

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) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of all our hostages from Gaza and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

I am pleased to be able to post again after three weeks of constant pain from an infection that forced us to cancel our travel plans and required multiple interventions to eliminate.

Yitro contains two main events central to the story of our people. Chapter 18 focuses on Moshe's father-in-law Yitro, who hears of the miracles that Hashem performs for B'Nai Yisrael. The word reaches him in Midian, far from Egypt or B'Nai Yisrael (who are in the Midbar between Egypt and Canaan). Chapter 19 is the story of the Revelation at Har Sinai, the intense experience when Hashem's presence comes to the mountain and is too much for B'Nai Yisrael to experience in person (so they ask Moshe to listen and tell them everything). Rather than focus on either of the two "big" stories, both of which I have discussed in previous years, I decided to observe some connections in the parsha with events elsewhere in the Torah.

How do B'Nai Yisrael end up in Egypt for such an extended period of time? During an early famine, Avram and Sarai go to Egypt. Avram tells Sarai to pose as his sister, not his wife, for fear that the Egyptians would kill him to take her as a wife (Bereishis 12). God protects them, and Paro tells them to leave. He also gives Avram and Sarai Hagar as a servant. Hagar – whose name means "the foreigner" – has a difficult relationship with Sarai, who later (renamed Sarah) sends Hagar and Ishmael away because he is a bad influence on Yitzhak. Sarah's problems with Hagar return after the Revelation as the mitzvah to be kind to strangers and the less advantaged members of society – a theme that appears throughout the Torah and Navi.

One of the themes in Sefer Shemot is that God brings the plagues to Egypt as part of an educational campaign – so B'Nai Yisrael, Paro, the Egyptians, and the world will know that "Ani Hashem." God is the supreme power in the world and stronger than all the pagan gods combined. Hashem gives Moshe three signs as a taste of His power: turning his stake into a snake and back again; turning his arm into tzaraat and back again; and turning water into blood (ch. 4). The campaign of plagues is to demonstrate to B'Nai Yisrael (6:7) and the Egyptians (7:5) that "Ani Hashem." When God destroys the Egyptian army and weapons at the Sea of Reeds, the message is immediately clear to B'Nai Yisrael and the Egyptians that Hashem is more powerful than the combined gods of Egypt and the most powerful army of the time.

Despite the primitive methods of communication and travel of the time, word of Hashem's power reaches as far as Midian, where Yitro learns of God's power and his defeat of the Egyptian army. Yitro then brings Moshe's wife and sons to meet B'Nai Yisrael to reunite with Moshe. Moshe tells his father-in-law all that Hashem has done for B'Nai Yisrael, and Yitro is even more impressed – enough that he prepares a huge feast in honor of Hashem (18:9-12). What did Moshe tell Yitro

that topped the story of Hashem defeating the entire Egyptian army? Moshe explains that God performed these miracles because of His love for B'Nai Yisrael. Yitro and the Egyptians already understood the concept of an all powerful God of war. What was new was the concept and proof of a God who loved and cared for every single Jew. A God who wanted a close relationship with every person and cared for the welfare of every person was a completely new concept, even for Paro (who knew all 70 pagan gods) and Yitro (a priest for Paro and Midian). The concept of a Deity who looks for a close, personal relationship with each individual, which goes back to Adam and Gan Eden, is central to Judaism.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander focuses on a related concept. Moshe and Yeshayahu both have speech imperfections and wonder how they can fulfill their roles as spokesmen for Hashem. God's response is that He provides His messengers with the means to reach their targets. He purifies Yeshayahu and has Moshe spend three days purifying himself and B'Nai Yisrael to make them ready for His messages. Our task for today is to prepare ourselves, to be ready to listen to Hashem's messages, to work on our relations with Hashem (prayer and mitzvot), and to be a part of the spiritual renewal of our people now that all our hostages are back from Gaza.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, visited Israel as often as possible. His parents and sister moved to Israel, and Hannah and I visited them on each of our trips. Listening to Rabbi Cahan reinforced the importance of Israel to every Jew, the presence of God watching over the land and people, and the significance of Israel in our lives anywhere on the planet. From Avraham Avinu to the present, all Jews must open our eyes to see how God continues to bless us and preserve the land that He promised to our ancestors to keep for our people. We must remember to care for those of our people less fortunate than we are and to teach our children and grandchildren the messages of Moshe, Yeshayahu, Micah, and our other prophets. Let us make this world a better place for ourselves and those who come after us.

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.

Please daven for a Refuah Shleimah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezl Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; 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; Rena Michal bat Sara, Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, 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.

Haftarat Parshat Yitro: Crafting a Covenant for the Imperfect

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander *

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Note from Ohr Torah Stone: *The remains of Ran Gvili, the last Israeli hostage from the Hamas attacks on October 7, are finally home. His return ended 844 days of painful uncertainty for the Gvili family - and for all of Am Yisrael.*

From the moment Ran's remains were found, we have seen a surge of faith and spiritual expression on public display throughout Israel. IDF soldiers broke into song, shouting "Ani Ma'amin" ("I believe with perfect faith"). Southern Command Chief Maj. Gen. Yaniv Asor quoted Parshat Beshalach's command to return the bones of Yosef to the Land of Israel. And IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir recited the Shehechyanu blessing, honoring the end of the mission to bring every hostage home.

]Ian and Bernice Charif of Sydney, Australia dedicate the OTS Devrei Torah this week in honor of their granddaughter Ellie Yona Charif's sixth birthday.[Rabbi Brander's words follow:

In both the parsha and haftarah, revelation forces its recipients to confront their humanity and imperfection. In our parsha, God instructs Moshe: *"Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow; let them wash their clothes and be ready for the third day, for on that third day the Lord will descend on Mount Sinai before all the peoples' eyes"*)Exodus 19:10–11(. Encountering God requires preparation. When Yeshayahu experiences his prophetic vision, his response is deeply personal: *"I am condemned, for my mouth has been defiled, one man among a people with their mouths defiled, and my eyes see the King, the Lord of Hosts"*)Isaiah 6:5(. God responds not by rejecting him, but by purifying him: *"One of the Seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a coal, taken with tongs from the altar top. With this he touched my lips and said, 'When this has touched your lips, your iniquity is gone, and all your sin forgiven'"*)vv. 6–7(.

We learn from these encounters that the divine-human relationship is not built despite human imperfection, but through an honest acknowledgement of it. God does not demand perfection as a precondition for connection; rather, He recognizes these challenges and provides us with the tools to work through them. What's more, only a person like Yeshayahu who understands his own limitations can successfully convey God's message to the people. Yeshayahu's concern about his defiled mouth reminds us of Moshe's famous concern that he was *"not a man of words"*)Exodus 4:10(. In both cases, God does not erase the limitation, but works through it, empowering the messenger to fulfill his mission despite his perceived inadequacy.

It is made clear to Yeshayahu from the outset that the people of Israel will themselves have to overcome significant challenges to be able to hear the prophet's message. *"Go – tell this people: Hear, you shall hear but understand it not, see it all but know it not"*)Isaiah 6:9(. The challenge, then, is not only prophetic clarity, but human receptivity. For Yeshayahu, and for us today, the task is to find concrete avenues and methods through which we can meaningfully engage and build a relationship with God. The relationship begins from the starting point of our humanity. This is why the mitzvot, which were first given at Sinai, are designed for human beings with human weaknesses and opportunities, and not for angels.

This idea is illustrated powerfully in a well-known Talmudic story)Shabbat 88–89(in which Moshe is commanded to defend why the Torah should be given to Israel, and when the angels demand that it be reserved for them. Moshe points out that the Torah declares *"I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt."* *"Did you go down to Egypt?"* he asks the angels. *"Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should you possess the Torah?"*

The Torah, Moshe argues, is meant to guide human life, moral conduct, and the challenges of existence on earth. Our rendezvous with God, through Torah and mitzvot, is meant for fallible people, offering a path by which we draw closer to God, and He to us.

Interestingly, within the kabbalistic tradition, mitzvot are sometimes called *"suggestions"*)וּמִצְוֹת(, not because they are optional, but because they are practical strategies for connection with God. This idea is expressed eloquently by Rabbi Tzadok of Lublin)Dover Tzekek p. 40(when he explains that the Jewish people heard the first two commandments firsthand from God: *"I am your God"* and *"You shall have no other gods."* According to Kabbalistic tradition, these two statements actually contain within them the spiritual kernel of all commandments, as they refer to establishing a singular and exclusive bond with God. Thus, the remaining 611 laws are essentially practical suggestions and pathways through which we can live out that bond in our everyday lives.

A truly honest assessment of our relationship with God therefore requires asking ourselves difficult questions: Are we committed to seeking God's presence in our lives? Do the mitzvot still speak to us, or has our observance become perfunctory and robotic? Are we willing to invest the effort in deepening our relationship with God?

This is the enduring message that is given to the prophet Yeshayahu: you, the prophet, and they, the people, are human. Human relationships are complex and dynamic, and they require constant work and investment. That is precisely what makes the covenant between God and the Jewish people so precious. It is sanctified and purified not by perfection, but by the efforts both parties invest in it. And it is only through that sustained effort that true closeness can be achieved.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Ohr Torah Stone is 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@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. **Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.**

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-yitro-rabbi-brander-5786/>

Yisro: The Sweet Taste of Victory

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5768

And now if you will heed My voice and you will keep My covenant – you will be to Me a treasure from amongst all the nations for the earth is Mine. (Shemos 19:5)

And now: If now you will accept upon yourselves, it will be sweet for you from here and further, because all beginnings are difficult. (Rashi)

Prior to the event of the giving of the Torah, the Jewish Nation was strongly encouraged to be in a ready and accepting mode. Like a strong sales pitch, they were pressed to commit now and guaranteed that later everything would be great. What is it that creates the urgency and the need for such a pressured approach? What does Rashi mean when he says, “*all beginnings are difficult*”? Which “*beginnings*” is he talking about?

At the end of a Talmud class in Queens, we were just winding down from the learning and feeling good, when one of the fellows said *something that sparked a lively discussion*. He said, “Rabbi, I hate getting up in the morning to go to Davening!” I think he thought he was going to shock me with his rugged admission. Some of the other fellows started to stir in defense of prayer but I stayed still, because I agreed with him. I told him that I also hate to get up in the morning to go to Davening. “*Who likes to go out from under warm covers to put on black boxes when the body is crying out for a little more slumber?*”

Napoleon is reputed to have said, “*When I'm awake I'm Napoleon but when I'm asleep I'm a horse!*” The most powerfully motivated man on the planet is conflicted at that moment it can be difficult for anybody. However, when already awake and in the midst of Davening almost nothing in the world feels as good. It also feels great to have Davened. Similarly, those who exercise formally may find it painfully difficult to get started each time but what gets one going sometimes is the feeling of accomplishment, the high that follows when the hard workout is done.

There's a story about a Rebbe and his son that were breaking a hole through an icy lake in order to immerse themselves for purity sake. The son entered the freezing waters first. As he braced himself for the entry cries of anguish could already be heard which grew in to shouts of biting pain. “Ouch!” When he exited the frigid lake he let loose an expression of relief, “AHHHHHH!”

His wise father who was yet to follow told him, “*My son, you should always remember that that's how it is with Mitzvos! They start out “Ouch! Ouch!” and end up “Ooooooh Ahhhhhhhh!” Aveiros – sins, on the other hand, usually start out “Ooooooooooooooh! Ahhhhhhhh!, but end up with the feeling “Ouch! Ouch!”*

Which “beginnings” are difficult? Rashi tells us straight, “All beginnings are difficult.” At the beginning of each day and sometime hundreds of times a day there are new little beginnings that, in order to overcome that initial pinch of “ouch” require thinking about the “Oooooo! Ahhhhhhh!” – that follows each minor accomplishment. It may yet become an acquired taste but that takes work and imagination. Once the great weight of inertia is overcome, anticipated is the sweet taste of victory.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-yisro/>

How Covenant Frames Obligations

By Rabbi Dov Linzer

Rosh HaYeshiva and President, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2012

After crossing the Red Sea, seeing the drowning of the Egyptians, experiencing the first hardships of the desert, and receiving the quail and the manna from God, the Children of Israel have finally arrived at their first destination, Mt. Sinai. While the Land of Israel still awaits, their initial demand to leave Egypt was to worship God, and that worship takes place here, in the desert, at the foot of Har Sinai: “When you take this people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.” (Shemot 3:12).

The Giving of the Torah at Har Sinai was an event of giluy Shekina, of theophany, of a direct revelation of the Divine. God – speaking metaphorically – descended from heaven and came down to earth: “For on the third day, God will descend – in the sight of the entire people – onto Har Sinai” (19:11). Of course, some distance between the Divine and the human, between the transcendent and the physical, remained. As the Gemara in Sukkah puts it: “The Shekina never descended to earth lower than 10 handbreadths” (Sukkah 5a). The gap between the Divine and the human could never be fully bridged, direct encounter was not possible, but this was the closest it would ever get. The revelation of the Divine on Har Sinai was an event never to be repeated. The people would never encounter God again as they had on that day.

This, then, would seem to be the worship that they were heading towards: an intense encounter with the Divine, followed – as we read at the end of Parshat Mishpatim – with the offering of sacrifices. But was this really the point? If it were all about the Divine-human encounter, then why did it take the form of the declaration of the Ten Commandments? In fact, in God’s preparing Moshe for this event, the theophany is not the focus, mitzvot are: “Now, if you will listen well to My voice and observe all My commandments, then shall be to Me a treasured nation... And the entire people responded as one, and they said, ‘Everything that God has said we will do.’” (19:5, 8). The primary purpose of coming to Har Sinai is not to encounter God, but to receive the Torah. The theophany was necessary so that “the people may listen when I speak to you (Moshe), and so that they will have faith in you forever.” (19:9). God revealed Himself so that we would know that it was God who had issued the commandments, that we would feel their binding force, that we would know that we were obligated and act on that knowledge. It was so that we would be and know that we were mitzuvah, commanded.

Perhaps it is something more than that. To just do the mitzvot is not the entire goal. The Ten Commandments starts with a theological declaration: “I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt from the house of bondage.” (20:2). The mitzvot flow from that first statement, and flow in a particular way. God is not described here as the God who created Heaven and Earth. Such a God can command, and we will be bound, but there will be no intimate connection. To the degree that there would be any relationship, it would be on of monarch and subject. In such a case, our observance of the mitzvot will be framed as obligation and nothing more – we do as we have been told.

Not so regarding the God who took us out of Egypt. Having been redeemed by God, we entered into a special relationship with God, we became God’s people. When this God commands us, we are bound not only because we are commanded, but also because of our relationship, and it is the performance of the mitzvot that express and sustain that relationship.

When a husband does the dishes or takes out the garbage, even unasked, he is doing this not because he is obligated or commanded, but because such actions are an expression of his relationship to his wife, and such acts nurture and sustain the relationship.

We observe the mitzvot because we were commanded, but not just because we were commanded. We also observe them because they connect us to God. The mitzvot are empty when there is no connection, but neither are they just means to an end. The goal is not the connection, and we do not keep the mitzvot in order that we may have a relationship with God. Rather, the mitzvot – the way we live every moment of our lives – is the essence of the relationship itself.

There is a problem if we overly focus on the experiential dimension – the emotional, psychological or religious intensity that such connection can bring. If this is our focus, we will always be trying to recapture the same feeling as the “*first time*,” and it will reduce our relationship to that feeling, that experience. And is this truly what the relationship is about? This feeling? Isn’t about how we act, how we live our lives? A hyper-focus on the experiential can make us lose sight of the totality of the relationship. It can pervert it, narrowing its meaning; it can turn the emotional or religious experience into a thing of ultimate meaning, into idolatry.

It is thus that immediately after receiving the Torah and experiencing the theophany that the Children of Israel are not commanded to build the Tabernacle. That structure is a structure which will be – as Ramban describes it – a portable Mount Sinai; it is a structure that will allow us to recapture, even if only slightly, the Sinaitic encounter. But the command for that structure will come later. The first response to the Divine-human encounter is not to recreate it, but to avoid its potential pitfalls:

God said to Moshe, so shall you say to the Children of Israel: You have seen that I have spoken to you from the heaven. You shall not make [representations of] Me. Gods of gold and gods of silver you shall not make for yourselves. (20:19-20).

Do not focus on recapturing that encounter, God is saying. Do not try to overly concretize that experience. If you do, it will become an idol. In your attempt to capture this ephemeral thing, you will turn Me into something lesser than who I am. We will continue to have encounters, You and I, says God, but they will not be like the first time. And these encounters will not require a specific place or a specific structure: “... *In every place where I will call My name, I will come to you and bless you*” (20:22).

Yes, God is saying, our relationship is of critical importance, and it must and will continue, but in ways that transcend this location, this experience. It must be a relationship that is the very warp and woof of your life. And thus, parshat Yitro is not followed by parshat Terumah, the parsha of the Mishkan, but by parshat Mishpatim, the parsha of the laws. This is how our relationship with God is lived.

Tellingly, parshat Mishpatim ends with the Children of Israel entering into a brit, a covenant with God, that is the commitment to these laws. To do the laws with no relationship to God reduces them to hollow observance. One is doing one’s obligation, but no more, and the context of brit is completely forgotten. But to pursue the relationship at its experiential level with disregard for the laws is to misunderstand the very nature of the relationship. Our relationship with God means nothing, or at least very little, when it does not translate into action. Only when we follow Yitro with Mishpatim, do we live a life in which our relationship with God becomes real, where our actions are its very expression and its sustenance. And only when we Yitro precedes Mishpatim do we live a life in which our observance is no longer mechanical, but is part of a brit, part of a true, enduring and covenantal relationship.

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

Nishmat haTorah: Parashat Yitro

By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *

The central event of this week's Torah portion, Yitro, is the story of Mattan Torah (the Revelation at Sinai). However, as the Children of Israel prepare to accept the Torah and enter a covenantal relationship with God, their journey is interrupted by something unexpected: the sudden appearance of Yitro, an outsider who is not a member of the tribe. Yitro's arrival makes a significant impression on the community. His son-in-law, Moses, leaves the camp to greet and welcome him into the community. Moses then prepares a feast to celebrate his arrival. It appears Yitro is not only welcomed, but he is given a prominent role in shaping the community.

When Yitro observes Moses' overwhelming judicial responsibilities, he devises a plan which completely overhauls the Jews' communal structure. He instructs Moses to delegate some of his tasks to others, thereby helping him move from a centralized mode of leadership towards a more egalitarian model. Yitro the outsider becomes Yitro the insider.

After we are given much detail about Yitro's integration into the community, the Torah returns to its original trajectory: the narrative of Mattan Torah.

On the surface, the interjection of Yitro's arrival into the story seems disruptive and distracting. One wonders, why did the Torah find it important to preface the Mattan Torah narrative with the story of Yitro, a stranger from a foreign nation?

The Sefat Emet of Gur, Rav Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter z"l, teaches that Yitro's arrival just before Mattan Torah is not incidental; rather, it is part of a deliberate, expansive strategy. He writes:

[Hebrew text omitted; translation follows]:

For the Holy One, blessed be He, chose the Children of Israel as His chosen people [by giving the Torah]. One might have concluded that as a result, the nations of the world were pushed away. But, in truth, the very opposite is the case: this is a profound and audacious strategy of the Creator, blessed be He, to draw all the nations close to Him through the Children of Israel. And the Children of Israel understand this, and desire to bring all of creation close to Him... When Yitro came they wholeheartedly brought him close. ...He (God) conferred this strength upon the Children of Israel — that the power would be in their hands through the might of the Torah which He gave them so that they may fulfill their mission... since they are His emissaries to bring all created beings close to Him, blessed be He.

The Sefat Emet of Gur reads the placement of the Yitro narrative as a test of the people's character before Mattan Torah. The fact that the Jews were chosen to receive the Torah could have led them to cultivate a sense of particularism and superiority. To counteract that tendency, the Torah chose to preface the story of Mattan Torah with the tale of Yitro, introducing it as a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. By doing so, the Torah underscores the election of the Jews is a means to a universal end: to bring the light of Torah to all of creation through wholeheartedly embracing the outsider, recognizing their value, and learning from their perspective.

The Sefat Emet's reading challenges us to grasp the purpose of particularism: not as a withdrawal from the world, but as a specific assignment to bring all of creation closer to God.

This vision of universalism transcends mere social ethics, grounding itself instead in the profound Chassidic principle of the Divine Spark (nitzotz Elokai). This principle teaches that a sacred, essential flicker of God's presence — an imprint of the Divine — permeates every single created being. This means that every human being, regardless of their background, belief, or origin, is infused with a shared, essential holiness. The difference between an insider and an outsider is therefore not one of value, but of circumstance: everyone possesses this essential divinity, even if they express it differently.

It is this radical, inherent spiritual egalitarianism that necessitates a robust embrace of the outsider. Welcoming the stranger is not merely an act of kindness; it is the recognition and affirmation of God's presence in the world. The ultimate lesson of Yitro, as illuminated by the Sefat Emet, is that the power of the Torah is not intended to be used for separation, but to provide the spiritual capacity to recognize the universal presence of God.

The Torah, by emphatically stressing the contributions of an outsider as the preamble to Mattan Torah, thus presents Israel's particular election as the means for realizing this universal spiritual vision. Israel's triumphant welcome of Yitro, and the Jews' readiness to receive the wisdom of an outsider, is the ultimate preparation for Mattan Torah, a demonstration that they recognize the essential, shared divinity in all humanity.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Chair of the Talmud Department and the Director of the Lindenbaum Center for Halakhic Studies, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, NY

Hugs and Kisses: Thoughts for Parashat Yitro

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

"And Yitro came with his [Moses's] sons and his wife unto Moses into the wilderness where he was encamped at the mount of God; and he said to Moses: I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her. And Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him, and they asked each other of their welfare, and they came into the tent")Shemot 18:5-7(.

Moses had left his family for an extended time to go to Egypt to liberate the Israelite slaves. Upon his return, his father-in-law, together with Moses's wife and sons, came to greet him. The Torah's report of the reunion is jarring. Moses greeted Yitro, bowed and kissed him...but there is no mention of Moses greeting or kissing his wife and sons. The men went off to a feast and Moses's wife and sons vanish from the scene.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167, Spain), in his Torah commentary, notes that Moses was simply following the usual protocol of those times. When respected high-ranking leaders met, they did not get wives and children involved.

Others have suggested that Moses had a strained relationship with his wife and sons. The Torah specifically describes Gershom and Eliezer as her two sons, rather than his two sons.

Yet others have opined that Moses must have had a warm reunion with wife and sons but that public demonstrations of affection are generally omitted in the Torah. The narrative is interested in Moses's relationship with Yitro, not with Moses's personal life with his family.

One line of Midrashic interpretation points in a different direction. Moses was so busy leading the Israelites that he had little time to devote to his family. His public responsibilities were overwhelming. His spiritual relationship with God was lofty and all-consuming, leaving him little emotional strength to cope with everyday family life. It must have been very difficult to have been Moses's wife or children.

In the book of Judges, we are told of a battle by the tribe of Dan in which they conquered a town in the upper Galilee and installed a cult with an idol to be led by "*Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Menashe, and his descendants*")Judges 18:30(. The name Menashe is spelled in the text with the letter Nun above the line. Without the Nun, the name Menashe is Moshe i.e. Moses. It has been suggested that in fact this idolatrous leader Menashe was a grandson of Moshe/Moses, but that the Nun was added to shield Moses's good name from that of his idolatrous grandson.

Is it shocking to imagine that Moses's own grandson could have been an idolater, and there is no actual proof that this was the case. But the Midrash is pointing to a larger issue: if parents do not give enough time and devotion to their children and grandchildren, negative results may ensue. If even Moses, the greatest of all prophets and teachers, failed in his family responsibilities, then any of us could face the same consequences.

It has been said that no one on their death bed says they wished they would have spent more time at the office! People tend to regret that they devoted so much time and energy to their work and social obligations that they shortchanged their own families. We need to put our lives in perspective: our responsibilities to our families must be prioritized. Even if our other responsibilities are very important, we must always make as much quality time as possible for our loved ones.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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The Priests that God Seeks

By Rabbi Uzi Weingarten *

An interesting aspect of the Jethro account is where it appears in the Torah. Already in the Talmud, some sages claim that although the story appears here, it actually occurs after the giving of the Ten Commandments.

It is quite acceptable in the Jewish tradition to posit that the Torah's accounts are not sequential. The Talmud teaches that "*there is no 'earlier' and 'later' in the Torah*" (Pesachim 6b). Applied here, even though the story of Jethro appears before the Ten Commandments, it could have happened later. The question we do need to ask is: why does this section appear here if it actually occurred later?

It seems to me that this story, in addition to everything else that it teaches, serves as an introduction to the Ten Commandments and the other laws and statutes that follow, and here is why. Jethro is introduced as "*the Priest of Midian*" (18:1). In the next chapter, God calls the Israelites to be "*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (19:6). But what kind of priests are we called to be?

Our ancestors, like much of the ancient Near East, were heavily involved in animal sacrifices, believing that this was the preferred form of worship. Upon hearing the call to be "*a kingdom of priests*," they may have imagined that they would be officiating at the altar. Some of them may have even been delighted at this prospect.

God, however, has other ideas. One of the great innovations of the Hebrew Prophets is that animal sacrifices are NOT the worship that God prefers. This polemic against animal sacrifices, and certainly against their centrality in worship, is a core theme of the Prophets.

To quote one of the better-known of these teachings:

*Shall I come before]God[with burnt offerings, with year-old calves?...
He has told you what is good
and what does God ask of you:
ONLY
To do what is just and to love kindness,*

and to walk humbly with your God”)Micah 6:6, 8(.

In this week’s portion, one way the Torah makes this point is by not including animal sacrifices in the Ten Commandments. They are mentioned only in the postscript)20:21-23(. The Decalogue itself – “*God’s covenant*”)Deut. 4:13(– does not contain a word about sacrifices. This was quite a revolution.

Another way our portion focuses people on the essence of serving God is by redefining the meaning of ‘*priest.*’ The Torah does this by placing the account of Jethro, priest of Midian, immediately before the call to become “*a kingdom of priests,*” even though chronologically it might have happened later. That is because Jethro models how a priest ideally behaves.

Jethro sees people waiting long hours to get to Moses’s court. Since “*justice delayed is justice denied,*” Jethro intervenes to correct the situation. He sees people in distress — litigants waiting in line all day, Moses shouldering an unbearable load — and acts to alleviate their suffering. Jethro is practicing Micah’s first two principles, “*to do what is just and to love kindness.*”

When he offers advice, Jethro does so with wisdom and humility. Even though he knew that there was only one solution, namely, for Moses to delegate, Jethro listens first, asking Moses why he is doing things in this way, and only then offering his ideas. And even then, Jethro advises rather than commands. He does not insist on Moses taking his advice, but rather tells him to consult with God)See Exodus 18:19 and Rashi there; compare this to Rebecca ‘*commanding*’ Jacob, Genesis 27:8(. This is Jethro practicing Micah’s third principle, “*to walk humbly with your God.*”

By placing the account of Jethro’s visit immediately before the invitation to be “*a nation of priests,*” the Torah illustrates the kind of priests that God calls us to be: people who act with wisdom, justice, compassion and humility. And this kind of priesthood does not require an altar in Jerusalem. We can practice it at any time and in any place.

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Yisro's Vision for Mesorah

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

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

Until Yisro spoke, Moshe was personally teaching Torah to everyone and ruling on their questions. Yisro’s suggestion was a simple one. “*With Hashem’s permission,*” he began, “*Appoint responsible leaders and delegate to them responsibility to teach and to answer questions.*” He even identified the qualities that these leaders would need to have, including, “*People who fear Hashem; people of truth.*” (Shimos 18:19-22)

What Yisro suggested was what we now know as the Mesorah (tradition). Yisro said, just as I was not there at Yetzias Mitzrayim (the Exodus) but I know exactly what happened because I heard it from you and I trust you, so it will be for generations. Generations from now, descendants who were not present at Yetzias Mitzrayim or Matan Torah will know well what happened because of tradition that we now set in motion. People will trust those who Moshe appoints to guide them accurately regarding the Law, and generations will trust the teachings in the chain of the Mesorah because of the accurate transmission of teacher to student all the way back to Moshe at Sinai.

What is fascinating is that Yisro, who first suggested implementing Mesorah, didn't merely suggest that brilliant people be chosen for the task. Yisro understood that a conduit of Torah was more than being tasked to transmit information. Yisro's wish-list of qualifications called for good people, "*People who fear Hashem; people of truth.*" As we similarly state in the Bracha of the Haftora each Shabbos, "*Hashem chose good prophets,*" meaning that they were good people. Merely being brilliant and having textual knowledge isn't enough.

When I was in high school, Rabbi Wein zt'l recounted how he once met with a non-Jewish young man who wanted to convert. In preparation for the meeting, the young man had studied the entire Kitzur Shulchan Aruch. Rabbi Wein wasn't impressed. He explained to us that it was possible for a person to know the entire text of Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, "*Better than I do,*" but still not have a clue of what it means to be a Jew. Certainly, Yisro knew that those appointed would have to be very smart; the BOK (Body of Knowledge) of Torah is enormous. **But what stood out in the qualifications he suggested were personal character and personal experience. To be a conduit of Torah a person needs to be personally transformed by Torah.** [emphasis added]

People sometimes make the mistake of thinking that a scholar is simply transmitting information. But in Torah and in ethics, so much more is expected. The person is expected to be an elevated person. As the Alter of Kelm explained (Chochma U'Mussar 11): When a person is a worthy recipient and transmitter of Torah, Hashem authorizes him to rule on issues and that ruling is binding. But when a smart person who is unworthy says things, it may sound interesting, but it is not Torah.

An entertaining contemporary example of this is AI. As people have become increasingly aware of the power of AI, I was jokingly asked if at some point AI could get semicha. The question was meant to be funny, but more than that it is a thought-provoking question. What exactly does it take to be a conduit of our Mesorah? Is it about being smart? Is it about sounding smart? **Yisro understood that only worthy human beings, faced with the challenges of life who have elevated their souls through those experiences, could be conduits of Torah.** Information and decision making, intelligent as they sound, are not Torah. Torah requires a lived experience, a moral struggle, and a divine relationship. Yisro recognized this as essential. Transmitting Torah is more than just transmitting information. Yisro's plan called for people who fear Hashem, people of truth. [emphasis added]

The task upon us is to be the best conduits we can be for our families and our generation. It is our challenges, triumphs, and even failures, that make our journey with Torah so very special.

For Family Discussion:

Transmitting ethics and values to others is so much more than sharing information. Are there Torah observances or values that you want to transmit and share with your family? What are you doing or want to do to make that happen?

Wishing you 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. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Parshas Yisro – Redefining Our Own Fate

By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2022

Rash”i quotes an astounding Medrash relating a conversation between Moshe and G-d prior to the giving of the Torah. After our ancestors stated their readiness to accept the Torah, Hashem explains to Moshe how the Torah would be given. Hashem tells Moshe, *“Behold, I will come to you in the thickness of cloud in order that the nation will hear when I speak with you and they will also believe in you forever.”* The Torah then tells us that Moshe told Hashem the nation’s words, but does not tell us what those words are.)Shemos 19:9(

Rash”i quotes a Mechilta which explains that Moshe was responding to G-d’s plan for the giving of the Torah. As Rash”i says, *“I heard an answer from them regarding this. They want to hear from You -- it is not the same to hear from a messenger as it is to hear from the king. ‘Our desire is to see our King.’”* Moshe was telling Hashem that the Jewish people would not be happy to listen and watch as G-d gave Moshe the Torah to teach them. They wanted to receive the Torah directly from Hashem. They desired a higher level of closeness with their King and a clearer understanding of their responsibility to Him.

In the next verse, Hashem tells Moshe to go to the nation and sanctify them over the next days and to wash their clothing. Rash”i explains that this command was in response to Moshe. Hashem was accepting our desire and telling Moshe that if G-d would be speaking to the entire nation then they would need to prepare themselves for that experience. Hashem was accepting our desire and changing the arrangement He had planned for the giving of the Torah! These instructions were for the Torah to be given the way we wanted!

This concept is astounding and hard to fully understand. The giving of the Torah was a foundational event in the very existence of the world. Our Rabbis teach us that when Hashem created the world, He made a condition for all of creation – He would only maintain and continue the world if we would accept the Torah.)See Rash”i Berieshis 1:31(The acceptance of the Torah was establishing an eternal relationship between G-d and His beloved nation. Certainly, the appropriate procedure and arrangement for the giving of the Torah was predetermined and defined. Yet, when Moshe expressed that we wanted something different, G-d was willing to incorporate our desires and adjust the plans for what may have been the most pivotal moment in the history of the world.

When we consider the details of our request, it is even more difficult to understand. The reason we wanted to hear the Torah directly from Hashem was because one has a different level of commitment when hearing instructions directly from the King. Seeing the King and hearing His direct instructions creates a deeper sense of connection and a deeper sense of responsibility to fulfill His commands. Nonetheless, it appears that in G-d’s infinite wisdom, He determined that it was not necessary to include this added measure of connection to Him and commitment to Torah and mitzvos in the giving of the Torah. G-d had determined that He would not be allotting us with that added measure of spirituality. Yet, when Moshe explained that we wanted it, G-d changed our destiny and gave us that level of connection and closeness. In response to our desire, G-d gave us more than He had intended for us.

We sometimes think that our spiritual lot in life is predetermined. Some people are destined to be great scholars, some have great character traits, some are community builders. But if I was not born that way, then my life was not intended for spiritual greatness. This Medrash gives us an insight into a very different reality. If we truly wish for greater opportunities, G-d will change our destiny and increase our capacity. If we ask, G-d may even rearrange His plans for the giving of the Torah itself to help us.

* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

Yitro: The Ten Concepts: You and God By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

Concepts, not Commandments

The famous term “*Ten Commandments*” is a misnomer. In the three references in the Torah to what we call the Ten Commandments, one term is used: the Ten Concepts.

He [Moshe] wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Concepts)Ex. 34:28(

He told you of His covenant which he commanded you to follow, the Ten Concepts)Deut. 4:13(

He [God] wrote on the [second] tablets, as the first writing, the Ten Concepts)ibid. 10:4(

Those are concepts and not commandments because the first and the last items of the covenant cannot be commandments. The first is a statement:

I am YHWH, your God, who took you out of Egypt

The last one is a promise:

You will not covet... that which belongs to others.

Promise of Joy and Peace

The promise of the Ten Concepts is as follows:

Understand and cherish your personal relationship with God, who gave you freedom.

Do not adulterate or limit that relationship by making physical, limited images to represent God.

Do not abuse the relationship by claiming to speak in God’s name.

Cherish your relationships with your parents, and by extension, your family.

Allow yourself to enjoy the gift of Shabbat, together with the whole nation, thus acknowledging the importance of freedom.

Do not infringe upon others’ rights. Protect their life, their relationships, their possessions, and their right to fair trial.

Once you have accomplished that, you will be able to appreciate the basic gifts we all share as humans and to respect the rights of others. That, in turn, will guarantee that you will not covet what does not belong to you.

To achieve that state of mind is to have the greatest joy possible. As our sages have commented:

Who is truly wealthy? One who is happy with his lot.

Envy and jealousy are the causes of all strife and misery in the world, on a personal, national, and global level, so this promise of the Torah should not be taken lightly.

I have explained this interpretation in detail elsewhere. Here, I would like to focus on the first two concepts, starting with this question:

Why does God consider it so important that we recognize Him as God and that we do not worship idols to the extent that He would be jealous if we did?

Personal God

Let us look at the first concept:

I am YHWH, your God!]I[have brought you out of Egypt, of the house of bondage.

This statement, as is the rest of the covenant, is addressed to an individual and written in the singular. God speaks to the Israelites as a nation, yet He addresses each one of them individually. The covenant is about the importance and the uniqueness of the individual. It emphasizes the personal relationship each one of us has with God, a relationship which is a product of the way we perceive ourselves.

The idea of a personal God is a recurring motif in the bible. It is evident in the narratives of those who sought God or were chosen by him, but it emerges more powerfully in the stories of those who tried to hide from Him, even if only momentarily. They have discovered that the Image of God, embedded in humankind at creation, is a spiritual GPS chip which accompanies us wherever we go. Even when you try to drive God away, even when you run to the most remote corners of the world, you are not alone! YOU are there, and if you are there, God is there as well.

You Can Run

The first fugitive is Adam:

...Adam and his wife hid from God amongst the trees of the garden. God called out to Adam, saying, where are you? Adam said, I heard Your voice in the garden and I was filled with fear for I am naked, so I hid...)Gen. 3, 8-10(

Adam is hiding because he has lost something he held precious: his relationship with God. He feels that he has been stripped naked, that he lost what he had because of his error. God calls out to Adam to remind him that they can still talk, even if it is to accept responsibility for the wrongdoing. Adam, forefather of humanity, thus learns to reclaim his dignity and face his demons, empowered by the divine spark in him.

Another famous fugitive is Jonah. After Jonah is thrown to the sea and swallowed by a fish, he speaks of his failed attempt to run away from God and from himself:

I thought I have exiled myself from your sight, but I still gaze at Your sacred temple... when my soul withdraws into itself. I remember You, and my prayer comes to You, to Your sacred temple...)Jonah 2:5(

Jonah tried to exile himself, to drive himself away from the presence of God. He uses the same root which describes Adam's exile from the Garden of Eden – גרש. But he still gazes, as his soul withdraws into itself in the belly of the fish, at the sacred temple. He is the only one there, in the darkest, narrowest, most horrific prison, the belly of the fish at the bottom of the ocean, and yet there is someone in the room with him. It is Jonah himself. He is still connected to God and can still have a dialog with him. Eventually, he emerges from his living prison cell.

Running From God Towards God

The last biblical figure is David, who spent many years as a fugitive from King Saul, but who also reveals in Psalm 139)7-12(that he has contemplated running away from God:

How can I escape Your spirit? How can I avoid Your presence? If I rise to the heavens, You are there, I go down to the netherworld, I face You.]Even if[I soar on the wings of dawn, I dwell at the far end of the ocean, there also Your hand will guide me, Your right]hand[will hold me. I thought that darkness could cover me, that night could be my day, but darkness, for You, is not dark, the night shines as day, darkness is light.

Rabbi Shelomo ibn Gevirol put it succinctly in his Keter Malkhut)chapter 38(:

I run away from You to You!

You are Unique

Going back to the first of the Ten Concepts, we can say that God tells each individual that the Exodus has granted him the power to be unique and to develop his own relationship with God, without being subjugated to any other human being. This does not mean that one could do whatever he wants with disregard for others. That is why we have the other concepts. We tend to think of the second half of the Ten Concepts as the one protecting the rights of others, but that idea is there from the very beginning. The individual divinity of each person is a manifestation of the idea of the Image of God. As we appreciate the Image of God in us, we understand that all humans are created in the Image of God. Therefore, all humans must respect and protect each other.

You and God

That idea is also at the core of the prohibition against idolatry. God's "jealousy" does not stem from selfish considerations but rather from His concern for humanity. Paganism is a pretext for doing as you wish, including the greatest evils, in the name of religion. When there is a pantheon of competing and quarreling gods, one can always choose sides. In stories such as the Iliad, one god supports the Greeks while the other fights with the Trojans. Paganism also allows people to craft their gods in their own image and then ask these gods to guide them. Thus, they make themselves gods and invent religions to live and kill by. This system, which the Israelites found very hard to abandon, could lead to the destruction of humanity. God uses such harsh language here and throughout the bible, not because paganism is a threat to Him, but because it is a threat to humanity.

This is also the reason for the prohibition against making images. God is the Creator, He is omniscient and omnipresent, and our perception of Him changes constantly in accordance with our experience and stage in life. Similarly, us humans, created in His image, possess something of these qualities. Making a carved or molten image confines the Divine Image into limited physical object with clearly defined boundaries. By creating molten or carved images, we limit ourselves.

In the first two of the Ten concepts the Torah teaches us to appreciate freedom, explore our potential, and remember our commitment towards all humankind.

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 include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights)copyright(to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz *

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation **

This Tuesday, I flew down to Christchurch for a kosher audit, beginning the day at a local dairy factory. Between inspections, I visited the Canterbury Hebrew Congregation)CHC(, the oldest Jewish community in New Zealand. In my previous role, I often worked with smaller communities across Africa, so it was a privilege to connect with the local community here and see how the Jewish spirit thrives across the country.

Later, while visiting a honey processing plant, I met Yuri. He shared that his mother had fled Poland for Ukraine and was Jewish. When I explained that this meant he was also Jewish, we had a moving conversation about how he could reconnect with his heritage.

To top off the day, I met an Israeli backpacker at the airport. We spent our wait time discussing life in the diaspora and the beauty of returning to Israel.

It was a day of "milk and honey" in more ways than one, meeting Jews from completely different walks of life. I may not have planned these encounters, but Hashem clearly had a different itinerary. Just another day as a Jew in New Zealand!

In this week's Parsha, Yitro, we read about Moshe's father-in-law, who hears of the wonders Hashem performed for the Jewish people and makes his own journey to join them. Our sages teach that when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, the soul of every Jew - past, present, and future, was standing there together.

Just as Yitro was moved to reconnect with the Jewish people after hearing of their journey, my day in Christchurch felt like a modern echo of that Sinai moment. Whether it was the historic roots of the CHC, Yuri discovering his heritage at a honey plant, or an Israeli backpacker dreaming of home, these encounters reminded me that no matter how far a Jew may travel from Poland to Ukraine to New Zealand, our souls are eternally connected to that same "itinerary" established at Sinai. We are all part of one continuous story, wandering through our own "deserts" only to find each other and our shared heritage in the most unexpected places.

Bahavat Yisrael

Rabbi Netanel

* Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

]Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message for the congregation?]

** Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

Rav Kook Torah Yitro: Serving the Community

"Moses sat to judge the people. They stood around Moses from morning to evening.")Exod. 18:13(

From the account in the Torah, it would seem that Moses spent all his time judging the people. Yet it was clear to the Sages that this could not be the case.

Overworked Judges

The Talmud)Shabbat 10a(relates that two dedicated judges worked such long hours that they were overcome with fatigue.)It is unclear whether this was a physical weakness from overwork, or a psychological depression from time lost from Torah study.(When Rabbi Hiyya saw their exhaustion, he advised the two scholars to limit their hours in court:

"It says that Moses judged the people from morning to evening. But could it be that Moses sat and judged all day? When did he have time for Torah study?"

Rather, the Torah is teaching us that a judge who judges with complete fairness, even for a single hour, is considered to be God's partner in creating the world. For the Torah uses a similar phrase to describe Creation, 'It was evening and morning, one day')Gen. 1:5(."

Rav Hiyya's statement requires clarification. If judging is such a wonderful occupation — one becomes a partner with God! — then why not adjudicate all day long? And in what way is the work of a judge like creating the world?

Personal Well-Being vs. Public Service

Great individuals aspire to serve the community and help others to the best of their abilities. The two judges felt that they could best serve their community by bringing social justice and order through the framework of the judicial system. Therefore, they invested all of their time and energy in judging the people. For these scholars, any other activity would be a lesser form of divine service. However, their dedication to public service was so intense that it came at the expense of their own personal welfare, both physical and spiritual.

Rabbi Chiyya explained to the scholars that while their public service was truly a wonderful thing, it is not necessary to neglect all other aspects of life. If one only judges for a single hour, and spends the rest of his time improving his physical and spiritual well-being so that he can better serve in his public position, then his entire life is still directed towards his true goal. It is clear that personal growth will enhance one's community service. Better an hour of productive activity in a fresh, relaxed state of mind and body, than many hours of constant toil in a tired and frenzied state.

Two Parts of the Day

What is the connection between Moses' judging "*from morning to evening*" and the description of the first day of Creation, "*It was evening and morning, one day*"? The day is one unit, made up of two parts — daytime and night. The daytime is meant for activity and pursuing our goals, while the night is the time for rest and renewal. Together, daytime and night form a single unit, constituting a "day."

The balance of these two aspects — activity and renewal — is particularly appropriate for those who labor for the public good. The hours that we devote to physical and spiritual renewal help us in our public roles; they become an integral part of our higher aspiration to serve the community.

)*Gold from the Land of Israel* pp. 130-132. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. III, pp. 4-5.(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/YITRO60.htm>

Yitro: Justice or Peace? (5770, 5777)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former UK Chief Rabbi*

The sedra of Yitro, which contains the account of the greatest Divine revelation in history, at Mount Sinai, begins on a note that is human, all too human. Yitro, priest of Midian, has come to see how his son-in-law Moses and the people he leads are faring. It begins by telling us what Yitro heard)the details of the exodus and its attendant miracles(. It goes on to describe what Yitro saw, and this gave him cause for concern.

He saw Moses leading the people alone. The result was bad for Moses and bad for the people. This is what Yitro said:

"What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will wear yourselves

out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you advice, and may God be with you... Select capable men from all the people-men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain-and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and so too all these people will reach their place in peace."
Exodus 18:17-23

Moses must learn to delegate and share the burden of leadership. Interestingly, the sentence "*What you are doing is not good*)*lo tov*" is one of only two places in the Torah where the phrase "*not good*" occurs. The other)Genesis 2:18(is "*It is not good for man to be alone.*" We cannot lead alone; we cannot live alone. That is one of the axioms of biblical anthropology.

The Hebrew word for life, *chayim*, is in the plural as if to signify that life is essentially shared. Dean Inge once defined religion as "*what an individual does with his own solitude.*" That is not a Jewish thought. However, it was the great nineteenth century scholar the Netziv)R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin(who made an unexpected, even counter-intuitive observation on this passage. He begins by raising the following question. It is easy to understand how Yitro's advice helped Moses. The work was too much. He was becoming exhausted. He needed help. What is less easy to understand is his final comment: if, with God's permission, you delegate, "*so too all these people will reach their place in peace.*" The people were not exhausted; Moses was. How then would they gain by a system of delegation? Their case would still be heard – but not by Moses. How was this to their advantage?)Harchev Davar to Exodus 18:23(.

The Netziv begins by quoting the Talmud, Sanhedrin 6b. The passage is about what the Sages called *bitzua*, or what later become known as *pesharah*, compromise. This is a decision on the part of a judge in a civil case to seek a solution based on equity rather than strict application of the law. It is not wholly unlike mediation, in which the parties agree to a resolution that they both consider fair, regardless of whether or not it is based on statute or precedent. From a different perspective, it is a mode of conflict resolution in which both sides gain, rather than the pure administration of justice, in which one side wins, the other loses. The Talmud wants to know: is this good or bad? To be adopted or avoided? This is part of the debate:

Rabbi Eliezer, son of R. Jose the Galilean, said: it is forbidden to mediate. . . Instead, let the law pierce the mountain)*Ja saying similar to: "Let the chips fall where they may"*[. And so Moses' motto was: *Let the law pierce the mountain. Aaron, however, loved peace and pursued peace and made peace between people . . . R. Judah ben Korcha said: it is good to mediate, for it is written*)*Zechariah 8:16*(, "*Execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates.*" Surely where there is strict justice, there is no peace, and where there is peace, there is no strict justice! What then is the justice that coexists with peace? We must say: mediation.

The law follows R. Judah ben Korcha. It is permissible, even preferable, to mediate – with one proviso, that the judge does not yet know who is right and who is wrong. It is precisely this uncertainty at the early stages of a hearing that allows an equitable resolution to be favoured over a strictly legal one. If the judge has already reached a clear verdict, it would be a suppression of justice on his part to favour a compromise solution.

Ingeniously applying this principle to the Israelites in Moses' day, the Netziv points out that – as the Talmud says – Moses preferred strict justice to peace. He was not a man to compromise or mediate. In addition, as the greatest of the prophets, he knew almost instantly which of the parties before him was innocent and which guilty; who had right on his side and who did not. It was therefore impossible for him to mediate, since this is only permitted before the judge has reached a verdict, which in Moses' case was almost immediately.

Hence the Netziv's astonishing conclusion. By delegating the judicial function downward, Moses would bring ordinary

people – with no special prophetic or legal gifts – into the seats of judgment. Precisely because they lacked Moses' intuitive knowledge of law and justice, they were able to propose equitable solutions, and an equitable solution is one in which both sides feel they have been heard; both gain; both believe the result is fair. That, as the Talmud says above, is the only kind of justice that at the same time creates peace. That is why the delegation of judgment would not only help Moses avoid total exhaustion; it would also help “all these people” to “*reach their place in peace.*”

What a profound idea this is. Moses was the Ish ha-Elokim)Psalm 90:1(, the supreme man of God. Yet there was, the Netziv implies, one thing he could not do, which others – less great in every other respect – could achieve. They could bring peace between contending parties. They could create non-violent, non-coercive forms of conflict resolution. Not knowing the law with the depth that Moses did, not having his intuitive sense of truth, they had instead to exercise patience. They had to listen to both sides. They had to arrive at an equitable verdict that both parties could see as fair. A mediator has different gifts from a prophet, a liberator, a law-giver – more modest perhaps, but sometimes no less necessary.

It is not that one character type is to be preferred to another. No one – certainly not the Netziv – regarded Moses as anything less than the greatest leader and prophet Israel has ever had. It is, rather, that no one individual can embody all the virtues necessary to sustain a people. A priest is not a prophet)though a few, like Samuel and Ezekiel were both(. A king needs different virtues than a saint. A military leader is not)though in later life he can become(a man of peace.

What emerges at the end of the train of thought the Netziv sets in motion is the deep significance of the idea that we can neither live nor lead alone. Judaism is not so much a faith transacted in the privacy of the believer's soul. It is a social faith. It is about networks of relationship. It is about families, communities, and ultimately a nation, in which each of us, great or small, has a role to play. “*Despise no one and disdain nothing,*” said Ben Azzai)Avot 4:3(, “*for there is no one who does not have his hour, and nothing that does not have its place.*”

There was something ordinary individuals)heads of thousands, hundreds, tens(could achieve that even Moses in all his glory could not achieve. That is why a nation is greater than any individual, and why each of us has something to give.

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/yitro/justice-or-peace/> 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 Devar. Footnotes are not available for this Dvar Torah.

Do the 10 Commandments Forbid Kidnapping or Theft?

By Mordechai Rubin* © Chabad

The eighth of the Ten Commandments, “*Lo tignov,*” literally translates as “*do not steal.*”¹ Interestingly, both the Talmud and Midrash interpret it specifically as a prohibition against kidnapping. Why the insistence to read into it beyond a simple warning against theft?

1. It Is Due to the Context of Capital Cases

Rashi² cites the Talmud, which explains that this verse refers to the kidnapping of a person. This inference is based on one of the Thirteen Principles of Torah Interpretation, specifically the rule of “*deduction from context.*”³

“*You shall not steal,*” and it is with regard to one who abducts people that the verse is speaking. Do you say that the verse is speaking with regard to one who abducts people, or perhaps the verse is speaking only with regard to one who steals property? You say: Go out and learn from one of the thirteen hermeneutical principles: A matter derived from its context. With regard to what context are the adjacent prohibitions “*You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery*” in the verse speaking? They are speaking with regard to capital cases)nefashot(. Likewise here, the prohibition is speaking with

regard
to a capital case)nefashot(of abduction.⁴

As understood by Rashi, the term nefashot refers to capital cases, leading to the conclusion that the prohibition against stealing must also pertain to capital offenses. Since kidnapping is a capital offence and theft is not, the prohibition must refer to kidnapping.

2. It Is Due to the Context of Individual Interactions

Aruch LaNer points out, however, that it is not entirely precise to assert that the context proves this interpretation. The final two of the Ten Commandments — *“Do not provide false testimony”* and *“Do not covet”* — do not involve capital punishment. Typically, when using context to clarify meaning, we consider the entirety of the surrounding text, both what precedes and what follows the phrase in question. In this case, only the preceding passage relates to a capital case.⁵

He therefore proposes a rereading of the Talmud. In his view, the term nefashot)“souls”(used by the Talmud could be interpreted as referring to dealings with another individual.

According to Aruch LaNer, the context indicates that this prohibition refers to kidnapping because the surrounding prohibitions primarily concern direct interactions with another person, rather than just property. The two preceding commandments — *“Do not murder”* and *“Do not commit adultery”* — are explicit offenses against another individual. Likewise, the two commandments that follow — *“Do not covet”* and *“Do not bear false witness”* — also relate to direct personal impact.⁶

This contextual framework, applied through the Thirteen Principles of Torah Elucidation, informs us that *“Do not steal”* is also a prohibition against kidnapping, which directly involves another individual.⁷

3. It’s Really a Catch-All for All Types of Theft

Although it could be argued that according to the Talmud and Mechilta *“Do not steal”* refers solely to the act of kidnapping, most classical commentators believe that the prohibition also refers to monetary theft.⁸ This seems to be the understanding of the Zohar:

Come and see: The world was created with ten utterances. The giving of the Torah also consisted of ten utterances, which are the Ten Commandments.

It is written)Exodus 20:2(: *“I am the L rd your G d,”* and it is written in the account of Creation)Genesis 1:3(: *“Let there be light, and there was light.”*

The faith in the Holy One, blessed be He, is called light, as it is written)Psalms 27:1(: *“The L rd is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”* . . .

It is written: *“You shall not steal”*)Exodus 20:13(, and it is also written in the account of Creation: *“And G d said, behold, I have given you every seed-bearing plant”*)Genesis 1:29(.

What I have given to you and entrusted to you shall be yours, but do not steal what belongs to another.⁹

The Jerusalem Talmud also implies that it also refers to monetary theft.¹⁰

And the Seforno and Ibn Ezra even extend it to deception or misleading others)genevat daat(.¹¹

FOOTNOTES:

1. Exodus 20:12.
2. Ibid.
3. Baraita of Rabbi Yishmael, introduction to Sifra.
4. Sanhedrin 86a.
5. Another issue with interpreting the Talmud in accordance with Rashi is that the Mechilta — which appears to be the source for this section of the Talmud — continues as follows:

“And furthermore, it was stated: Three commandments were given in this matter — two explicitly and one more vague. The implicit one is derived from the explicit ones. Just as the explicit commandments are those for which one is liable for the death penalty by a court, so the implicit commandment)theft(is one for which one is liable for the death penalty by a court ... This serves as a warning against kidnapping, whereas the other serves as a warning against monetary theft.”

At first, this seems to be a new and novel explanation, but if we interpret it the way Rashi does, then it seems to be the exact same explanation. Both assume we look at the context of the capital cases directly before it to determine what the uncertain statement means. What, then, does the Mechilta add as a seemingly second explanation?

6. To reconcile Rashi, we could argue that this second statement of the Mechilta is not an additional explanation, but an expansion of the first, clarifying that the context is capital cases. However, this would not resolve the first question. Regarding the first question, one could argue that Rashi determines context based only on the immediately preceding text, leading to his conclusion. However, Aruch LaNer points out that in other instances Rashi considers both the preceding and following context to determine meaning.

7. *Aruch LaNer*, Sanhedrin 86a.
8. See Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra, Rabbi Abraham ben Maimonides, and others.
9. Zohar, Leviticus, 12a.
10. *Berachot* 1:5. See also *Mechilta DaRashbi*, Genesis 20:12.
11. Seforno, Ibn Ezra, Genesis 20:12.

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https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6773943/jewish/Do-the-10-Commandments-Forbid-Kidnapping-or-Theft.htm

Yitro: The Antidote to Strife

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnepsky *

Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, [former] priest of Midian, heard about all that G-d had done for Moses

and for His people Israel, that G-d had brought Israel out of Egypt.)Ex. 18:1(

The word Midian in Hebrew means “contention” and “strife.” Allegorically, then, Yitro was “*the priest of strife.*”

We are taught that Yitro, in his search for spirituality, had tried practicing every form of idolatry then known. A major difference between idolatry and the service of G-d is that idolatry promotes self-awareness and egocentricity – for a person only manufactures gods in order to satisfy his needs and desires – whereas serving G-d promotes self-effacement and selflessness.

This is why Yitro, the arch-idolater, was the “*prince of strife*”: egocentricity causes us to clash with others, whereas selflessness enables us to get along with our fellows.

* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

— from *Daily Wisdom #3*

Gut Shabbos,

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l

The Custom that Refused to Die

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

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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.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Religious Coercion vs. Religious Conviction

And the entire nation responded together and said, "Everything which the Lord has spoken, we shall do." (Exodus 19:8)

What would happen if one of the religious parties in Israel received a majority of the popular vote, or was at least in the position of leading a coalition government? Would they set up moral squads to separate amorous couples, open up prisons for those who mix meat and milk dishes, and mete out corporal punishment for Shabbat desecrators?

I truly believe that despite the fact that we believe in 613 commandments, not 613 options or possibilities, secular Israel need not necessarily fear a fundamentalist religious state. In the words of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, religious commitment and religious coercion are mutually exclusive terms.

A midrashic interpretation of a verse in Yitro seems to lead to the opposite conclusion of what has just been said.

"And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain." (Exodus 19:17)

R. Abdimi bar Hama comments that the verse comes to teach us that God picked up the mountain and "held it over their heads like a barrel, threatening 'If you will accept the Torah – good; if not, there shall be your burial.'" (Shabbat 88a)

This is a difficult commentary at the very least. After all, the plain meaning of the biblical text portrays the Israelites as having accepted the Torah of their own free will. God enters into a covenant with the children of Abraham only after they declare, "We shall do and we shall obey [na'aseh ve-nishma]." R. Abdimi's midrashic reading contradicts this description at the conclusion of the Torah portion of Mishpatim.

Based upon our earlier citation, Rabbi Soloveitchik is obviously disturbed by the ramifications of this midrash. In a footnote to one of the passages in his novella *The Lonely Man of Faith*, the sage maintains that the biblical description of freely accepted obligation is dealing with the "in general" acquiescence of the Israelites to live by divine will. The talmudic addition of coercion refers to the details of the religio-legal structure, concerning which different individuals at different times must be forced to comply.

In order to understand this position in greater detail, it is important to study a passage in

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Maimonides' Code of Jewish Law pertaining to divorce. Maimonides writes that if a man is ordered by a Jewish court to grant his wife a divorce and he refuses to do so, he must be forced (through financial sanctions, the removal of professional and personal licenses such as a medical license or a driver's license, incarceration or even physical beatings) to comply until he says "I want to divorce her." He then gives her a get [writ of divorce] and the get is valid [kosher]. (Laws of Divorce 2:20)

Isn't this coercion? Doesn't Jewish law require that a get be given of one's own volition? How can a court coerce an individual into saying "I want to"?

Maimonides continues, explaining the logic of the Talmud:

"We do not consider anyone to be compelled unless he is forced to do something which the Torah does not obligate him to do... but someone whose evil desire encourages him to nullify a commandment or commit a transgression can be beaten until he does what he is obligated to do or until he stops doing what he is forbidden to do. This is not considered coercion because it is as if his own evil instincts compelled him to go against the Torah. Although this individual may not want to divorce his wife, since he does wish to be a member of the Jewish people, and he does desire to keep the commandments and keep away from transgression, except that in this instance, his evil instinct overpowered him, we therefore beat him until his evil instinct becomes weakened. He then says, "I want to give her a divorce." (ibid.)

Using terminology from the Zohar, Rabbi A.Y. Hakohen Kook would explain the dilemma of this recalcitrant husband in terms of two "wills" within the human personality, a "lower will" and a "higher will." Each person must somehow orchestrate these two inclinations. An individual who is on a diet, for example, and is offered chocolate cream pie, might well say, "My lower will wants it, but my higher will does not." Similarly in this case: the lower will of the husband might want to lash out at the woman, but the Bet Din knows that the individual's higher will truly wants to do what is right.

If this indeed is the correct interpretation of Maimonides' ruling, one might fear that when it comes to the question of keeping the Shabbat in a Torah majority government with the power to enact laws, the ruling party might very well argue that the higher will of the Israeli citizenry wants to go to synagogue and not the cinema on Friday night, wants to eat kugel and not cheeseburgers, and on this basis argue that religious legislation is the higher

will of every Jew in Israel. In the final analysis it is rather paternalistic to tell the secular Jew "I know that what you really want is to daven rather than disco on Friday evening!"

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, a nineteenth-century commentator on the Bible and the Mishneh Torah, interprets Maimonides' law about the forcing of a divorce differently. Maintaining that the last two sentences in the Previous citation regarding divorce seem superfluous, he interprets Maimonides to be saying that only a person who has announced that he is observant of religious law (Torah umitzvot) and that he wants to keep all the commandments may be compelled to listen to the sages. To return to our earlier example, if I am offered a piece of chocolate cream pie and my wife says "He does not want it," she is being paternalistic. But if I just joined Weight Watchers, she is being helpful.

Certainly, the interpretation of Rabbi Meir Simcha applies in the realm of purely religious actions, between the individual and God. In the area of interpersonal human relationships, a court of law can and must use coercion in order to establish a just society in which no one may be allowed to unjustly take advantage of the other. But in the area of religious law, of what value to God is a ritual act coerced by religious judges? Hence, only those who publicly identify themselves with the tradition may be considered to be exercising this higher will if they are coerced to perform a ritual act. The truth is that in the world at large this is exactly how we live. Assume for a moment that an individual is caught speeding and a policeman pulls him to the side. A natural tendency might be to try to get out of the ticket by coming up with all sorts of stories, explaining that he was driving to a special occasion to which one could not be late, or pleading a momentary lapse of awareness. But no one in their right mind would argue that they are opposed to the entire system of traffic laws, that it is everyone's democratic right to drive their car as quickly as (or in whichever direction) their fancy takes them. The assumption of whoever applies for a driver's license is their acceptance of the traffic laws. People understand that these laws merely help them to keep to the regulations which they know are for everyone's good, including their own!

We constantly see how laws intervene in the actions of people if such actions endanger others. This is the unspoken agreement between all members of society. When it comes to areas of ritual law between human and God, however, any enforced action will only empty the deed of any semblance of true religious significance or divine service. Only for those who privately and publicly accept the entire system of divine commandments and

rabbinic interpretation, and who are desirous of a punitive structure to help keep them on the straight and narrow in terms of specific details, does any kind of external regulation begin to make sense. Everyone ought to be punished for traffic violations, but not necessarily for Shabbat desecration. Regarding the Shabbat, one must first be convinced, not coerced.

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
The Power of Commitment

Back in the days when I was a pulpit rabbi in Baltimore, Maryland, I made it my business to meet with every bar mitzvah boy and girl several weeks before their big day.

It was my way of becoming familiar with these youngsters. We would discuss their interests, hobbies, favorite books, and what they were studying in school.

Over the years, I developed the practice which came to be known as "the rabbi's gift, assignment, and blessing." On the Shabbat of the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony, I presented each child with a gift from the synagogue. Usually it was a sacred book, most often a siddur with an English translation and commentary. I would also charge each child with an assignment to be completed within the coming year. And I would close with a personal blessing appropriate to each one's background and interests.

It was during the pre-bar mitzvah interview that we would together begin to formulate what would ultimately become both the assignment and the blessing.

During those interview sessions, I would frequently share the teaching of our sages that all of us had two distinct sets of impulses, yetzer tov and yetzer hara, an evil inclination and an inclination to do good. Furthermore, the evil inclination, the yetzer hara, was with us from birth or perhaps even from conception. "It has been your old friend," I would say. "Your companion for the past twelve or thirteen years."

"But," I would continue, "in several weeks, you will gain a new companion, a better self. At your bar or bat mitzvah, you will attain the yetzer tov, the so-called 'good angel.'"

Almost invariably, especially from the girls, I was greeted by the following response: "That's not fair! For all these years, I've only had an evil spirit and no means to combat it. Now, finally, I have an ally! Where has he been when I've needed him the most? Shouldn't I have been granted both angels at the same time to even the playing field? No fair!"

Likutei Divrei Torah

An excellent question with no easy answer! For years, I've searched for a convincing response to this question. Few commentaries even raise the question, despite it being one that weighed heavily upon my group of Baltimore pre-teens.

I have found a useful, albeit very subtle, approach in the writings of a representative of the Mussar Movement whom I've occasionally cited in these weekly columns. His name is Rabbi Chaim Zaitchik, of blessed memory, a student of the Nevardok school of Mussar, who spent the years of the Holocaust in a Soviet labor camp in Siberia, and who emerged from his torturous experiences to become an extremely creative and influential spiritual guide.

Included in his collection of essays known as *Ohr Chadash* is a most profound reflection on the power of verbal commitments. It can be found among his contributions to this week's Torah portion, Parshat Yitro (Exodus 18:1-20:23). It is entitled *Amirah v'Kabbalah v'HaBriah Kayemet*, translated to the best of my ability as, "Commitments and Resolutions Allow Creation to Endure."

His opening paragraphs review the numerous passages in Talmud and Midrash that underscore the significance of the fact that the Jewish people accepted the Torah willingly, whereas the other nations of the world did not. WE expressed our willingness verbally, insufficiently aware of what our commitment entailed. *Naaseh v'nishma!* We will observe and perform all the Lord's commandments even before we hear what they are!

We are told that had the Israelites not committed themselves to accept the Torah, the Lord would have destroyed heaven and earth and nullify His creation. Verbal commitment, resolute acceptance, was sufficient to allow the universe to endure.

He goes on to provide quite an array of less cosmic examples of the power of verbal commitments. One interesting example has to do with the restrictions which are demanded of a nazir, an individual who verbally commits to accept the role of the Nazirite. He must refrain from wine and from all fruits of the vine. He must let his hair and beard grow. And he (or she) must keep away from dead bodies and even avoid contact with the dead bodies of his own mother and father.

In this respect, he is like a kohen, who also must avoid contact with the dead. But the ordinary kohen, unless he is the High Priest or Kohen Gadol, need not refrain from contact with the dead bodies of his own parents.

Why? Ask Rabbi Zaitchik. Is the nazir somehow holier than a kohen? He answers in the affirmative. The kohen did not attain his sanctity by virtue of his personal commitment. He was born a kohen but never personally committed to that position. The nazir made a voluntary verbal commitment, a statement that he accepted upon himself the restrictions incumbent upon a nazir. That personal voluntary commitment is sufficient to bestow upon him, to some degree, a status of sanctity superior to that of the kohen. The nazir may not compromise his self-attained level of sanctity by coming near the dead bodies of his own parents. The power of commitment!

Let us return to the question that my synagogues' teenagers (who are, at this point in time, parents of their own teenagers!) asked of me so forcefully.

Rabbi Zaitchik intensifies their question by stressing the imbalance caused to a growing child by being assigned an evil inclination without assistance from a benevolent force adequate to the challenge. Is the Creator not concerned that twelve or thirteen years of exposure to only evil powers might render the child incapable of ever incorporating the belated coaxing or coaching of the yetzer tov, of the good spirit?

Here, Rabbi Zeitchik reminds us of those passages in Talmud and Midrash which suggest that, as one source has it, the Almighty Himself is occupied with teaching Torah to yet unborn children and that, as another source suggests, an angel tutors us all, as embryos in our mother's womb, in the ways and words of the Torah.

At that early stage in the celestial "classroom" we attended before our birth, we made a verbal commitment to adhere to the Torah. We have no recall whatsoever of that commitment, but our unborn souls made that commitment, and it is with that sincere resolution to do good and be good that we are equipped to do battle with the yetzer hara. That supernatural commitment is merely reinforced when we reach the age of religious maturity to take on the yetzer hara competently and indeed to overcome him entirely as we march forward into adulthood.

This week's Torah portion is all about the verbal commitment made by our ancestors at Sinai. But the souls of all of us were present at Mount Sinai, and in a mysterious but real sense, we are still bound by the commitment we made so long ago.

Let's keep our commitment and make good use of our trusted ally, the yetzer tov!

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

If They Were Just Rich Men, They Still Would Not Necessarily Be 'Anshei Chayil' 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

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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 Steimann 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.

The Three Reports — Landmarks of Inspiration for Our Generation - It is possible that these three opinions reflect the well-known dispute among our Sages as to whether Yitro arrived before or after the giving of the Torah.

In my understanding, however, all three events together form a single arc of hope and inspiration—from the reports that Yitro heard in his time until our own days.

The War with Amalek — a resounding military victory over the Amaleki terror power. This war, as is known, was directed specifically at the weakest segments of Israeli society. Am Yisrael does not fear, and it does not abandon its own; it comes to the rescue even of those living "in the periphery." The victory over Amalek—over whom Yitro himself may once have served as an enemy commander—became a source of inspiration for Yitro, and remains an inspiration for the nations of the world today, reminding them not provoke our IDF. The same nation that was found deserving to receive Torah knows how to fight for its freedom, guarantee the safety of its weakest, and not forsake the weary and the vulnerable. As in Yitro's time, so too today: we fight on the battlefield, we do not abandon the wounded or those taken captive, and we uphold mutual responsibility for our brethren.

He heard of the Giving of the Torah and came — this is the spiritual consciousness that drew Yitro near. Matan Torah represents wisdom, understanding, and knowledge—the hallmarks of Jewish genius: giants of spirit and Torah, and towering figures in science and literature. Just as in ancient days the report of the giving of the Torah moved Yitro, so too today the faith and inner strength of the people dwelling in Zion are powerful and enduring. It is the spirit voiced by captives who testify: "It is the path of faith I have chosen, and it is in the path of faith that I will return," as spoken by the redeemed captive Agam Berger, paraphrasing the words of Tehillim 119.

He heard of the Splitting of the Sea and came — the splitting of the Sea of Reeds expresses the great miracle through which Yitro joins Am Yisrael: the intimate Divine providence of the Almighty. The splitting of the Sea reflects the moral distinction between the People of Israel and the Egyptian people. Just as this report reached Yitro, so too today Am Yisrael continues to stand erect due to great miracles. For example, the prevention of a full-scale war in the north, alongside the devastation in the south, was in itself an act of salvation. Three thousand Hezbollah fighters waited to invade and murder from the north, and the hand of Hashem was with us, granting deliverance. At the same time, the moral conduct of the Jewish

people stood exposed before a world cloaked in false morality.

The Strongest Report — A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation - All these reports converge in the most resonant proclamation uttered by God Himself in our portion: "And you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Yitro discovers that this great people is not composed merely of religious elites or isolated functionaries, but of an entire kingdom of priests and a nation that is wholly holy. Even today, this remains a people that continues to build itself as a nation—living with the consciousness of royal priesthood, sanctity, giving, and mutual responsibility.

A Report from Ancient Times has transformed into the Inspiration for our own Generation

All the reports that Yitro heard continue to serve as the inspiration and hope of our generation. We see that these are not old reports that have faded with time, but enduring realities and sources of hope for Tikkun Olam, then as now. Many years ago, these reports ceased to be mere accounts and became woven into the Jewish-Israeli genome. Our task today is simply to ensure that these reports and proclamations fully take hold of the reality in which we now live.

The reports heard in those ancient days remain the hope and inspiration of our own times.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

The Holy Haughtiness of Matan Torah

The appropriate word has not yet been coined. After all, can you think of a word that describes Polish leadership barring the Israeli Prime Minister from setting foot on their blood-soaked soil to mark a Holocaust anniversary? What phrase portrays world leadership, not one of whom stayed home in protest? How would you label a post October 7 international court that determined Israel's guilt of war crimes? Will you be able to paint in words, for your children, the deafening silence of world opinion watching the release of hundreds of merciless terrorists for one innocent Jewish hostage? "Audacious"? "Chutzpa"? "Ginormous chutzpa"? "Colossal audacity"? Are we even close?

Truth be told, we do have the phrase. Now we understand it and live it. The prescient phrase of Chazal found in the last mishna of mesechta Sotah has now come to life. There we learned that our final redemption unfolds in a world of increasing audacity: "בְּעִקְבוֹת מִשִּׁיחָה תֵּצֵא חֵטְאֵי דְּבִינָא".

Harav Eliyahu Dessler (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu, volume 3, page 215), the wildly creative

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Kelmer talmid who became the mashgiach of Gateshead and later of Ponevezh, postulates that this indescribable impertinence is borne out of a profound guilt. That guilt, he submits, happens when unbridled conceit and entitlement doesn't allow us to be guided by the truths of heart and conscience. It was that "chutzpah yasgi" that exiled us or accompanied our exile, and consequently we need to suffer it in order to merit our redemption.

However, where Harav Dessler sees consequences and self-awareness, Harav Kook (Ikvei Hatzon, 120, following the insights of Rav Tzadok) sees promise and vision, and concomitant growing self-confidence. He explains that times of redemption are informed by "holy chutzpa, sacred audacity". Is it not audacious for a people, homeless for close to two millennia, to be unquestionably certain that we will have a full-blown redemption? Is not wildly impertinent to believe that we, mortal men, will once again make Hashem's presence and sovereignty patently clear and His morality commonplace? Apparently, times of unabashed immoral impertinence can unleash and model, and then nurture, the required holy conceit that we need to recognize that we are living the visions of age-old prophecies and are destined to see them all come true.

It all began at Sinai. Is it not immodest to demand of Moshe Rabbeinu that he no longer acts as the intermediary, that we need to directly imbibe Torah from Hashem? Were we not driven by holy entitlement when we declared, "רצונו לראות מלכנו" - it is our will to see Our King", that we could live in the non-corporeal and then return to the finite and physical?

Indeed, Rav Nachman of Breslov finds the source for all this sacred snobbery in the words of Chazal (Beitza 25b) "The Torah was given to the Jews because they are ענין. Whereas this is usually rendered to portray the Torah's softening impact on an otherwise tough group, the great Rav Nachmam Breslover teaches otherwise, explaining: "just as one who is impertinent has no place within our Torah... So too one who lacks self-awareness and is devoid of self-esteem and does not have the holy haughty ambitiousness will also not find his place in Hashem's Torah".

May the deeply troubling and unspeakable audacity of our times become one of the many great signs of the unfolding redemption, and may we merit to see that redemption speedily.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Being A Good Listener

By Rabbi Shalom Rosner

Not many parshiyot are named after individuals. What was so unique about Yitro that he merited to have a parasha referred to by his name? Moreover, there is debate among the Rishonim as to whether this parasha transpired prior to or following Matan Torah. According to the opinion of ein mukdam u'meuchar b'Torah – that Yitro is not in chronological order, why is this episode of Yitro's arrival purposely placed to precede Matan Torah?

Rav Wolbe in his Shiurei Chumash, derives an important lesson from Yitro's actions. Imagine someone reading the New York Times and coming across an article about Kriyat Yam Suf. They may be amazed at learning of the miraculous event, yet they proceed to turn the page and continue on to the next article. They may be impressed, even amazed, but are not at all affected by what they just learned.

What was Yitro's reaction? He hears about the miracles that transpired at Yetziat Mitzrayim, and it permeates his very being. He immediately reacts by leaving his home and traveling with his daughter and grandsons to meet up with his son-in-law.

The Torah declares: "vayishma Yitro" (Yitro hears). One can "hear" but not "listen". Onkelos translates the word "nishma" in the famous phrase "na'ase v'nishma" as "nekabel" – we will accept. It is a hearing that triggers a reaction – an acceptance.

Shlomo HaMelech requests of HaKadosh Baruch Hu "v'natata l'avdecha lev l'shmoah, provide for your servant, a heart that can hear" (Melachim I 3:9). What exactly is Shlomo requesting? Sound enters through the ears not the heart. However, if one is affected by what he hears, then it will enter one's heart and trigger a reaction. Pharaoh heard and even witnessed G-d's strength, yet, "kaved lev Pharaoh" – his heart was hard and nothing was able to pierce it. Essentially, each makka went in one ear and out the other, having no lasting effect on him.

Perhaps, Yitro's arrival is purposely placed prior to Matan Torah, to teach us how to listen! G-d is about to speak to us and transmit the Torah to us. It is not enough to just hear what G-d says, but we have to listen, accept and internalize all of those commandments. Our response needs to be like that of Yitro – who immediately took what he heard and acted upon it. We too must learn this lesson from Yitro. When we are inspired, we need to internalize and act upon it.

It is not only crucial to be a "good" listener – when we refer to mitzvot kein adam l'Makom.

Unfortunately, at times when we are with friends and family we don't grant them the proper attention. They speak to us, but we are not listening attentively. We may check our messages or be distracted by our phones. We need to not hear them, but rather to listen to them as well. To try to understand what they are communicating. Whether it is requesting our opinion and assistance or providing us with advice and constructive criticism. Moshe was very busy but he took time to greet his father-in-law and to entertain and implement Yitro's suggestions.

May we be good listeners – in both the spiritual and social realms so that we internalize what we hear and properly react so we can maximize our potential.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Why Was Moshe's Leadership Necessary?

By Rav Meir Spiegelman

"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Kabasio taught: All my days I fled from exercising authority. However, now that I have assumed office, I will scald with boiling water anyone who tries to take it away from me..."

Rabbi Yossi bei Rabbi Bun said: Heaven forbid that he desired power; rather, he felt that no one else who would hold office would sanctify God's name as much as did he." (Talmud Yerushalmi, Pesachim 39b)

There are not many leaders throughout history who have assumed their position only due to some necessity, rather than out of their own desire for the job. Among these, few are those who, having attained their position, longed every day for their job to end - and even fewer the number who have actively sought to hand over the mantle of leadership. But we may point to Moshe as an example of a leader whose attempts to step down from his position were completely unsuccessful. This fact in itself is no innovation, but its implications in our parasha are substantial, as we shall see below.

God tells Moshe a number of times (see chapter 19, verses 12-13, 21, 24) to warn Bnei Yisrael against any attempt to ascend Mount Sinai. Our impression from reading these warnings is that all of Bnei Yisrael are rushing towards the mountain and that they must be restrained by force. This impression turns out to be completely false: not only is no one trying to ascend the mountain; the entire nation is actually trying to back away. Am Yisrael send Moshe to the forefront to speak with God in their name.

There are further questions. In Sefer Devarim, when Moshe reminds the nation of the Revelation at Sinai, he states clearly that the nation did not ascend the mountain because of

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the fear that seized them (5:5). This is most surprising: God explicitly commanded that no one should ascend; how, then, can Moshe claim that it was only their fear that held them back? If we examine what Moshe says in those places where he refers to the giving of the Torah at Sinai, we see that he is most consistent in his conduct: when God sends him to warn the nation against ascending the mountain, Moshe answers that there is no need, since he has already warned them himself (Shemot 19:23). When Am Yisrael ask, following the Revelation, that Moshe speak with God on their behalf, Moshe tries to alleviate their fear (ibid. 20:17).

In Sefer Devarim, the same picture arises: after the description of the giving of the Torah, when the nation asks Moshe to speak with God, Moshe does not relay their request – he apparently assumes that God has heard their words (Devarim 5:23). From God's positive response to Bnei Yisrael's request, we may deduce that Moshe himself was not altogether happy with what they had said. Further on, again, when Moshe addresses the future of the leadership after his own death, he depicts the prophet who will replace him as who will function as such only because of the initiative of the nation at the time of the Revelation at Sinai, an initiative to which God agreed (see Devarim 18:14-19). Moshe fails to explain what alternative situation would be preferable in his eyes.

Further questions are raised by the Tablets. Up until the moment when God commands Moshe to ascend Mount Sinai in order to receive the Tablets (Shemot 24:12), there is no mention anywhere of the fact that there are going to be Tablets. If the Tablets are so important, why is there no hint of them earlier? Moreover, close to the description of the Tablets, we read of Bnei Yisrael's promise to God, "We shall do and we shall hear" (ibid., verse 7). This is a strange declaration: how can they perform God's will before they have heard what He wants? Chazal explain that Bnei Yisrael mean by this that their readiness to do what God asks of them is not dependent on what they will hear. But this answer does not solve the fundamental difficulty. In addition, it should also be noted that prior to the giving of the Torah (ibid. 19:8) Bnei Yisrael suffice with a declaration of "We shall do." Only after the giving of the Torah do they declare, "We shall do and we shall hear" – what is the meaning of this addition?

The Torah sums up the episode of Mei Meriva with the affirmation that Bnei Yisrael tested God in their demand for water: "... and because they tested God, saying: Is God in our midst, or not?" (Shemot 17:7). At first glance, it is not at all clear in what way they were challenging God; the nation wanted water only

because they were thirsty, not out of any desire to rebel. But upon closer inspection, we note that the episode itself is composed of two stages. As a first stage, there is no water for the people, and they cry out and demand water to drink (ibid., verse 2). Only afterwards do we read, "And the nation was thirsty there for water" (ibid., verse 3). In other words, the demand for water preceded the thirst; it arose immediately upon their noticing the lack of water. The Torah itself defines the essence of the test by stating that they wanted to know whether God was in their midst or not. This test seems to express a doubt lurking in the hearts of Bnei Yisrael that God's Presence rested only in Egypt and that His rulership and providence were limited to that land.

Perhaps the background of this test may shed light on the significance of the warning not to ascend the mountain. It is possible that God is telling Bnei Yisrael that the true sign of His presence among them is not related to the question of whether they have water to drink or food to eat. The measure of God's presence depends of Bnei Yisrael's desire to come close to Him, to cleave to Him. The expectation is that Bnei Yisrael will surge forward, seeking to ascend the mountain – and this expectation finds expression in the fact that they are explicitly forbidden to do so. This prohibition is relevant only where there exists a basic motivation to ascend, and it is precisely the importance of this motivation that the prohibition comes to emphasize.

We may take a step further. In His words to Moshe, God says that Bnei Yisrael may ascend Mount Sinai when the long shofar blast is sounded (ibid. 19:13). There is no indication of when that event will take place. It would seem that the earliest possibility would be following Moshe's descent from the mountain, forty days after the giving of the Torah. According to this estimation, it is not clear why there is any need for God to say now that Bnei Yisrael will be able to ascend in another forty days; right now it is irrelevant. Moreover, this prediction actually serves to weaken the power of the prohibition against ascending. We may, of course, posit that this sentence is meant to reassure the nation that at some future point they will be permitted to ascend, but our question is not thereby resolved.

It seems that a satisfactory explanation of this verse requires that we assume that the original plan was that Bnei Yisrael would, indeed, ascend the mountain – and this assumption appears altogether reasonable. The purpose of the Revelation was to confirm the truth of Moshe's prophecy before the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, when they would watch him actually meeting with God. But this was not the sole purpose of the Revelation. God wanted to see whether the nation really wanted Him to dwell

amongst them, whether they wanted direct contact with Him. Thus, the Revelation was meant to create a direct, unmediated encounter between the nation of Israel and the Almighty. In order for both aims to be realized, the idea was that first Moshe would ascend alone – in order to highlight his status as the prophet of Truth; afterwards, there would be a long shofar blast, following which all of Israel could ascend. This is exactly the test that God presented to Bnei Yisrael: was their desire for His Presence strong enough to withstand the awesome experience of this encounter with the Divine Presence? Would they have the strength to ascend the mountain?

In light of the above, we can certainly understand the reason for the repeated warnings not to ascend the mountain. It is precisely because such an ascent was meant to take place that there existed the possibility of some people attempting it too early. The kohanim, who were meant to ascend before the people, are therefore given an additional special warning (ibid. 19:24), lest they, specifically, try to bring forward the appointed time. Moshe himself wanted the nation to realize this original plan for the Revelation, according to which they themselves would see the Divine Presence. Therefore his words to them, "for you feared the fire and did not ascend the mountain" (Devarim 5:5), in fact express his personal disappointment over their failure to ascend.

The giving of the Torah could actually have taken place according to one of three different scenarios. Am Yisrael clearly chose the option in which there would be no direct encounter between them and God, with contact being made solely through Moshe's mediation. God, Who adopts this model in accordance with Bnei Yisrael's request, then presents the rules in this type of relationship: whoever fails to heed the words of the prophet requested by the nation, will be punished (Devarim 18:19).

The scenario that Moshe desired was quite different. He felt that his role as prophet was redundant. The ideal situation would be one in which Am Yisrael would have direct contact with God, such that his role would not be necessary. Moshe expresses this position on several occasions. Aside from his continuing refusal to accept the leadership role in the episode of the burning bush, there is also his declaration with regard to Eldad and Medad, who are prophesying in the camp: "Would that all of Am Yisrael would be prophets!" (Bamidbar 11:29). Prior to this, in the same parasha, Moshe complains that God has placed the entire burden of the nation on his shoulders (ibid. 11:11-15; although the emphasis there is on the difficulty of the job from Moshe's point of view, rather than on his principled objection to the job of mediator), as well as in many

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other places. This aspiration on the part of Moshe – that Bnei Yisrael would themselves ascend the mountain – finds expression, inter alia, in the fact that he refrains from warning them once again, when God commands him to do so. He fears that too many warnings will cause the nation to forego the ascent altogether. Elsewhere we find no opposition on Moshe's part to repeating a particular warning over and over again.

From the very start, God's plan for the Revelation was somewhere in between these two possibilities. At first, He desired that Moshe would ascend alone. This stage was meant to strengthen the nation's belief in Moshe's prophecy and his special connection to God. Thereafter, the kohanim and the elders could ascend, and finally – as explained above – all of Bnei Yisrael were meant to ascend the mountain. According to this scenario, we can understand the requirement that the entire nation sanctify themselves (Shemot 19:10). Concerning the kohanim, the text explains their sanctification on the basis of their intended ascent (ibid., verse 22). It is reasonable, then, to posit that the sanctification of the nation as a whole was necessary in the context of the original plan, since they were all to ascend the mountain.

This scenario of the Revelation at Sinai assumes that the entire nation of Israel is worthy of prophecy – even if only a one-time, very specific type of prophecy. Still, this does not cancel the need for Moshe's prophecy. The connection between the nation of Israel and God was created mainly through Moshe's prophecy, while the ascent of the nation to the mountain was to be simply an expression of their desire and aspiration to achieve proximity to God. Therefore, God's words to Moshe in parashat Vaetchanan – "Would that they would have such a heart, to fear Me..." (Devarim 5:26) – come as no surprise. From the moment that Bnei Yisrael refrained from ascending the mountain not out of apathy but rather out of the fear of God that seized them, that was fine. In fact, this indicated that one of the central goals of the Revelation had been achieved.

However, it seems that at the end of parashat Mishpatim Bnei Yisrael changed their mind about ascending the mountain. Once the covenant had been forged, Bnei Yisrael turned to Moshe and expressed their desire not only to fulfill God's word but also to hear it. For the first time, Bnei Yisrael express a readiness for a direct encounter with God and His Torah. In fact, they are really asking for a repeat of Sinai.

God responds to their newfound readiness on several levels. Firstly, He invites seventy of the elders of Israel to ascend Mount Sinai as representatives of the nation (Shemot 24:1). In

parashat Yitro, the elders were not mentioned as candidates for ascent. According to the text there, only Moshe and the kohanim were meant to ascend.

Secondly, Bnei Yisrael are in fact given a sort of replay of the Revelation, in the form of the giving of the Tablets. The Revelation at Sinai was a one-time historical event, and there is no way in which it could be repeated. However, in the wake of Bnei Yisrael's enthusiasm to hear God's word, the Holy One Himself initiates a renewed encounter of a different type, via the Tablets. This encounter, via the Divinely-written word, is admittedly on a lower level than the encounter with God Himself, but it nevertheless facilitates once again a direct encounter between Am Yisrael and God. It is no coincidence that the Tablets are written by God's hand: this message in fact represents a substitute for direct speech. Thus we can understand the lack of any mention of the Tablets in parashat Yitro: at that stage they were indeed non-existent, from the point of view of the nation, since the need for them had not yet arisen.

The third level is the most significant. The readiness of Bnei Yisrael for a direct encounter with God after the giving of the Torah finds a response in the possibility of a permanent encounter via the Mishkan. The command to build the Mishkan in the midst of the camp comes to provide a response to the nation's request for God's Presence and His word among them. Moshe could have continued to receive the Torah in the Ohel Mo'ed outside of the camp. The Mishkan was a device that facilitated continuous, direct contact between Am Yisrael and God.

The Torah hints, in several places, at a parallel between the Mishkan and the giving of the Torah; a discussion of these sources lies beyond the scope of this shiur. The Torah establishes – and repeats several times – that Moshe saw an image of the Mishkan when he was atop Mount Sinai. Likewise, the Torah recounts that Moshe ascended the mountain for a period of forty days. In parashat Yitro there is no hint of such a long stay. The purpose for which Moshe ascended, according to parashat Yitro, was to confirm the veracity of his prophecy in the eyes of the nation. For this purpose there was no need for a forty-day stay; a short encounter was sufficient. It was the display of the nation's desire to experience closeness to God, as expressed in their declaration, "We shall do and we shall hear", that led to God inviting Moshe for the lengthy stay atop the mountain, in order to receive the command concerning the construction of the Mishkan.

The Mishkan was able to create a direct, continuous relationship between the nation and

their God, which in fact came to complement the partial encounter that had taken place at Sinai. The verses describing the completion of the construction of the Mishkan are reminiscent, in their style, of the verses describing the descent of the Divine Presence onto Mount Sinai (compare especially Shemot 24:16-18 with Shemot 40:34-38). God's word to His nation is conveyed from between the keruvim in the Kodesh Kodashim – the resting place of the Tablets, representing God's word to His people as presented to them because of their desire to cleave to God and His Torah. *(Translated by Kaeren Fish)*



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Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

The Dual Path to Avodas Hashem

Chazal teach us that the process necessary for a person to convert to become Jewish is derived from the events that preceded the סיני experience. Just as our ancestors became endowed with קדושת ישראל at the time of התורה, so too in subsequent generations one enters a life of תורה and מצוה by undergoing a similar process. There are three components of the גרות process for a man and two for a woman. A man receives a מילה, or if previously circumcised undergoes the halachic procedure of ברית דם – a small drawing of blood as a substitute for an actual ברית. In addition, both a man and a woman immerse in the מקוה and bring a קרבן in the days of the בית המקדש.

The men replicates the "גרות" of בני ישראל prior to התורה. The men performed ברית מילה immediately before leaving מצרים, as the תורה relates in פרשת בא, since otherwise they would not have been permitted to participate in קרבן פסח. As a preparation for קבלת התורה everyone immersed in the מקוה. One opinion in Chazal derives this from the פרשת יתרו in פסוק that discusses immersing their clothing and certainly themselves. Others suggest it is being sprinkled on the people which always is accompanied by immersion in a מקוה. The obligation to offer a קרבן during the time of the בית המקדש is patterned after the special קרבנות that were offered accompanying מעמד הר סיני, as they appear in פרשת משפטים. Why are these three procedures ones that encapsulate the גרות process?

The רמב"ן elaborates on the two distinct terms that are used to describe the observance of "זכור" and שבת, "זכור" refers specifically to זכור and also encompasses all the positive actions performed to designate שבת as a holy day. שמור, which refers to refraining from מלאכה, speaks to the prohibitions that apply on שבת. These two dimensions of שבת emanate from the two dimensions of our relationship with ה'. We are commanded to simultaneously love and be in awe of ה'. Love expresses itself by actions, the positive מצוות that bring us closer to ה'. Awe requires us to step back and refrain from what ה' commands us to refrain from. מצוות not only define מצוות but describe our entire עבודה ה' which is comprised of מצוות and לא תעשה. When we entered a covenant with ה' סיני, and when a prospective convert is about to join that covenant, it is a dual commitment to the ideals of acting and refraining, יראה and אהבה, that make up the essence of our relationship with ה'.

Most מצוות are either an expression of either אהבה or יראה, but טבילה, and קרבן are a fusion of both. In many areas, ערל equates an ערל – one who does

not have a ברית – to one who is טמא. The states of ערל and טמא are negative spiritual ones that must be overcome before one can join the ה'. יראה ה' necessitates distancing oneself and refraining from the aspects of טומאה that are antithetical to the מילה. מילה and קדושת ישראל are not only responses to negativity but also lead us on a path of positive spiritual growth through טהרה and קדושה. We recite a ברכה following a ברית highlighting that we are performing an "אות ברית קודש" – a sign of a holy covenant. ברית מילה symbolizes a distancing from the influences of spiritual negativity and simultaneously a commitment to spiritual positivity. Similarly, מקוה removes impurity and endows with holiness. It is the vehicle of the מקוה that enables the מילה to attain the degree of sanctity necessary to enter the גרות, the prospective גר and גר purify themselves from the impurities that surround them and sanctify themselves in the water of the מקוה. Both מילה and טבילה are vehicles for attaining ה' יראה ה' and אהבת ה' and are the perfect way to transition into a life of both aspects of ה'. עבודה ה' is also merging of אהבה and יראה. The בית המקדש is simultaneously a place of יראה, as the מורא המקדש מצוה requires, and a place to express our great love for ה' as we become closer to Him by offering a gift of love. The רמב"ם describes how one aspect of קרבנות is that it is a way to draw us away from idolatry. Yet the רמב"ם emphasizes that קרבנות will play a major role in עבודה זרה long after עבודה זרה is eradicated from the world. קרבנות are positive מצוות of קדושה that connect us to ה'. As the prospective גר offers his קרבן, he is following in the footsteps of those who stood at סיני. He is joining the very people who offered קרבנות thereby distancing themselves from the idolatrous world that surrounded them. The גר is also connecting to ה' as he brings his first gift of love thereby embarking on a lifetime of אהבה and יראה. For both the born Jew and the גר, the dual goals of אהבה and יראה are the same. The entire Jewish people continue its journey to reach the heights of ה' אהבת ה' and יראה ה'.

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from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** ryfrand@torah.org ravfrand@torah.org

date: Feb 4, 2026, 12:43 PM

subject: Rav Frand - Passion is Necessary – Within Limits

Parshas Yisro

Passion is Necessary – Within Limits

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1368 Davening For Personal Needs on Shabbos? Good Shabbos!

Passion is Necessary – Within Limits

The pasuk says "Mt. Sinai was smoking in its entirety because Hashem had descended upon it in the fire; its smoke ascended like the smoke of the kiln, and the entire mountain shuddered exceedingly." (Shemos 19:18). It is hard for us to picture or even imagine what Har Sinai looked like at the time of Matan Torah. But the Torah says that the entire mountain was smoking. It looked like the mountain was on fire.

There is a famous Gemara (Shabbos 88a) regarding the pasuk "...vayisatzvu b'sachtis hahor" (and they stood underneath the mountain) (Shemos 19:17). The Gemara says that this pasuk teaches "shekofu Hakodesh Baruch Hu aleihem es har k'gigis" (that the Almighty covered them with the mountain as though it were an overturned vat) and He said to them "im atem mekabl'im Hatorah mutav, v'im lav, shom tehay kevuraschem" (If you accept the Torah, good, but if not, there will be your burial.)

In effect, the Ribono shel Olam put a gun to our heads and made us an offer we could not refuse. Tosfos there asks a famous question: Klal Yisrael already proclaimed "Na'aseh" (We will do) before even hearing (nishma) what was written in the Torah. Why, then, was it necessary to "force them" to accept the Torah when they already willingly accepted it? Tosfos answers that they were so frightened when they saw the great fire surrounding Har Sinai that they would have retracted their previous commitment had Hashem

not “kafah aleihem har k’gigis” (turned the mountain over them like an upturned vat).

Rav Shmuel Rozovsky asks a question on this answer of Tosfos: If the only reason why it was necessary to set up a situation of “kafah aleihem har k’gigis” was because they saw the great fire, then why did Hashem make the great fire in the first place? Why didn’t He just allow the mountain to remain with its normal appearance and avoid the need for “kafah aleihem har k’gigis?”

The answer is that it was necessary for Kabalas Hatorah to take place with fire surrounding the mountain. Why is that? I read the following statement (translated from the original Yiddish) made by the Chofetz Chaim:

In this world, there are all sorts of ‘groups,’ including Litvish, Chassidish, Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Modern Orthodox, Chareidi, Mizrachi, Agudah – all sorts of stripes. There are all kinds of head coverings: Velvet yarmulka, black yarmulka, leather yarmulka, knitted yarmulka; sheitel, tichel, all sorts of groups. The Chofetz Chaim said that all this is only “down here.”

However, in the world to come, the world of truth, such groups do not exist. There are only five groups in the olam haemes: The boiling, the warm, the lukewarm, the cold, and the frozen. The Chofetz Chaim said that whatever group you belong to, you need to strive to be passionate. Whatever group you belong to, you need to be passionate about your affiliation. We learn that from Kabalas Hatorah because Kabalas Hatorah came about through fire. That is why it was necessary to give the Torah through a mountain on fire. That is how Rav Shmuel Rozovsky’s question is answered. There had to be fire because Kabalas Hatorah set the tone. There is a concept called “k’nesinasa” (as it was given). Torah must be learned and Torah must be observed “like it was given.” The Torah was given with fire because our commitment to and passion for Torah must be fiery!

This is not the only aspect of Kabalas Hatorah that we need to imitate. Passion for Torah is very important. We must engage in Torah with fire. However, like everything else in Yiddishkeit, there is a time and place for everything. Sometimes fire and passion need to be restrained. How do we see that? The Torah also says by Kabalas Hatorah, “And you shall set boundaries around it for the people, saying ‘Guard yourself from ascending the mountain or touching its edge; whoever touches the mountain shall surely die.’” (Shemos 19:12). There was a requirement at the time of Kabalas Hatorah that boundaries be established. If someone advanced beyond his place, “the one who touched the mountain shall die.” Moshe had his place where he was allowed to advance. Aharon had his place where he was allowed to advance. The Kohanim had their place, and the nation had their place.

Chazal say that as important as passion is for Judaism, it is also important to not go overboard. Each person needs to be “makir es mekomo” (recognize his place). It is the nature of people to not be satisfied with limitations and to feel “No. I want more!”

An interesting Klei Chemda asks on a Medrash: The Medrash says that the Ribono shel Olam went to all the nations of the world and offered them the Torah. They inquired: What is written in it? Some nations were turned off and refused to accept the Torah because of “Thou shall not commit adultery.” Others could not handle “Thou shall not murder.” Others rejected the Torah because of “Thou shall not steal.”

The Klei Chemda asks that it doesn’t seem fair. All the nations were seemingly encouraged to reject the Torah based on Hashem citing to them the Torah requirement that most challenged their natural instincts. Why did Hashem not similarly challenge Klal Yisrael. The Klei Chemda answers: Hashem did challenge Klal Yisrael with a mitzva that goes against our most basic inclinations: However, we are not intrinsically challenged by the prohibitions of murder, adultery, or theft. Our challenge is to accept boundaries and limitations upon ourselves. This is the test with which He challenged us: Do not cross the boundaries set up for you.

A Jew always wants more. He wants to get closer to the mountain. If I have a passion for Torah, I want to take it further. However, we must know that

every person has his place. A person cannot be successful in Torah – or in Yiddishkeit for that matter – unless he is makir es mekomo.

The Gemara says (Bava Kama 117a) that Rav Kahana had trouble with the government so Rav told him to leave Bavel and go to Eretz Yisrael. Rav further warned him, however, that he should go learn in Rabi Yochanan’s yeshiva, but not ask Rabi Yochanan any questions for seven years! (Rav felt that Rav Kahana, as a newcomer in that environment, should know his place and not actively participate in the give and take of the lessons until he fully grasped the style of Rabi Yochanan’s Torah lectures.) The Gemara says that Reish Lakish was saying over the shiur and Rav Kahana started asking him questions from all over Shas.

The Gemara says that Reish Lakish told Rabi Yochanan “A Lion has come up from Bavel” (indicating the presence of a great Babylonian Torah scholar in their yeshiva). Rav Kahana had been sitting near the back, in the seventh row of students. After hearing Reish Lakish’s report that “A Lion has come up from Bavel,” they moved him to the first row.

Rabi Yochanan said his first shiur and Rav Kahana said nothing. Rav Yochanan, having expected more challenge from this “lion who came up from Bavel” remarked, “This is not a lion that came up, it is a fox! Put him in the second row.” During the next shiur, again Rav Kahana was silent. He was demoted to the third row. Ultimately, as the pattern continued, he was placed all the way back in the seventh row again – all because Rav had instructed him: Don’t ask. It is not your place.

The Gemara says that the shame of being demoted seven rows was equivalent to waiting seven years and he then started participating in the shiurim and asking his penetrating questions.

I remember when I first became a rebbi in Yeshivas Ner Yisrael. It is every bochurs’ dream to be present at a Hanhala meeting (of the yeshiva leadership and rabbeyim). After many years as a student in Ner Israel, I went to my first Hanhala meeting. Who was there? The Rosh Yeshiva (Rav Ruderman) was there. Rav Weinberg was there. Rav Kulefsky was there. Rav Nussbaum was there. They were all my rebbeim. I don’t think I opened my mouth for three years. I didn’t wait seven years, but I should open my mouth with my little opinion in front of all my teachers and mentors? That was not my place at that time. I was afraid. “Who are you?” They remembered me from when I was fifteen years old. One must be makir es mekomo.

It could be that this provides a connection between the parsha and the haftorah. The haftorah of Parshas Yisro (Yeshaya 6) includes the vision of the navi’s beholding the Heavenly vision of the Divine throne of glory. This is a clear connection to the vision of Heaven that occurred at the time of Kabalas Hatorah.

However, I saw in the sefer Meorei Ha’esh that there is a second connection to the parsha. The Haftorah begins with the words “In the year of the death of King Uziyahu...” (Yeshaya 6:1). Uziyahu was one of the kings of Yehudah. He was a great king who “did that which was proper in the eyes of Hashem.” He fought the Plishtim and he was victorious in battles. He improved Yerushalayim and he improved Eretz Yisrael. He was terrific. Chazal say on the pasuk “In the year of the death of King Uziyahu...” that Uziyahu did not die. What does it mean “in the year of the death of King Uziyahu...”? The Medrash says that he became afflicted with tzaraas. How did he get tzaraas? We learn in Divrei Hayamim that after all of his aforementioned accomplishments, he said to himself “It is only right that the king does the avodah in the Beis Hamikdash for the King of Kings.” Consequently, he decided to personally bring a ketores offering to the Ribono shel Olam. (Divrei Hayomim II 26:19-21)

King Uziyahu was so passionate about his Yiddishkeit that he felt he wanted to personally offer this special incense offering. The fact that the Torah teaches “The zar (non-kohen) who comes too close will die” (Bamidbar 18:7) did not cause him pause. He felt that referred to regular Jews, not to the king. Indeed, there was some halachic precedence for his error. The halacha is that no one is allowed to sit in the courtyard of the Beis Hamikdash other than kings of the Davidic dynasty. Thus, he reasoned, kings of Judea are different.

Therefore, he took a pan of ketores and started walking into the Heichal. He was followed by Azaryahu the Kohen Gadol and with him there were another eighty Kohanim. They meet Uziyahu and Azaryahu said to Uziyahu “Where do you think you are going? What you are doing is reserved for Kohanim. Leave immediately!” Uziyahu got very angry at them and was about to hit them with the pan of ketores. At that moment, tzaraas broke out on the middle of his forehead.

He ran out. A metzorah is not allowed to be in the Beis Hamikdash. What happened to Uziyahu? Why did he do this? The Alter from Slabodka says that just as we know that “ha’ahava mekalkeles es hashurah” (love spoils propriety) and “ha’sinah mekalkeles es hashurah (hatred spoils propriety), so too, passion can also blind a person. Uziyahu’s passion to do the Avodah and to serve the Ribono shel Olam literally corrupted his ability to learn the pasuk “The stranger who draws close will die.” Indeed, there was to be no exception – even the king!

So, in spite of the fact that Har Sinai had to be entirely consumed with smoke and fire, and in spite of the fact that it scared the people and it necessitated holding the mountain above them like an inverted tub, there is also a counter balance to that – “v’higbalta es ha’am saviv...” (and you should set boundaries around the mountain...) No matter how passionate a person is, he needs to recognize his place. Yiddishkeit is not egalitarian. Today, society thinks “everyone is the same.” Men are the same. Women are the same. All is the same. No. There are Kohanim, there are Leviim, there are Yisraelim, there are men, there are women, there are adults there are minors. There are different gradations and different roles.

The introduction to receiving the Torah was – you shall place boundaries around the mountain. Know your place. The passion of the fire must be balanced with the boundaries placed around the mountain.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com
Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week’s write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Yisro is provided below: # 042 – Kiddush: To Sit or Not to Sit # 085 – Christianity in Halacha # 133 – Honoring In-Laws # 180 – The Mitzvah of Kiddush for Men and Women # 226 – The Fearless Judge: A Difficult Task # 270 – Parental Wishes vs. Staying in Israel # 316 – The Reading of the “Aseres Hadibros” # 360 – Dolls and Statues: Is There An Avodah Zarah Problem? # 404 – Making a Bracha on a Makom Neis # 448 – Lo Sachmod # 492 – Eating Before Kiddush # 536 – Newspapers on Shabbos # 580 – Women and Havdalah # 624 – Resting Your Animal on the Shabbos # 668 – Kiddush B’mkom Seudah # 712 – The Kiddush Club # 756 – The Kosel Video Camera # 800 – Avoda Zara and The Jewish Jeweler # 844 – Yisro and Birchas Hagomel # 888 – What Should It Be – Hello or Shalom? # 932 – Saying The Shem Hashem While Learning – Yes or No? # 975 – Kiddush on Wine: Absolutely Necessary? #1019 – Unnecessary Brachos #1063 – Ma’aris Ayin: The Power Lunch In A Treife Restaurant #1106 – Must You Treat Your Father-in-Law Like Your Father? #1149 – Kiddush Shabbos Day – On What? What Do You Say? #1192 – I Keep 72 Minutes; You Keep 45 – Can You Do Melacha for Me? #1236 – “I Want Your House and I’ll Make You an Offer You Can’t Refuse”: Muttar or Assur? #1280 – The Shul Kiddish Shabbos Monring: Two Interesting Shailos #1281 – Kiddush Shabbos Day – Must Everyone Drink the Wine? #1324 – Saying Kaddish: All Aveilim Together or Each One Individually on a Rotating Basis? #1368 – Davening For Personal Needs on Shabbos? #1412 – Must One Keep Their Father’s Minhagim or What Bracha Do You Make on Potatoes #1456 – I Haven’t Accepted Shabbos Yet – May I Make Kiddush For You? #1543 – Can You Get Your Corona Vaccine on Shabbos? #1586 – Learning the Third Perek of Moed Katan -- Is There a Problem? #1624 – Must You Honor Your Mother-in-Law? 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.
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from: Team TorahAnytime <info@torahanytime.com>

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TheTorahAnyTimes

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Standing With You

At the conclusion of the Second World War, a small group of non-Jewish British intellectuals made an extraordinary decision. They chose to convert to Judaism.

Their reasoning was stark and unsentimental. History, they believed, had issued a warning: if one does not actively stand on the side of moral truth, one will eventually become complicit in its negation. They had witnessed how Germany, regarded as the most cultured and enlightened nation in Europe, descended within a few short years into unprecedented barbarism. Faced with that reality, they resolved not merely to admire Jewish survival from a distance, but to cast their lot with the Jewish people themselves. Rashi, commenting on the opening words of Parashat Yisro—“And Yisro heard”—asks the obvious question. What did Yisro hear that compelled him to come? The answer, as the Gemara notes, is striking. Yitro heard of the splitting of the sea and the war with Amalek (Zevachim 116a). Why these two events, of all the miracles surrounding the Exodus?

Amalek represents a hatred that is irrational, instinctive, and visceral. Its animosity toward the Jewish people is not ideological or strategic, but elemental. It is antisemitism as reflex, as natural as breathing. Yet not everyone is born an Amalek. Most people inhabit the vast moral middle: neither Jew nor Jew-hater, neither ally nor enemy, waiting, consciously or not, to be pulled in one direction or the other.

Yisro understood something profound. Inspiration that is not acted upon does not simply fade; it decays.

Left unattended, moral awakening curdles into cynicism, disbelief, and ultimately revulsion. He recognized that if he failed to respond decisively to the overwhelming clarity of the sea splitting before the eyes of the world, he too would drift toward the coldness of Amalek, and move toward moral detachment, denial, and hostility. Conversion, for Yisro, was not sentiment; it was urgency.

Anyone paying attention to contemporary events cannot fail to notice the bitter irony of much of the world’s accusation that Israel is committing genocide. The very concept of genocide was coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish lawyer, to give language to the horrors of the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Among the judges deliberating interim measures in the case concerning Gaza, only one—Justice Julia Sebutinde of Uganda—rejected all proposed provisional measures, citing the absence of credible evidence of genocidal intent on Israel’s part.

Genocide is defined by intent: the deliberate aim to obliterate a people. It is not synonymous with the tragic civilian casualties that accompany urban warfare, especially when civilians are deliberately used as human shields by terrorist regimes. The chant “From the River to the Sea,” by contrast, is an unambiguous call for the erasure of a nation.

And yet, amid the noise and distortion, moments of moral clarity still emerge. The Jewish people may never have had many friends, but when someone—like Yisro—steps forward and declares, “I stand with you,” it does more than encourage.

It restores faith in human conscience itself.

from: Team TorahAnytime <info@torahanytime.com>

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subject: Your TorahAnyTimes Parashat Yitro is here!

TheTorahAnyTimes

Rabbi Mordechai Becher

Climbing the Mountain

The Imrei Emes cites a teaching in the name of the Kotzker Rebbe, Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, on the verse describing the revelation at Mount Sinai. Hashem warns the Jewish people:

“Hishamru lachem alos bahar u’negoa bi’katzeihu—Be exceedingly careful not to ascend the mountain, nor to touch even its edge. “Kol hanogea bahar mos yumas—Whoever touches the mountain shall surely die” (Shemos 19:12).

On a simple level, the meaning is clear and straightforward. The sanctity of Sinai was absolute. The people were forbidden not only from ascending the mountain, but even from brushing against its perimeter. Any violation, even at the margins, carried fatal consequence.

But the Kotzker Rebbe read the verse in a radically different way. He explained it not as a prohibition, but as a challenge. If you wish to ascend the mountain—if you aspire to Sinai—then do not content yourself with merely touching the edges. Hishamru lachem: beware of superficial engagement. Alos bahar u’negoa bi’katzeihu: if all you are doing is grazing the margins, that is empty, even pathetic. True ascent demands total commitment.

Kol hanogea bahar mos yumas— to truly touch the mountain, to truly encounter Sinai, requires readiness for complete self-investment, even self-sacrifice. Not literally to die, but to give oneself over entirely.

This is not pshat; it is not the plain meaning of the verse. But it is profoundly beautiful. What the Kotzker is teaching is that Sinai is not a historical location. Sinai is any mitzvah. It is Torah study. It is chesed. It is avodas Hashem in all its forms. As the Chovos HaLevavos teaches, virtually any permissible act can become a mitzvah depending on one’s kavanah. Intention transforms action.

But transformation only occurs when one is fully present. If I am merely “touching the edge”—half-engaged, distracted, hedging my commitment—I receive nothing. Sinai demands immersion. It demands wholeness. It demands that I bring my entire self into the experience.

That is the Kotzker’s warning: do not dare approach holiness tentatively. If you want the mountain, you must give your life to it—not in martyrdom, but in meaning. And the key to sustaining such total engagement is simcha.

There is a well-known story about Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, the rebbe of the Kotzker. Before he became a rebbe, and even before he became a pharmacist, Rav Simcha Bunim served as the manager, effectively the CEO, of a lumber enterprise in Danzig. One day, he was walking along the riverbank with several students when one of them slipped in the mud and was swept into the river by the current. None of them could swim; swimming simply was not part of nineteenth-century Polish Hasidic life.

As the man was being carried away, the group ran helplessly along the riverbank, unable to intervene. Suddenly, Rav Simcha Bunim called out to him in Yiddish, “Give my regards to the Leviathan.” It sounded absurd. A man is drowning, and you send greetings to the mythical sea creature? It was the last thing anyone expected, and it was utterly impractical.

But something extraordinary happened. The man in the water smiled. That moment of levity pierced his despair. He began thrashing again, fighting the current with renewed energy, managing to maneuver himself close enough to the bank for the others to pull him out. His life was saved.

Later, the chassidim asked Rav Simcha Bunim what he had been thinking. He explained by quoting the verse in Isaiah (55:12): “Ki b’simcha tetze’u.” We usually translate it as “You shall go out with joy.” But Rav Simcha Bunim read it literally: With simcha, you can get out of anything.

“All I saw on his face,” he said, “was yei’ush, despair. If I could inject even a moment of simcha, I knew it would shift his inner state. One thought would spark another, his body would follow his mind, and he would save himself.” And he did.

This insight reaches far beyond that riverbank. Simcha is not a superficial emotion; it is a cognitive and spiritual force. In modern terms, simcha moves us out of compulsive dopamine-driven distraction and into a state of meaning, reflection, and flow; what psychologists might associate with serotonin and sustained engagement. That is Sinai. Not touching the edge, but climbing the mountain with joy, wholeness, and presence.

from: [Ira Zlotowitz Iraz@kialgovoah.org](mailto:Ira.Zlotowitz@kialgovoah.org) date: Feb 5, 2026, 7:04 PM subject: Tidbits for Parashas Yisro 5786

During Kerias HaTorah of Parashas Yisro, the minhag of many Ashkenazic congregations is to stand when the Aseres HaDibros are read. Most Sephardic congregations are particular not to follow this practice..

Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Menachos 27 • Yerushalmi: Beitzah 17 • Mishnah Yomis: Temurah 5:3-4 • Oraysa (coming week): Yevamos 28a-30a • Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: 65:9-15..

Summaries YISRO: Yisro arrives at the Jews' encampment along with Moshe's family • Moshe greets him in distinguished fashion; Yisro praises Hashem • Yisro witnesses Moshe's wearying schedule and suggests a system of judges • Moshe implements Yisro's system • Moshe escorts Yisro as he leaves • The Jews arrive at Har Sinai • Moshe ascends the mountain • Moshe prophetically tells Bnei Yisrael that they are the chosen nation and must actualize their potential • Bnei Yisrael respond by saying “Na’aseh” • Hashem tells Moshe that He will reveal Himself to ensure the nation's eternal faith • Three days of preparation for the revelation • Moshe sets boundaries around the mountain • Hashem's glory descends on Har Sinai in an awe-inspiring manner • Moshe warns Bnei Yisrael not to approach the mountain • The Aseres HaDibros - See Taryag Weekly for the various mitzvos [first two spoken by Hashem, the remaining eight by Moshe] • This event elicits intense fear and trembling • Prohibition against making idols • Laws regarding construction and ascension of the altar
Haftarah: The Parashah discusses Kabbalas HaTorah, the awesome event at Har Sinai, that was an amazing spectacle of the glory of Hashem. The Navi Yeshaya relates the great heavenly spectacle he saw in his nevuah. (Yeshaya 6:1)

Taryag Parashas Yisro: 72 Pesukim • 3 Obligations • 14 Prohibitions 1) Recognize and believe in Hashem's existence and His eternal omnipotence. 2) Do not believe in any other godly power. 3) Do not form or commission the formation of an idol. 4-5) Do not perform Temple services, or any other services, for another god. 6) Do not swear with Hashem's Name in vain. 7) Sanctify the Shabbos. 8) Do not perform melachah on Shabbos. 9) Honor your parents. 10) Do not commit murder. 11) Do not commit adultery. 12) Do not kidnap. 13) Do not testify falsely. 14) Do not attempt to acquire or covet another's possessions. 15) Do not create a statue or form of a human. 16) Do not construct an altar by carving stone. 17) Do not ascend the altar via stairs or with wide strides.

For the Shabbos Table

“לא תהמדם בית רבעך לא תהמדם אשת רבעך ועבדו ונאמרו ונחמרו וכל אשר לרבעך” “You shall not covet your fellow's home; You shall not covet your fellow's wife, his servant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey or anything that belongs to your fellow man” (Shemos 20:14) In the prohibition of coveting another's possessions, the Torah first details various items and then concludes by prohibiting “anything that belongs to your fellow man.” Why does the Torah first list these various items if the conclusion is that everything is prohibited? Rav Yaakov Galinsky zt”l explains that it seems to be a difficult task for a human being to not desire something he likes. To address this, the Torah writes sage advice on how to curb jealousy. “V’chol (everything) asher l’reiecha” explains that although your friend's home seems so appealing, you must take all of the homeowner's life circumstances and burdens into account - “all that is his.” One would need to accept problems, issues, worries, and challenges that accompany this coveted item.

We can understand each person's unique circumstances and provisions with a parable from the Chofetz Chaim. A man enters a shop seeking to purchase an ax with which to chop firewood. The proprietor has no axes in stock, but the salesman offers him a quality saw used for cutting metal, and he implores the man to buy it. The man responds, “I am a woodchopper and have no need for blacksmith tools.” The Chofetz Chaim explains that one must recognize that Hashem provides each person with a custom-tailored package of a wife, household, etc., that he needs for his unique mission. Then, after the Torah lists these individual items, it guides us to understand that each of these gifts and possessions is uniquely suited to its owner. Through acceptance of this

reality, jealousy dissipates quickly and easily, as one views his situation from its correct perspective.

from: **Michal Horowitz** <michalchorowitz@gmail.com>

date: Feb 5, 2026, 8:06 AM

subject: Yisro 5786: Unity Through Torah

February 5, 2026

In Parshas Yisro, the nation of Israel arrives at the Wilderness of Sinai on Rosh Chodesh Sivan and camps opposite Mt. Sinai. There they spend the next days preparing for Matan Torah (and there they will stay for the next almost-one-year learning many mitzvos, building the Mishkan and preparing for their planned [but ultimately aborted] entry into the Promised Land).

About their encampment at the mountain, the pasuk tells us: וַיָּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים - And they journeyed from Refidim, and they arrived in the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert, and Israel encamped there opposite the mountain (Shemos 19:2). Noting an anomaly in this verse - for the verbs are all written in the plural form, except for “וַיָּסְעוּ” which is singular and literally means “and he camped” - Rashi, quoting the Sages points out: וַיָּסְעוּ שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל. כְּאִשׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד, אָבָל - Rashi, quoting the Sages points out: וַיָּסְעוּ שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל. כְּאִשׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד, אָבָל - And Israel encamped there - as one man with one heart, but all the other encampments were with complaints and with strife.

The encampment at Har Sinai was different than all others, for here, they were united. Their unity was so strong that they stood before G-d like one man, with one heart.

In our world torn asunder, when the nations of the world rise up once again to destroy our nation and our Land - may the Almighty have mercy upon us - it behooves us to remember this well-known Rashi. While the greatest protection that Am Yisrael has is the holiness, beauty and wisdom of Torah, ultimately, the Torah can only truly rest when our people are united. While it is true there are Jews of many different hashkafos, dress, language, appearance, countries of dispersion and all across the religious spectrum - and each must stay true to the emes of Torah and masorah as transmitted by his rebbe/rav/teacher - despite differences, we must strive to be united as one nation.

As we come up to the yomtov of Purim, we must remember that to the nations of the world, we are one nation. They do not differentiate between different sects of Jews, and we must take to heart the words of Haman to Achashvairosh, in his request to annihilate the nation:

וַיֹּאמֶר הֵמּוֹן לְמַלְכָּהּ אֶחָד שְׂרָפָה יִשְׁנֶנּוּ עִם־אֶחָד מִבָּנֶיהָ וּמִפְּרִדֵּי בֵּין הָעַמִּים כֹּלל מְדִינֹת מְלֻכּוֹתָהּ - And Haman said to King Achashvairosh, "There is one nation scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws differ from those of every other nation, and they do not keep the king's laws - and to the king - there is no use to leave them alone" (Esther 3:8).

Though scattered and dispersed throughout 127 provinces, surely speaking different languages, with different dress, different head coverings, different shuls and different schools... to Haman, we were all one. If Haman knew this to be true (as do his descendants throughout the generations, dayeinu!), should we not know it to be true as well?

We must strive to recognize that it is the koach of Torah that binds us as one - as the nation understood at the foothills of Sinai - and not wait until the Hamans of the world remind us.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav zt'l, teaches that, “The Jewish people constitute an edah when they are united in acknowledging and loving G-d, and when they have a shared desire to live a sanctified life. In such times they form an edah not because they take pride in their intellectuals, scientific geniuses, or inspired authors. Their edah is distinguished by virtue of its embrace of the prophets, tananim, amoraim, and other holy and heroic people who forged the character of the nation of Israel. When constituting such an edah, the Jewish nation is recognized for its holiness, ethical purity, humility, eternity and nobility of spirit... In such times, Adas Yisrael is

bathed in a sea of divine light, an ocean of eternal radiance, from which G-d's Shechina emerges... .

“There are also times when Jews come together as a machaneh - whether out of fear of an Amalek or a Haman, or because it is impossible for them to assimilate. Such is the case in our own time, when our sanctity is diminished, Shabbos is in exile, Jewish family life is under assault, and our past spiritual glory is in tatters. We are bereft of the ancient commitment to spirituality that united us in the past. Today we are forced to invoke intellectual and pragmatic considerations for Jewish solidarity, such as fear of the enemy who despises us, or shared economic interests that often entail a disregard for the mitzvos. But such things by themselves cannot bind our camp together in lasting fashion. Yes, it is true that some of us come together occasionally for the sake of mutual protection, but this has no staying power, for there is no strong group identity. Proof can be found in the dismal failure of American Jewry when it comes to its organizational life. How much ink has been spilled, how much quills have been broken, how much energy and effort expended in attempting to consolidate the Jews in this country into a single entity! It is all to no avail.

“Where there is no shared spiritual vision, fear and trepidation are the only recourse to bring people together. But fear is a negative emotion, utterly incapable of building a lasting unity. Even though a machaneh might be formed on an emergency basis, its internal divisions will always resurface once the danger has passed. The only unity among Jews that can persist over time is the unity of an edah, which, like a tzibbur or kahal, is characterized not by shared fear or anxiety, but by a collective spiritual goal and purpose” (Chumash Masores HaRav, Bamidbar, p.71-72).

Two and a half years after the horrific and terrifying pogrom of October 7th, how powerful, true, unsettling in their reality, and awesome are the words of Rav Soloveitchik. They deserve to be read, and read again. In order for our nation to achieve lasting unity, it must be through the spirituality, holiness and purity of shared Torah goals, as the mamleches kohanim and goy kadosh (cf. Shemos 19:6) that we are destined to be. May we merit it speedily, in our days and in our time.

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What's in a Parsha Name? The Wisdom of Yitro

Feb 5, 2026 **Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman**

Jewish mothers take pride in their intellectually accomplished children—the doctors, the lawyers, the professors, even the rabbis. The Jewish people have earned a reputation for intellectual achievement, a stereotype reinforced by disproportionate representation among Nobel Prize laureates and leading scholars across disciplines.

The Ohr HaChaim (Exodus 18:21), however, makes a striking observation that challenges this perspective. He addresses why the Torah goes out of its way to connect Yitro's judicial suggestion with him specifically. The answer reveals something fundamental about why God chose the Jewish people; not because they possessed superior intellectual qualities, but in recognition of the faithfulness the patriarchs had shown Him and as an act of love toward this people. As far as intelligence is concerned, good ideas can come from anywhere, and there is no hesitation in acknowledging wisdom from outside the community.

It is a powerful statement of this principle, and recognition of the gratitude owed to the wise Midianite priest who came to offer his concerned advice, that the very portion in which the Torah is given bears his name. There is, in fact, a beautiful reciprocity in that the parashah is named after him, and Rashi tells us that he received an additional name, Yeter, to represent the parashah he caused to be added to the Torah, the judicial system that would allow Moses to delegate authority and create sustainable governance for the nation.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points to a revealing detail that builds on the Ohr HaChaim's insight. When the verse states “Vayishma Moshe”—“and Moses listened” (Exodus 18:24)—the Torah is emphasizing that Moses

needed Yitro to teach him these administrative basics. Moses had no independent qualifications as a lawmaker or organizer. He was simply a vessel for God's will. This humility, this recognition that wisdom can come from unexpected sources, creates the space for the true source of Jewish pride to be identified.

The Oznayim LaTorah makes a related observation. Other nations are united by common race or territory. Among the Jewish people, families have often been divided by circumstances and geography. What brings them together is not any racial or genetic characteristic, but rather a shared belief system, a commitment to Torah and its values.

This focus on the name of the parashah and of Yitro himself leads to another point about naming. When Rashi identifies which section Yitro added, he doesn't cite its opening words; rather, he refers to it as "Atah Techezeh"—"you shall see"—a phrase from the middle of that passage. Rabbi Meir Shapiro addressed this with an incisive observation: anyone can identify a problem, yet recognition goes to the one who provides the solution. Yitro didn't merely observe that Moses was overwhelmed; he presented a concrete, implementable answer.

This principle of problem-solving over problem-identification resonated deeply in Rabbi Shapiro's own life. When he founded Daf Yomi, critics had no trouble articulating why Jewish learning was in decline. They could identify the problem with ease. What they lacked was a plan. Rabbi Shapiro wasn't deterred by those who offered only criticism without solutions. He created a practical framework that would unite Jews across the world in daily Talmud study, a system that not only continues to this day but thrives as one of the most successful educational initiatives in Jewish history.

To take the theme of names a further step, the parashah's name is particularly noteworthy because "Yitro" is not actually the opening word. The first word is "Vayishma"—"and he heard." While custom has developed in various ways regarding how parashiyot are named, the choice to use Yitro's name rather than the opening word represents an additional measure of deliberate recognition.

It is particularly notable because that first word is not insignificant; it actually carries tremendous importance. The Talmud (Zevachim 116a) asks what exactly Yitro heard that prompted him to come to the Jewish people. The word "vayishma" in the verse implies not merely hearing but responding with action. Three possible choices are given as to which event brought him: the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the war with Amalek, and the giving of the Torah. Rashi mentions only the first two.

In the context of this question, there is a discussion about whether Yitro came before or after the giving of the Torah. Nachmanides asks why, if he came after that momentous event, the text does not inform us that he had heard about it. R. Simcha Zissel Broide (Sam Derech) offers an answer that emphasizes the Torah's focus on the splitting of the sea, precisely because that miraculous occurrence was heard in three distinct ways by different populations. The nations of the world heard and were frightened, but continued living as before. Amalek heard and attacked. Yitro heard and responded with wisdom.

The Midrash (Tanchuma Yitro 3:2) expands on these different reactions through the language of Proverbs 19:25: "Strike a scoffer and the simple will become clever; reprove an understanding person and he will gain knowledge." The "scoffer" refers to Amalek, who witnessed the miracles and nevertheless attacked. The "understanding person" is Yitro, who heard the same news and came to join the Jewish people. The Midrash praises Yitro using this very language, as can be seen in Rashi's commentary on that verse in Proverbs.

These responses reveal a crucial component of this story. The splitting of the Sea represented a moment of miraculous salvation and divine intervention, followed almost immediately by Amalek's devastating attack. The Darkhei No'am of Slonim suggests that Yitro came not only to give advice but also to seek it. Having heard of these dramatic swings, he wanted to understand how one maintains consistency through such upheaval. The answer, ultimately, will be found through the Torah itself.

The Nachalat Eliezer raises a penetrating question about Yitro's conversion. Why did he convert rather than simply rely on his own intellect and wisdom? Yitro witnessed Amalek's pointless and self-destructive war against the Jewish people, which demonstrated the overwhelming power of bias and personal interest. Even the wisest person needs something beyond their own reasoning to guide them reliably.

The Ohr HaChaim's emphasis on the faithfulness of the patriarchs rather than intellectual superiority brings the picture into focus. Abraham was indeed a man of great intelligence and wisdom. He engaged with a transcendent system of morality and committed himself to it, while also creating a legacy of kindness and personal concern, all of which the Torah acknowledges (Gen. 18:19) as the reason for his selection; not his intellectual prowess, but his moral character, faith, and his readiness to transmit that message to his family, then and for all generations.

Intelligence is not the defining quality of the Jewish people. What matters is the commitment to something higher: to a moral framework rooted in divine command, to a tradition that would define Abraham's descendants. The Talmud emphasizes that Yitro didn't merely come to offer his advice; he actually converted and threw his lot in with the Jewish people. This wise man, this exemplar of intellectual achievement from among the nations, joined the Abrahamic vision, setting the stage for many righteous converts throughout Jewish history.

Perhaps this is why some refer to the parashah as "Vayishma Yitro," combining the two words. The title captures not just what Yitro heard, but how he responded; with recognition, action, and commitment. He understood that the Torah offers something intelligence alone cannot provide: the guide for morality and life, the framework that provides consistency when everything else is in flux. What the Jewish people received was something of an entirely different order; not superior intellect, but the Torah and its mission, the foundation that shapes the very essence of how to live and who to be.

from: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>

date: Feb 5, 2026, 3:31 AM

subject: **Rav Kook on Yitro: Reward and Punishment**
Yitro: Reward and Punishment

How did Moses first present the Torah and its laws to Israel?

The Talmud (Shabbat 87a) records a disagreement. According to Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, Moses began by warning the people of the penalties for violating the Torah, and only afterward spoke of its rewards. Others maintain that Moses reversed the order, first describing the rewards of observance and only later the punishments for transgression.

Rav Kook explained that this dispute reflects two distinct educational approaches, two different ways of guiding the soul toward holiness and spiritual growth.

First Liberate, Then Illuminate

Rabbi Yehudah held that we must begin by confronting a person's darker impulses. It is necessary to first battle the traits of selfishness, coarseness, and materialism. Only then will the soul be free to rise up in purity and realize its lofty potential.

Once these forces are neutralized, the light of Torah can shine clearly. For this reason, Moses first warned of punishment, loosening the grip of destructive tendencies. Only afterward did he speak of reward, so that their souls' yearnings for good and truth would be wholehearted.

Illumination That Refines All Forces

The second approach takes a different path. Rather than uprooting negative tendencies at the outset, it seeks to flood the soul with light. The soul's raw energies are not immediately suppressed; instead, they are redirected and harnessed for holy purposes.

When divine light fills the soul, even coarse impulses can intensify spiritual vitality. These energies are elevated and pressed into the service of holiness itself. Only what remains resistant, what cannot be refined, is uprooted.

According to this view, Moses began by describing the rewards of Torah observance. His words strengthened confidence and awakened the soul's inner light, drawing all life-forces toward holy service. Once the soul was uplifted, the remaining dross could be addressed through warnings and discipline.

Both paths reflect a shared aim. Reward and punishment are educational means, guiding the soul toward its highest potential. Whether by first restraining darkness or by first amplifying light, Moses led Israel to a life in which their capacity for holiness could be fully realized.

Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, pp. 181-182 on Shabbat 87a

from: Rabbi Yochanan Zweig genesis@torah.org rabbizweig@torah.org

date: Feb 5, 2026, 1:51 PM

subject: Rabbi Zweig on the Parsha - Opiate Of The Elite

Rabbi Zweig on the Parsha

By Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

Parshas Yisro

Opiate Of The Elite

“The entire people saw the thunder and the flames...” (20:15)

Rashi cites the Midrash which teaches that since the verse states “kol ha’am ro’im es hakolos” – “the entire nation was able to see the thunder”, miraculously all those who suffered from impaired vision had their sight restored. Similarly, since the verse states that the entire nation responded “na’aseh venishmah” – “we will do and we will obey”, all those who were deaf or mute were miraculously healed. Why is physical perfection a prerequisite for the Sinaitic revelation?

The Torah is dispelling the myth that religion is primarily a crutch for the infirm and misfortunate of society. Religion has always been prevalent amongst the lower classes of society, bringing them solace and hope in the face of the travails of their daily lives. The elite have generally shunned religion with affluence and health in inverse proportion to religious observance. The Jews leaving Mitzrayim were all laden with great wealth and were miraculously cured from any physical ailment, for Hashem wanted to ensure that there should be no misconceptions as to the nature of the Jewish religion; it is not a religion solely for the misfortunate, but on the contrary, for the elite. 1.20:15

ESSENTIALLY THE SAME “I am Hashem, your G-d, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt...” (20:2)

The commentaries all question why it was necessary for Hashem to identify himself as the G-d who took Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt. Rashi cites the answer given by the Midrash stating that at Sinai, Hashem appeared to Bnei Yisroel as an elderly person, full of compassion, whereas upon leaving Egypt, at the splitting of the Red Sea, He appeared as a powerful warrior. This apparent dichotomy could leave a person with the impression that the world is controlled by different deities. Therefore, Hashem accentuates that He is the same G-d who took Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt. Monotheism is a basic tenet of Judaism introduced to the world by Avraham Avinu. After Avraham, this concept was passed down from father to son, and is the basic belief of every Jew. How could any person standing at Sinai require a message regarding the unity of Hashem? Furthermore, another basic tenet of Judaism is Hashem's omnipotence, His ability to perform any miracle He desires. Why would there be any doubt that the G-d who split the Red Sea and drowned the Egyptians is the same force at the Sinaitic revelation? The Midrash is offering a powerful insight into the level of revelation which occurred at both the Red Sea and Sinai. All miracles require some level of revelation of the presence of Hashem. However, the level of revelation at the splitting of the Red Sea and at Sinai was so strong that, although Hashem is incorporeal, having no body or form, the people experiencing this event perceived that they “saw” Hashem's true essence. It would cause great conflict in the human mind to perceive Hashem's essence in one form, and then again in another. It required a statement from Hashem to prevent any misconceptions and to prove that there were no inconsistencies in His true essence.

1.20:2

TAKING A NEW IDENTITY “who took you out of the land of Egypt” (20:2)

This week's parsha records the Decalogue. The first commandment, which is the basis of all precepts, requires us to believe in the existence of Hashem. Hashem identifies Himself as the One “who took you out of the land of Egypt”. The Ibn Ezra recounts a question which he was asked by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi: Why does Hashem define Himself as the G-d who took us out of Egypt? It seems that a more appropriate title for Hashem would be “G-d, Creator of the Universe”. Defining Hashem as “Creator” identifies Him as the One responsible for all existence, while, “the One who took us out of Egypt” indicates that He is responsible for only one historical incident. Rashi, apparently sensitive to this difficulty, comments “kedai hi hahotsa'ah shetihyu mishubadim li” – “Taking you out of Egypt is sufficient reason for you to be subservient to Me.” Most commentaries interpret that Rashi is explaining that we are obligated to be subservient to Hashem because He saved us from the tyranny of Pharaoh. Citing the Midrash, Rashi offers a second explanation; Hashem was identifying Himself at Sinai as the same power that took Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt. When punishing the Egyptians Hashem appeared as a “man of war”, while at Sinai He appeared as an “elderly man full of compassion”. Hashem was dispelling the notion that there were two different deities. He therefore stated at Sinai “I am the G-d who took you out of Egypt.” How does compelling Bnei Yisroel to subjugate themselves to Him reflect the compassion of an elderly man? Bnei Yisroel left Egypt to begin a relationship with Hashem. Rashi is not stating that the basis of our relationship with Hashem is that we owe Him our allegiance because He saved us. Rather, Rashi is explaining that the basis for every healthy relationship is each party's concern for the well-being of the other. Hashem's taking us out of Egypt reflects His compassion and care for the Jewish people, and it is therefore the cornerstone of the relationship. “Kedai hi hahotsa'a” means that it is fitting that this act should be the basis for our serving Him, for He has shown His commitment and concern for our well-being. The relationship forged at Sinai is described by our Sages as a marriage; by definition it must be exclusionary. Stating that Hashem created the world does not indicate a unique concern for the Jewish People alone. Therefore, it could not be the cornerstone of the marriage. The exodus from Egypt, which was performed exclusively for us, is the appropriate basis of our marital bond.

1. 20:2 2. Ibid 3. Ibid. 4. Ibid. Rabbi Zweig on the Parsha © 2023 by Torah.org.

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date: Feb 5, 2026, 11:20 PM

Understanding the War Against the Jews The Two Great Evils of History: The Islamists and Hitler

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

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?

There is the stereotypical Jew-bashing joke about this. Before coming to the Jews, G-d approached all the nations and asked if they would like to accept the Torah. Each of them refused because of some commandment in the Bible to which they could not possibly adhere. When G-d presented the offer to the Jews, their sole question was: How much do you want for it?

To which G-d responded: “It's for free.”

So the Jews replied: “Give us two.”

Yet the issue demands sincere reflection. Why indeed was there a need for two tablets?

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)vicies, 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 cruelest 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 vile 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. There 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 Vayeishev. 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 Weisel 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>

Sent: Thursday, February 5, 2026 at 06:05:33 PM EST

Subject: My message for Yitro Alan

Yitro contains two main events central to the story of our people. Chapter 18 focuses on Moshe's father-in-law Yitro, who hears of the miracles that Hashem performs for B'Nai Yisrael. The word reaches him in Midian, far from Egypt or B'Nai Yisrael (who are in the Midbar between Egypt and Canaan). Chapter 19 is the story of the Revelation at Har Sinai, the intense experience when Hashem's presence comes to the mountain and is too much for B'Nai Yisrael to experience in person (so they ask Moshe to listen and tell them everything). Rather than focus on either of the two "big" stories, both of which I have discussed in previous years, I decided to observe some connections in the parsha with events elsewhere in the Torah.

How do B'Nai Yisrael end up in Egypt for such an extended period of time?

During an early famine, Avram and Sarai go to Egypt. Avram tells Sarai to pose as his sister, not his wife, for fear that the Egyptians would kill him to take her as a wife (Bereishis 12). God protects them, and Paro tells them to leave. He also gives Avram and Sarai Hagar as a servant. Hagar -- whose name means "the foreigner" -- has a difficult relationship with Sarai, who later (renamed Sarah) sends Hagar and Ishmael away because he is a bad influence on Yitzhak. Sarah's problems with Hagar return after the Revelation as the mitzvah to be kind to strangers and the less advantaged members of society -- a theme that appears throughout the Torah and Navi.

One of the themes in Sefer Shemot is that God brings the plagues to Egypt as part of an educational campaign -- so B'Nai Yisrael, Paro, the Egyptians, and the world will know that "Ani Hashem." God is the supreme power in the world and stronger than all the pagan gods combined. Hashem gives Moshe three signs as a taste of His power: turning his stake into a snake and back again; turning his arm into tzaraat and back again; and turning water into blood (ch. 4). The campaign of plagues is to demonstrate to B'Nai Yisrael (6:7) and the Egyptians (7:5) that "Ani Hashem." When God destroys the Egyptian army and weapons at the Sea of Reeds, the message is immediately clear to B'Nai Yisrael and the Egyptians that Hashem is more powerful than the combined gods of Egypt and the most powerful army of the time.

Despite the primitive methods of communication and travel of the time, word of Hashem's power reaches as far as Midian, where Yitro learns of God's power and his defeat of the Egyptian army. Yitro then brings Moshe's wife and sons to meet B'Nai Yisrael to reunite with Moshe. Moshe tells his father-in-law all that Hashem has done for B'Nai Yisrael, and Yitro is even more impressed -- enough that he prepares a huge feast in honor of Hashem (18:9-12). What did Moshe tell Yitro that topped the story of Hashem defeating the entire Egyptian army?

Moshe explains that God performed these miracles because of His love for B'Nai Yisrael. Yitro and the Egyptians already understood the concept of an all powerful God of war. What was new was the concept and proof of a God who loved and cared for every single Jew. A God who wanted a close relationship with every person and cared for the welfare of every person was a completely new concept, even for Paro (who knew all 70 pagan gods) and Yitro (a priest for Paro and Midian). The concept of a Deity who looks for a close, personal relationship with each individual, which goes back to Adam and Gan Eden, is central to Judaism.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander focuses on a related concept. Moshe and Yeshayahu both have speech imperfections and wonder how they can fulfill their roles as spokesmen for Hashem. God's response is that He provides His messengers with the means to reach their targets. He purifies Yeshayahu and has Moshe spend three days purifying himself and B'Nai Yisrael to make them ready for His messages. Our task for today is to prepare ourselves, to be ready to listen to Hashem's messages, to work on our relations with Hashem (prayer and mitzvot), and to be a part of the spiritual renewal of our people now that all our hostages are back from Gaza. We must remember to care for those of our people less fortunate than we are and to teach our children and grandchildren the messages of Moshe, Yeshayahu, Micah, and our other prophets. Let us make this world a better place for ourselves and those who come after us.

Shabbat Shalom, Alan & Hannah

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 maintain 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 Canaan:

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 HAD'VARIM

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'eresheet, 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 it 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 Gezeilah 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 haDibro:

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 Sinaitic 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 Mosheh 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 Mosheh , “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Mosheh 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 Mosheh 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 Mosheh 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 Mosheh-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 Mosheh 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 opens 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 Pesachim 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 Kibbud 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.

[Parenthetic 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'eresheet 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 'proposition'.

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 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 OMITTS 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'g'vurah 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?

AHAVAH 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'amad Har Sinai remains unclear. However, what 'could have happened' remains man's eternal challenge.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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 chofshit" 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 "Shchina." 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 "I'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 tishm'u 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'anan," 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'anan" 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'Ramban, 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 lightning 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'anan..." 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 "Hadrash Veha'Iyun" (though with some variation). They claim that the sound of the shofar proclaimed, "Moshe yedaber v'ha'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 v'ha'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 4:5. 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 exegetic 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.