automatic and desiccated, it has a psychology of its own. It has a psychology of its own which is based on the moral tradition of Judaism, and which rejects at one and the same time the harshness and severity of a Victorian father, the cruelty of a Sodom attitude and the silly and ludicrous coddling of children as practiced by the modern mother who reads "psychology" books and does not begin to understand them. To the modern parent who, frightened by the dire threat of complexes and maladjustments, asks "why?" and "what does it mean?" of KIBUD AV VE'AIM, Judaism has a real answer.

Perhaps the Jewish attitude, which is not for Jews alone but for all people, is best expressed, albeit indirectly and subtly, by a story that our Rabbis of the Talmud tell. SHA'ALU ES RABBI ELIEZER. Rabbi Eliezer was asked - AD HAYCHAN KIBUD AV VE'AIM? - to what extent must one practice the commandment to honor his parents? What is the significance of KIBUD AV VE'AIM? And he answered, "If you would know the meaning of KIBUD AV, hearken to the story of what one gentile, who lived in the Palestinian city of Ashkelon, did for his father. This man, whose name was Dama ben Nessinah, owned certain rare gems which were needed by the officials of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem for the breast-plate of the High Priest. Furthermore, the jewels were needed immediately, for without them the Temple Service could not continue. Dama was told that he could name his own price if he delivered without delay. But he refused, because *מפתח מונת החת מראותיו של אביו*, because the key to the safe was under the pillow of his father, who was sleeping at the time, and Damah did not want to awaken him. He was offered the astounding sum of 60,000 - and others say 80,000 - shekels. He still refused to disturb his father. As a reward for this demonstration of respect and honor for his father, G-d rewarded Damah, and the following year one of his cows bore a PARAH ADUMAH - a completely red heifer, which was an expensive rarity, and which was used by Jews LETAHER ES HA'TMEIM, to purify the unclean who were defiled because of contact with the dead.

What Rabbi Eliezer meant to teach by this story is clear enough. If you would live a life characterized by the PARAH ADUMAH, a life of purity and cleanliness and decency and serenity, a life free from defilement and filth and all other aspects of death, a life in which the family is one and at peace, of undiminished and undamaged reputation, then the children must remember that MAFTEI'ACH MUNACH TACHAS ME'RASHO'SAV SHEL AVIV, that the key lies under the head of father; that no matter how successful one is, no matter how thriving a

jewelry trade and no matter how prosperous a farm and cattle ranch you have, the key to your successes and your personality, the key to your life and your future, lies TACHAS

ME'RASHO'SAV SHEL AVIV, under your father's head. It is your parents who are the source of your future. Man, unlike the lower animals, is not born self-sufficient. In his infancy he is extremely vulnerable and defenseless. In the heads of his parents are the agonies of worry and concern over his care, and upon their heads devolves the responsibility for his future.

MAFTEI'ACH MUNACH TACHAS

ME'RASHO'SAV SHEL AVIV. The key to the son is the head of the father. With an attitude of that sort, a generation can be raised which will not be looked upon with horror by the older, and the term "younger generation" will not be used as an epithet of frightened contempt; a generation which will not be obsessed with its own importance and possessed of a disregard and studied contempt of everything old; a generation which will not condemn all the treasures of the past as "old fashioned."

Judaism, therefore, tells us moderns that the reason for honoring parents is, simply, that they are the key to our lives and our futures. Judaism certainly does not object to the legitimate use of child-psychology in the raising of children. Quite the contrary, it always has preached moderation. But, as one educator recently pointed out, "the trouble with child psychology is that children just don't understand psychology." Or, as another wit said, "Parents who want to use child psychology on their children would do much better to apply the child-psychology book to them." A generation which is not taught that the key to their future lies in their parents' past can never hope to unlock the treasury of good-will and humility that is stored up in the human heart.

The way to making children realize where the key lies is not by uninterrupted coddling and shielding them from the realities of life. A second story related by Rabbi Dimi, when he came from Palestine to settle in Babylon, gives us the sense of realism and refusal to accept nonsense which should be practiced. It is a symbolic story, also about the same Damah ben Nessinah, which is most applicable to our own day and age. Perhaps parents who are perplexed by the conflicting advice given them and, at the same time, outraged by the near-complete loss of spiritual, religious and moral value by the younger generation, can find heart and guidance in the symbolic tale.

PA'AM ACHAS, once, Rabbi Dimi told, HAYAH LA'VUSH SIRKON SHEL ZAHAV, ישב בין גדי רומי ובאותה אמו וקרעתו ממנה לו על יאשׁו וירקה לו בפכו ולא הכלימה He was sitting among the greats of Rome, and his mother came and tore it from him. She hit him on the head and spat before him, yet he did not shame her.

Ah, but Damah's mother was a good mother. She knew that teaching her son KIBUD AV VE'EM was the only way of molding his character and personality properly.

Here was her son, her own boy, who thought that he had "out-grown" his home and family. Now he was wearing a SIRKON SHEL ZAHAV, a gold-embroidered silk, he was being

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fashionable and keeping with the elite. Not one for the masses, was he; only silk would do, and it had to be embroidered with gold. If all the world was involved in this mad drive for gold, so would I, thought Damah. If the almighty dollar must replace the Almighty G-d, and monotheism became money-theism, then I too must don this cloak of gold. A modern mother would have "shepped nachas" from a hustler of a son of this sort, a real "go-getter." But no, not his mother. She tore this gold-silk scarf off him. No son of mine is going to live a life of that sort. "No, son," she told, "You are going to get off the gold standard!"

There was a time in Jewish life when a mother's greatest ambition was to have her son become a scholar. The very lullabies they sung to their tots in their cradles spoke not of business and successes, but of Torah and scholarship. In the famous "ROZHENKES UN MANDLEN" lullaby, the Jewish mother would sing: TORAH IZ DIE BESTEH S'CHORA- "Torah is the best business." Modern mothers, however, are almost afraid of scholarship, and dressed them in the SIRKON SHEL ZAHAV, gold-embroidered silk. Gold, gold, gold. And let us be honest with ourselves. This attitude is not caused by a desire for financial security for the children. Gone are the days when scholarship was identified with hunger. Today scholars too are assured of comfortable living. It is, rather, a "keeping-up-with-the-Joneses" attitude. The little tyrant who today demands the best bicycle - and gets it without question - must tomorrow be able to demand the Cadillacs and so hollywood-kitchens - and get them without question. But if a mother or father wants respect and honor and love, then she must tear the SIRKON SHEL ZAHAV from off her child, and give him instead the spiritual dimensions which he will need in life.

And in the case of Damah ben Nessinah even more than the profit-motive was involved. Here was her son climbing the social ladder too. He was YOSHEV BEIN G'DOLEI ROMI, sitting in the company of great Romans. A modern mother might have envied her - with a son one of the proconsuls of Rome. An important person. A politician. Modern mothers with a penchant for psychological terminology which they do not understand would have advised the mother of Damah to desist and swallow her objections. "Don't say anything," they would have told her, "he's got to live in society, and he had better adjust while he can. Otherwise, he might even become a neurotic!"

But this mother will not allow herself to adopt a cringing attitude of this sort. She knew what "society" meant in those days. She knew that the "400" of Roman-Palestinian society were no philosophers and do-gooders. These were the Romans whose notoriety was known throughout the world. This was a society of degenerates, people of base instincts, lust, murder, and degradation. True, it was fashionable in those days to be a YOSHEV BEIN G'DOLEI ROMI, a member of that elite group of perverts. A young man who had gained admission into their circles was proud and developed a swelled head. But the mother of Damah would not stand for such immorality, psychology or no psychology. And

so, TAFCHA LO AL ROSHO. She slapped him on the head. "You are not going to have a swelled head, my son, I will never allow you to be proud of membership in such a society. This is one type of people to which you must never adjust." And then YARKAH LO BE'FANAV. She expectorated before him. She expressed her undiminished contempt for all that a life of this sort meant. She expressed her disdain for the SIRKON SHEL ZAHAV and the G'DOLEI ROMI, money-madness and social climbing.

And as a result VE'LO HICHLIMAH, he did not insult his mother. This was more than a generously negative reaction to his mother's violent scolding and reproach. It was, rather, an education he had received by his brave and intelligent mother. How often parents, and especially Jewish parents, express the worry that when they grow old they will be cast aside by their children, insulted and neglected by them. And actually the best way to insure that they will so be insulted, is by impressing them with the fact that they are the undisputed depots of home and family, and that they may adjust to prevailing conditions regardless of their ethical or moral nature. But give them the sort of education that Damah's mother did, tear off their gold wrappings, slap their swelled heads and whittle them down to size, and show your undisguised contempt for a way of living that does not recognize that the past is the key to the future, and then there is no doubt but that those children will recognize, in respect, love, and affection, the authority and the wisdom of intelligent parents. Only thus can parents be assured that LO HICHLIMAH, that their children will not only insult them, but that they will hold them in the high esteem that parents, as educators, deserve.

Parents must not expect that children can blossom into respectable adulthood in a natural and undirected way. No beautiful flower ever grew into full blossom without conscientious cultivation. The only plant that can grow "naturally," without devoted guidance and intelligent cultivation, is a weed.

The fifth commandment has indeed had a strange fate. From era to era, the history of family life has seen a shift from the despotism of parents to the tyranny of children. Our Torah and our Sages have urged, throughout the ages, that we preserve the middle way, the way of intelligence, honor, and respect. The way of the Torah is the way of life which we must ultimately prevail if parents and children are to be bound by the mutual bonds of honor, esteem and love. "For her ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths lead to peace."



BS"D

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subject: Rav Frand - If They Were Just Rich Men, They Still Would Not Necessarily Be 'Anshei Chayil'

Parshas Yisro

If They Were Just Rich Men, They Still Would Not Necessarily Be 'Anshei Chayil' These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1324 Saying Kaddish: All Aveilim Together or Each One Individually on a Rotating Basis? Good Shabbos!

Parshas Yisro begins with Yisro's arrival and his taking notice that people were standing from morning until evening waiting for adjudication from Moshe Rabbeinu. Yisro came up with the idea that there should be a judicial system of lower courts and higher courts to improve the efficiency of the adjudication process. Yisro advised his son-in-law, "And you shall see from among the entire people, men of means, G-d fearing people, men of truth, people who despise money, and you shall appoint them leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens." (Shemos 18:21)

Moshe Rabbeinu accepted Yisro's plan: "Moshe chose anshei chayil (men of accomplishment) from among all Israel and appointed them heads of the people, leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens." (Shemos 18:25). Rashi explains the expression "anshei chayil" as "ashirim" (rich people, who have no need to worry about flattering other people or showing favoritism)." (Shemos 18:21) In other words, an independently wealthy individual is a good person to have as a judge.

Not everyone explains "anshei chayil" in this fashion. For example, the Ibn Ezra interprets the term as "patient people." There is something called "judicial temperament." People can get very testy about dinei Torah. A judge needs to have a certain calmness and emotional discipline to maintain the appropriate decorum between litigants. The Ramban has a third interpretation: "hachacham, hazariz v'ha'yashar" (someone who is wise, diligent, and has integrity).

At any rate, Rashi says that anshei chayil means rich people. The pasuk also lists several other qualities, in addition to anshei chayil: G-d fearing, men of truth, and those who hate corruption. What would we consider as the number one quality of a judge? I would think that the top two qualities would be "G-d fearing" and "men of truth". It is certainly nice for a person to be wealthy

and not beholden to others, but why should that be priority number one on the list of qualifications for the job?

A second question may be asked: The Gemara says (Bechoros 5b) that every Jew who left Mitzrayim had ninety donkeys laden with silver and gold. Everyone was rich! If that is the case, there should have been no need at all to specify that the judges chosen should be rich. Pick a number out of a hat! Look in the phone book! Everyone met this criterion!

I saw a very interesting approach from the Tolner Rebbe. The Tolner Rebbe states that there is a difference between "the essence of a person" and "a person who possesses a certain quality." To what can this be compared? The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 53) paskens that a shliach tzibbur (chazan) who leads the congregation in prayer should be "free from sin and not have a bad reputation, even in his youth, and be modest and acceptable to the congregation." We might suggest that the Shulchan Aruch forgot to mention the main quality to look for in picking a chazan: The shliach tzibbur should know how to clearly articulate the words of the prayers. We are not going to even mention that the Shulchan Aruch contains no mention of a requirement that a chazan should have a "nice voice." Why was there no mention of the requirement to enunciate properly?

The Tolner Rebbe explains that the reason is that proper enunciation is not a quality. It is the definition of a chazan. If a chazan can't speak the words or if he doesn't know 'Ivra' (Hebrew), then he is not a chazan. Similarly, Rashi's comment about the judges needs to be understood in the same fashion. When Rashi says that he must be a wealthy individual who does not flatter people, Rashi is not talking about the candidate's bank account or stock portfolio. Rashi is saying that the judge must have the essence of an ashir (rich man)." A person who is by essence an "ashir" is a person who is not going to lower himself by trying to curry favor with flattery of individuals. That is beneath his dignity. That is not who he is.

Possessing money is not good enough to qualify someone as a judge. The person needs to have the essence and the mentality of an ashir. On occasion, people win lotteries worth mega millions. Overnight, these people are worth a couple hundred million dollars. Are they ashirim? They may have money but they are not ashirim. An ashir is a person who has a certain standard, a certain approach and dignity. That is what Rashi means when he comments that anshei chayil = ashirim, as the number one criterion for a judge.

The colloquial term for a rich man is a "gvir." Rav Leib Steinmann once commented that a "gvir" must be a gibor (possessing strength of character)! A person can have a lot of money but that alone does not make him into a gvir. A gvir means a person who is in charge of himself. Who is the gibor – one who conquers his evil inclination (Avos 4:1).

Many of us remember Rav Moshe Reichmann of Toronto. By all standards he was an ashir. But not only was he a person who had a lot of money, he was an ashir because of the way he conducted himself and the way he treated others. He was not just an ashir. He was a gvir.

Of all the stories I read about Rav Moshe Reichmann, the following made the most lasting impression on me: He was suffering from cancer at the end of his life. He had an aide who used to take him for treatments. After his treatments, he was very thirsty. After one of his treatments, he asked his aide to get him a glass of water. The aide came back with a bottle of water and no cup. Rav Moshe Reichmann refused the water. He said that since the time he was a baby, he never drank out of a bottle and he did not intend to start now. That is a certain dignity and presence of how a person holds himself. That is an ashir! That is a gvir!

So sure, all the people in Klal Yisrael had ninety donkeys laden with silver and gold. But that only makes them into people with a lot of money. It does not make them into ashirim. It does not make them into anshei chayil (according to Rashi's interpretation of the term.)

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Do you have a question or comment? Feel free to contact us on our website. Join the Jewish Learning Revolution! Torah.org: The Judaism Site brings this and a host of other

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subject: The War Of Hamas and the Radical Left on the Jews - Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

The War Of Hamas and the Radical Left on the Jews

The Two Great Evils of History: The Islamists and Hitler

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

This Nazi swastika flag was planted in 2018 near the Gaza-Israel border

Give Us Two

One of the intriguing things about the Ten Commandments[1], given to the Jewish people is that they were engraved on two separate tablets. Was G-d short of granite that He needed to use two tablets? Why could He not carve the commandments onto a single stone?

Two Versions

The rabbis in the midrash proposed a novel answer. The Ten Commandments, they suggested, were engraved on two tablets, five on each stone, so that they would be read in two directions -- from top to bottom, and from side to side[2].

The simplest way of reading the Ten Commandments is, of course, from top to bottom:

On the first stone:

1) I am the Lord your G-d who has taken you out of Egypt...

2) You shall have no other gods...

3) You shall not swear in G-d's name in vain...

4) Remember the Sabbath...

5) Honor your father and your mother...

And the five commandments engraved on the second tablet:

6) You shall not murder.

7) You shall not commit adultery.

8) You shall not steal.

9) You shall not bear false witness against your fellow.

10) You shall not covet your fellow's house; you shall not covet your fellow's wife ... nor anything that belongs to your fellow.

This was the way of reading the Ten Commandments vertically. Yet due to the fact that the first five commandments were engraved on one stone and the second five on a separate stone, there was another way of reading the commandments -- horizontally instead of vertically, from commandment No. 1 directly to No. 6; from No. 2 to No. 7; 3 -- 8; 4 -- 9; 5 -- 10.

This version of the Ten Commandments would then read like this:

1) I am the Lord your G-d/You shall not murder. 2) You shall have no other gods/You shall not commit adultery; and so forth with the rest of the commandments.

But why is it necessary to read the Ten Commandments horizontally? What insight can we gain from this alternative reading of the commandments?

In this essay we will discuss the juxtaposition of the first and sixth commandments: "I am the Lord your G-d/You shall not murder." The significance of this "horizontal" reading from a historical, political and religious standpoint cannot be overstated. It embodies one of the most stunning aspects of Judaism. What is at stake in this juxtaposition is nothing less than the future of human civilization.

Two Historical Attempts

Two groups have made an attempt to divorce commandment no. 1 from commandment no. 6 -- to sever the idea of a Creator, who conceived the world for a moral purpose, from the imperative to honor the life of another human being. The first group was comprised of the philosophers of the Enlightenment during the 18th and 19th centuries, the second of religious leaders in many and diverse ages. The result for both was moral defeat.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment ushered in the Age of Reason and the

modern secular era, founded on the belief that the great ideal of "You shall not murder" did not require the prerequisite of "I am the Lord Your G-d" in order to be sustained. Religion was not necessary to ensure moral behavior; reason alone, without G-d, would guide humanity into an age of liberty and to the achievement of moral greatness. The sixth commandment could operate successfully independent of the first.

While religion embodied the vision of man standing in a continuous relationship with G-d, the essence of the Enlightenment represented the vision of man without G-d. It was a vision already introduced during the first days of creation near the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, by the most sophisticated animal of the time, the serpent. "You shall be like G-d," it promised Eve[3]. Man could, and ought to, replace G-d. Left to his own (de)vices, the thinking went, the human being will achieve greatness. But the Holocaust spelled the end of this grand faith in the promise of human progress based on human reason. In Auschwitz, the belief that modern man felt a natural empathy for others was ruined forever.

The gas chambers were not invented by a primitive, barbaric and illiterate people. To the contrary, this people excelled in sciences and the arts, but nevertheless sent 1.5 million children, and 4.5 million adults, to their deaths solely because they had Jewish blood flowing in their veins. SS guards would spend a day in Auschwitz, gassing as many as 12,000 human beings, and then return home in the evening to pet their dogs and laugh with their wives. As the smoke of children ascended from the crematoriums, these charming romantics would enjoy good wine, beautiful women and the moving music of Bach, Mozart and Wagner. They murdered millions of innocents in the name of a developed ethic, and they justified genocide on purely rational grounds.

In "Schindler's List," there is a scene during the liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto where a little girl hiding in a piano is shot dead by an SS guard. As her little angelic body lay in a river of blood, another guard sits down to play the piano.

First SS guard: Was ist das? Ist das Bach?

Second SS guard: Nein. Mozart.

First SS guard: Mozart?

Second SS guard: Ja. And they both marvel at the exquisite music.

This was Nazi Germany at its best.

Elie Wiesel, who gripped the world's imagination with his book "Night," a personal testimony of life and death in Auschwitz, once asked the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who himself lost many members of his family in the Holocaust, how he could believe in G-d after Auschwitz. If G-d existed, Wiesel asked, posing the single greatest challenge to faith, how could He ignore 6 million of His children de-humanized and murdered in the crudest of fashions?

The Rebbe shed a tear and then replied, "In whom do you expect me to believe after Auschwitz? In man?"

This must remain one of the lasting legacies of Auschwitz. If there is any faith at all left after the extermination of 6 million people, it must glean its vitality from something transcending the human rationale and its properties. If morality is left to be determined exclusively by the human mind, it can become a morality that justifies the guillotine, the gulag and the gas chamber. As Dostoevsky famously put it in "The Brothers Karamazov," "Where there is no G-d, all is permitted."

The atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote: "I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values [resulting from atheism], but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it." Russell's point is critical. Without G-d, we cannot objectively define any behavior as good or evil. As difficult as it is to entertain, no one can objectively claim that gassing a mother and her children is any more evil than killing a mouse. It is all a matter of taste and opinion. The validity and effectiveness of "You shall not murder" can be sustained only if it is predicated on the foundation of faith in a universal moral creator who gave humanity an absolute and unwavering definition of what constitutes good vs. evil.

It is why so many on the radical left are so confused about morality, as to even defend Hitler and Hamas. Who would have believed the vilew hatred

that emerged from Harvard and Colombia, the elite universities of our country? who would believe how sick and deranged some professors and students can be?

Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel, who escaped Warsaw a few weeks before it was invaded and lost most of his family in the Nazi Holocaust, captured this sentiment succinctly: "If man is not more than human, then he is less than human." Either we climb to a place beyond ourselves, or we are likely to fall to a place below ourselves. When the vision of the sacred dies in the soul of a person, he or she is capable of becoming a servant of the devil.

Religious Evil

But this is far from the whole picture.

While the Enlightenment abandoned commandment no. 1 in favor of no. 6, various religions over the ages abandoned no. 6 in favor of no. 1. Theirs has been the atrocious belief that as long as you believe in the Lord, or in Allah, you can kill and maim whomever you brand an "infidel." Whether it is a business executive in New York, or a teenager eating a slice of pizza in Jerusalem, or a child on the first day of school in Beslan, or a commuter in Madrid, or a tourist in Bali, or a Chabad couple in Mumbai, if the person is not a member of your faith, G-d wants him or her to die. For the religious fundamentalist, "I am the Lord your G-d" has nothing to do with "You shall not murder."

This is the greatest perversion of faith. When thousands can rejoice gleefully in the torture of Jewish babies, in the rape and beheading of Jewish women, as the Hamas monsters did on October 7th, 2023, while millions of others celebrated, it is the most vile desecration of Allah. Faith that does not inculcate its followers with the sanctity of every single human life desecrates and erodes the very purpose of faith, which is to elevate the human person to a state beyond personal instinct and prejudice. If you delete "You shall not murder" from religion, you have detached yourself from "I am the Lord your G-d." To believe in G-d means to honor the life of every person created in the image of G-d. What the juxtaposition of the two commandments is telling us is that you can't believe in G-d and murder[4].

Conversely, if you truly believe that taking the life of another human is wrong -- not just because you lack the means or motive to do so or are afraid of ending up in jail, but because you recognize the transcendent, inviolable value of life -- that's just another way of saying you believe in G-d. For what confers upon human life its radical grace, its transcendent sanctity and its absolute value if not the living presence of G-d imprinted on the face of the human person?

3,336 years ago, Judaism, in the most ennobling attempt to create a society based on justice and peace, established its principle code in the sequence of the two commandments -- "I am the Lord your G-d/You shall not murder." A society without G-d can become monstrous; a society that abandons the eternal and absolute commandment "You shall not murder" is equally evil. Both are capable of burning children alive during the day and then retiring to sleep with a clear conscience.

The Mountain

The Talmud captures this notion in an intriguing fashion[5].

The Talmud cites a tradition that when Israel approached Sinai, G-d lifted up the mountain, held it over the people's heads and declared: "Either you accept the Torah, or be crushed beneath the mountain." (The Talmud bases this tradition on the verse in Exodus, "And they stood beneath the mountain[6].")

This seems ludicrous. What worth is there to a relationship and a covenant accepted through coercion[7]?

The answer is profoundly simple. What G-d was telling the Jewish people is that the creation of societies that honor life and shun cruelty is dependent on education and on the value system inculcated within children of the society. The system of Torah, G-d was suggesting, was the guarantor for life and liberty. If you reject the morality of Torah, if you will lack the courage and conviction to teach the world that "I am the Lord your G-d" and that I have stated unequivocally "You shall not murder," the result will be humanity crushed under a mountain of tyrants.

Seventy-five years since Auschwitz and after two decades of incessant

Islamic terrorism, the mountain is hanging over our heads once again. Shall we embrace the path of divine-based morality? Shall we never forget that religion must always be defined by "You shall not murder[8]?"

[1] Exodus chapter 20. [2] Mechilta to Exodus ibid. [3] Genesis 3:5.

[4] The Midrash (Mechiultah ibid.) in discussing the connection between the first and sixth commandments presents the following parable to explain the evil behind murder: "There was a king who entered a country and put up portraits of himself, and made statues of himself, and minted coins with his image. After a while, the people of the country overturned his portraits, broke his statues and invalidated his coins, thereby reducing the image of the king. "So, too, one who sheds blood reduces the image of the King, as it is written (Genesis 9:6): "One who spills a man's blood... for in the image of G-d He made man."

[5] Talmud, Shabbas 88a. [6] Exodus 19:17.

[7] This question is raised among many of the Talmudic commentators. Many answers have been offered. See Tosfos, Eitz Yosef, Pnei Yehoshua, Shabbos Shel Mi and BenYehoyada to Talmud Shabbos ibid. Midrash Tanchumah Noach section 3. Daas Zekeinim Mibbalei Hatosafos on Exodus 19:17. Maharal Tiferes Yisroel ch. 32, Gur Aryeh on Exodus ibid. and Or Chodash p. 45. Sources noted in Pardas Yosef to Exodus ibid. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Pulnah in Ben Poras Yosef Parshas Vayaishev. Torah Or Megilas Esther p. 96c; 118c. 7) This essay is based on a Yiddish letter by the Lubavitcher Rebbe written to Dr. Elie Wiesel in 1965 (published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 33 pp.255-260) and on a 1962 public address by the Rebbe (published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 3 pp. 887-895), and on other sources.

[8] This essay is based on a Yiddish letter by the Lubavitcher Rebbe written to Dr. Elie Wiesel in April, 1965 (published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 33 pp.255-260) and on a 1962 public address by the Rebbe (published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 3 pp. 887-895), and on a lecture presented by Rabbi Dr. Benjamin Bleich, and other sources.

from: Alan Fisher <afisherads@yahoo.com>

Subject: Potomac Torah Study Center Devrei Torah for Parshat Yitro 5785
BS"D February 14, 2025 Potomac Torah Study Center 23-24 Shevat 5784;
Yitro; Mevarchim HaHodesh

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May Israel, with the support of the U.S. government, find a way to force Hamas to release the remaining hostages and bodies of victims of their brutality as soon as possible. May 5785 initiate a period of peace and security for Israel and Jews throughout the world.

Parshat Yitro opens (chapter 18) as Moshe's father-in-law hears of God's great interventions for B'Nai Yisrael and takes Moshe's wife and sons with him to reunite at the base of Har Sinai. However, chapter 17 ends with B'Nai Yisrael at Refidim, and they do not depart for Har Sinai until later and do not reach the base of Har Sinai until Sivan (19:2). Moshe's reunion with his family, including Yitro, therefore must take place after the Revelation – and thus chapter 18 is out of chronological order. (I discussed the likely reason for moving chapter 18 in my introduction two years ago.)

What is so important about Yitro's reunion with Moshe that the Torah moves it out of chronological order? The most common answer I have seen (and discussed in the past) is that chapter 17 ends with Amalek's attack – the reaction of one group of non-Jews to B'Nai Yisrael leaving Egypt. Yitro demonstrates a very different response, a non-Jewish (Midianite) priest thrilled for the Jews leaving Egypt and about to receive a direct message from God. By moving Yitro's reunion to come directly after Amalek's attack, chapter 18 fits thematically to contrast B'Nai Yisrael's interactions with members of two nearby non-Jewish nations living near them. Chapters 17 and 18 are models for B'Nai Yisrael on how to relate to evil and good from neighboring nations.

This year, I would like to discuss Who Are You Moshe Rabbeinu?, a compelling article by Rabbi Itiel Gold, a psychologist and alumnus of Yeshivat Har Etzion. I obtained the article from the Har Etzion archives, but it is also easily available on the Internet by searching the author and name of the article. Rabbi Gold observes that B'Nai Yisrael seem not to have accepted Zipporah, Moshe's foreign (Midianite) wife, and they also consider Moshe to be a foreigner, because Paro's daughter adopted him and raised him in the palace. Moshe is in a difficult situation, because at best B'Nai

Yisrael consider him to be Hashem's representative while Moshe wishes to become a representative of the people to Hashem. The Jews do not completely trust Moshe as their representative. (The people seem not to realize that a recently freed slave would not be effective negotiating with Paro.)

Yitro arrives and almost immediately realizes that Moshe and Zipporah both need to interact socially with B'Nai Yisrael so the people and Moshe's family can all relate comfortably with each other. Yitro therefore arranges a large dinner to celebrate God's gifts for the people and invites the heads of the various tribes and other VIPs to interact with Moshe and his family. Everyone comes and enjoys the meal – except Moshe. Yitro discovers that Moshe spends all day and night every day meeting with people who have questions for God, and Moshe judges disagreements for many hours each day. Given that schedule, Moshe does not finish his work early enough for a social meal.

Yitro's next intervention is to recommend a judicial system to make Moshe's workload manageable. If God approves, Moshe should train judges for minor matters; higher level judges for initial appeals; and reserve only the most important not yet determined cases to go on to Moshe for final decisions. This model, the prototype for judicial systems for most countries even today, has the advantage of showing the people that Moshe is on their side and is their representative taking issues up from the people to God to resolve.

Rabbi Gold's analysis demonstrates how Yitro's suggestions meet the psychological needs of Moshe, Zipporah, and B'Nai Yisrael. The people come to meet Moshe and his family, see them as their representatives, and understand that Moshe is working very long hours to help the people understand and obtain help from God. With this system newly in place, the people have a method to help them understand and learn how to meet Hashem's demands. B'Nai Yisrael do not all learn and trust either Moshe or God completely for some time, but at least they have an intelligent method to learn better how to follow the mitzvot.

So far my discussion focuses on how we are to live and relate to each other, God, and non-Jews in a civilized world. Israel, however, has been dealing with a world of evil – murderers capturing and torturing our people, sending weapons aimed at destroying lives and property, and encouraging hatred among non-Jews all over the world. Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander asks how "we balance the imminent threat to the lives of our brothers and sisters in captivity with the prospect of harm to any or many of us when convicted murderers go free?" Rabbi Brander's answer is that the Torah gives us a road map directing us toward values by which we wish to live. Meanwhile, the Israeli and American governments support our people in fighting evil as necessary to bring the fighting to an end.

Our prayers help. On Tu B'Shevat, I received an email from Kiryat Arba informing us that The Mor family of Kiryat Arba have received a sign of life from their son, hostage Eitan Mor. As we continue to pray for Eitan Avraham ben Efrat and all the hostages, may the news about Eitan Mor be a sign that Hashem is listening and working to bring better news to our people.

As we continue to perform more mitzvot, pray to Hashem, and oppose evil in the world, may conditions for our people improve. May we also teach our children and grandchildren more lessons from the Torah.

Note: in writing these words, I recall anti-Semitic attacks on my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, such as his getting arrested and spending time in jail for petitioning for Soviet Jews in front of the Soviet Embassy and spending all day in shul on Yom Kippur after high school thugs pelted him with raw eggs while he walked to services. In contrast, one of Rabbi Cahan's closest friends was a minister with whom he co-taught a Bible course for many years (with some services at Har Shalom and others at the Lutheran Church). Hopefully all of us can remember many episodes of positive interactions with non-Jews as well as any anti-Semitic incidents.

Shabbat Shalom, Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the

pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Fw from allen.klein@gmail.com

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subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Home Weekly Parsha YITRO

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

At the revelation at Sinai the Lord set the goal for the Jewish people – "to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These noble goals, like all great ideas and lofty ideals, require definition. What is meant by a kingdom of priests? In Jewish life the priests, the descendants of Aharon, were people who were freed from the daily mundane chores of life and were supported by the masses of Israel who sustained them physically and financially.

Now if the entire nation was to be a kingdom of priests, in those terms of support and life, it obviously was an impossibility to maintain such a kingdom. Therefore the idea of the kingdom of priests must mean a broader reality. It is the challenge of being a kingdom of teachers of others – "for the lips of the priest shall guard knowledge and Torah will be asked to be taught from his mouth."

We are all teachers by example if not by profession. How we act influences our children, our neighbors, our customers and our coworkers. And a priest in the service of the Jewish people was someone who served the public and private needs of Jews. He was someone who was on call to answer the needs of the community, whether in the required Temple service or in the private endeavors meant to enhance the status of the community or of help to other individuals. The priest was the social worker, the peace maker, the cement that binds a community together and gives it its necessary sense of unity and cohesion. Every Jew is obligated to attempt to be such a priest.

A holy nation is also a phrase that requires definition and detail. Holiness in its Hebrew root means dedication, loyalty and an ability to break down the barriers of society that oftentimes prevent us from achieving spiritual satisfaction and nobility of purpose. A holy nation must therefore mean a nation that is able to retain its unique identity. It cannot be swallowed up by the prevailing and ever changing majority cultures that will always surround it.

Holiness requires the ability to care for everyone while remaining apart from everyone at one and the same time. Holiness refers to the body and not just to the soul and the spirit. It speaks to discipline and order, self-control and resisting impulse. The great challenge here is to instill these virtues and traits of character and behavior in an entire nation and not only in a few special chosen, extraordinary individuals.

These goals of probity and correct behavior are to be the national goals of the Jewish people and the hallmark of its society. Other societies look for greatness and morality from the few. Not so the society of the Jewish people, where these demands and goals are laid upon all who are part of the household of Israel.

A holy nation is not restricted to being so only in the house of worship and study. It is to be a holy nation in every walk of life, at home and in the marketplace, in the halls of government - and certainly in its treatment of others. That is the blueprint of Sinai that was set before us millennia ago and still binds us to this very day.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

from: The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust <info@rabbisacks.org>

subject: Covenant and Conversation

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

The Custom that Refused to Die

Yitro

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

There's an enthralling story about the Ten Commandments and the role they played in Jewish worship and the synagogue.

It begins with a little-known fact. There was a time when there were not three paragraphs in the prayer we call the Shema, but four. The Mishnah in Tamid (5:1) tells us that in Temple times the officiating priests would first recite the Ten Commandments and then the three paragraphs of the Shema. We have several pieces of independent evidence for this. The first consists of four papyrus fragments acquired in Egypt in 1898 by the then secretary of the Society of Biblical Archaeology, W.L. Nash. Pieced together and located today in the Cambridge University Library, they are known as the Nash Papyrus. Dating from the second century BCE, they contain a version of the Ten Commandments, immediately followed by the Shema. Almost certainly the papyrus was used for prayer in a synagogue in Egypt before the birth of Christianity, at a time when the custom was to include all four paragraphs. Tefillin from the Second Temple period, discovered in the Qumran caves along with the Dead Sea Scrolls, contained the Ten Commandments. Indeed a lengthy section of the halachic Midrash on Deuteronomy, the Sifri, is dedicated to proving that we should not include the Ten Commandments in the tefillin, which suggests that there were some Jews who did so, and the rabbis needed to be able to show that they were wrong. We also have evidence from both the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli, Brachot 12a) and the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi Brachot 1:8) that there were communities in Israel and Babylon who sought to introduce the Ten Commandments into the prayers, and that the rabbis had to issue a ruling against doing so. There is even documentary evidence that the Jewish community in Fostat, near Cairo, kept a special scroll in the Ark called the Sefer al-Shir, which they took out after the conclusion of daily prayers and read from it the Ten Commandments.^[1]

So the custom of including the Ten Commandments as part of the Shema was once widespread, but from a certain point in time it was systematically opposed by the Sages. Why did they object to it? Both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud say it was because of the “claim of the sectarians.” Jewish sectarians – some identify them as a group of early Christians but there is no compelling evidence for this – argued that only the Ten Commandments were binding, because only they were received by the Israelites directly from God at Mount Sinai. The others were received through Moses, and this sect, or perhaps several of them, held that they did not come from God. They were Moses’ own invention, and therefore not binding.

There is a Midrash that gives us an idea of what the sectarians were saying. It places in the mouth of Korach and his followers, who rebelled against Moses, these words:

“The whole congregation are holy. Are you [Moses and Aaron] the only ones who are holy? All of us were sanctified at Sinai . . . and when the Ten Commandments were given, there was no mention of challah or terumah or tithes or tzitzit. You made this all up yourself.”

Yalkut Shimoni Korach 752

So the rabbis were opposed to any custom that would give special prominence to the Ten Commandments since the sectarians were pointing to such customs as proof that even orthodox Jews treated them differently from the other commands. By removing them from the prayer book, the rabbis hoped to silence such claims.

But the story does not end there. So special were the Ten Commandments to Jews that they found their way back. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, author of the Tur (14th century) suggested that one should say them privately. Rabbi Joseph Karo argues that the ban only applies to reciting the Ten Commandments publicly during the service, so they could be said privately after the service. That is where you find them today in most siddurim – immediately after the morning service. Rabbi Shlomo Luria had the custom of reading the Ten Commandments at the beginning of prayer, before the start of Pesukei de-Zimra, the Verses of Praise.

That was not the end of the argument. Given that we do not say the Ten Commandments during public prayer, should we none the less give them special honour when we read them from the Torah, whether on Shavuot or in the weeks of Parshat Yitro and Vaetchanan? Should we stand when they are being read?

Maimonides found himself involved in a controversy over this question. Someone wrote him a letter telling the following story. He was a member of a synagogue where originally the custom was to stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments. Then a rabbi came and ruled otherwise, saying that it was wrong to stand for the same reason as it was forbidden to say the Ten Commandments during public prayer. It could be used by sectarians, heretics and others to claim that even the Jews themselves held that the Ten Commandments were more important than the other 603. So the community stopped standing. Years later another rabbi came, this time from a community where the custom was to stand for the Ten Commandments. The new rabbi stood and told the congregation to do likewise. Some did. Some did not, since their previous rabbi had ruled against. Who was right? Maimonides had no doubt. It was the previous rabbi, the one who had told them not to stand, who was in the right. His reasoning was correct also. Exactly the logic that barred it from the daily prayers should be applied to the reading of the Torah. It should be given no special prominence. The community should stay sitting. Thus ruled Maimonides, the greatest rabbi of the Middle Ages. However, sometimes even great rabbis have difficulty persuading communities to change. Then, as now, most communities – even those in Maimonides’ Egypt – stood while the Ten Commandments were being read.

So despite strong attempts by the Sages, in the time of the Mishnah, Gemara, and later in the age of Maimonides, to ban any custom that gave special dignity to the Ten Commandments, whether as prayer or as biblical reading, Jews kept finding ways of doing so. They brought it back into daily prayer by saying it privately and outside the mandatory service, and they continued to stand while it was being read from the Torah despite Maimonides’ ruling that they should not.

“Leave Israel alone,” said Hillel, “for even if they are not prophets, they are still the children of prophets.” Ordinary Jews had a passion for the Ten Commandments. They were the distilled essence of Judaism. They were heard directly by the people from the mouth of God himself. They were the basis of the covenant they made with God at Mount Sinai, calling on them to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Twice in the Torah they are described as the covenant itself:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

Ex 34:27-28

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you His covenant, the Ten Commandments, which He commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.

Deut. 4:12-13

That is why they were originally said immediately prior to the Shema, and why despite their removal from the prayers Jews continued to say them – because their recital constituted a daily renewal of the covenant with God. That too is why Jews insisted on standing when they were being read from the Torah, because when they were being given, the Israelites “stood at the foot of the mountain” (Ex. 19:17). The Midrash says about the reading of the Ten Commandments on Shavuot:

“The Holy One blessed be He said to the Israelites: My children, read this passage every year and I will account it to you as if you were standing before Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah.”

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 12, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 204

Jews kept searching for ways of recreating that scene, by standing when they listened to it from the Torah and by saying it privately after the end of the morning prayers. Despite the fact that they knew their acts could be misconstrued by heretics, they were too attached to that great epiphany – the only time in history God spoke to an entire people – to treat it like any other passage in the Torah. The honour given to the Ten Commandments was the custom that refused to die.

[1] Jacob Mann, The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fātimid caliphs, 1920, volume I, p. 221.

from: Yeshiva.org.il <subscribe@yeshiva.org.il>
Revivim by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed (R"Y Har Bracha)

Release of Hostages on Shabbat, And Israel's Dignity

Revivim

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

It is unfortunate that the representatives of the State of Israel did not take heed of the fact that the release of the hostages was done on Shabbat, violating the national sanctity of Shabbat * As part of the religious war Hamas is waging against us, they worked towards this outcome, continuing from the terrible desecration on Shabbat and Simchat Torah * Even wicked kings achieved victory when they honored Israel's sanctities * Honor for Israel's sanctities is an essential component in defeating the enemy, and in establishing the Israeli national identity * In our time, it is forbidden to enter a mosque, because in recent generations, many Muslims have become leaders of anti-Israel sentiment in the world

Sanctification of God's Name through Observance of Commandments in Captivity

The story of Agam Berger, the surveillance soldier who was kidnapped and released, is inspiring. The terrorists used her as a servant, and demanded that she cook for them even on Shabbat, but she courageously insisted on not violating Shabbat. Her friends testified that she made sure to eat kosher food, even though it limited her diet. Her friends also shared that they did not eat chametz during Passover, and fasted on Yom Kippur. Meanwhile, Agam's mother, Merav Berger, asked the public not to desecrate Shabbat during her release. Divine help guided them, and Agam was released on Thursday. When she was freed and in the helicopter, she wrote: "I chose the way of faith, and I returned through the way of faith. Thank you to all the people of Israel, and the brave soldiers of the IDF." These beautiful words should serve as a model for all of us. May it be God's will that dear Agam, along with all the kidnapped women and the brave soldiers of the IDF, merit good health, joy, and the ability to build wonderful families, with happiness and love.

Negligence

It is unfortunate that the representatives of the State of Israel did not pay attention to the fact that the release of the hostages took place on Shabbat, violating the national sanctity of Shabbat. It turns out that the representatives of Hamas, as part of the religious war they are waging against us, worked towards this, continuing from the terrible desecration on Shabbat and Simchat Torah. However, the representatives of the Shin Bet and the Israeli government continue to fail to understand the enemy, and the price is heavy. I asked Member of Knesset Amit Halevi, a member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, about this. He responded: "This is a religious war, and therefore, I believe that this is a deliberate humiliation by Hamas to ensure that the release takes place specifically on Shabbat, causing the State to desecrate Shabbat publicly. After Agam Berger insisted not to be released on Shabbat and proved that it was possible, even though she personally was not obligated to do so, the state representatives should have insisted on this, not because of the desecration of Shabbat itself, but because of the desecration of God's name that stems from it, which is the focus of the entire war."

National Honor in Observance of Israel's Sanctities

Even Jewish wicked kings, when they kept Israel's sanctities, achieved victory, as is told about Ahab, the king of Israel (1 Kings 20). Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, gathered a very large army, and went to war against the kingdom of Israel. The Israeli army could not stop his forces, and they conquered the entire land, laying siege to Samaria, Ahab's royal city. The situation seemed hopeless. Ben-Hadad was willing to end the siege if Ahab would surrender and give him his money, gold, wives, and children. Ahab, who thought his chances of winning were lost, agreed to give the king of Aram everything that belonged to him personally. However, Ben-Hadad then demanded "the delights of his eyes." Our Sages explained (Sanhedrin 102b) that he meant the Sefer Torah – the Torah scroll. But Ahab did not agree to give the Torah scroll. Although he did not keep the commandments properly,

the national honor represented by the Torah scroll was so precious to him, that he preferred to go into a hopeless battle, rather than degrade the honor of Israel by handing over the Torah scroll to the enemy.

Because this was a fateful decision, one that could cause many to die, Ahab did not want to decide alone and consulted with the elders, and they too, supported his position. Ahab then said to Ben-Hadad's messengers: "Say to your master, the king, all that you sent to your servant in the first matter I will do, but this thing I cannot do" (1 Kings 20:9). Ben-Hadad got angry, and threatened to destroy Samaria. Then a prophet sent by God came to assure Ahab that he would defeat Aram. The Israelites went out and struck the Arameans with a great blow, and Ben-Hadad fled for his life. The prophet came again to warn Ahab, in the name of God, that Ben-Hadad would return to fight him the next year. Ahab properly prepared his army, and Israel once again defeated Aram.

Settlement of the Land

National honor is connected to the commandment of Yishuv Ha'aretz (settling the Land) and defending it, which Omri and his son Ahab, excelled in. Therefore, even though they practiced avodah zara (idolatry), they enjoyed successes, as the Tanna of the School of Elijah said:

"Once I was sitting in the great study hall in Jerusalem before the sages, and I asked them: Why did King Omri merit that all the kings before him did not have their sons sit on their throne, but Omri succeeded in having three kings from his seed sit on his throne (Ahab his son, Ahaziah son of Ahab, and Jehoram son of Ahab)? They replied: 'We don't know'. I said to them: My friends, Omri merited to have three kings from his seed sit on his throne because he built a great city in the Land of Israel" (Tanna d'Vei Eliyahu Rabba 9).

In other words, even though King Omri did evil in the eyes of God more than all those before him (1 Kings 16:25), the merit of Yishuv Ha'aretz, settling the Land, stood for him and his descendants. And this was despite the fact that he did not build the city of Samaria with pure intentions of settling the Land, but for personal reasons – to strengthen his monarchy, as Omri said, "Just as Jerusalem is for the kings of Judah, so Samaria will be for the kings of Israel." From here, we learn how great is the merit of the commandment of Yishuv Ha'aretz – that even though Omri's motivation for building Samaria was flawed, because he effectively settled the Land, he merited to have three kings from his descendants sit on his throne.

Settlement of the Land and Unity of Israel

The commandment of Yishuv Ha'aretz is connected to achdut ha'am, the unity of the nation, and in the days of Ahab, there was peace between the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel, and Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, married Ahab's daughter, and the king of Judah and the king of Israel went out together to war against their enemies, and were victorious (1 Kings 22). Our Sages also said that in Ahab's generation, they were idolaters, yet they went to war and won, because they did not speak lashon ha'ra – evil of one another. Whereas in the generation of Saul, despite being scholars of the Torah, they went to war and lost, because they had among them those who spoke lashon ha'ra (Devarim Rabbah 5:10; Yerushalmi Peah 1:1). And it is written in the Sifrei:

"Great is peace, for even if Israel are idolaters and there is peace between them, it is as though God says that the Satan does not touch them, as it is written: 'Ephraim is addicted to images – let him be', but when they are divided, what is said about them? 'Their hearts are divided, now they shall be guilty'" (Sifrei Bamidbar 42).

Without Faith, the Love for the People and the Land Weakens

However, it must be known that the merit of the commandment of Yishuv Ha'aretz and the unity derived from national sentiment, cannot last forever. Because Omri and his son Ahab sinned with idolatry, their relationship with the nation and the Land weakened. Therefore, after Ahab succeeded, with God's help, in defeating Aram in the second battle, instead of killing Ben-Hadad as he had planned to do to Israel, he showed mercy on him, brought him up into his chariot, made a covenant with him, and sent him on his way. Then the prophet came and said:

"Because you have let go of a man whom I had devoted to destruction, your life shall go for his life and your people for his people" (1 Kings 20:42).

And so it was, after a few years, Ahab was killed in battle against Aram (1 Kings 22:34-38).

Moral Decline

Turning away from God also caused a moral decline, which was sharply evident in Ahab's treatment of Naboth the Jezreelite. Ahab coveted his vineyard, and when Naboth refused to sell it to him, at the advice of his wicked wife Jezebel, false witnesses were brought to testify that Naboth had rebelled against the king. Based on their testimony, Naboth was executed, and Ahab inherited his vineyard. God then commanded Elijah the prophet: "Go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who is in Samaria, and is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. Say to him: 'This is what the Lord says: Have you murdered and also taken possession?'" (1 Kings 21:17-19).

Summary

From all this, we learn that there is value in observing Israel's sanctities, even for national honor alone. Moreover, honor for Israel's sanctities is an essential component in defeating the enemy, and in establishing Israeli statehood. For the unity needed to strengthen the nation, especially in the face of difficult challenges such as war and mourning, must be created around a general and sacred, national value.

Entering a Mosque

Q: According to halakha, is it permitted to enter a Muslim mosque?

A: According to the overwhelming majority of poskim (religious authorities), Islam is not idolatry, so there is no prohibition against entering a mosque, and in times of need, it is even permitted to pray inside.

However, it seems that in practice, entering a mosque today is forbidden. This is because in recent generations, many Muslims have become leaders of anti-Israel sentiment in the world, despising and humiliating the people of Israel, and its Torah. In many mosques, they incite hatred against Israel, and in some, they even call for war against Israel, and the Jews. Our Sages said: "Anyone who is an enemy and hates Israel, is as if he is an enemy and hates God" (Sifrei Zuta, Numbers 10:35). This is what is meant when it is written: "When the ark set out, Moses said: 'Arise, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee'" (Numbers 10:35).

The enemies and haters mentioned here, are the enemies and haters of Israel. Our Sages continue and explain, regarding them it is said in the verse: "Do I not hate those who hate You, Lord, and abhor those who rise up against You? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies" (Psalms 139:21-22).

And our Sages also said regarding the verse:

"In the greatness of Your majesty, You will overthrow those who rise up against You" (Exodus 15:7), who are those who rise up against God? They answered: "Anyone who rises against Israel, is as if they are rising against the Holy One, blessed be He" (Mechilta of Rabbi Ishmael).

Therefore, it is forbidden to enter a mosque in general, except for those mosques with good leaders who openly declare that they respect Israel and Judaism – and may all follow their example.

fw from allen.klein@gmail.com

from: Ohr Torah Stone <ohrtorahstone@otsny.org>

subject: Rabbi Riskin on the Weekly Torah Portion

Parshat Yitro: Who is a Jew

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

"You have seen what I have done to Egypt... And now, if you will surely hearken to My voice and observe My covenant...then you will be for Me a kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation..." (Exodus 19:4-6)

In effect, the drama of the Exodus and its aftermath have transformed Israel from a family to a nation-religion, from Bet Yisrael to Am Yisrael. But how do we define the 'Am'[1]? Are we a nation, are we a religion, or are we an amalgamation of both?

In truth, one of the most agonizing problems facing the Jewish people of Israel as well as the Diaspora, an issue which can potentially tear us asunder and make a mockery of the Jewish Federation slogan "We are one," is "Who is a Jew." From a technical, legal perspective, this question expresses itself

in the requirements for conversion, the ramifications of which impinge on who qualifies for automatic Israeli citizenship under the "Right of Return," an Israeli law that provides automatic citizenship for any "Jew" who desires to live there. This law was enacted as an obvious and proud reaction to the tragic situation in the 1930s and 1940s, when Jews were sent to the gas chambers because virtually no existing country would relax their immigration rules and allow the would-be refugees a haven from Nazi persecution. In a far broader way, however, the "Who is a Jew" controversy speaks volumes about "what is Judaism"; after all, the necessary criteria for entering our fellowship will pretty much define the cardinal principles of that fellowship.

The sages of the Talmud, as interpreted by Rabbi Yosef Karo's sixteenth-century code of Jewish Law, set down three criteria for male conversion, with the latter two forming the criteria for female conversion: circumcision, immersion in a mikva, and acceptance of the commandments (Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, 268:3).

The casting off of the foreskin connotes the removal of gentile-dom, the separation of the Jew from the licentious practices (especially in the sexual realm) which characterized the pagan world (interestingly enough, the sages saw women as "naturally circumcised.")

Ritual mikva immersion symbolizes rebirth – after all, the fetus is encompassed in fluid and birth is presaged by the "breaking" of the mother's "waters" – into a new family-nation. (A similar ritual was adopted by Christianity in the form of baptism.)

The acceptance of the commandments signals the entry into a religion, a faith community bound together by common adherence to a system of ritual, moral and ethical laws. With this understanding it becomes clear that we are a nation as well as a religion, a nation with a separate language, culture and homeland and a religion with a unique code of law defining our prayer rituals, feasts and fasts, lifecycle celebrations, and ethical behavior.

Fascinatingly enough, the Bible records just such a process of development, a "national conversion," as it were, in the Torah portions in the middle of the book of Exodus. In the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites separated themselves from the Egyptians, the Egyptian enslavement, the Egyptian concept of slavery as a societal norm, and the immoral Egyptian lifestyle. The Bible suggests that the Jews expressed this removal from "Egyptiandom" with circumcision, since the Paschal lamb sacrifice could only be eaten by males who were circumcised (Ex. 12:48). The Midrash explains precisely when the circumcision took place. The Bible provides for the Israelite preparation for the Exodus, commanding each household to take a lamb on the tenth of Nisan, to guard the lamb until the fourteenth of Nisan, and then to sacrifice the lamb to God (their disavowal of Egyptian idolatry, since the lamb was one of the Egyptian gods) and place its blood on their doorposts. On the night of the fifteenth they were to eat the lamb – their first Seder – and then exit from Egypt.

Asks the Midrash: why take the lamb on the tenth and wait until the fourteenth to sacrifice it? The Midrash answers that the male Israelites were to have themselves circumcised, and by merit of the twofold blood of the sacrifice and the circumcision they would be found worthy by God to be freed from Egypt (Ex. 12:6, Mechilta and Rashi ad loc.). Indeed, in Temple times, a convert was expected not only to have himself circumcised, but to bring a sacrificial offering as well (Maimonides, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 13:1).

The ritual immersion of the Israelites took place right before the revelation at Sinai, either when God commanded Moses to see that the people "be sanctified and their clothing be washed" (Ex. 19:10, see Maimonides, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 13, 2-3), or when the Israelites jumped into the Reed Sea before it split ("and the children of Israel entered into the midst of the waters on the dry land..." [Ex. 14:22]).

And of course, the acceptance of the commandments came following the Decalogue and the subsequent legal code, but as a prerequisite to the confirmation of the eternal covenant between God and Israel: "... And the entire nation responded with one voice and declared, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we shall do and we shall internalize'" (Ex. 24:3, 7). Indeed, prior to the formula of acceptance, the Bible not only recorded the Ten

Commandments as well as the major civil and ritual laws, but also outlined the eventual borders of the Land of Israel which the Jews would occupy (Ex. 23:20-25).

In effect, therefore, the Israelites were accepting both Jewish nationality and Jewish religion. We came to be bound together ('am' contains the same letters as the word 'im', which means "together") by common genes, land and destiny as well as by a unifying system of laws, values and lifestyle.

Now, does this mean that a person can only convert to Judaism if he/she lives in our Jewish homeland and is observant of all of the commandments? Perhaps the book of Ruth suggests that this be the case, having Ruth say to Naomi, "Where you shall go [to your homeland Israel], there shall I go; your nation shall be my nation, your God [religion] shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16). However, since the Babylonian expulsion of the Jews from Israel (586 BCE), a majority of Jews have lived in the Diaspora – even during the Second Commonwealth. Hence, the rabbis accepted even converts living in the Diaspora. And many religio-legal decisors have also ruled that although acceptance of commandments is a necessary prerequisite for conversion, there is no requirement to teach all of the 613 commandments with their respective rabbinic injunctions and enactments; indeed, the Talmud merely requires "several of the more stringent laws and several of the more lenient laws," specifically mentioning the laws of the Sabbath, kashrut and tithing (charity to the poor). [2]

There is nevertheless a general consensus amongst the rabbinic authorities that circumcision for males, and ritual immersion and a general acceptance of commandments for both males and females, are clear and absolute requirements for conversion. After all, becoming Jewish is not merely an acquisition of a new garment; it is a commitment which connotes sacrifice, a willingness to share a national destiny of yearning for Zion and perfecting the world (tikkun olam) and participating in a tradition of faith and habitual norms which have united Jews from Ethiopia, Yemen, Jerusalem, New York and Melbourne for 4,000 years. And it was these very requirements which the Israelites fulfilled at the very dawn of their history.

[1] The Hebrew letters ayin and mem may form a word translated as "with," 'together,' or 'collective.'

[2] See Yevamot 45b-47a

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Rav Kook Torah

Yitro: Breaking Bread with Scholars

A Meal Before God

When Moses' father-in-law Jethro met the Israelites in the desert, he rejoiced when he heard about the rescue of the Jewish people from Pharaoh's hand, and he brought offerings to God. "And Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to share the meal with Moses' father-in-law before God." (Exodus 18:12)

The expression "before God" appears out of place here. In what way was this particular feast in God's presence?

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Avin explained:

"To partake of a meal where a Torah scholar is present is like enjoying the splendor of God's Divine Presence. After all, did Jethro, Aaron, and the elders of Israel eat before God? They ate before Moses! Rather, this verse teaches us that sharing a meal with a scholar [such as Moses] is like enjoying the splendor of God's Presence." (Berachot 64a)

Rabbi Avin's statement needs to be clarified. What is so wonderful about eating with a Torah scholar? Wouldn't studying Torah with him be a much greater spiritual experience? And in what way is such a meal similar to "enjoying the splendor of God's Presence"?

Common Denominator

The human soul, for all its greatness, is limited in its ability to grasp and enjoy God's infinite wisdom. Whatever degree of pleasure we are able to derive from God's Presence is a function of our spiritual attainments. The greater our spiritual awareness, the greater the pleasure we feel in God's

Presence. But while we will never gain complete mastery of Divine wisdom, even the small measure of comprehension that is possible is sufficient to fill the soul with tremendous light and joy.

A Torah scholar whose holiness is great, whose wisdom is profound, and whose conduct is lofty cannot be properly appreciated by the masses.

Common folk will not understand his wisdom and may not be able to relate to his holiness. In what way can they connect with such a lofty scholar?

A scholar's greatest influence takes place in those spheres where others can best relate to him. Most people will be unable to follow his erudite lectures, but a meal forms a common bond between the most illustrious and the most ordinary. This connection allows everyone to experience some aspect of a great scholar's path in Torah and service of God.

When a Torah scholar reveals his great wisdom and holiness, the average person will be overcome by a sense of unbridgeable distance from such sublime attainments. He may despair of ever reaching a level so far beyond his own limited capabilities. But when sharing a meal with a scholar, the common physical connection enables people to be more receptive to the scholar's noble traits and holy conduct.

Of course, those who are able to understand the scholar's wisdom can more fully appreciate his greatness. Those individuals will derive greater benefit and pleasure from him. This is precisely Rabbi Avin's point: just as the degree of pleasure gained from God's Presence depends on the soul's spiritual state, so too, the benefit we derive from a great scholar depends on our spiritual level and erudition.

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Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Yisro

What's News

Though the marquee event of this week's portion surrounds the epic event of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, there are still many lessons to be learned from every pasuk of the parsha, even the seemingly innocuous ones. Rabbi Mordechai Rogov, of blessed memory, points out a fascinating insight from the following verses that discuss the naming of Moshe's children.

"Yisro, the father-in-law of Moses, took Zipporah, the wife of Moses, after she had been sent away, and her two sons – of whom the name of one was Gershom, for he had said, 'I was a sojourner in a strange land.' And the name of the other was Eliezer, for 'the God of my father came to my aid, and He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'" (Exodus 18:2-4).

After Moshe killed the Egyptian taskmaster who had hit the Hebrew slave, Pharaoh put a price on Moshe's head. The Medrash tells us that Moshe's head was actually on the chopping block but he was miraculously saved. He immediately fled from Egypt to Midian. In Midian, he met his wife Zipporah and there had two sons.

The question posed is simple and straightforward: Moshe was first saved from Pharaoh and only then did he flee to Midian and become a "sojourner in a strange land." Why did he name his first child after the events in exile his second son in honor of the miraculous salvation from Pharaoh's sword? Rav Rogov points out a certain human nature about how events, even the most notable ones, are viewed and appreciated through the prospect of time.

Chris Matthews in his classic book *Hardball, An Inside Look at How Politics is Played* by one who knows the Game, tells how Senator Alben W. Barkley of Kentucky, who would later serve as Harry Truman's vice president, related a story that is reflective of human nature and memory. In 1938, Barkley had been challenged for reelection to the Senate by Governor A. B. "Happy" Chandler, who later made his name as Commissioner of Baseball. During that campaign, Barkley liked to tell the story of a certain rural constituent on whom he had called in the weeks before the election, only to discover that he was thinking of voting for Governor Chandler. Barkley

reminded the man of the many things he had done for him as a prosecuting attorney, as a county judge, and as a congressman and as a senator. "I recalled how I had helped get an access road built to his farm, how I had visited him in a military hospital in France when he was wounded in World War I, how I had assisted him in securing his veteran's benefits, how I had arranged his loan from the Farm Credit Administration, and how I had got him a disaster loan when the flood destroyed his home."

"How can you think of voting for Happy?" Barkley cried. "Surely you remember all these things I have done for you!"

"Sure," the fellow said, "I remember. But what in the world have you done for me lately?"

Though this story in no way reflects upon the great personage of Moshe, the lessons we can garner from it as well as they apply to all of us.

Rabbi Rogov explains that though the Moshe's fleeing Pharaoh was notably miraculous it was still an event of the past. Now he was in Midian. The pressure of exile from his parents, his immediate family, his brother Ahron and sister Miriam, and his people, was a constant test of faith. Therefore, the name of Moshe's first son commemorated his current crisis as opposed to his prior, albeit more miraculous and traumatic one.

Sometimes appreciating the minor issues of life take precedence over even the most eventful – if that is what is currently sitting on the table.

Good Shabbos

Dedicated in memory of Rose Horn (Rachel bas Shraga Faivel) Felig by Dr. & Mrs. Philip Felig – 17 Shevat

Dedicated by Michael & Rikki Charnowitz in memory of Ephraim (Efraim Yitzchak ben R' Avraham) Spinner – 17 Shevat

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Chief Rabbi Mirvis

Yitro

Every child is the one and only Parshat Yitro famously gives us a commandment relating to how we should be good children to our parents. However, it also offers a hint as to how we can be good parents to our children.

It is well known that in the Ten Commandments, presented to us in this Parsha, the fifth of the mitzvot is "Kabbed et-avicha ve'et-immecha"— honour your father and your mother. But in addition, there is a wonderful lesson relating to parenting in the Parsha. Close to the beginning, we are given details of the names of the two sons born to Moshe and Tziporah. The Torah presents it as follows: "Shem ha'echad Gershom" – "the name of the one is Gershom". "Veshem ha'echad Eli'ezer" – "and the name of the one is Eliezer." This is extraordinary. Everywhere else in the Torah, when there is a list, you find "Shem ha'echad" — the name of the first one — and "Shem hasheni" — the name of the second. Similarly, for example, with regard to the days of creation, and so on.

How can you have "the one" and "the one"? I believe that Moshe and Tziporah recognised that, in order to create a healthy home environment, they needed to avoid all the pressures, tensions, enmity, bitterness, and even hatred that existed in nearly every family we are introduced to in the Book of Bereshit that preceded them — including the very first family on earth, within which, one brother killed another.

Moshe and Tziporah recognised that there should be no room for jealousy or for the question of who the senior is, who will command respect and attention, or the subordination of others.

That's why, they let their children know that in their eyes: "Gershom — you're echad, you're the one and only Gershom," and "Eliezer, you too are echad, you're the one and only Eliezer." And so too, for all parents: in order that, please God, we should succeed in building and maintaining a healthy home environment, we should let each and every one of our children know that, in our eyes, they are the one and only.

Shabbat Shalom.

Living Synesthesia

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

The Torah's description of Matan Torah, the most seminal moment in human history, a moment that defined not only a nation but gave meaning and purpose to the very creation of the world, is extremely powerful and dynamic, but also perplexing.

ככל העם רואים את הקולות

and the entire people saw the sounds.

What does it mean to "see" sounds? The Zohar writes, "These sounds were etched into the darkness, cloud and mist and were visible." The Zohar understands the pasuk literally: the sounds could be seen.

Though our rational minds dismiss this suggestion as mere mysticism and unrealistic, there is in fact a rare neurological condition called synesthesia which causes the senses to be mixed up and to see sounds as colors. Jan MacKay, a woman with the condition, describes that she sees sneezes as turquoise. "One of my earliest memories is that I could tell the difference between Canadian and American accents because the Canadian accent is more yellow." Neurologist Richard Cytowic explained, "You know the word anesthesia, which means no sensation, synesthesia means joined sensation, and some people are born with two or more of their senses hooked together so that my voice, for example, is not just something that they hear, but it's also something that they might see."

Though this condition only occurs in one in twenty thousand, it is possible that for the seminal moment of Matan Torah, Hashem wanted to leave an indelible and unforgettable impression and so He caused us all to experience synesthesia so that we literally saw the sounds as the Zohar suggests.

The Kli Yakar comments that they didn't see the sounds as colors, but they actually visualized God's commandments, each letter, word and sentence they were hearing was projected before them. The vocalized words were expressed not only in sound waves, but materialized as physical letters and words as if projected on a screen.

The Ibn Ezra interprets the expression "see the sounds" much more metaphorically. We know that in many places in Tanach the expression "to see" is used for something that is intangible or conceptual. Re'eh anochi nosein lifneichem hayom beracha ukelala, see I place before you today blessings and curses. Seeing is the sense we reference when we seek to convey the powerful impression something makes. In our own vernacular, when we want the person speaking to us to feel heard and validated we say, "I see what you are saying, I see your perspective on this issue."

The Zohar, Kli Yakar and Ibn Ezra all offer fascinating interpretations, but I would like to suggest something a little different. Some speakers are talented at communicating ideas. They are well organized, articulate and effectively transmit the information, idea or concept. Yet as successful as these speakers are, their content remains intellectual, cognitive, and abstract. Much more rare and unusual are those speakers that are able to paint a picture with their words. Their message is so compelling and persuasive, the listener not only hears what they are saying, but sees their vision and pictures themselves living the life being described. This information doesn't remain abstract and theoretical, but is absorbed by the listener such that they can envision themselves transformed and behaving differently.

The giving of the Torah was undoubtedly an educational, pedagogic experience. Laws and rules were communicated and transmitted to a nation that was now bound to observe them. For most people law is dry, sterile, and uninspiring. Law books and statutory codes are for reference only and are grossly unexciting and monotonous. One could easily have mistaken Matan Torah as an information session, an intellectual transmission of the new laws incumbent on the people.

Perhaps the Torah is telling us that this description couldn't be further from the truth. At that fateful and faithful moment at Sinai, Hashem painted a picture for his people of a purpose-driven life, of an existence that is sacred and sanctified, of a lifestyle that is extraordinarily rewarding and spiritually satisfying. Perhaps V'chol ha'am ro'im es ha'kolos means they didn't hear about 39 categories of forbidden creative labor on Shabbos, they saw what a Shabbos is like, they felt the serenity, tranquility and rest that Shabbos provides. They heard the laws of Shabbos but they pictured the Shabbos table filled with family and friends, they smelled the cholent and tasted the

chicken soup. At Har Sinai, they didn't just hear about the detailed laws of the prohibition against stealing, they envisioned an ethical society and pictured themselves submitting honest tax returns.

Indeed, Har Sinai is the defining moment of our history not for the laws that we heard but the pictures and the images that we saw and became the vision of a lifestyle that is divinely enriching and elevating. According to the Ramban, there is a biblical commandment to remember Har Sinai each and every day of our lives. Sinai cannot be something in the past, a piece of history, a part of an ancient record. Har Sinai remains relevant, compelling and real each day when we are ro'im es hakolos, when the voice of God spoken that day animates our lives such that it can be seen through us and our homes.

Har Sinai is alive when Judaism for us is not a burden but a beracha, not limiting but limitless in its meaning, not a prescription for hardship but for holiness. V'chol ha'am ro'im es hakolos. The entire nation seeing the voice, envisioning the message, and absorbing the sounds, is in many ways the mission of Jewish parenting.

What do our children see? What are we celebrating for our children, for our family, for ourselves? Are we celebrating the things and accomplishments that we truly value? Here is why that question is critical: Because whatever you celebrate, that's what you'll value and that is what your children will value and sacrifice for.

Our Judaism must not be commemorative, our commitment to Torah must not be a casual connection because of a past. It must be vibrant, dynamic, alive, passionate in the present.

The Midrash tells us that when Hashem gave the Torah, כפה עליהם הָר כְּנַגְיָה, He held it over our heads and said accept it or שֶׁמֶת קְבּוֹרָתְכֶם, there you will be buried. Many ask, shouldn't it say כה, here, not שֶׁמֶת, there? If Hashem is going to threaten us, shouldn't He get it right?

I believe, and we are sadly seeing empirically all around us, that if you don't feel the weight of Torah over your head, the responsibility of a deep, profound and passionate commitment to it personally, you may not spiritually die in that moment. Perhaps you can go a generation or two. But שֶׁמֶת, down the line, a few generations in, it will catch up. If we negotiate with our Yiddishkeit, if we pick and choose, if we are casual about it, down the road it will come crashing down on our head.

Israel's war against her enemies and the rise of antisemitism have posed formidable challenges but they also bring an opportunity. How we react, what we are doing about it, how focused we are on the fate of our people, can and will leave an indelible and enduring impression on our children and grandchildren.

If we want our families to be passionate, practicing, and proud Jews, living and learning Torah and loving Israel when they are שֶׁמֶת, down the road, they need to רואים את הַקּוֹלֶת, not only hear, but see our voices in action now.

Parshat Yitro: Moshe's Management Consultant

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

Our parasha splits neatly into two parts. It's easy to guess which part has all the action, and therefore usually gets all the attention:

- 1) The visit of Yitro, Moshe Rabbeinu's father-in-law, to the camp of the Bnei Yisrael.
- 2) The revelation of the Decalogue (the so-called "Ten Commandments").

There's no question that the Decalogue has all the action: it's not every day that Hashem descends on a mountain amid lightning and thunder to deliver life-instructions to three million people! Besides the drama of the scene, this part of the parasha is the "fireworks" in other senses: theologically, religiously, and nationally, Matan Torah (the giving of the Torah) changes our nation and the course of world history.

You've got to feel some 'sympathy' for the other half of the parasha, the half for which the parasha is named, which tells a story with no "fireworks": no juicy story of conflict, no dramatic divine revelation, no eloquent speech. The story of Yitro's visit doesn't excite us much. It doesn't even seem very important. Distracted by the fanfare of the revelation, we tend to neglect Yitro's visit. Perhaps the parasha is named after Yitro just to remind us that this part of the parasha exists!

As parasha-contrarians, always looking for neglected areas of the Torah, we will be looking away from the dramatic scene of the giving of the Torah to see what we can learn from the story of Yitro's visit.

YITRO'S VISIT:

The Torah focuses on three separate themes in recounting Yitro's visit:

- 1) Yitro returns Moshe's family (wife and two sons) to him, after an unspecified period of apartness.
- 2) Yitro reacts joyfully to the news of the miracles Hashem has performed for Bnei Yisrael.
- 3) Yitro suggests setting up a judicial system / government to share the burden of leadership with Moshe.

We will focus on the last of these themes: Yitro's suggestion to set up a system resembling a government. At this point, it is crucial to read through the text of the section:

SHEMOT 18:13-27 --

The next day [i.e., the day after Yitro's arrival at Bnei Yisrael's camp], Moshe sat to judge the people. The people stood before Moshe from morning till night.

Moshe's father-in-law saw what he was doing to the people and said, "What are you doing to the people? Why do you sit alone, and all of the people stand before you from morning till night?"

Moshe said to his father-in-law, "The people come to me to seek Hashem ["Elokim"]. If they have a matter, they come to me; I judge between man and his fellow, and I teach the laws of Hashem and His instructions."

Moshe's father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You will tire yourself out -- you and the people with you, because it is too much for you. You cannot do it alone! Now, hear me, let me advise you, and may Hashem be with you: you should represent the people before Hashem and bring matters to Hashem [when necessary]. Warn them of the laws and instructions, teach them the path they should follow and what they should do."

"Choose from among the entire nation men of valor who fear Hashem, men of truth, haters of ill-gotten profit, and appoint them as officers of a thousand [men], a hundred, fifty, and ten. They should judge the people at all times; they should bring all important matters to you, but they should judge all minor matters."

"Lighten your load -- they will bear it with you! If you do this, and Hashem commands you so, then you will be able to stand, and all of these people will get to where they are going in peace!"

Moshe listened to his father-in-law and did all that he said. Moshe chose men of valor from among the whole nation and placed them as heads of the people -- ministers of a thousand, a hundred, fifty, and ten. They judged the people at all times; they brought the difficult matters to Moshe and judged the small matters themselves. Moshe sent off his father-in-law, and he went to his land.

THE CORPORATE METAPHOR:

If you're familiar with the business world, you may recognize Yitro as a "management consultant" and Moshe as the CEO (of a not-for-profit organization, of course). The consultant is supposed to be an outsider to the company, just as Yitro is not a member of Bnei Yisrael. The Torah notes Yitro's outsider status at the beginning of the parasha by referring to him not just as Moshe's father-in-law, but as the "Kohen Midyan," the Priest of Midyan; his own loyalties are elsewhere. This is important: sometimes it takes an outsider to notice things insiders don't notice. Once you're part of an environment, you begin to see its problems as part of "the way things are around here." It can take an outsider's fresh perspective to awaken insiders to problems which can be solved and motivate them to act. Also, insiders are often part of the problem! And an outsider can be more effective as a consultant because he or she may feel more comfortable offering criticism (and will not suffer consequences later from vengeful coworkers or superiors).

Just to string the "corporate metaphor" along a bit further, Sefer BeMidbar (10:29-33) tells us that Moshe invites Yitro to join Bnei Yisrael in the march to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe promises that if he joins them, he will share in all the benefits Bnei Yisrael receive from Hashem. In corporate terms, this is what happens when the CEO is so pleased with the management consultant's work and so impressed with his insight that he offers him a permanent job at the company. The CEO promises that the consultant will enjoy all the benefits that the most privileged company employees receive. Yitro's decision not to join Bnei Yisrael is the management consultant's demurral to change loyalties and tie himself to the company for which he has consulted. He does his job and goes home; he is impressed by Bnei Yisrael's support system -- Hashem and His miracles -- but he doesn't want to join the team. (Note, however, that some commentators assume that Yitro does accept the offer in the end and does join Bnei Yisrael.)

INTERVIEWING THE CEO:

Yitro, the "management consultant," opens the conversation reported above. He 'interviews' the 'CEO' and asks him how he would describe his job:

"Moshe's father-in-law saw what he was doing to the people and said, 'What are you doing to the people? Why do you sit alone, and all of the people stand before you from morning till night?'

One way for the consultant to understand the organization and its problems is to hear conflicting understandings of the roles individuals are supposed to play. What does the executive, the leader, think his job is? What are the needs of the employees, and are they being met?

Yitro observes Moshe judging the people and asks what he is doing. Well, obviously, Moshe is judging the people -- so what does Yitro really want to know? There seem to be two components to his question:

- 1) Focus on Moshe: "Why do you sit alone? Why don't you share the burden? Why do it all yourself?"
- 2) Focus on the people: "Why do the people have to wait all day? Why set up your system in such an inefficient way that people are forced to wait from morning till night to get a hearing?"

THE CENTRAL PROBLEM:

Here we come to the central problem in this story: Is Moshe somehow unaware that things are running very inefficiently?

Can't he see the mob of people clamoring for his attention from dawn to dusk? Can't he figure out himself that appointing more judges would alleviate the problem? Abravanel articulates this question sharply:

ABRAVANEL, EXODUS 18:

"Concerning the advice of Yitro to Moshe about appointing judges: certainly, Yitro's words were good and correct. But even the simplest [intellect] should have understood that it was foolish to have one person judge from morning to night, for the judge and the judged would surely grow faint and fatigued! How could Moshe Rabbeinu and all the Elders of Israel not have realized that appointing [more] judges over the people would have lightened the load?"

This question makes Yitro's question particularly problematic: what is his assumption? If it's so obvious that the present way of organizing the judicial system is not good for either Moshe or the people, what does he think Moshe has in mind? Does he think Moshe so egotistical that he believes no one else can do an adequate job? Does he think Moshe so power-hungry that he refuses to share authority?

The Torah tells us in Sefer BeMidbar (12:3) that Moshe is the humblest person walking the face of the Earth. Could Yitro have missed this quality in his son-in-law? Many stories throughout the Torah demonstrate Moshe's willingness to share power, as well as his general humility. Yitro may not know all of these stories, and some of them haven't even happened yet, but they say something important about Moshe's character, something Yitro could not have missed.

For instance: Yitro could not have missed the humility which made his son-in-law attempt to reject Hashem's command to serve as His messenger in taking Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim. He could not have missed that Moshe was the kind of person who felt able to approach Paro only if he could share that role with someone else, with Aharon, because of his belief in his inability to express himself properly. He could not have missed the quality that enabled Moshe and Aharon to cooperate perfectly as a team in performing the plagues in Mitzrayim without even a hint that Moshe resented Aharon's taking part of the spotlight or that the brothers were competing for supremacy. He could not have missed the quality which made Moshe wish (BeMidbar 11:29) that all of Bnei Yisrael could share with him in the gift of prophecy, the quality that made him dismiss a threat to his virtual monopoly on communicating with Hashem.

Well, how does Moshe *himself* understand Yitro's question? We can tell from his answer. It seems that Moshe understands that Yitro has asked him, "What is it about the way you think about your role as a leader, your responsibility to the people, which makes you believe that things can *only* be this way, and that you can't share the burden with others?" This question prompts Moshe to describe what he believes is his role.

MOSHE'S "JOB":

The first thing Moshe says is that the people come to him to seek "E-lohim." In some contexts in the Torah, "Elohim" does not mean "God," it means "judges." For example:

1) SHEMOT 21:6 -- (the beginning of Parashat Mishpatim) if a male Jewish slave does not want to leave servitude at the end of his term of slavery, his ear is pierced and he serves a longer term. The ear-piercing ceremony takes place before a court; the Torah uses the term "Elohim" to refer to the court.

2) SHEMOT 22:7-8 -- in a dispute between the owner of an object and someone who was supposed to watch it for him, the parties are to bring the matter "before Elohim" -- before a court.

Is this what Moshe means by "Elohim" in this context? On the one hand, it is tempting to think that he is using "Elohim" to mean "judges," since this whole discussion centers on his function as a judge. Moshe would be saying, "People come to me to seek judgment ['Elohim']." But there is evidence that Moshe probably does not mean "judges," and that "Elohim" means "Hashem":

1) First of all, in almost every instance during Yitro's visit in which Hashem is mentioned, the word "E-lohim," the more universal term for Hashem, is used instead of the more Bnei-Yisrael-specific name for Hashem, "Y-HVH." "Y-HVH" appears a few times at the beginning, but "E-lohim" quickly becomes predominant. So there is reason to think that "E-

lohim" in Moshe's sentence means "Hashem" as well.

2) A stronger indication: Moshe finishes this very sentence by using the word "E-lohim" in a way that can only mean "Hashem" -- "I teach the laws of 'E-lohim' and His instructions." It is possible that Moshe is playing a little word game, using "Elohim" in different ways in the same sentence, but I think the stronger possibility is that both mentions of "E-lohim" refer to Hashem.

After telling Yitro that the people come to him to seek Hashem, Moshe goes on to explain that when people have a dispute, they come to him and he does two things: he judges them and he teaches them Hashem's laws (the Torah).

MOSHE: DIVINE CONDUIT:

Yitro had asked Moshe why he felt compelled to sit alone to judge the people. Moshe's response tells Yitro that Moshe does not see himself as just a functionary of a judicial system; he does not see himself as just a judge. Moshe sees himself as the intermediary between the people and Hashem. The way he sees it, the people come to him seeking not just justice, not just a judge -- they come seeking "E-lohim" -- seeking Hashem! The reason no one else can do this job is because Moshe does not want to turn the people's encounter with Hashem into an encounter with a judicial system. The current system is a religious one: people bring their problems and questions to Hashem's closest representative. Yitro is suggesting that Moshe turn the system into a judicial one. Instead of walking into the presence of God -- into shul, so to speak -- the people will now walk into a courtroom. Instead of meeting an intermediary to Hashem, people will bring their troubles to legal scholars who have studied law codes. This is what Moshe wants to avoid, why he feels he is the only one who can do the job, for Moshe is Hashem's right-hand man.

Yitro does not try to argue with Moshe. He agrees that the legal system should be a bridge to Hashem rather than a set of static statutes. And he does not tell Moshe to stop his work -- "You should represent the people before Hashem and bring matters to Hashem." All he says is that Moshe is being too religiously ambitious. It is simply impossible to try to turn every legal question and dispute into an encounter with Hashem's chief representative: "You will tire yourself out . . . it is too much for you!" Moshe must relinquish this goal of continuous Matan Torah, this continuous Mosaic revelation. He must appoint others to judge along with him.

It would be great if the CEO himself (or herself) would answer the customer relations phones at IBM or Microsoft or GM or Merck to help you figure out why your modem or your word processor or your mini-van or your hypertension pills weren't doing what you needed. You'd be very impressed! In seconds, the CEO would cut through all the red tape and solve your problems with no delay. But the reason no CEO answers the public relations phones is that "navol ti-bol, gam ata, gam ha-am ha-zeh": he would sit from morning till night answering customer calls, ignoring larger and more important responsibilities, like deciding where the company is headed in the future and what its role is in the global market . . . and how to make money from the Internet. Also, customers would have to wait for weeks on "hold." No one would be happy.

The same is true here: Moshe wants to give everyone his attention and provide a direct line to Hashem. But he can't handle the sheer volume himself, and even if he could, he would have to ignore the more important duties of leading the nation. Meanwhile, the people would wait in lines winding around the block ten times.

HASHEM SHOWS UP IN COURT:

Ultimately, Moshe remains the source of revelation: Yitro encourages him to continue to be the one to teach the people the laws of the Torah; he remains "Moshe Rabbeinu," "Moshe, our Teacher," but he gives up most of the day-to-day functions of "Moshe, our Judge." This does not mean that from this point on, the Jewish legal system has nothing to do with approaching Hashem. Since Torah law is divinely given, one who submits to Torah law and the Torah's courts submits to Hashem. But more immediately, Hashem Himself maintains a presence in court. One manifestation of Hashem's presence in a Jewish court is that the Supreme Court -- the Sanhedrin He-Gedola -- meets in the Beit HaMikdash (Temple) itself. We all know that Hashem is present in the Mikdash as a focus for worship, but the fact that the Supreme Court meets there means that Hashem is also there in order to meet the people who come to seek His instructions.

In addition, the Midrash understands the pasuk, "E-lohim nitzav ba-adat e-l," "E-lohim stands among the congregation of God," to mean that Hashem is present in Beit Din (Jewish court). Rashi and Ramban also develop this idea in several places (see Rashi Bereshit 18:1 and Tehillim 82:1, Ramban Shemot 21:6 and BeMidbar 11:16).

Nowadays, many of us think of court as the domain of slick lawyers, biased juries, and crooked or inobjective judges. Maybe we think of it as Judge Wapner's territory, or material for a nighttime soap opera, or the forum for a celebrity murder trial, or the stage for a tawdry Presidential scandal. But ideally, Jewish court is something like shul -- it is a place to meet Hashem and bring our problems to Him. (When I say "shul," I mean what shul *should* be, not the place some people go to yak with their friends and see what everyone is wearing.)

SAME OLD SAME OLD:

Often, the Torah reports several different versions of an event. The most common location for repeated stories is Sefer Devarim, "Deuteronomy," the "Repeated Torah," called "Mishneh Torah" by Hazal (the rabbis of the Talmud). Our story -- the story of Moshe's appointment of judges to serve under him -- appears just nine pesukim (verses) from the beginning of Sefer Devarim. Moshe narrates the story to Bnei Yisrael, who are assembled to hear their leader's final speech before his death and their entry, without him, to Eretz Cana'an:

DEVARIM 1:9-18 --

At that time I said to you, "I cannot carry you alone -- Hashem, your Lord, has increased you, and you are today numerous as the stars of the sky. May Hashem, Lord of your fathers, add to you a thousand times your number, and bless you, as He said [He would]. But how can I alone carry your troubles, burdens, and disputes? Select for yourselves wise and understanding men, known to your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads." You answered me and said, "What you have said to do is a good idea." I took the heads of your tribes, wise and well-known men, and made them heads over you: officers of a thousand, a hundred, fifty, and ten, and police for your tribes. I commanded your judges at that time, "Hear [disputes] between your brothers and judge justly between each man and his brother, and between the stranger. Do not 'recognize faces' in judging: listen to the small as to the great. Do not fear any man, for justice is Hashem's. Whatever is too hard for you, bring to me and I will hear it." I commanded you at that time all the things which you should do.

How is this story different than the story in Parashat Yitro?

- 1) In Parashat Yitro, the idea for the new judicial system comes from Yitro; in Parashat Devarim, it seems to be Moshe's idea. Yitro does not even merit an honorable mention in Devarim. Whose idea was it really?
- 2) In Parashat Yitro, it is Moshe who approves the idea for the new system; in Parashat Devarim, Bnei Yisrael approve the idea. Who really approved the idea?
- 3) In Parashat Yitro, Moshe selects leaders and appoints them; in Parashat Devarim, the people select leaders and Moshe appoints them. Who really made the selection?
- 4) In Parashat Yitro, the judges to be selected must be "men of valor" who "fear of Hashem," "men of truth," "haters of ill-gotten gains"; in Parashat Devarim, the judges to be selected must meet a decidedly different set of criteria: men who are "wise" and "understanding," "well-known to the tribes." The actual selection as described in Yitro and Devarim follows the specific criteria for each account: in Yitro, those selected are indeed "men of valor from all of Yisrael," while in Devarim, those selected are "heads of tribes" who are "wise" and "well-known." Put slightly differently, Parashat Yitro projects a judicial meritocracy, in which even non-leaders may be selected if they bear the qualities of impartiality and incorruptibility specified by the Torah; Parashat Devarim projects a judicial "old boy network," in which those who are already leaders -- wise leaders, to be sure -- will be appointed as judges.

[By the way, "anshei hayyil," literally, "men of valor, does not mean "brave warriors" or "fearless heroes," it means "judges who will be strong and brave enough to remain honest [=valor] even when it is difficult to do so" -- like when they are

threatened or bribed by the litigants, or when they feel emotionally inclined to sympathize with one side. Perhaps some judges currently on the bench might be described as "cowboys," but it seems to me that the Torah is not advocating swashbuckling jurisprudence.]

The above discrepancies between the two versions leave us with two questions:

A) WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

- 1) Who initiates the new judicial system? Does Yitro tell Moshe that his task is too much for him (Parashat Yitro), or does Moshe realize on his own that his burden is too great (Parashat Devarim)? Both can be true without contradiction: Yitro notices the problem and takes the initiative in alerting Moshe. But when reviewing the event in Parashat Devarim for the benefit of the assembled, Moshe leaves out Yitro's role. In a moment we will speculate about Moshe's rationale.
- 2) Who approves the system? Does Moshe approve it (Parashat Yitro), or do Bnei Yisrael agree to the plan (Parashat Devarim)? Both can be true without contradiction: Moshe approves Yitro's suggestion, and when Moshe presents the plan to the people, they approve as well.
- 3) Who selects the leaders, Moshe (Parashat Yitro) or Bnei Yisrael (Parashat Devarim)? Both can be true without contradiction: Moshe does indeed do the choosing, in a sense, since he approves or rejects the candidates nominated by the people. On the other hand, the people do the choosing, since they nominate leaders for appointment by Moshe.
- 4) What are the criteria for the judges, honesty/impartiality/incorruptibility (Parashat Yitro) or wisdom/wide reputation/current leaders (Parashat Devarim)? Both can be true without contradiction (or without much!): Parashat Yitro tells us that those chosen are honest, while Parashat Devarim tells us that they were also wise, well-known, and already occupied leadership positions. Each story emphasizes a different aspect of the judges for a particular reason. [Alternatively, perhaps, by "from all of Yisrael," Yitro means to advocate a complete meritocracy, which would select judges just on the basis of their qualifications -- men of valor, truth, honesty -- but Moshe realizes that the nation and its leaders would be completely destabilized by replacing the current leadership with new people. He takes Yitro's suggestion, but perhaps he understands the words "from all of Yisrael" to mean that the leaders should come from all of the tribes, not just those currently ascendant in leading the nation. In choosing local political and judicial leaders, Moshe realizes that only leaders chosen from each tribe will be accepted as leaders by that tribe. So in Devarim, he accepts the leaders of the tribes as judges; they are the leaders chosen "from all of Israel."]

B) WHY DOES THE TORAH REPORT DIFFERENT VERSIONS IN DIFFERENT PLACES?

Now we come to our second question: granted that we can reconstruct what actually happened [either my version above, or one you might propose] -- but why does the Torah give us two different versions? Perhaps another way to ask this question is, what is the focus of Sefer Shemot and what is the focus of Sefer Devarim?

Sefer Shemot traces the development of Bnei Yisrael into a nation and Moshe Rabbeinu into a leader. Sefer Devarim's narrative section reviews the trip through the desert and makes explicit the lessons to be learned from the journey. Since Moshe knows he is to die soon, he must prepare the people to 1) keep the Torah without his guidance and 2) function as a nation without his guidance.

Since Shemot is partly about Moshe's development, the focus of the visit with Yitro is how *Moshe* reacts, not how the people react. The Torah tells us nothing about the people's role in selecting the judges and nothing about their approval of the whole process because the focus is on Moshe and his developing role as leader of the nation. But since Devarim is about Moshe's attempt to strengthen the people's commitment to the Torah and the authority structure so they can "make it" religiously and politically without him, the Torah focuses in Devarim on Moshe's interaction with the people in putting the new system into play:

- 1) Yitro is left out of the story because he is external to the relationship between Moshe and the people, and certainly external to perpetuating the authority structure beyond Moshe's demise. Moreover, the reminder that an outsider invented

this system might make the people feel it had been imposed on them from the outside, while Moshe aims in Sefer Devarim to emphasize to the people the role they themselves played in creating the system and appointing its authorities.

2) Moshe mentions only that the people approve the plan, leaving out his own approval, for the same reason: if he wants to give the authority structure the best chance of surviving his death, it is best to minimize his own role in imposing the system on the people. The more they perceive it as their own creation, the more they will be inclined to accept its authority.

3) Moshe stresses that the people suggested candidates: again, Moshe emphasizes that the authority structure is not something imposed by him, but something in which the people participated.

4) The judges chosen are "wise" and "known to your tribes": as mentioned above, Moshe knows that the traditional tribal leadership cannot simply be rejected and replaced by a complete meritocracy. This would destabilize the nation and encourage it to reject the whole system (besides creating a disgruntled class of former leaders who would eagerly aid efforts at a rebellion which would return them to their former positions of authority). Instead, the people nominate those leaders they feel fit the bill, and Moshe approves them and appoints them officially. Once these leaders are nominated, Moshe makes sure -- as Parashat Devarim reports -- to deliver to them detailed instructions about maintaining impartiality and honesty in the face of obstacles (echoing the description in Parashat Yitro of "haters of ill-gotten gains," "men of truth," etc.).

The comparison between the two versions, then, reveals the purpose and character of Sefer Shemot and Sefer Devarim, as well as teaching sophisticated strategies for leadership and diplomacy.

Parshas Yitro: Aseret Hadibrot: The Ten Commandments

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. ASERET HA'DVARIM

The 'Aseret haDibrot ("Ten Commandments", as they are [inaccurately] called [see below]), have always been a source of tension and conflict in Judaism. On the one hand, the Torah explicitly states that the 'Aseret haDibrot comprise the covenant between God and the B'nei Yisra'el (see Sh'mot 34:28, D'varim 4:13). Yet, throughout our history, we have fought those religious approaches that maintain that only these "Ten Commandments" were Divinely given and continue to maintain that the entire Torah, from the Bet of B'resheet, is from God. (This difficulty is what led to the abandonment of the daily public reading of the 'Aseret haDibrot – see BT Berakhot 12a and JT Berakhot 1:5. See also the famous Response of Rambam [#233] to the question of standing up for the public reading of the 'Aseret haDibrot).

Before moving on, a word about the faulty translation of Aseret haDibrot – "Ten Commandments". First of all, this group of Divine commands is not referred to by any numerical grouping until later in Sh'mot (34:28) – where it is called 'Aseret haD'varim – the Ten Statements. The other references in the Torah use the same wording and Rabbinic literature constantly refers to 'Aseret haDibrot (Rabbinic Dibrot being roughly equivalent to the Toraic D'varim).

The word Commandment – (Heb. Mitzvah) implies a Divine directive which either obligates or restricts us. Eating Matzah on Pesach night, avoiding stealing, studying Torah and avoiding eating impure animals (e.g. pigs) are all Mitzvot – Commandments. Each separate action which is obligated or forbidden constitutes an independent Mitzvah (although there are significant debates as to the number of Mitzvot included in some commands which have two separate actions; e.g. hand and head T'fillin, morning and evening K'riat Sh'ma); several Mitzvot may be included in one paragraph, even in one sentence or phrase in the Torah. When we read through the first section of the 'Aseret haDibrot, we find four or five distinct commands (depending on whether we reckon the opening statement as a Mitzvah – see Ramban and, alternatively, Avrabanel on Sh'mot 20:2). It is not only a poor translation to render this group of statements as Ten Commandments – it is also inaccurate. There are between 13 and 15 Mitzvot within the 'Aseret haDibrot. In order to avoid inaccuracies or clumsiness, we will just refer to these verses as 'Aseret haDibrot throughout this shiur.

II. COUNTING UP TO "TEN"

Once we have established the proper translation and understanding – we need to analyze the numeric reality here: If there are ten statements here, where does #1 end, where does #2 end etc.? Convention maintains the following breakdown [I suggest that you follow with a Humash open]:

I. I am Hashem...house of slaves; II. You shall have no other gods...my Mitzvot. III. You shall not take the Name...in vain. IV. Remember...and made it holy. V. Honor...gives you. VI. Don't murder. VII. Don't commit adultery VIII. Don't steal/kidnap (see below) IX. Don't commit perjury X. Don't covet.

This breakdown, which is familiar to us (e.g. the common references to murder as "the sixth commandment [sic]" and which is thematically strong (each statement is a different idea or theme), has one difficulty. First, a bit of terminology. The word "Parashah", which we commonly use to denote a particular week's Torah reading, actually means "paragraph". The Torah, in its Halakhically valid format (in a scroll), is not written with vowels or punctuation – but the Parashiot are separated. Some Parashiot are separated by a partial- line space (Parashah S'tumah), others by a skip to the next line (Parashah P'tuchah).

After being informed that there were Ten Statements that we heard at Sinai (34:28), if we look back at this group of statements we see ten Parashiot – as follows:

I. I am Hashem...my Mitzvot II. Do not take...in vain. III. Remember...and made it holy. IV. Honor...gives you. V. Don't murder. VI. Don't commit adultery VII. Don't steal/kidnap (see below) VIII. Don't commit perjury against your fellow IX. Don't covet your fellow's house X. Don't covet your fellow's...all that belongs to your fellow

The difference is telling – the first statement includes the command to believe in God (as most Rishonim understand the first line) and the prohibitions against idolatry. Oddly enough, coveting, which is the most difficult Mitzvah to explain here, becomes 2 of the 10 statements!

There is yet a third possibility – which I will sketch briefly.

In BT Makkot 23b, we read the famous passage: R' Simlai expounded: We were given 613 Mitzvot at Sinai; as is says: Torah tzivah lanu Mosheh... – and the numeric value of Torah is 611 – (meaning, Moshe commanded us 611 Mitzvot) – and Anokhi vLo Yih'hey lekha ("I am..." and "you shall have no other...." we heard from the Almighty. (= 613)

This distinction, between the first two Dibrot (or first statement – as above) and the rest seems to be based on the grammatical difference – the first two Dibrot are phrased in the first person – "I am Hashem your God... You shall have no other gods before Me..."; however, this distinction obtains throughout the entire second statement. Based on the grammar, we heard this section from God directly – but there are 4 or 5 Mitzvot (depending on your position on "I am..." as Mitzva or not -see Avrabanel, question 7 on this section) in these Dibrot:

1) belief in God 2) not to maintain idols (or beliefs in other gods) 3) not to fashion them 4) not to worship them 5) not to bow down to them.

Which means that besides the 611 taught to us by Moshe, we heard another 4 or 5 from the Almighty Himself. This difficulty might be sidestepped if we break down the statements a bit differently – but it would mean ignoring the grammar of the rest of the "you shall have no other..." statement. (see Ramban s.v. Lo Tisa (20:7) for an explanation of the grammatical switch in the middle of the Dibrot).

I. I am Hashem...before Me; II. You shall make no image...my Mitzvot. III.-X (as above)

In any case, we often refer to the "Ten Commandments" as if their meaning and structure is obvious – and, as noted, it is anything but. There are at least three different ways to break the statements down and we have various ways of interpreting the meaning and import of the various statements.

III. 10 → 613?

That these 'Aseret haDibrot hold a special place in our historic and religious consciousness goes without saying; the two stone tablets, carved by God and including a graphic version of these Ten Statements were placed in the central vessel of the Mishkan (Sanctuary) – see Sh'mot 25:16. The question must be asked – why these ten? What is so special about these ten statements (and the 13-15 Mitzvot included therein) which merit their unique and sanctified place in revelation and on the tablets?

There have been many approaches which suggest that these ten statements serve as an outline for the Torah; that each of them is a super-category under which other Mitzvot are subsumed – such that all 613 Mitzvot are included (conceptually) in these 'Aseret haDibrot. See, for instance, JT Shekalim 6:1, Rashi on Sh'mot 24:12, R' Sa'adiah Ga'on's Azharot, Ralbag on Sh'mot 20 following v. 14. Perhaps the earliest source for this idea is Philo's De Decalogo.

Although these approaches have much to recommend them, there are some obvious difficulties they generate. In order to "include" all of the commands relating to forbidden foods, the Mishkan, the Kehunah (Priesthood), agricultural laws etc. – we have to utilize a lot of exegetical imagination. Besides this difficulty, the inclusion of "coveting" here is problematic – since it is no way a "category of Mitzvot". There are no Mitzvot which command a limitation of desire – just self-restraint against acting on that desire. (The entire subject of coveting is problematic – see MT Hilkhot Gezelah va'Avedah 1:9).

I would like to suggest another approach to understanding the 'Aseret haDibrot which explains the inclusion of specifically these Ten Statements in the revelation and on the tablets. There are three premises which must be established regarding the 'Aseret haDibrot:

IV. PREMISE A: UNDERSTANDING THE MESSAGE MEANS UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

We study Torah in great depth and with passion not only because we are commanded to do so, but also (and perhaps chiefly) because we believe that the Torah, although 3000+ years old addresses and directs us here and today. (I am referring to the non-Halakhic sections of Torah; it goes without saying that the behavior which we are duty-bound to fulfill by virtue of our participation in the Sinaiitic covenant is relevant to us at all times. Even those commandments which are not practically implementable today have great significance.) If we are to understand the Torah properly, we have to begin by understanding the time-frame, circumstances and original target audience to whom it was addressed. Just like it is impossible to understand the import of Yeshayahu's message without understanding the background of court-sanctioned oppression in Yehudah, or Eliyahu's message without understanding the nature of Ahav's monarchy and syncretistic worship – similarly, we cannot understand the impact and “message” of the Torah without taking into account the reality of the B'nei Yisra'el at this time in history. By integrating what we know about them and their circumstances at this specific point in time, we can grasp the “ur- message” and learn to apply it to our own lives. [We might consider this a parallel to understanding Halakhic concepts in order to apply them to modern appliances]. It is therefore incumbent upon us to take into account the situation and knowledge of the B'nei Yisra'el prior to their arrival at Sinai in order to understand the 'Aseret haDibrot more fully.

V. PREMISE B: THE DIBROT WERE “INTERRUPTED”

If we look at the verses immediately following the 'Aseret haDibrot, we see that the B'nei Yisra'el could not take the intense experience of direct Divine revelation and asked Moshe to go up to God to get the rest of the Torah and relay it to them:

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moshe, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Moshe said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” Then the people stood at a distance, while Moshe drew near to the thick darkness where God was. (20:15-18) In other words, the original plan was for the people to hear more than just these 'Aseret haDibrot; whether they should have heard the entire Torah or just the rest of Sefer haB'rit (through 23:19) is unclear. What is implicit in these verses is that it was the people's fear that interrupted the revelation and “changed the rules” such that Moshe would receive the rest of the revelation alone and transmit it to the people.

This would also explain an interesting switch in terminology in the Torah relating to the Tablets. Whereas they are called Luchot haB'rit – “the Tablets of the Covenant” in one section of Sefer D'varim (9:9-15), they have a different name in reference to their placement in the Mishkan:

You shall put into the ark the Edut (testimony) that I shall give you. (25:16). These tablets are called Edut because they testify to the Revelation. In other words, these 'Aseret haDibrot were not committed to graphic representation on the tablets because of their inherent importance, but rather as a testimony to the Revelation which every member of the B'nei Yisra'el had experienced (see the S'forno on 24:12). Had the B'nei Yisra'el “withstood” the fear and heard more of the Torah directly from God, perhaps the whole Torah would have been given in stone by the Hand of God – or perhaps none would have been carved (there would be no need for a physical representation of the Revelation – whose purpose may be to validate the rest of the Moshe-only Revelation – if all of the Torah had been given directly to the B'nei Yisra'el). This – we will never know.

One conclusion we can draw from this is that instead of viewing the 'Aseret haDibrot as categories or an “outline of Torah”, we may view them as the FIRST ten statements to be given to the B'nei Yisra'el. In other words, instead of seeing the 'Aseret haDibrot as (the) ten chapter headings of the covenant, let's see them as the “first ten pages” of that covenant.

VI. PREMISE C: TWO VERSIONS MUST BE INTEGRATED

As we all know, there are two versions of the 'Aseret haDibrot in the Torah. Besides those appearing in our Parashah (20:2-14), they are “repeated” by Moshe to the new generation in D'varim (5:6-18). Although the two versions are structurally alike, there are some significant differences between them – especially in the Dibber about Shabbat. Rabbinic tradition – and a simple reading of the text – mandates that both versions were given at Sinai. For example, the notion that Shamor (D'varim) and Zakhor (Sh'mot) were said in one voice is not only p'shat – it is also Halakhically meaningful

(see BT Berakhot 20b). In order to fully understand the impact of the 'Aseret haDibrot, we have to integrate both versions. [A modern-day analogy to this would be taking a stereo recording and isolating each channel – first listening to the left channel with the strings and horns, then listening to the right channel with the percussion and vocals; God gave us "stereo" at Sinai (at least), and each "channel" was written separately. The harmonic "reality" can only be understood when integrated.]

In summary: We must understand these 'Aseret haDibrot through the eyes and ears of the B'nei Yisra'el at that time; we must understand them as the "opening" of the covenant as opposed to its "outline" and we must integrate both versions in order to comprehend the impact and import of this Revelation.

VII. THE FIRST DIBROT: INTRODUCTION TO GOD

Although there are some (relatively minor) differences between the two presentations of the first few Dibrot (I am...you shall have no other gods...you shall not take the Name...in vain), we are on fairly safe ground examining them as one consistent unit (see Ramban s.v. Zakhor). As the "first page" in the covenant, it is clear that the two parties to the contract need to be introduced. The B'nei Yisra'el have seen God as a warrior (see 15:3) and have been witness to His power in Egypt and on the sea – but could have been misled (based on their experience with Egyptian culture and religion) to believe that there is one God who fights for them, another who meets them in this cloud of glory etc. Therefore – the first statement for them to hear is "I am Hashem who took you out of Egypt" – the same God who fought your wars and fed you in the desert. (See Ibn Ezra on this verse and his explanation of why the introduction isn't "Who created heaven and earth").

As part of this introduction, a sharp divide must be made between the way the gods were worshipped in Egypt and the way Hashem is to be served. Images, physical representations of any sort – even those resembling His noblest creations – are absolutely forbidden. God's glory is represented not through an image or representation – but through His Name. You must not only avoid any syncretism (worship of other gods along with Hashem), you must also avoid trying to represent or depict God – He is beyond imagery. The only way to understand Him is through His Name (however that is to be understood – perhaps it means that just as a Name is purely for external interaction, so the only way to understand God is through His actions with us. We refer to Him as "merciful" not because that's who He is, but because that is how He manifests Himself to us).

This pattern – the obliteration and impossibility of idolatry and fetishes followed by a deep reverence for God's Name – is found in the opening verses of D'varim 12.

VIII. TWO ASPECTS OF SHABBAT

As mentioned above, the two versions of the "Shabbat Statement" vary greatly:

(Sh'mot): Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to Hashem your God; you shall not do any work; you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days Hashem made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore Hashem blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

(D'varim): Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as Hashem your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to Hashem your God; you shall not do any work; you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Hashem your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore Hashem your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

* Difference #1: Zakhor – "remember" (Sh'mot) / Shamor – "observe" (D'varim);

* Difference #2: "...as Hashem your God commanded you." (D'varim only)

* Difference #3: "...so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you." (D'varim only)

* Difference #4: Commemoration of Creation (Sh'mot)/Commemoration of Exodus (D'varim)

In order to understand these differences – and the propriety of Shabbat following the “introductory” dibrot – let’s begin by focusing on the second difference. In D'varim, we are told that Shabbat was already commanded by God. To what is this referring? It certainly can't be referring to the earlier version of the 'Aseret haDibrot, since that statement would be true for all Ten Statements. If this is the case – then “...as Hashem your God commanded you” should have either appeared in all ten statements or at the very beginning or end of the series.

Some of the Rishonim cite the well-known Gemara (BT Sanhedrin 56b) that we were commanded regarding Shabbat at Marah (Sh'mot 15:22-26); however, if this is the case, why doesn't the Torah make the same statement in the Sh'mot version of the 'Aseret haDibrot? I believe that what these Rishonim – and the Gemara itself (in the name of R. Yehudah) intend is as follows:

There are two aspects to Shabbat. On the one hand, Shabbat is a day of cessation of labor – set up in a special way to reflect a humane approach to those who work with and for us. The Torah commands us not only to avoid working, but to make sure that our servants “rest as well as you”. This is commemorative of an overt experience of the Exodus – that even though we were enslaved to the Egyptians, we must not fall prey to the human tendency to “pass on the pain” and inflict the same bad treatment upon our (future) servants. This particular aspect was already commanded – in the desert, regarding the Mahn (Mannah). We were commanded to only take enough Mahn for one day for each member of our household – reflecting a sensitivity to others (if we took more than our share, someone else would suffer) and a faith in God that He would provide. On Friday of that week, we found a double portion and were commanded to prepare today everything we would need for these two days and not to go out and collect it on the morrow. In other words, Shabbat is a day of cessation of social and financial competition and accumulation – and this had already been commanded. (See R. Hirsch's comments in D'varim and at the end of Sh'mot 16:20).

There is another side to Shabbat, which also relates to the Exodus – although more covertly than the first aspect. Shabbat is not only a commemoration of the Exodus and a behavioral reminder and guide to proper and dignified treatment of others – it is also a commemoration of creation. The entire debate/polemic between Mosheh and Pharaoh that led to our Exodus was about God's ultimate power and control over His world. The commemoration and remembrance of Shabbat (Zakhor) is a weekly testimony to God as creator, as evidenced by the plagues in Egypt. (Note that this version open up with virtually the same wording as the Mitzvah to commemorate the Exodus (13:3); from here our Rabbis learn that the Exodus must be mentioned in the Kiddush of Shabbat – BT Pesahim 117b)

In other words, as we move to the next stage of the B'rit, we are not receiving a “new” command; on the one hand, an older Mitzvah (dating back two to three weeks to the first week of the Mahn) is being reinforced while another aspect, one which is also part of our most recent experience of the Exodus, is being integrated into that same day of cessation/commemoration.

IX. TWO ASPECTS OF KIBBUD AV VA'EM

Regarding the next Statement (honoring parents), we have two problems: Why is this statement here at all, and why is it given the same “...as Hashem your God commanded you” as Shabbat – again, only in D'varim?

I'd like to suggest that not only are there two underlying motivations for Kibbud Av va'Em – as we defined regarding Shabbat – but that both of them have direct associations with the Exodus. As such, this Mitzvah quite properly belongs at the beginning of the B'rit.

When we were first commanded to celebrate the Pesach and thereby save the B'khorot (firstborn), God commanded us to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. This celebration was commanded to be done by families. This may not seem very noteworthy to us, but keep in mind the Halakhah that Eved ein lo hayyis (a slave has no Halakhically meaningful family relationships – BT Kiddushin 69a), and that slave life does not admit to family as a priority. The notion that we were commanded to celebrate with our families indicates an obligation to recognize the fact of family as a unique and special circle around us – which was not necessarily the norm in Egypt. In this sense, we were very much commanded to honor parents – for the most basic level of honor is the recognition that our relationship with them goes

beyond the biological and genetic. (See the Gemara in Sanhedrin ibid. where the same Marah-association is made with Kibbutz Av va'Em – I believe that our explanation fits nicely with that and is not a challenge to it. Perhaps at Marah, but most certainly at the Mahn, we gathered water and food by families and households!)

There is another underlying motivation for parental honor which is most certainly part of the Exodus – but which is more covert in the experience. Almost anyone standing at Sinai was the product of several generations of slaves – generations which could easily have given up in despair and ceased reproducing. Much as the brave stories from the ghettos of WWII, the faith and tenacity with which the B'nei Yisra'el continued to raise families was heroic – and was the direct cause for the Exodus. God could never have taken a non-existent people out of Egypt! For them to be “redeemable”, they had to exist and that debt of gratitude had to be paid to parents.

So far, we have seen two areas of Mitzvah (Shabbat includes at least three Mitzvot between the two versions) which directly build upon commandments or experiences of the recent past. We will now see that the rest of the Statements came to deflect the B'nei Yisra'el from behavior which was most likely for them to be drawn to – again, as a result of their most recent experiences.

X. MURDER-ADULTERY – KIDNAPPING/STEALING

The B'nei Yisra'el had not only been the victims of genocide, seeing their own babies thrown into the Nile, but they had also been witness to the destruction and murder of much of Egyptian society. The Torah is sensitive to the notion that our environment affects us and that our (even necessary) involvement in war can lead to a significant lowering of our moral compass. Witness the specific commands regarding the sanctity of the Mahaneh – war camp (See Ramban's commentary on D'varim 23:10). We had just arrived at Sinai fresh from our first war (against Amalek) – and had to be warned that in spite of what was done to us and in spite of what we had just been commanded to do (defend ourselves), human life is still sacred and we must never lose that awareness: Lo Tirtzach – Do Not Murder.

It is often the fate of slaves (or any “lower class”) that they dream of overturning the oppressive class and allowing themselves the freedoms enjoyed by their overlords (Orwell's Animal Farm is a good example). As we are told in Vayyikra (Leviticus) 18, Egyptian society was promiscuous in the extreme and practiced every kind of sexual abomination. Coming from this type of society, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the B'nei Yisra'el would have thought about “enjoying” such activities. After commanding us regarding proper respect for parents, the Torah commands us about the sanctity of the marital bond. Therefore, the next step in the B'rit is: Lo Tin'af – Do Not Commit Adultery.

[Parenthetical note: The “Halakhic p'shat” of the next Statement is “Do Not Kidnap”. This is learned from context (see Rashi ad loc.); since the other statements all carry the possibility of capital punishment, this one must also include a capital crime. The only type of “stealing” which involves the potential for capital punishment is kidnapping.]

People who have been treated badly usually have one of two reactions (and often both at the same time) – they either wish to continue to be subjugated (note the difficulty that many long-term prisoners have with managing their own lives) or they wish to subjugate others. This would be especially true of slaves, who have been used for material gain with no regard for their humanity. We might have reacted in one of these ways, subjugating others or looking for others to subjugate us. Whereas God prohibits the latter – after a fashion – in its earlier prohibition of idolatry, He prohibits the former here. Therefore, the Torah commands us to restrain ourselves from using others for our own material gain: Lo Tignov – Do Not Kidnap.

XI. THE NEW SOCIAL CIRCLE: RE'AKHA'

In the final Dibrot, we are introduced to a new term: Re'akha – your fellow. This word obviously plays a significant role here as it shows up four times within these last couple of lines. I believe that both the significance of this word and of the mention of these Mitzvot at the beginning of the B'rit may be understood in light of an event that took place several months earlier in Egypt:

[God tells Mosheh:] ... “Tell the people that every man is to ask Re'ehu (his neighbor) and every woman is to ask R'utah (her neighbor) for objects of silver and gold.” (Sh'mot 11:2)

We were commanded to “borrow” the gold and silver of the Egyptians, who are called, ironically, our Re'im. This act constituted both deception and coveting. [A note about coveting: To covet something does not mean that you see your

neighbor with a new car and you want one just like it – that may just be good taste. Coveting is when you want THAT car – his car. It relates more to your appreciation – or lack thereof – of his ownership and property than about what you want.] We weren't told to get gold – but to get it from the Egyptians. It wasn't as much an issue of having great possessions (see B'resheet 15:14) as much as "emptying Egypt out" (Sh'mot 3:22, 12:36).

Now we are commanded that our new Re'im – every other member of the Covenant – must be treated differently. Besides being a Kingdom of Kohanim, we are also slated to be a "Holy Nation" (see 19:6). In order for this to take place, we have to reshape our attitudes towards neighbors and fellows and create a just society based on law: Lo Ta'aneh v'Re'akha Ed Shaker – Do Not Bear False Witness Against Your Fellow.

We must also respect the rights and property of our fellows: Lo Tahmod...v'Khol Asher l'Re'ekha: "Do Not Covet...nor Anything Which Belongs To Your Fellow."

It is most poignant that these 'Aseret haDibrot conclude with that key word – Re'akha, reminding us of how differently we need to behave towards our covenantal fellows than we did to our neighbors in Egypt.

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PARSHAT YITRO - Ma'amad Har Sinai

A wedding ceremony? Well, not exactly; but many sources in Chazal compare the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai to a marriage between God (the groom) and Am Yisrael (the bride). [See for example the last Mishnah in Mesechet Taanit!]

In this week's shiur, as we study the numerous ambiguities in Shmot chapter 19, we attempt to explain the deeper meaning of this analogy, as well as the underlying reason for those ambiguities.

INTRODUCTION

Thus far, Sefer Shmot has discussed the story of Yetziat Mitzraim, and hence - how God had fulfilled His covenant with the Avot. However, that covenant included not only a promise of redemption, but also the promise that Bnei Yisrael would become God's special nation in Eretz Canaan. As Bnei Yisrael now travel to establish that nation in that 'Promised Land', God brings them to Har Sinai in order to teach them the specific laws [mitzvot] that will help make them His special nation.

Therefore, the primary purpose of Bnei Yisrael's arrival at Har Sinai was to receive God's LAWS. Nevertheless, the Torah describes in no less detail the 'experience' of how those laws were given. In the following shiur, we undertake a careful reading of Shmot chapter 19 (i.e. the events that precede the Ten Commandments), highlighting its complexities, in an attempt to better appreciate Chazal's understanding of Ma'amad Har Sinai.

[Before you continue, it is highly recommended that you quickly review chapters 19 and 20 to refresh your memory, noting its flow of topic. (While doing so, try to notice how many psukim are difficult to translate.) For a more comprehensive preparation, see the Questions for self-study (sent earlier this week).]

THE 'PROPOSAL'

Shmot chapter 19 opens as Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai - presumably, to receive the Torah. However, before the Torah is given, God first summons Moshe to the mountain, instructing him to relay a certain message to the people. As you review these psukim (19:3-6), note how they form a 'proposal':

"Thus shall you say to Beit Yaakov and tell Bnei Yisrael:

You have seen what I have done to Egypt... so NOW:

IF - you will OBEY Me faithfully and keep My COVENANT...and be my treasured nation, for all the Land is Mine.

THEN: You shall be for Me a 'mamlechet Kohanim v'goy kadosh' [a kingdom of priests and a holy nation]..." (19:4-6)

The 'if / then' clause proves that these instructions constitute a proposal (and not just a decree) - to which Bnei Yisrael must answer either 'yes' or 'no'. And that's exactly what we find:

"And the people answered together and said, 'Everything that God has spoken we shall keep,' and Moshe brought the people's answer back to God." (see 19:7-8)

Clearly, Moshe Rabeinu acts as the 'middle-man' - who must relay the people's answer to this 'proposal' back to God.

[In regard to what would have happened had Bnei Yisrael answered 'no', see the Further Iyun section.]

Let's take a minute to discuss the meaning of the two sides of this 'proposal'.

The first part of the '**IF**' clause - "if you will OBEY Me" - makes sense, as God must first clarify if Bnei Yisrael are indeed now ready to follow His laws; in contrast to their previous 'refusals' (see

Yechezkel 20:5-9, Shmot 6:9 & 15:26). However, the precise meaning of the second clause - "and if you will keep My COVENANT" is uncertain, for it is not clear if this 'covenant' refers to something old - i.e. 'brit Avot'; or something new - i.e. 'brit Sinai'.

SOMETHING 'OLD' or SOMETHING 'NEW'

It would be difficult to explain that the word 'covenant' in this pasuk refers to 'brit Avot', for brit Avot doesn't seem to include any specific action that Bnei Yisrael must keep. More likely, it refers to 'brit Sinai' - whose details will soon be revealed, should Bnei Yisrael accept this proposal.

However, this ambiguity may be intentional, for this forthcoming 'brit Sinai' could be understood as an 'upgrade' of 'brit Avot'. In other words, 'brit Avot' discusses the very basic framework of a relationship (see Breishit 17:7-8), while 'brit Sinai' will contain the detailed laws which will make that original covenant more meaningful.

If so, then the proposition could be understood as follows: Should Bnei Yisrael agree to obey whatever God may command, and to remain faithful to this covenant, and act as His treasured nation (see 19:5) - **THEN**, the result will be that Bnei Yisrael will serve as God's 'model' nation, representing Him before all other nations [a "mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh" / see 19:6].

As a prerequisite for Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael must both confirm their readiness to obey God's commandments while recognizing that these mitzvot will facilitate their achievement of the very purpose of God's covenant with them.

Whereas a covenant requires the willful consent of both sides, this section concludes with Bnei Yisrael's collective acceptance of these terms (see again 19:7-8).

MAKING PLANS (and changing them)

Now that Bnei Yisrael had accepted God's proposal, the next step should be for them to receive the specific MITZVOT (i.e. the laws that they just agreed to observe). However, before those laws can be given, there are some technical details that must be ironed out, concerning **HOW** Bnei Yisrael will receive these laws. Note how the next pasuk describes God's 'plans' for how He intends to convey these mitzvot

"And God said to Moshe, 'I will come to you in the thickness of a CLOUD, in order that the people HEAR when I SPEAK WITH YOU, and in order that they believe in you [i.e. that you are My spokesman] forever..." (19:9)

It appears from this pasuk that God plans to use Moshe Rabeinu as an intermediary to convey His laws to Bnei Yisrael, consistent with Moshe's role as His liaison heretofore. Nonetheless, God insists that the people will 'overhear' His communication with Moshe, so that they believe that these laws truly originate from God, and not from Moshe.

At this point, in the middle of pasuk 9, we encounter our first major difficulty in following the flow of events. Note that God has just informed Moshe of **HOW** He plans to convey His laws. Hence, we would expect Moshe to convey this message to Bnei Yisrael (just as he did in 19:7). However, when we continue our reading of 19:9, something very strange takes place:

"...Then Moshe reported the PEOPLE'S words to God." (19:9)

What's going on? The second half of this pasuk seems to omit an entire clause - for it never tells us what the people responded. Instead, it just says that Moshe relayed the people's response back to God, without telling us **WHAT** the people said!

BE PREPARED!

This question is so glaring (and obvious) that Rashi, taking for granted that the reader realized this problem, provides an answer based on the Midrash that fills in the 'missing details'.

"Et divrei ha'am" [the words of the people]... The people responded: 'We want to hear from YOU [God] directly, for one cannot compare hearing from a "shaliach" (a messenger) to hearing from the King himself, [or they said,]: We want to SEE our King!' (see Rashi on 19:9)

Note how Rashi adds an entire line to this narrative. According to his interpretation, Bnei Yisrael don't accept God's original plan that they would hear the MITZVOT via Moshe. Instead, they demand to hear them directly - from God Himself!

What allows Rashi to offer such a bold interpretation?

Rashi's interpretation is based on an apparent contradiction between God's original plan in 19:9 and what appears to be His new plan, as described in the next two psukim:

"And God told Moshe, 'Go to the people and get them ready... for on the third day God will reveal Himself IN VIEW OF ALL THE PEOPLE on Har Sinai.' (see 19:10-11)

Note how God commands Bnei Yisrael to ready themselves, for in three days time they will actually SEE God. This declaration that He plans to reveal himself before the 'eyes of the entire nation' suggests that God now plans to convey His mitzvot DIRECTLY to the people. These instructions appear to describe a NEW PLAN for Matan Torah (in contrast to His original plan that Moshe will act as an intermediary - as described in 19:9).

For the sake of clarity, from now on, we refer to the God's original plan (Dibrot via Moshe) as PLAN 'A' (based on 19:9), and to the new plan (Dibrot Direct) as PLAN 'B' (based on 19:11).

Rashi claims that God's suggestion of Plan 'B' stems from the people's unwillingness to accept Plan 'A' - for Bnei Yisrael want to hear the Commandments DIRECTLY.

This 'change of plan' can explain why the people now require THREE days of preparation. In order to prepare for this DIRECT encounter, Bnei Yisrael must first attain a higher level of spiritual readiness, as reflected in the three-day preparation period. Note how the details of this 'preparation' continue until 19:15.

In 19:12-13, Moshe is commanded to cordon off the entire area surrounding the mountain. In 19:14-15, Moshe relays these commands to the people. Hence, from now on, we refer to this section (i.e. 19:9-15) as 'PREPARATION'.

Are Bnei Yisrael capable of reaching this level? Are they truly ready to receive the DIBROT directly from God?

If so, why did God not suggest this direct encounter in the first place? If not, why does God now agree to their request?

[As you may have guessed, we have encountered a 'dialectic'.]

To answer these questions, we must analyze the psukim that follow to determine which of these two divine plans actually unfolds.

RUNAWAY BRIDE

According to the new plan, on 'day three' God should reveal Himself on Mount Sinai and speak the DIBROT directly to the entire nation. Let's continue now in chapter 19 and see what happens: "And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, and there were loud sounds and lightening, and a THICK CLOUD on the mountain, and the SHOFAR sounded very strong, and the people in the CAMP all became frightened." (19:16)

If you read this pasuk carefully, you will most probably be startled by the fact that Bnei Yisrael never came to Har Sinai that morning! Instead, they were so frightened of God's "hitgalut" [revelation] that they remained in the CAMP.

[Our minhag to stay up (and learn Torah) the entire night of Shavuot is based on the Midrash that Bnei Yisrael 'slept in' on that morning. Note how that Midrash is based on this pasuk.]

This background explains the next pasuk, where Moshe goes back to the camp, and brings everyone back to the foot of the mountain (see 19:17). Now it's time to 'try it again'. Let's see what happens: "And Har Sinai was full of smoke, for God had DESCENDED upon it in FIRE, and its smoke was like a furnace, and the entire mountain shook violently..." (see 19:18)

This pasuk certainly describes God's "hitgalut", and it appears to follow according to PLAN 'B'. Note how God's descends onto the mountain (note the word "va'yered" in both 19:11 and 19:18). Nevertheless, one could also understand the intense smoke as reflective of the protective 'cloud' described in 19:9 (Plan 'A').

The stage has now been set for Matan Torah. The people are standing at the foot of Har Sinai and God has revealed Himself - He has descended upon Har Sinai. Therefore, the next pasuk should describe God's proclamation of the Ten Commandments.

Let's examine that pasuk (19:19) carefully:

"The sound of the shofar grew louder and louder; as Moshe would speak, God would answer him with a KOL." (19:19)

This pasuk is quite ambiguous, for it does not give us even a clue as to WHAT Moshe was saying or what God was answering. It is not even clear as to WHOM Moshe is speaking, to God or to the people!

If Moshe is speaking to the people, then this pasuk would be describing how he conveyed the DIBROT. If so, then Moshe speaking and God responding with a "kol" - implies that the DIBROT were given according to PLAN 'A', as Moshe serves as the intermediary. [Compare with 19:9!]

However, if "Moshe y'daber" (in 19:19) refers to Moshe speaking to God, then it is not at all clear what their conversation is about; nor can we make any deduction in regard to how the Dibrot were given! [Note the range of opinion among the commentators on this pasuk!]

PLAN 'B' - MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING!

Rashi's commentary on this pasuk is simply amazing. Again quoting the Midrash, Rashi claims that Moshe is speaking to the people, telling them the Dibrot! However, what's amazing is Rashi's explanation that the clause "Moshe y'daber..." describes the transmission of the LAST EIGHT Commandments, but not the first TWO. This is because Rashi understands that the first two DIBROT were given DIRECTLY from God - in accordance with PLAN 'B' - while the last eight were given via Moshe - in accordance with PLAN 'A'. As this pasuk (19:19) describes PLAN 'A' it could only be referring to the transmission of the last eight DIBROT!

[See also Rambam in Moreh N'vuchim II, chapter 33.]

Note that according to Rashi, chapter 19 intentionally OMITS two key events relating to Plan B:

- 1) Bnei Yisrael's original request for Plan B (in 19:9), &
- 2) The story of the two DIBROT given at the level of Plan 'B'.

For some thematic reason that remains unclear, chapter 19 prefers to omit these two important details, leaving us with the impression that Plan 'B' may have never taken place!

Ramban rejects Rashi's interpretation of 19:19 (as do many other commentators), arguing that 19:19 does NOT describe how the Dibrot were given. Instead, Ramban explains that "Moshe y'daber..." describes the conversation between God and Moshe that immediately follows in 19:20-25.

[As usual, Ramban prefers to keep the sequence of events according to the order of the psukim, while Rashi is willing to 'change' the order for thematic considerations.]

LIMITATION/ A FINAL WARNING

To better appreciate this "machloket" between Rashi and Ramban, we must examine the last set of psukim in chapter 19 (i.e. 19:20-25).

"God descended upon Mount Sinai to the TOP of the Mountain and summoned Moshe to the TOP of the Mountain, and Moshe ascended... Then God told Moshe: Go down and WARN the people lest they break through toward God to SEE, and many of them will perish. And even the KOHANIM who are permitted to come closer must prepare themselves..." (19:20-22)

[Btw, note that 20:25 refers to Moshe's conveying this warning to the people, NOT to his conveying the "DIBROT," as is commonly misunderstood. See Rashi!]

According to Ramban, this additional 'warning' is given BEFORE Matan Torah, and serves as the final preparation before the DIBROT are given. However, according to Rashi's interpretation, it remains unclear when, where, and why this conversation (in 19:20-25) takes place.

[Even though Rashi explains 19:19 as depicting the presentation of the DIBROT, he maintains that 19:20-25 takes place beforehand - for it relates to the ceremony described in 24:3-11, which Rashi himself claims to have occurred BEFORE the DIBROT. This "sugya" lies beyond the scope of our shiur.]

In any case, this final 'warning' clearly reflects the mode of transmission of the Dibrot that we have referred to as PLAN 'A' - God will appear only to Moshe (at the top of the mountain), while everyone else must keep their distance down below. Only Moshe will be privy to witness the descent of the "shechina" onto the TOP of the mountain, while Bnei Yisrael are prohibited from ascending to see, "lest they die."

As this section describes how God is now limiting His revelation to the top of the Mountain, we refer from now on to this section (19:20-25) as 'LIMITATION'.

Note how chapter 19 now divides into four distinct sections:

- I. PROPOSITION (19:1-8)
- II. PREPARATION (19:9-15)
- III. REVELATION (19:16-19)
- IV. LIMITATION (19:20-25)]

So what happened? Has God reverted to Plan 'A' (that Moshe is to act as an intermediary)? If so, why? On the other hand, if Plan 'B' remains in operation, why does God restrict His revelation to the TOP of the mountain? Could this be considered some sort of 'compromise'?

There appears to have been a change in plans, but why?

Even though chapter 19 does not seem to provide any explanation for what motivated this change, a story found later in chapter 20 seems to provide us with all the 'missing details'.

TREPIDATION [or 'FEAR' STORY ONE']

Towards the end of chapter 20, immediately after the Torah records the DIBROT, we find yet another story concerning what transpired at Har Sinai:

"And the people all saw the KOLOT, the torches, the sound of the SHOFAR and the mountain smoking; the people saw and MOVED BACK and stood at a distance. And they told Moshe: 'Why don't YOU SPEAK to us, and we will listen to you, but God should NOT SPEAK to us, lest we die.'

"Moshe responded saying: 'DO NOT BE FEARFUL, for God is coming to 'test' you and instill fear within you so that you will not sin.' "But the people STOOD AT A DISTANCE, and Moshe [alone] entered the CLOUD where God was." (see 20:15-18)

This short narrative provides us with a perfect explanation for WHY God chooses to revert from PLAN 'B' back to PLAN 'A'. Here, the reason is stated explicitly: the people changed their mind because they were frightened and overwhelmed by this intense experience of "hitgalut."

But why is this story recorded in chapter 20? Should it not have been recorded in chapter 19?

Indeed, Ramban does place this story in the middle of chapter 19. Despite his general reluctance towards rearranging the chronology in Chumash, Ramban (on 20:14-15) explains that this entire parshia (20:15-18) took place earlier, BEFORE Matan Torah. Based on a textual and thematic similarities between 20:15-18 and 19:16-19 (and a problematic parallel in Devarim 5:20-28), Ramban concludes that the events described in 20:15-18 took place before Matan Torah, and should be read together with 19:16-18!

Thus, according to Ramban, the people's request to hear from Moshe (and not from God) that took place within 19:16-18, explains

the need for the 'limitation' section that follows immediately afterward in 20:19-25. [See Ramban on 20:15.]

Rashi and Chizkuni offer a different interpretation. They agree with Ramban that 20:15-18 - the Fear Story - is 'out of place,' but they disagree concerning WHERE to put it. While Ramban places this story BEFORE Matan Torah, Rashi (based on his pirush to 19:19) & Chizkuni (on 20:15) claim that it took place DURING Matan Torah, BETWEEN the first two and last eight commandments.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS - FIRST OR THIRD PERSON

In fact, this creative solution solves yet another problem. It explains WHY the text of the Ten Commandments shifts from first to third person after the second commandment. Whereas the first two commandments (20:2-5) are written in FIRST person, indicating that God conveyed them DIRECTLY to the people [reflective of Plan 'B'], the last eight commandments (20:6-14) are written in third person, suggesting a less direct form of communication [reflective of Plan 'A']. This reflects Chazal's explanation that: "Anochi v'Lo Yihiyeh Lachem, m'pi ha'gvrurah shma'um" - the first two commandments were heard directly from God (Makkot 24a); see also Chizkuni 20:2 and 20:15.]

Rashi and Chizkuni's explanation has a clear advantage over Ramban's, as it justifies the 'transplantation' of the Fear story (20:15-18) from its proper chronological location to after the Dibrot. Since this story took place DURING the Ten Commandments, the Torah could not record it beforehand. On the other hand, it could not have been recorded where it belongs (i.e. in between the second and third DIBROT), for the Torah does not want to 'break up' the DIBROT (whereas they form a single unit). Therefore, the Torah records this 'fear story' as a type of 'appendix' to the Ten Commandments, explaining afterward what happened while they were given.

To summarize, in chapter 19, it was unclear whether or not Bnei Yisrael would hear the DIBROT according to PLAN 'A' (as God originally had planned) or at the higher level of PLAN 'B' (as Bnei Yisrael requested). Later, in chapter 20, the Torah describes how Bnei Yisrael were frightened and requested to revert back to PLAN 'A'. Ramban claims that this 'fear story' took place BEFORE Matan Torah, and hence the people heard ALL Ten Commandments through Moshe (Plan 'A'). Rashi maintains that this story took place DURING the DIBROT; hence the first TWO DIBROT were transmitted according to PLAN 'B', while the remainder were heard according to PLAN 'A'.

[Ibn Ezra (see 20:15) takes an opposite approach, maintaining that the fear story is recorded right where it belongs; it took place only AFTER Matan Torah. Therefore, the people heard all Ten Commandments directly from God, as mandated by Plan 'B'.]

A PROOF FROM SEFER DEVARIM

Based on our discussion, we can resolve two adjacent yet seemingly contradictory psukim in the description of Matan Torah in Sefer Devarim:

"Face to face God spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire [PLAN 'B']. I stood BETWEEN God and you at that time to convey God's words to you [PLAN 'A'], for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain..." (see Devarim 5:4-5)

Once again, the Torah incorporates BOTH PLANS in its description of Matan Torah. Evidently, both plans were in fact carried out, as we explained.

Although we have suggested several solutions to problems raised by chapters 19-20, a much more basic question arises: why can't the Torah be more precise? Why does the Torah appear to intentionally obscure the details of such an important event in our history?

AHAVA and YIRAH

One could suggest that this ambiguity is intentional, as it reflects the dialectic nature of man's encounter with God.

Man, in search of God, constantly faces a certain tension. On the one hand, he must constantly strive to come as close to God as possible ("ahava" - the love of God). On the other hand, he must constantly retain an awareness of God's greatness and recognize his own shortcomings and unworthiness ("yirah" the fear of God). Awed by God's infinity and humbled by his own imperfection, man must keep his distance (see Devarim 5:25-26).

God's original plan for Matan Torah was 'realistic.' Recognizing man's inability to directly confront the "shechina," God intends to use Moshe as an intermediary (Plan 'A'). Bnei Yisrael, eager to become active covenantal partners, express their desire to come as close as possible to God. They want to encounter the "Shechina" directly, without any mediating agent (Plan 'B').

Could God say NO to this sincere expression of "ahavat Hashem"? Of course not! Yet, on the other hand, answering YES could place the people in tremendous danger, as they must rise to the highest levels of spirituality to deserve such a direct, unmediated manifestation of God.

While Plan 'B' may reflect a more 'ideal' encounter, Plan 'A' reflects a more realistic one. One could suggest that by presenting the details with such ambiguity, the Torah emphasizes the need to find the proper balance between this realism as well as idealism when serving God.

GOD KNOWS BEST

Although God knows full well that Bnei Yisrael cannot possibly sustain a direct encounter, He nonetheless concedes to their request to hear the Commandments directly. Why?

One could compare this Divine encounter to a parent-child relationship. As a child grows up, there are times when he wishes to do things on his own. Despite his clear incapability to perform the given task, his desire to accomplish is the key to his growth. A wise parent will allow his child to try, even though he knows that the child may fail - for it is better that one recognize his shortcomings on his own, rather than be told by others that he cannot accomplish.

On the other hand, although a child's desire to grow should not be inhibited by an overprotective parent, a responsible parent must also know when to tell his child STOP.

Similarly, God is well aware of Bnei Yisrael's unworthiness to encounter the Divine at the highest level. Nevertheless, He encourages them to aspire to their highest potential. As Bnei Yisrael struggle to maintain the proper balance between "ahava" and "yirah," God must guide and they must strive.

Our study of Parshat Yitro has shown us that what actually happened at Ma'amat Har Sinai remains unclear. However, what 'could have happened' remains man's eternal challenge.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. What would have happened had Bnei Yisrael said NO to God's proposition? The Midrash posits that had Bnei Yisrael rejected the offer, the world would have returned to "tohu va'vahu" (void) - the phrase used in Breishit 1:2 to describe the state prior to Creation! [See Shabbat 88a & Rashi 19:17.] From this Midrash, it appears that Bnei Yisrael had no choice but to accept. Why is the covenant binding, if Am Yisrael had no choice?

Any covenant, by its very nature, requires the willful acceptance of both parties. Therefore, according to "pshat," Bnei Yisrael have "bechira chochma" to either accept or reject God's proposition. Their willful acceptance makes the covenant at Har Sinai binding for all generations. Thus, had Bnei Yisrael said NO (chas v'shalom), Matan Torah would not have taken place! However, such a possibility is unthinkable, for without Matan Torah there would have been no purpose for Creation. Therefore, because the psukim indicate that Bnei Yisrael had free choice, the Midrash must emphasize that from the perspective of the purpose behind God's Creation, the people had no choice other than accept the Torah.

B. Most m'forshim explain that "b'mshoch ha'yovel hay'mah ya'alu b'Har" (19:13) refers to the long shofar blast that signaled the COMPLETION of the "hitgalut" - an 'all clear' signal.

One could suggest exactly the opposite interpretation, that the long shofar blast indicated the BEGINNING of Matan Torah.

Explain why this interpretation fits nicely into the pshat of 19:11-15, that limiting access to the Mountain is part of the preparation for Matan Torah. [What does an 'all clear' signal have to do with preparation?] Explain as well why this would imply that during Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael should have actually ascended Har Sinai!

Relate this to concept of PLAN 'B' and Bnei Yisrael's request to SEE the "Shechina." Relate to Devarim 5:5 in support of this interpretation. Why would "kol ha'shofar holaych v'chazak m'od" (19:19) be precisely what God meant by "b'mshoch ha'yovel."

Relate to "tachtit ha'har" in 19:17! Use this to explain why the psukim immediately following 19:19 describe God's decision to LIMIT his "hitgalut" to the TOP of the mountain.

C. Compare the details of 19:20-24 to the Mishkan: i.e. Rosh ha'har = kodesh kdoshim; Har = Mishkan; Tachtit Ha'har = azara, etc. Where can Moshe and Aharon enter? What about the Kohanim and the Am? Explain how this may reflect a bit of a 'compromise' between plans A & B.

D. You are probably familiar with Kabbalat Shabbat. Based on the above shiur, explain why our weekly preparation for Shabbat could be compared to Bnei Yisrael's original preparation for Matan Torah.

Relate this to the verses of "l'cho dodi" and its 'wedding like' imagery!

ADDITIONAL NOTES AND SOURCES

A. WHAT WERE "DIVREI HA'AM" in 19:9:

In the shiur we mentioned Rashi's interpretation (based on the Mechilta), that though the Torah does not state this explicitly, Bnei Yisrael insisted on hearing Hashem's word directly, rather than through a mediator. Moshe then reports this request to Hashem. This is also the implication of the Midrash in Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:2. We will briefly review some of the other interpretations offered to resolve the difficulty in this pasuk:

1. The **Abarbanel** takes the same general approach as Rashi, that Moshe here tells Hashem of the nation's desire to hear His word directly. However, he claims that this request actually appears in the psukim (whereas according to Rashi the Torah never records the people making this request). The Abarbanel claims that their acceptance of the "proposition" - "everything that Hashem said - we will do" - included their wish to hear Hashem directly. (He appears to interpret the clause, "im shamo'a tish'mu b'koli...," which we generally explain to mean, "if you obey Me faithfully," as, "if you will hear My voice." Thus, when they accepted this proposition, they expressed the desire to hear Hashem's voice as well.

This approach appears more explicitly in the Netziv's He'amek Davar (19:8.) Hashem here tells Moshe that as not everyone is worthy of prophecy, He will speak to Moshe "b'av he'an'an," which the Abarbanel explains as a physical voice, as opposed to the usual medium of prophecy, which involves none of the physical senses. (This understanding of "av he'an'an" appears as well in the Or Hachayim and Malbim.) The nation will thus hear Hashem's voice without experiencing actual prophecy. Moshe then informs Hashem that the people want to hear Hashem speaking to them, rather than to Moshe. This general approach of the Abarbanel appears to be the intent of the Midrash Lekach Tov on our pasuk.

2. The **Ibn Ezra**, like Rashi, understands the "divrei ha'am" in this pasuk as referring to something not explicitly mentioned in the psukim. Whereas according to Rashi that something was the nation's desire to hear Hashem directly, the Ibn Ezra points to the skepticism on the part of segments of Bnei Yisrael. He claims

that "vayaged Moshe et divrei ha'am" means that Moshe had previously made this comment to Hashem, prior to the beginning of this pasuk. It thus turns out that Hashem speaks to Moshe here in response to his report of the "divrei ha'am." Moshe had reported that some among Bnei Yisrael do not believe that a human being can survive a revelation of Hashem; they therefore doubted the fact that Moshe had been appointed God's messenger. Hashem therefore tells Moshe that Ma'amad Har Sinai will result in "v'gam b'cha ya'aminu l'olam" - Bnei Yisrael's complete trust and faith in Moshe's prophecy.

3. Other Rishonim suggest that when Moshe "returns the nation's words to Hashem" (see 19:8) - he does not actually tell Hashem what the nation said; he merely returned to God with the intention of telling Him. It is only in 19:9 that Moshe actually told this to God (see Ibn Ezra in Shmot 19:23 citing Rav Sa'adya Gaon's claim that just as in his day people could not initiate conversation with a monarch, but must rather wait for the king to begin speaking with them, so did Moshe abstain from addressing God until after God spoke with him.)

This explanation is also suggested by Rav Sa'adya Gaon (as explained by Rabbenu Avraham Ben ha'Rambam, and Rabbi Yaakov of Vienna in "Imrei Noam"), the Ba'alei HaTosfot (as quoted in both Hadar Zekeinim and Da'at Zekeinim), Rabbenu Yosef Bechor Shor, and the Ramban. The Rashbam, too, appears to take this position.

[Two Midrashic interpretations of this pasuk appear in Masechet Shabbat 87a and in the Mechilta on our pasuk.] This discussion surrounding 19:9 directly impacts another issue, one of the central points of our shiur: does Hashem introduce a "new plan" in psukim 10-11, after Moshe "reports the people's words" to Him? According to Rashi, as discussed at length in the shiur, He clearly did. The same is true according to the Abarbanel's approach. However, according to the second and third explanations quoted here, it would seem that Hashem is not describing here an alternate procedure. Indeed, the Ramban (on this pasuk) explains Hashem's original "plan" as having Bnei Yisrael watch as Hashem appears to Moshe. Thus, pasuk 11, in which Hashem says that He will descend "in the view of the nation," does not mark a change of plans. Similarly, in the introduction to his commentary to Shir Hashirim, as well as in his peirush to Shmot 3:12, the Ramban writes that Hashem's promise to Moshe at the burning bush, that Bnei Yisrael will "serve God on this mountain," involved their " beholding His glory face-to-face." This was God's intention all along.

B. PLAN A & PLAN B

In the shiur we worked with Rashi's view - i.e. God originally had planned to speak only to Moshe, as Bnei Yisrael listened in. In response to the nation's request, however, God switches to "plan B," by which He will address the nation directly.

An interesting variation on this theme is suggested by the Malbim. According to his explanation, plan B, which the people requested, involved their hearing directly from Hashem the entire Torah, not only the Ten Commandments. (The Ramban - 20:14 - writes that Bnei Yisrael feared that this was God's plan, though in actuality He had never intended to transmit the entire Torah to them directly.) Hashem initially agrees, but their sense of terror upon hearing the thunder and lightening signaling God's descent onto the mountain (19:16), and their consequent hesitation to go to the mountain ("vayotzei Moshe" - 19:17), reflected their unworthiness for this lengthy exposure to divine revelation. Hashem therefore presented them directly either the Ten Commandments or the first two. Only Moshe received the rest of the mitzvot directly from Hashem.

We should note that in contradistinction to our understanding of Rashi, the Maharal of Prague (in his Gur Aryeh to 19:9) explains Rashi to mean that Moshe simply confirms Hashem's plan. God tells him that He plans on revealing Himself to Moshe as the nation hears, and Moshe replies, "Indeed, this is what the

people want." Apparently, the Maharal understands "hinei Anochi ba eilecha b'av he'anah..." to refer to the same level of "giluy Shechina" that actually occurs, such that there was never any change of plans. (According to the Maharal's approach, it turns out that there is no difference between the approaches of Rashi and the Ramban.)

C. "Moshe Yedaber Veha'Elokim Ya'anenu B'kol" (19:19)

As we saw, Rashi, following the Mechilta, understands this pasuk as referring to the procedure of the transmission of the Asseret Hadibrot. We also noted that the Ramban disagrees, claiming that it describes the manner in which the laws in the following psukim - concerning the "limitation" - were presented. This is the general approach of the Abarbanel and Rabbenu Yosef Bechor Shor, as well. The Ibn Ezra claims that the pasuk does not reveal what it is that Moshe says here, but it definitely does not refer to the Asseret Hadibrot. The point of the pasuk is to stress that despite the overpowering sound of the shofar, it did not interfere with Moshe's conversation with Hashem. The Or Hachayim writes that Moshe here spoke words of praise to Hashem, and He would then respond. According to all these views, this pasuk does not refer to Asseret Hadibrot, as Rashi claims.

A particularly interesting interpretation is suggested by the Malbim, Netziv and "Hadash Veha'iyun" (though with some variation). They claim that the sound of the shofar proclaimed, "Moshe yedaber vaha'Elokim ya'anenu b'kol." In other words, they place a colon after the word "me'od" in this pasuk. The shofar blast thus informed the people that Moshe will serve as the intermediary in between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael in transmitting the Torah.

D. What Did Bnei Yisrael Hear?

The issue of whether or not Bnei Yisrael heard Hashem speak at Ma'amad Har Sinai involves both parshanut and machshava. In terms of parshanut, as we discussed in the shiur, we must accommodate several psukim: in our parasha - 19:9, which, as discussed, implies that Hashem (at least originally) planned to speak to Moshe as the nation listened; 19:19 - "Moshe yedaber vaha'Elokim ya'anenu be'kol," which, if it refers to the Asseret Hadibrot (a point debated by Rashi and the Ramban, as discussed in the shiur), points to the involvement of both Hashem and Moshe in the transmission of the Commandments to Bnei Yisrael; 20:15-18, where Bnei Yisrael retreat from fear; and the transition from second to third person after the second Commandment. We must also resolve the contradiction noted in the shiur between Devarim 4:4 and 45. Devarim 5:19-28 strongly implies that Hashem said all the dibrot to the people and then they asked Moshe to serve as an intermediary.

The philosophical issue involves the question as to whether an entire nation can experience prophecy, or is this reserved only for the spiritual elite who have adequately prepared themselves.

We briefly present here the basic positions that have been taken regarding this issue:

Ibn Ezra (20:1) and Abarbanel (here and in Devarim 5:4) maintain that Bnei Yisrael heard all Ten Commandments. This is also the majority view cited in Pesikta Rabbati 22, and the implication of the Yalkut Shimoni - Shir Hashirim 981. Although in Parshat Vaetchanan Moshe describes himself as having stood in between Hashem and the people serving as an intermediary, the Ibn Ezra there explains that this refers to the situation after the Dibrot, when Moshe conveyed the rest of the Torah to Bnei Yisrael.

It emerges from Rashi's comments to 19:19 and 20:1 that Hashem first uttered, as it were, all Ten Commandments in a single moment and then began repeating them one by one. After the second Dibra, however, Bnei Yisrael became too frightened and asked Moshe to serve as their intermediary. This is the position of the Chzikuni, and is found in an earlier source, as well - Midrash Asseret Hadibrot l'Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan, as cited by

Rav Menachem Kasher (Torah Shleima, vol. 16, miluim # 4). In his commentary to Masechet Brachot 12a, however, Rashi seems to imply that Bnei Yisrael in fact heard all Ten Commandments from Hashem.

The Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 2:33) maintains that all Bnei Yisrael heard and understood the first two commandments (without any need for Hashem to repeat them). They then asked Moshe to hear the other commandments on their behalf; he therefore heard the last eight Dibrot and conveyed them to Bnei Yisrael. Though the Rambam claims that this is the view of Chazal, many later writers could not find any sources in Chazal corroborating this view. Rav Kasher, however, notes that this is the implication of the Mechilta as quoted by the Da'at Zekeinim mi'Ba'alei ha'Tosfot (20:1; the Mechilta is cited differently in other sources). The Rambam claims that since one can arrive at the first two Dibrot (the existence and singularity of God) through intellectual engagement, even without divine revelation, Bnei Yisrael understood these Dibrot as clearly as Moshe did. This philosophical point sparked considerable controversy and drew strong criticism from later rishonim and acharonim. See Sefer Ha'ikarim 17, the Abarbanel here and in Vaetchanan, Shut ha'Rashba 4:234, and Shnei Luchot Habrit - Masechet Shavuot.

The Ramban (on 20:6), explaining the Mechilta, claims that Bnei Yisrael heard all Ten Commandments but understood only the first two. Moshe then explained to them the final eight. The Sefer Ha'ikarim (ibid.) concurs with this view.

PARSHAT YITRO - Intro to 2nd half of Sefer Shmot

In Parshat Yitro, Chumash enters a new phase as its primary focus now shifts from its ongoing **narrative** to the **mitzvot** that Bnei Yisrael receive at Har Sinai. Nonetheless, the manner in which the Torah presents the **mitzvot** is far more exciting than we would expect. Instead of a formal [organized] 'shulchan aruch' style of presentation, Chumash records the **mitzvot** in a very special manner. In each of our shiurim from Parshat Yitro until Parshat Pekudei, our study of the sequence and progression of the mitzvot will be no less significant than the study of the mitzvot themselves!

INTRODUCTION - STRUCTURE AND THEME IN CHUMASH

When we study Chumash, we encounter two types of parshiot:

- (1) Narrative, i.e. the ongoing story;
- (2) Mitzvot, i.e. the commandments.

Until Parshat Yitro, i.e. **before** Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai, Chumash consisted primarily of narrative (e.g. the story of Creation, the Avot, Yetziat Mitzrayim etc.). In contrast, beginning with Parshat Yitro, we find many sections consisting primarily of 'mitzvot' (e.g. the Ten Commandments, the 'mishpatim' (chapters 21->23), laws of the mishkan (chapters 25->31), etc.).

The reason for this is quite simple. Sefer Breishit explained **why** and **how** God chose Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation. Sefer Shmot began by describing how God fulfilled His covenant with the Avot, and redeemed His nation from slavery in Egypt. Now, before this nation enters the Promised Land where they are to live as God's nation, they must first receive the set of laws [i.e. Matan Torah] that will facilitate their becoming God's special nation.

Assuming that Bnei Yisrael are to receive ALL of the mitzvot at Har Sinai before they continue on their journey, we would expect to find the following 'logical' order:

I. NARRATIVE

The story of the Exodus from Egypt until Bnei Yisrael's arrival at Har Sinai.

II. MITZVOT

ALL of the mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael receive at Sinai.

III. NARRATIVE

The story of Bnei Yisrael's journey from Har Sinai to the Promised Land.

However, instead of this clear and structured order, we find a much more complicated presentation. First, 'ten commandments' are given at a special gathering (i.e. Ma'amad Har Sinai). After a short narrative, we find an additional set of mitzvot - that comprise most of Parshat Mishpatim. At the end of Parshat Mishpatim, we find yet another short narrative (chapter 24), followed by seven chapters of mitzvot that detail how to build the Mishkan (Teruma / Tetzaveh). This lengthy set of mitzvot is followed by yet another narrative, which describes 'chet ha-egel' (32:1-34:10), which is then followed by yet another set of mitzvot (see 34:11-26), etc. In a similar manner, we find this pattern of a 'blend' of mitzvot and narrative in the rest of Chumash as well.

So why does the Torah present its mitzvot in this complex manner? Would it not have made more sense to present all of the mitzvot together in one organized unit (like 'shulchan aruch')?

In the answer to this question lies the basis for our approach to studying Chumash - for the intricate manner in which the Torah presents the mitzvot 'begs' us to pay attention not only to the mitzvot themselves, but also to the manner of their presentation. Therefore, as we study, we search for thematic significance in the order and sequence in which the Torah presents the mitzvot.

For example, the first step in our study will be to identify the specific topic of each 'parshia' and/or 'paragraph'. Then we analyze the progression of topic from one parshia to the next in search of a thematic reason for this progression.

[Following this methodology will also help us better appreciate the underlying reason for the various controversies among the classic commentators.]

CHRONOLOGY IN CHUMASH

This introduction leads us directly into one of the most intriguing exegetical aspects of Torah study - the chronological progression of 'parshiot' [better known as the sugya of 'ein mukdam u-me'uchar...'].

In other words, as we study Chumash, should we assume that it progresses according to the chronological order by which the events took place, **or**, should we assume that thematic considerations may allow the Torah to place certain parshiot next to each other, even though each 'parshia' may have been given at different times.

In this respect, we must first differentiate once again between 'narrative' and 'mitzvot'.

It would only be logical to assume that the ongoing narrative of Chumash follows in chronological order, (i.e. the order in which the events took place/ e.g. the story of Yitzchak will obviously follow the story of his father Avraham).

Nonetheless, we periodically may find that a certain narrative may conclude with details that took place many years later. For example, the story of the manna in Parshat Beshalach concludes with God's commandment that Moshe place a sample of the manna next to the Aron in the Mishkan. This commandment could only have been given **after** the Mishkan was completed, an event that does not occur until many months later. Nevertheless, because that narrative deals with the manna, it includes a related event, even though it took place at a later time.

The story of Yehuda and Tamar in Sefer Breishit is another example. See chapter 38, note from 38:11-12 that since Tamar waited for Shela to grow up, the second part of that story must have taken place at least thirteen years later, and hence **after** Yosef becomes viceroy in Egypt! Recall that he was sold at age 17 and solved Pharaoh's dream at age 30.

How about the 'mitzvot' in Chumash? In what order are they presented? Do they follow the chronological order by which they were first given?

Because the mitzvot are embedded within the narrative of Chumash, and not presented in one unbroken unit (as explained above), the answer is not so simple. On this specific issue, a major controversy exists among the various commentators; popularly

known as: "ein mukdam u-me'uchar ba-Torah" (there is no chronological order in the Torah).

Rashi, together with many other commentators (and numerous Midrashim), consistently holds that 'ein mukdam u-me'uchar', i.e. Chumash **does not necessarily** follow a chronological order, while Ramban, amongst others, consistently argues that 'yesh mukdam u-me'uchar', i.e. Chumash **does** follow a chronological order.

However, Rashi's opinion, 'ein mukdam u-me'uchar', should not be understood as some 'wildcard' answer that allows one to totally disregard the order in which Chumash is written. Rashi simply claims that a primary consideration for the order of the Torah's presentation of the mitzvot is thematic, more so than chronological. Therefore, whenever 'thematically convenient', we find that Rashi will 'change' the chronological order of mitzvot, and sometimes even events.

For example, Rashi claims that the mitzva to build the Mishkan, as recorded in Parshat Teruma (chapters 25->31) was first given only **after** the sin of the Golden Calf, even though that narrative is only recorded afterward (in Parshat Ki Tisa /chapter 32). Rashi prefers this explanation due to the thematic similarities between the Mishkan and the story of 'chet ha-egel'.

In contrast, Ramban argues time and time again that unless there is 'clear cut' proof that a certain parshia is out of order, one must always assume that the mitzvot in Chumash are recorded in the same order as they were originally given. For example, Ramban maintains that the commandment to build the Mishkan was given **before** 'chet ha-egel' **despite** its thematic similarities to that event!

It should be pointed out that there is a very simple reason why the Torah is written in thematic order, which is not necessarily chronological. Recall that the Torah (in the form that we received it) was given to us by Moshe Rabeinu before his death in the fortieth year in the desert. [See Devarim 31:24-25.] When Moshe Rabeinu first received the laws, he wrote them down in 'megilot' [scrolls]. However, before his death, he organized all of the laws that he received, and the various stories that transpired into the Five Books. [See Masechet Megilla 60a, and Rashi on "Megilla megilla nitna...". See also Chizkuni on Shmot 34:32! It's not clear from these commentators whether God told Moshe concerning the order by which to put these 'megillot' together, or if Moshe Rabeinu made those decisions himself. However, it would only be logical to assume that God instructed Moshe Rabeinu in this regard as well.]

Considering that Chumash, in its final form, was 'composed' in the fortieth year - we can readily understand why its mitzvot and narratives would be recorded in a manner that is thematically significant. Therefore, almost all of the commentators are in constant search of the deeper meaning of the juxtaposition of 'parshiot' and the order of their presentation.

WHEN DID YITRO COME (AND GO)?

Even though this controversy of 'mukdam u-me'uchar' relates primarily to 'parshiot' dealing with mitzvot, there are even instances when this controversy relates to the narrative itself. A classic example is found with regard to when Yitro first came to join Bnei Yisrael in the desert.

Recall how Parshat Yitro opens with Yitro's arrival at the campsite of Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai (see 18:5). The location of this 'parshia' in Sefer Shmot clearly suggests that Yitro arrives **before** Matan Torah, yet certain details found later in the 'parshia', (e.g. Moshe's daily routine of judging the people and teaching them God's laws/ see 18:15-17), suggests that this event may have taken place **after** Matan Torah.

Based on this and several other strong proofs, Ibn Ezra claims that this entire parshia took place **after** Matan Torah ('ein mukdam u-me'uchar'). Ramban argues that since none of those proofs are conclusive, the entire 'parshia' should be understood as taking place **BEFORE** Matan Torah (i.e. when it is written - 'yesh mukdam u-me'uchar...').

Rashi (see 18:13) suggests an interesting 'compromise' by 'splitting' the parshia in half! His opinion would agree with Ramban

that Yitro first arrives **before** Matan Torah (18:1-12); however, the details found later (in 18:13-27), e.g. how Moshe taught the people etc. took place at a much later time. This interpretation forces Rashi to explain that the word 'mi-macharat' in 18:13 does not mean the 'next day', but rather the day after Yom Kippur (when Moshe came down from Har Sinai with the second Luchot), even though it was several months later.

But even Ibn Ezra, who maintains that the entire 'parshia' takes place after Matan Torah, must explain **why** the Torah records this 'parshia' here instead. Therefore, Ibn Ezra suggests a thematic explanation - based on the juxtaposition of this 'parshia' and the story of Amalek:

"...And now I will explain to you why this parshia is written here [out of place]: Because the preceding parshia discussed the terrible deeds of Amalek against Israel, now in contrast the Torah tells us of the **good** deeds that Yitro did for Am Yisrael..." [see Ibn Ezra 18:1]

The dispute concerning 'When Yitro came' illustrates some of the various methodological approaches we can take when confronted with apparent discrepancies. In general, whenever we find a 'parshia' which appears to be 'out of order', we can either:

- 1) Attempt to keep the chronological order, then deal with each problematic detail individually.
- 2) Keep the chronological order up until the first detail that is problematic. At that point, explain why the narrative records details that happen later.

- 3) Change the chronological order, and then explain the thematic reason why the Torah places the 'parshia' in this specific location.

MA'AMAD HAR SINAI

Let's bring another example in Parshat Yitro, from the most important event of our history: 'Ma'amad Har Sinai' - God's revelation to Am Yisrael at Mount Sinai.

[Matan Torah - the giving of the Ten Commandments at Har Sinai, together with the events which immediately precede and follow it (chapters 19->24), are commonly referred to as 'Ma'amad Har Sinai'.]

As we explained in our introduction, this 'ma'amad' can be divided between its basic sections of narrative and mitzva:
19:1-25 [Narrative] - Preparation for the Ten Commandments
20:1-14 [Mitzvot] - The Ten Commandments
20:15-18 [Narrative] - Bnei Yisrael's fear of God's revelation
21:19-23:33 [Mitzvot] - Additional mitzvot ('ha-mishpatim')
24:1-11 [Narrative] - The ceremonial covenant
(better known as 'brit na'aseh ve-nishma')

Note that Bnei Yisrael's declaration of 'na'aseh ve-nishma' takes place during the ceremonial covenant recorded at the end of Parshat Mishpatim (see 24:7). In Parshat Yitro, when Bnei Yisrael accept God's proposition to keep His Torah, the people reply only with 'na'aseh' (see 19:8).

If we would follow the simple order of these parshiot (see above table), we would have to conclude that the 'na'aseh ve-nishma' ceremony took place **after** Matan Torah. Nevertheless, Rashi [and most likely your first Chumash teacher] changes the order of the 'parshiot' and claims that this ceremony actually took place **before** Matan Torah. Why?

Rashi ('ein mukdam u-me'uchar') anchors his interpretation in the numerous similarities between chapter 19 and chapter 24. Therefore, he combines these two narratives together. [However, one must still explain the reason why they are presented separately.]

Ramban ('yesh mukdam u-me'uchar') prefers to accept the chronological order of the 'parshiot' as they are presented in Chumash, and explains that this ceremony takes place after Matan Torah.

This dispute causes Rashi and Ramban to explain the details of chapter 24 quite differently. For example, during that ceremony, recall how Moshe reads the 'sefer ha-brit' in public (see 24:7).

According to Rashi, 'sefer ha-brit' cannot refer to any of the mitzvot recorded in Yitro or Mishpatim, as they had not been given yet - therefore Rashi explains that it refers to all of Chumash from Breishit until Matan Torah!

According to Ramban, 'sefer ha-brit' refers to the Ten Commandments. This topic will be discussed in greater detail in next week's shiur on Parshat Mishpatim.

In this week's regular Parsha shiur (sent out yesterday), we discuss in greater detail the events that transpire in chapter 19.