



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

## Yitro 5781

### In The Days of Smallness

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 27, 1962)

**T**here is an impression current in our society that religion is solely a question in emotion. If you feel “inspired,” “in the mood,” then you believe, you worship, you observe. But if you are not subjectively attuned to religion, if you do not feel a powerful need for it, if you are not grasped by it, then it is meaningless and irrelevant for you. Some people go so far as to say that he who does not experience deep emotions and does not feel great stirrings, and yet prays and observes religious duties is a hypocrite.

Religion, according to this interpretation, is a subjective experience, a reaction of an autonomous personality, reflecting the moods and needs of man. If you have a feeling for it, then religion is for you; otherwise - keep away from it.

Can traditional Judaism agree with this romanticized notion of religion, so popular today?

To an extent, there are several romantic elements present in classical Judaism, and they are highlighted especially by the movement known as Hasidism. Thus, Judaism knows of, and Hasidism emphasizes, the inwardness of Kavvanah, the inspiration of devekut, the joy of *simchah shel mitzvah*, the outpouring of genuine emotions and ecstasy. It is these that distinguish Hasidism as a unique movement in Judaism. The subjective, human experience of religion is present in all of Judaism but lies at the very heart of Hasidism.

But does this mean that without the emotional outpouring, without the feeling of inspiration, that there is nothing left? - that Torah no longer can place any demands upon a man?

Of course not. We must never confuse Hasidism, which is an authentic religious movement, with this pale and shallow sentimentalism of our age. For the modern temper recognizes religion as “man-made,” as issuing from

the recesses of the human psyche alone. But Judaism firmly maintains that Torah comes from God, that it has clear claims upon the human being, that it is objectively valid, independent of human sentiments. Hasidism too recognizes these eternally valid divine claims; only it taught that it is better to react to God and respond to His demands with joy, with feeling, with ecstasy. But the total claim of Torah certainly goes beyond the passing moods of temperamental humans.

This problem is a real one for moderns. We live in a mundane, secularized world, in a highly technological society in which it is not easy to find inspiration. Our culture encourages bashfulness, not natural overflow of emotions; experiments, not experiences; facts, not feelings. We do not normally feel the urge to pray in utter devotion, to learn Torah for the sake of Heaven, to observe Mitzvot because we love God. If we accept this popular thesis that all religion is a matter of human moods, then, for all practical purposes, Torah must vanish from the world. Those who wait for “inspiration” to pray - usually do not pray.

It is this problem to which the Baal Shem Tov, the sainted founder of the Hasidic movement, addressed himself in a comment on this morning's Sidra. In the description of the revelation of Torah at Sinai we read: ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר - *“And they stood at the bottom of the mountain.”* Our Rabbis of the Talmud ( Shabbat 88) commented as follows:

כפה עליהם הר כגיגית ואמר אם תקבלו מוטב ואם לאו, שם תהא קבורתכם.

*“The Lord lifted up Mount Sinai like a barrel above their heads and said: if you accept the Torah, good and well; if not, I shall lower the mountain on your head, and here shall be your collective graves.”*

God “chose” the people of Israel; they, literally, had no choice. What do we, as individuals, learn from this? The Baal Shem Tov, quoted by his famous disciple Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, states the following:

ללמד שגם כשאנו חושק לתורה ועבודת ה' מ"מ אינו בן חורין  
ליבטל ממנה וידמה כמי שכופין אותו לעשות בע"כ.

*“This teaches us that even when a man does not have an overwhelming desire for Torah or the service of the Lord, nevertheless, he is not free to desist from them; he must imagine as if someone is forcing him to perform these duties against his will - just as God coerced the children of Israel into accepting the Torah at Sinai.”*

And the Baal Shem Tov concludes: והוא דרך טוב לאיש  
- ישראל לימי הקטנות - *“and this is the good way for a Jewish man to follow during the Yemei ha-Katnut, the days of smallness.”*

There are days - nay, years and decades - when we are small: our capacities sorely limited, our spirit puny, our soul desiccated, our sensitivity parched, our hearts shrunken and dried up. Society pushes us towards a constant trivialization. We are immersed in petty details, lost in the shallowness of little problems, little people, and a little self. We abjure large visions, we deny depth, we ignore our own large capacity for experiencing lofty emotions, for an awareness of the transcendent, for a sense of the mysterious, for the daring to lift the veil of everyday life and catch a glimpse of the grandeur and majesty that lie just beyond the world of money and machines, shipping and shopping.

And in these *Yemei ha-katnut*, when we cannot summon up the spirit from the resources within us, in these days too, we must not desist from prayer, from Torah, from Mitzvot. Just as kelal Yisrael accepted the Torah because God chose them and coerced them into it, so we as individuals, in the “days of smallness,” must force ourselves to do and observe, to live and obey, according to the word of God: as if we were big, inspired, uplifted.

There is no greater pleasure, says the Baal Shem Tov, than “davening” or studying Torah during the *Yemei ha-gadlut*, when we feel fully inspired, alert to the whisper of divinity all about us. But there is no greater reward, he continues, for practicing the disciplines of one’s self that results in observing, in studying, in practicing Jewishness during the *Yemei ha-katnut* ! For the only way to arrive at *gadlut* - greatness - is to live responsibly and respectfully through the periods of *Katnut* - smallness. Those who are defeated by triviality and pettiness cannot hope to succeed

to greatness and eminence. Only he who can “daven Minchah” in his office, despite a crowded calendar and a mind cluttered with commonplaces, can hope, some day, to experience true *gadlut*, an exquisite *aliyat neshamah* - the soaring of the soul and ascension of the spirit - during a Neilah service or other very special occasion. Only a person who studies Torah and attends classes regularly despite an inner inertia will some day experience the unique, full, and breathless joy in perceiving new intellectual horizons and spiritual vistas in Torah itself. For Torah is not primarily a matter of human moods; it is primarily a matter of the divine will. If we respond to that will when we are caught up in the moods of mediocrity, in *Yemei ha-Katnut*, then it will be His will to grant us a loftier, more sublime, and more exalted experience of *gadlut*.

The man who prays only when is moved to do so, who studies only when he is overwhelmed by intellectual curiosity - is like a mother who feeds her child only when she is inspired by his loveliness rather when the child is hungry, or like the husband who is faithful to his wife only when he feels stirred by a great love for her. It is a sure recipe for remaining forever stranded in the stagnating swamps of smallness; the *Yemei ha-Katnut*.

Hasidim tell us the following story: There was a small hamlet to which travelers from the outside world came only very rarely. One day the townspeople noticed that their watches were not synchronized. Every one showed a different time, so that most likely no one had the right time. As a result, all the townspeople except one put their watches on their shelves and failed to wind them. This one man said: although I am sure I do not have the right time, nevertheless, I will keep my watch wound. Several months later, a traveler chanced upon the hamlet. The people surrounded him and asked him for news from the outside world, and then - for the right time. He took out his watch and told them. The people ran back to recover their watches and set them properly. But, lo and behold, none of the watches would work, for they had grown rusty - except the watch which this one man had kept winding all along despite the ridicules of his friends.

So it is with prayer, or Torah, or any other religious duty. Unless you keep it “running” constantly it will be of no avail to you in the moment of crisis when you really need it. He who cannot abide them during the “days of smallness,” when he knows that his soul is not synchronized with sublimity - that man will fail during the opportunities of

the “days of greatness.” He will be rusty. His prayer will be puny, his worship an abortin, his study of Torah a frustration.

The Rabbi of Kotzk asked: why, in the Shema, do we read: והיו הדברים האלה על לבבך, “and these words shall be on your heart?” Why do we say *al levavekha*, “on your heart” and why not *bi-levavekha*, “in your heart?” And the Rabbi of Kotzk answers: it is not too often that the heart is open and that the words of God can enter directly into it. Usually the heart is closed, indifferent, and even callous. Yet the Torah demands that if the words of the Lord cannot come right into an open heart, then at least they shall be placed on the closed heart, so that during those moments of greatness and inspiration, when the human heart suddenly opens up, then the words of Torah which had been piled on it will tumble in and fill the heart with the seeds of true greatness and sublimity. The reward for the strenuous efforts made during the long, dreary, dismal,

and uninspired *Yemei ha-Katnut* comes during those rare but precious moments of *gadlut*.

יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך ד' צורי וגואלי

“May the words of my mouth be pleasing to Thee, and the meditation of my heart come before Thee, O Lord my Rock and Redeemer.”

Even when, during the “days of smallness,” only my lips move and only my mouth speaks, but my heart remains mute and my spirit sunk in a stony silence, even then יהיו לרצון אמרי פי, may my efforts be pleasing to Thee. So that, when, during the “days of greatness,” my heart opens up, then לפניך לבי והגיון לבי לפניך, may the meditations of my heart rise up before Thee in all their pristine glory.

For Thou, O Lord art Tzuri, my Rock who supports me in my weakness and smallness; and also go'ali, my Redeemer who raises me on high and gives wings to my soul during my moments of greatness.

Read more at [www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage](http://www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage).

## How Significant are the Ten Commandments?

Rabbi Aaron Kraft

There was no moment in all of human history more dramatic than when Hashem gave us the עשרת הדברות. But inexplicably, our sages give the impression that the עשרת הדברות are not all that significant. In fact, our practice to stand while the baal koreh reads them in shul, is subject to heated debate amongst Medieval commentators. The gemara in ברכות יב records that people requested the inclusion of the עשרת הדברות in תפילה. But תפילה decided against placing this extra emphasis on the group of ten commandments. Why?

Rabbi Norman Lamm suggested that the concern with placing too much emphasis on the Decalogue is that it may be mistaken for a simple formula. There is something intellectually unsettling and religiously harmful about reducing God's divine work – the key to our spiritual existence – to ten easy rules. Society, while certainly quite complex, craves simplicity. Numerous self-help articles

and books focus on enhancing our lives and making them easier in “just five simple steps,” or something of the sort.

Our sages, in de-emphasizing the Ten Commandments, teach us that life is nuanced and complex. There is no iphone app that can simply solve every dilemma we face. If we place too much focus on the Decalogue, we may reach the false conclusion that there are 10 easy steps to a successful relationship with God. חז"ל understood that sophistication brings wonder, grandeur and excitement into our existence. Our complex system of halacha allows for myriad paths to engage with the Divine and bring sanctity into our midst. God is grand and so our approach to developing a meaningful and deep connection to Him requires ambition. Such an approach, although more effortful, certainly encourages us to stretch beyond our comfort zones and when we venture into uncharted waters, we never know what we can discover.

## On the Other Side

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman

This week's parsha recounts the revelation at Mt. Sinai and the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people. This section is preceded by an account

of Yisro's visit to Moshe and his advice to him about the judicial system. There is a dispute in the talmud, discussed at length by the Torah commentaries, whether Yisro came

before the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai or afterwards. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra discusses the issue at length, and concludes that Yisro came after the Torah was given. Why, then, was this section about Yisro written out of its chronological order? Ibn Ezra explains that the Torah wanted to place the section about Yisro after the preceding section, in parshas Beshalach, about the war with Amalek, to contrast the reaction of Amalek to the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, to the reaction of Yisro. While Amalek reacted to all the miracles that were performed for the Jewish people by attacking them, Yisro reacted by joining and benefiting them. Based on this comment, we can, perhaps, say further that we are thereby given a more balanced perspective of the role of non-Jewish nations in the world, as an introduction to God's message to the people before giving them the Torah. As explained by the Seforno, God told the people that all of the nations of the world are His children, and important to Him, but the Jewish nation is an 'am segulah,' a treasured nation, with whom He has a special relationship. Still, the goal of that relationship is to influence other nations, as well, to recognize God as the Creator and Master of the universe. Therefore, the story of Yisro precedes this section, and follows the section on Amalek's attack, to demonstrate that, in contrast to Amalek, it is possible to influence members of other nations to recognize and accept God as their Sovereign. I would like to suggest another possible connection between these two sections of our parsha, based on a verse describing Yisro's reaction to Moshe's recounting of the events of the exodus to him.

The Torah relates that Moshe told Yisro about all that God had done to Pharaoh and Egypt for the sake of Yisroel. then, we are told, "Yisro rejoiced over all the good that God had done for Yisroel..." (Shemos 18:8-9). The word for 'and he rejoiced' is 'vayichad,' and it is explained by the Midrash Tanchuma, cited by Rabbi Avrohom Schorr in his work HaLekach VehaLibuy, as connected to the word 'vayihad.' Rabbi Schorr then mentions that the Kotzker Rebbe explained that this midrash is similar to a midrash on Megillas Esther, which explains that when Mordechai is referred to as "ish yehudi," or, a Jewish man, it should be read as 'ish yechidi,' or a singular, unique man. While Rabbi Schorr brings two explanations of this allusion that were given by students of the Kotzker Rebbe, he offers his own explanation of the connection the Rebbe made between these verses. Rabbi Schorr suggests that using the

term 'ish yechidi' in reference to Mordechai refers to the fact that Mordechai acted in a unique way, when he refused to bow down to Haman even though the rest of the Jews in Shushan did bow down to him. In this way, Mordechai was akin to Avrohom, who, according to another midrash, was called Ivri, or Hebrew, because he was on one 'eiver,' or side, of the world, and everyone else was on the other side. Avrohom asserted his unique individuality among the rest of the people in the world by recognizing God and attaching himself to Him, while the rest of the world worshipped idols. Similarly, says Rabbi Schorr, Mordechai would not bow down to Haman, who wore the image of an idol around his neck, even though everyone else in Shushan did. So too, continues Rabbi Schorr, did Yisro act as an individual, separating himself from the other nations and joining Yisroel, after witnessing the miracles of the redemption and hearing about them from Moshe.

Based on this midrash and Rav Schorr's explanation of it, we can suggest a further reason for the Torah's placing of the section concerning Yisro before the section of the revelation and giving of the Torah. Rashi mentions a midrash which says that the verse "I am the Lord, your God," which opens the Ten commandments, is written in the singular because God spoke to each person according to his capacity to absorb what he would hear. Stated a bit differently, God spoke to each person in accordance with his own unique personality and abilities, thus charging each person to develop his own unique relationship with Him, similar to what Yisro had done. Thus, Yisro's unique act of accepting God was to serve as an example for the Jewish nation as a whole, in that each of them needed to develop their own unique relationship with God, as well, as they would experience it during God's revelation to them at Mt. Sinai.

We may, perhaps, add to our suggestion the fact that the simple meaning of the word; 'vayichad' is to rejoice. We have mentioned a number of times that according to Rav Yosef Albo in his Sefer HaIkkarim, a person rejoices when he acts according to the nature of his soul, and since the nature of the Jewish soul is to do the mitzvos, it should be the natural reaction of a Jew to rejoice when doing mitzvos. As an adjunct to Rav Albo's comment, we may add that this joy should be heightened when a person is able to develop the unique aspect of his relationship with God, which is implanted in his soul by the Almighty before he is born. According to Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zt'l, this is the deeper meaning behind the gemara (Niddah 30b) which

tells us that an angel teaches Torah to a person while still in the mother's womb. Each person is taught a unique aspect of Torah that only he will be able to reveal to the world. Rav Aharon Selveichik, zt'l, further taught that the verse in Bereishis which teaches us that God created man *betzalmo*—should be translated, not as 'in His image,' which would imply the corporeality of God, but as 'in his image,' meaning, in man's own unique image, which he is charged to actualize during his lifetime. With the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, this unique aspect was now channeled through the Torah, and we must each fulfill our unique mission in life through the manner in which we observe the Torah and its mitzvos. Doing so leads to simcha, as taught by Yisro in the section which precedes the giving of the Torah.

## Thought Control

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on February 5, 2015)

**T**he pashut pshat is that according to the vast majority of poskim, there is an *issur*—even *b'machshava*—to desire *beis reyecha, eishes reyecha*, etc. (anything that belongs to another person). And therefore, Ibn Ezra asks the famous question—granted that the Torah can tell us not to do something, but how can the Torah can you not to want something? You want what you want, and you should control your actions. You can't help what you want.

There are several excellent responses to this. Ibn Ezra himself gave a famous answer. It's not true that you "just" want what you want. There's such a thing as "cognitive therapy." What you want depends on how you think about the world. He famously gives an example of a peasant in a village someplace. If a royal procession passes by and the peasant sees a beautiful princess, he doesn't have a *tayva* (desire) to marry the princess. Because it's not *shayach* (possible) for him to marry a princess—he is not in the "*parsha*" to marry her. You only have a *tayva* for something, Ibn Ezra says, that you have a '*hava amina*' to do. If you don't have a '*hava amina*' to do something anyway, then you will not have a '*tayva*.' It would be undoubtedly cool if I could fly like a bird. But I don't have a *tayva* for that because I know that it is not realistically possible. So he says that Torah is telling us here to engage in "cognitive therapy." If I think that I could steal something from someone else, I would have *tayva* to violate this '*issur*.' But

In last week's message, we mentioned the explanation that the Ramban gave to Rashi's comment concerning the mitzvos given at Marah. Rashi writes that God gave the people some mitzvos to occupy themselves with before we they were actually commanded, so that, when they would be commanded to perform them, they would do so with joy and alacrity. Following our explanation of the significance of mentioning the episode of Yisro before the giving of the Torah, we can add that Yisro's example was a further spur for the people to accept the mitzvos and perform them with joy, just as Yisro joyously accepted upon himself to become a Jew after hearing of God's display of greatness and of His kindness to the Jewish people during the process of their redemption from Egypt.

if we ingrain in ourselves that, NO! There are rules. There is "right" and there's "wrong." And something that belongs to someone else belongs to him, and I have no right to it. Then, obviously, I am not going to take it! When I see something that belongs to someone else, I will not desire it because I would not have a '*hava amina*' that this is something that I would take. That's one approach.

The Beis Halevi says a similar *pshat* on the Chumash here. He says: You know, we have strong desires. If a person sees a delicious cheesecake or a pretty girl, etc., they will have a strong desire. But if all of a sudden, there would be an avalanche, or an earthquake, or a gang war with bullets flying, he would be worried for his life and would forget his *tayva* right away. He will not think about his *tayva* because he will be SO scared about what could happen. And therefore, he also says that a person has to engage in "cognitive therapy." But he has a different kind of "therapy" in mind. He suggests a "cognitive therapy" of an old-style Mussar kind. *Yiras Chet!* I would be so scared to do something wrong! I wouldn't want to walk at the edge of the cliff for the fear that I could fall off. When you see a pretty girl, when you behold a delicious cheesecake—if you imagine yourself to be walking on a tightrope off a cliff—you won't have any *tayva* because you are too scared of dying. He says, "if someone really has this *Yiras Chet*, and they understand what danger they could be in if they do get this thing and the '*onesh*' (punishment) they would

incur, then they would suppress their *tayva*.” That’s more of a negative “cognitive therapy” approach.

However, the Ksav v’Kabala has a fascinating *pshat* here. He gives an entirely different psychological approach to avoiding ‘*lo sachmod*’ and ‘*lo sisaveh*.’ There are different kinds of things, he explains, that people have that could lead you to be jealous. People could have possessions that you could buy with money or with social status, etc. Those are the things you could be jealous of and violate ‘*lo sachmod*’ and ‘*lo sisaveh*.’ It could be that they have a fancier car, a fancier house, or a lot of money—whatever that may be. And then, there are things about which we say, “*Kinas Sofrim tarbeh chachma*.” A person could have a lot of Torah knowledge. He says: Ah. If you are jealous of that person’s Torah knowledge, that’s a good thing—“*Kinas Sofrim tarbeh chachma*.” It’s not a an *issur*. Actually, it’s a ‘*mida tova*.’ A person has a lot of good midos. They do a lot of mitzvos. If you are jealous of that, that’s a terrific thing. He says, What’s ultimately the difference? There are certain things that if I have them, then you don’t have them. Someone could take them. It’s a ‘zero-sum game.’ Those are the ‘*beis reyecha*,’ ‘*eishes reyecha*,’ the ‘*sadeh*,’ the ‘*eved*,’ and the ‘*shor*,’ etc. He says: Those are the things in the *gashmius* (physical) world for which we have *gashmius tayvas*. If you want the kinds of things that you could take from other

people, and both cannot have, then you get into problems of ‘*lo sachmod*’ and ‘*lo sisaveh*.’ If you want those kinds of things—the ‘*hanaos*’ of *gashmius*, out of life, then it will be very challenging for you. Ibn Ezra will have a good *kasha* (question). But if you change your *she’ifos* (things that you strive for) in your life. If for you, what’s important is not how much money you have or how fancy is your car. But, instead, you focus on ‘*maasim tovim*, on Torah, mitzvos, and *ruchnius*. Those are not the kind of things you could take from someone else. Those are the kinds of things that if two people want, or if they are jealous of each other—they can be *mechazek* themselves in these areas, and then they will both be able to attain it. Take ‘light,’ for example. If you take light from someone else, then you could both have it. Therefore, the Torah is telling you here, “Don’t want those things that are physical, that one person takes from another.” Because you will end up with a *nissayon* (difficult challenge) in ‘*lo sachmod*’ and ‘*lo sisaveh*.’ Change your perspective in life to realize that that’s not what’s important in life. You can’t take that with you. Instead, recognize that Torah and mitzvos and *maasim tovim* and *ruchnius* is what’s truly important. And then, “*aderaba*,” (on the contrary) go ahead and be jealous of your friend! — “*Kinas sofrim tarbeh chachma*.” And that way you will not have any problem with ‘*lo sachmod*’ and ‘*lo sisaveh*.’

## Emotional Responsibility

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

**H**ow can the Torah command us to feel or not feel certain emotions?

Many of us are under the impression that our emotions just happen to us without our input and against our will. Something or someone pushes our emotional buttons, which triggers a neural circuit in our brain and causes a physiological reaction, and there is nothing we could do to stop it from happening. My coworker makes me angry, my spouse makes me happy, traffic makes me anxious, and my neighbor causes me to be envious. Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, a neuroscientist and psychologist, labels this perspective as the classical view of emotions. It has roots in ancient philosophy and advocates in modern psychology. Yet, she argues based on her decades of research, that it is utterly incorrect.

In her bestselling book, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, Dr. Barrett describes her theory

of constructed emotion, contending that our emotions are constructed and created by us. We are the architects of our own emotion through our own interpretations of events, which can be based on our past experiences and our social and cultural environments. This theory can be both empowering and (can be interpreted as) anxiety provoking, as it confers upon each one of us to take responsibility for our own emotions.

Writing in the 12th century, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra addresses the subject of emotional responsibility as it relates to the 10th commandment, namely, the prohibition to be envious of a friend. Many people, Ibn Ezra writes, believe that we are not in control of our emotions, and therefore the Torah cannot command us in matters of the mind. They could understand the legislation of behavior, but not of internal states of being. Yet, Ibn Ezra argues that the Torah can and does command us to regulate our

emotions and that it is within our control to do so.

Ibn Ezra provides a parable whose relatability may have diminished in the modern era, but the message still resonates. He argues that a pauper living in the 12th century would not be desirous of a princess because of the impossibility of the prospect of courting her. He likens such a desire to wanting to have wings and fly in the sky. Since it is impossible, such a thought will not lead to an emotion. Similarly, there are certain religious perspectives, beliefs, and interpretations that we are expected to construct that will help prevent us from being envious of our friends. If we were to firmly believe that G-d provides us with all that we need, and we were to work on being content with our own lot, then we would not feel envious. While these may not be easy beliefs to inculcate, since they are within our control to work on, we are held responsible for the emotions we experience.

Building upon Ibn Ezra's idea that we can construct

and control our emotions, later commentaries provide alternative strategies for how to do so in the context of envy. Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik in his commentary Beit Halevi suggests that if one has a strong desire or temptation and is then startled, the temptation will be drowned out due to the fear. So too, if one has awe of G-d, that awe would preempt the temptation. Alternatively, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg suggests that if one's heart is filled with love and passion for G-d, there would be no room for envious feelings of others.

While these strategies may seem awfully lofty, they position our emotions within our own ability and control. While it may not be easy and it may take time and effort, we can work hard on constructing our worldview in such a way that we can take responsibility for our own emotions. By doing so, we can live more empowered, spiritual and emotionally healthy lives.

## Two Diamonds , A Chassidic Rebbe and a Cow

*Rabbi Moshe Taragin*

**T**wo intriguing stories about the eternal impact of Har Sinai— one fable about two engagement rings and one actual story about a Chassidic Rebbe and a cow. First the tale of the two rings.

Typically, a husband presents his bride with only one engagement ring- a ring she will treasure throughout her marriage; it would be unusual and even a bit abnormal to gift two separate engagement rings ... unless the husband didn't trust the woman to look after the original one. In that instance, it would be wise to present the young bride with two engagement rings to assure that she always has a backup.

The midrash applies this story to the events at Har Sinai. Atop this mountain, God and the Jews were married, and this marriage was riveted upon two diamond rings. The iconic Jewish response of 'na'aseh v'nishmah' the dual promise to both perform mitzvot as well as listen to God- amounted to two engagements rings. According to the midrash, God implored the Jewish people: you may misplace the engagement ring of 'na'aseh' but preserve the engagement ring of 'nishmah' What makes the ring of 'na'aseh' so insecure and, likewise, what renders the ring of 'nishmah' so durable and eternal?

The ring of 'na'aseh' reflects commitment to Divine commandments, a novel concept for ancient religions

which saw gods as merely stronger versions of human beings. In those paganistic systems, wholesale submission to the commands of a Higher being was absurd. Har Sinai introduced a broad system of mitzvot spanning the entirety of human experience; we live 'summoned lives' beckoned to fulfill the commands of a transcendent God. The 'na'aseh' declaration cemented our readiness to submit to commandments.

Furthermore, the sequencing of 'na'aseh' prior to 'nishmah' was also momentous. We enthusiastically accepted Divine obligation before studying the details or analyzing the logic of God's commandments. Having been rescued from Egypt and transported through the dry ocean bed, the Jews had enough trust in God to accept religion as an "article of faith" without inspecting the fine details. Trust lies at the basis of any relationship and, even more so, forms the cornerstone of religious belief. At Sinai, the stout faith and the fervent embrace of mitzvot glittered through the declaration of 'na'aseh'!!

However, the 'na'aseh' ring is also transient. God recognized the inherent weakness of human nature and the frailty of religious commitment. However precious the stone of 'na'aseh' seemed, God knew, that with the passage of time, commitment to His word would eventually

wane. It didn't take more than a few weeks for the Jews to construct a golden calf and relinquish their 'na'aseh' conviction. Throughout history, not every Jew would be faithful to the call of 'na'aseh'. Historical pressures, financial poverty, philosophical confusion, cultural drifting and, of course, hostile anti-Semitism, would cause Jews to wander from the path of mitzvot and disregard the ring of 'na'aseh'. For this reason, God cautioned us to protect the ring of 'nishmah' even if we were to turn a blind eye to the glow of the na'aseh ring.

The ring of 'nishmah' is based upon something even more fundamental than the Torah and mitzvot delivered on this mountain. Even if the mitzvah pledge of 'na'aseh' is renounced, the memory of 'nishmah' will still persist. Beyond whatever 'content' we received at Sinai, the entire Jewish people spoke directly with God in an unmediated fashion. Judaism stakes a bold claim which no other religion has ever asserted nor will ever allege- that 3.5 million people stood, shoulder-to-shoulder speaking directly with God in a non-hallucinatory fashion, and in a manner which was corroborated by joint experience. We didn't receive the word of God indirectly, through a prophet, but directly heard His voice. Jews may stray from the specific mitzvot of Sinai or may neglect the Torah delivered from Heaven, but the voice of God forever resonates within the deep recesses of every Jewish soul. No matter how far a Jew strays from Torah and mitzvot, the voice of God and the memory of the direct conversation with God remains etched in Jewish identity. Though the 'na'aseh' diamond of Torah and mitzvot may ultimately be lost, the 'nishmah' diamond never disappears; the echo of the Sinai conversation haunts Jewish consciousness and resonates eternal within a Jewish heart.

For this reason, Har Sinai began with the recital of the most iconic pasuk in the entire Torah. Prior to delivering the Ten Commandments, God launched Har Sinai by reciting 'shema yisrael'. Before delivering the content, God announced that the "conversation" was about to begin and that the Jews should literally listen to His voice- shema yisrael. It is not incidental that no matter how distant a

Jew strays, he can still recite the verse of shema yisrael. That verse was God's way of showcasing the value of the conversation with Him even in the absence of loyalty to Torah and to the legal mandates of Sinai. The haunting pasuk of shema, which describes the conversation with God lingers within the subconscious of every Jew, regardless of their fidelity to Torah and mitzvot.

Now to the story about the cow. Reb Moshe of Kobrin the 18th century Chassidic Rabbi once joined Reb Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apta for Shabbat arriving early to participate in the pre- Shabbat recital of the book of shir hashirim. The sacred melody of their sweet singing filled the air and Rav Avraham looked radiant as Shabbat approached. Suddenly, a stench-filled farmer burst into the room bringing with him the foul odors of cow stables. What possible question could warrant this rude interruption of the hallowed moment?

The farmer began moaning about his cow which was afflicted with a life-threatening illness. Much to Rav Moshe's shock, Rabbi Avram of Apta answered the question patiently, compassionately assisting the desperate owner of the stricken cow. Unable to contain his astonishment, Rav Moshe, the guest, asked Rav Avram why he tolerated this impolite disruption of his Shabbat preparations. Rav Avram answered that this simple villager wasn't actually interested in a remedy for his cow. He was seeking a connection with his Rebbe and through his Rebbe, a connection with God. He desperately wanted contact with the Rebbe, and the cow story was merely the pretext. Sometimes, in life, people seek connection with us and supply pretexts for grabbing our attention; we all must learn to read between the lines!

For that simple farmer the content of his question wasn't nearly as important as the conversation itself. So it was for that anxious farmer and so it is for so many people who are puzzled by religious confusion. Har Sinai was a moment of Torah content but also of a direct conversation with God. Sadly, for many, the content has become less compelling but the conversation with God is unforgettable. Some Jews wear two rings, others wear one; they each dazzle!

## The Sweet Sound of Torah

*Mrs. Michal Horowitz*

In this week's parsha, Parshas Yisro, the Bnei Yisrael arrive at the foothills of Mt. Sinai on Rosh Chodesh Sivan. It is here that the most exalted, awe-inspiring,

life-altering and nation-forming Revelation takes place, as the Almighty reveals Himself to the nation with the giving of the Torah and the Aseres Ha'Dibros (Ten Declarations).

In regard to the words of G-d, as transmitted to the people through Moshe, the Torah records: וַיַּעֲנוּ כָּל-הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ, וְכָל-אֶשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה - *and the entire nation answered together and said, "Everything that Hashem has spoken we shall do!"* (Shemos 19:8).

It is our acceptance of Torah, our commitment to mitzvos, and our adherence to living by the word of G-d that has shaped our people from time immemorial. It is the Torah and mitzvos, our guidebook in life, that gives our lives meaning, purpose, inspiration and clarity.

Each morning in our Shachris Tefilos, during the Birkas Ha'Shachar (morning blessings), we recite a series of brachos over Torah. We bless G-d Who is the Nosein Torah l'Amo Yisrael (the Giver of Torah to His nation, Israel); the Melamed Torah l'Amo Yisrael (the Teacher of Torah to His nation, Israel); and we pray that we, and our children and their children, should always be involved in the words of Torah - la'asok b'divrei Torah.

Rav Soloveitchik zt'l teaches, "Birkhot HaTorah are not related to the cognitive act of Talmud Torah, but rather are associated with the axiological (philosophical study of value; value system) involvement and consecration to Torah... We do not pronounce a blessing concerning the actual study of Torah - 'lilmod divrei Torah' is not mentioned. What is emphasized is the fascination which divrei Torah possess. La'asok b'divrei Torah means to occupy ourselves, to devote ourselves, to be fascinated (with Torah)... to be emotionally involved in it, not merely 'lilmod divrei Torah,' (not merely) the intellectual act of study.

"Veha'arev na means that Torah should fascinate us, it should allure us, it should become sweet in our mouths. In Veha'arev na we spell out the ideal of mesora, of continuity - 'so that we, our descendants, and the descendants of Your people, the house of Israel, may all know Your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake.' The idea of passing on, of transmitting, of perpetuating divrei Torah, of what I call belonging to the mesora community, is not realized through an intellectual act, but through emotional involvement. You can pass on mathematics because it is very useful for your child to know mathematics or physics. But... it is impossible to pass on an axiological system without loving it, without being dedicated and devoted to it...

"We cannot worship two gods. We cannot divide our emotions, our love, our sympathy, our appreciation, between two fields. Axiologically, we require a monistic attitude, and that means to be devoted to Torah alone"

(Blessing and Thanksgiving, p.53-55).

When our nation accepted Torah at Har Sinai, the contract became binding upon us for all generations - past, present and future. Our commitment to Torah study and Torah-living is so crucial, that the Sages teach that it is one of the three pillars that holds up the entire world: עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵה, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים - *Upon three things does the world stand: upon Torah, service and acts of loving-kindness* (Avos 1:2).

Without Torah learning and asiyas ha'mitzvos, the world would immediately cease to be. It is our obligation to not only live and love Torah, but to transmit this mesora to our children - and their children, and their children's children - as well.

Mr. Irving Bunim z'l (1901-1980 - major askan, philanthropist, and assistant to R' Aharon Kotler zt'l) "once visited Springfield, MA, to try to save its day school. Community leaders convened that evening. At 3 a.m., with the group at an impasse, Bunim wearily asked for the group's attention.

"You ask about the strength of the (Jewish) day school," he said gently. 'I want to answer by telling you the story of the lion and the (song) thrush (a singing bird). One day a little thrush challenged the great king of beasts, saying, 'My voice can reverberate further than yours.' The lion became enraged, and bellowed, 'How dare you challenge the king of the forest?' The lion then summoned all the animals to judge the contest. When they arrived, he emitted a tremendous roar that traveled fifty miles. The thrush's sweet voice followed; it carried 3,000 miles. As the thrush smiled, and the lion stared in wonder, the animals were all perplexed. how, they muttered to each other, could the lowly thrush have a voice so strong that it could carry sixty times farther than the lion's?

"Then,' Bunim smiled, 'they figured it out. When the thrush sang, every succeeding thrush relayed the sweet melody around the world. The entire host of thrushes was signing the same beautiful song.'

"Do you see?' Bunim asked the hushed group. "There are organizations in Jewish life that come forth like lions with a tremendous roar, but after a short time they fade. But (Jewish) day schools are like thrushes: Our children relay the sweet melody of Torah across the map of the United States and across generations. From a single child, or a single school, we suddenly hear the symphony of Torah all over America" (A Fire in His Soul, Feldheim, p.274).

ועתה, אם-שמוע תשמעו בקלי, ושמרתם, את-בריתי--והייתם  
כי-לי כל-הארץ - *and now, if you will surely listen to My voice, and keep My covenant, you will be a treasure to Me from all the nations, for the whole earth is mine; and you will be to Me a*

*kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Shemos 19:5-6).

When we sing the sweet song of Torah, it is a song that reverberates and is heard around the world and through all the generations. And then we will truly be the treasured, exalted and holy nation we are meant to be.

## Divine Retribution

Rabbi Sammy Bergman

When Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, joined Bnei Yisrael in the desert, Moshe informed him of numerous miracles Hashem had performed for the Jewish nation. (Shemot 18:8, Rashi ad loc.) Understandably, Yitro rejoiced upon hearing about the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea, and the victory against Amalek. However, as expressed in Shemot 18:11, Yitro proclaimed his appreciation of Hashem's greatness in a peculiar and cryptic way. Yitro declared that he knew: "Hashem is greater than all the gods" because "badavar asher zadu aleihem", loosely translated: "with the matter they had schemed upon them". Yitro's statement raises two exegetical difficulties. First, simply translating the second half of the verse requires creativity. Second, what specifically impressed Yitro, which caused him to realize Hashem's greatness?

One approach to Yitro's exclamation focuses on Hashem's insight into the Egyptians' evil machinations. Ramban (ad loc.) interprets the verse as follows: "through the matter in which the Egyptians willfully schemed against Israel, I know that Hashem is greater than all the gods." Ramban explains that since Hashem had decreed that the nation of Israel would suffer through slavery and oppression (Bereishit 15:13), if the Egyptians had merely subjugated the Jewish people, Hashem would not have punished them so severely. However, the Egyptians went much further. They plotted to wipe out Israel altogether, and threw male Jewish infants into the sea. Therefore, Hashem led the Egyptians to their destruction. Yitro praised Hashem's ability to detect the evil plans in the hearts of the Egyptians and punish them accordingly.

Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven ("Ran", Derashot HaRan 11) adopts a similar position, but adds another dimension to Hashem's precision in punishing Egypt. Ran notes that instead of simply coercing Pharaoh to free the Jewish people, Hashem waited until Pharaoh consented to let

the Jews leave. Furthermore, by ordering Moshe to tell Pharaoh that the Jews only wanted to leave for three days to serve Hashem in the desert (Shemot 3:18), Hashem incited Pharaoh to pursue the nation of Israel even after he had freed them. Rabbi Nissim suggests that Hashem wanted to punish the Egyptians for the devious plot they had deliberately executed against Israel. Therefore, He caused them to willfully run into the water and drown themselves. Yitro understood the brilliance of Hashem's execution of justice and therefore proclaimed: "Now I know Hashem is greater than all the gods." (18:11)

A second approach to understanding Yitro's cryptic statement concentrates on the idea that Hashem punishes middah k'neged middah or "measure for measure". A midrash (Shemot Rabbah 22) explains our verse: "With the same thing they attempted [to use to eradicate] Israel, with that thing the Omnipresent punished them."

Don Isaac Abarbanel (Shemot ad loc.) explains that in return for attempting to drown Jewish children in the Nile, Hashem brought the Red Sea upon the Egyptians. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (Kedushat Levi ibid.) adds that the Egyptians worshipped and drew its spiritual strength from the Nile River. Therefore, it was doubly impressive that Hashem harnessed the power of water to vanquish them.

Other commentaries expand the concept of middah k'neged middah beyond the limited scope of punishment by water. Malbim (Shemot ad loc.) notes that all ten plagues corresponded to the various forms of suffering the Egyptians inflicted upon the Jewish people. [See Shemot Rabbah 9:10.] Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Birkat haNetziv to Mechilta Beshalach 6) uses this idea to explain a perplexing passage in the Haggadah which describes numerous plagues the Egyptians suffered at the Red Sea. He explains that Hashem personalized the punishment of each Egyptian. They each felt the same anguish to which

they had subjected their Jewish slaves.

While we normally focus on Hashem's mercy, Yitro recognized that we can also learn by paying attention to Hashem's justice. Hashem's precise, multifaceted retaliation

## The Sinai Effect

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

In today's world, the claim of Divine communication would probably raise eyebrows amongst most people. However, the very foundation of belief in Torah begins with the event at Sinai, a moment of Divine Revelation unlike any other. The Jewish people received the Torah not just as a book of law, but through an event whose mechanism of communication made it the indisputable word of God. It is quite difficult to ever understand what the Jewish people themselves experienced. However, through an important set of explanations offered by Rashi, the veracity of the Torah's origin as from God is reiterated and consecrated into our entire ideology.

Immediately after the recording of the event at Sinai, God directs Moshe to command the Jews concerning the prohibition of building idols. The introduction to this section begins with a transitional verse (Shemot 20:19):

*"The Lord said to Moses, "So shall you say to the children of Israel, You have seen that from the heavens I have spoken with you."*

Then God instructs the Jews as follows (ibid 20):

*"You shall not make [images of anything that is] with Me. Gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves."*

The remaining verses in this section deal with further laws concerning the building of altars. It would appear, then, that the rejection of idolatry directly follows from the statement regarding God's transmission to the Jewish people.

Rashi raises an important question on the first cited verse. There, we see that the Torah isolates the idea that God "spoke" to the Jews from the heavens. However, prior to the recording of the episode, the Torah states that God "descended to Har Sinai" (Shemot 19:20). The question is which of these actually took place – was there a "voice" or a "descent". Rashi answers these competing claims as follows:

*"The third verse comes and harmonizes them: "From the heavens He let you hear His voice in order to discipline you,*

*and on earth He showed you His great fire" (Deut. 4:36). His glory was in heaven, His fire and His power were on the earth."*

Rashi indicates here that in fact there was both the "voice" and the "descent."

Rashi then offers a second possibility for explaining the idea of God speaking from the heavens:

*"Alternatively, He bent down the [lower] heavens and the highest heavens and spread them out upon the mountain. So [Scripture] says: "And He bent the heavens, and He came down" (Ps. 18:10)."*

This concept is based on a greater debate found in the Sifra. According to Rabbi Akiva, the heavens came down to Mount Sinai. According to Rebbe, Mount Sinai was elevated to the heavens. Rashi, therefore, would appear to be lining himself up with Rabbi Akiva's position. Of course, we must question what ideas are being presented here. For example, the idea of proximity as applied to God is extremely problematic. God is non-physical, thereby lacking a location. To say that God "descended" somewhere, if taken literally, would challenge this fundamental tenet of Judaism. As well, what exactly do we learn from the concept of God "bending the heavens"? What is this additional possibility teaching us?

The first verse, cited above, focuses our attention on the uniqueness of the event at Sinai. This Divine Revelation was a solitary moment in history, expressed in the very nature of the communication between God and the Jewish people. Rashi's commentary is focused on this communication, which serves as the clearest proof of the singular reality of God. As noted, there is an apparent disharmony in the historicity of Sinai – was it the "voice" of God or was it His "descent" to Sinai. Rashi's answer seems to be simple: it was both. How do we understand this? Clearly, neither of these descriptions can be taken literally, as they ascribe physicality to God. Rather, there is a critical idea regarding the event at Sinai that is being brought to the forefront. The concept of God's voice is referencing the idea of a metaphysical

revelation, a comprehension of God that the Jewish people received through this communication. Hearing this voice was God's method of establishing His metaphysical "source," that He was qualitatively removed from all existence. The only conclusion the Jewish people arrive at after hearing this voice was the truth of God's existence. At the same time, the event at Sinai was punctuated with clear breaches in the laws of nature. The presence of so many miracles (His fire) as well as the clear demonstration of God's complete dominion over the universe (His glory) could only be understood as the actions of the Creator. What Rashi is telling us is that the event at Sinai was the "most" complete manifestation of God that man was every privy to. He came to understand the reality of God as the supreme metaphysical existence as well as the reality of His complete control of the universe. It is quite difficult for us to understand the exact mechanism that allowed for these certainties to be reached. But this certitude of the existence of God served as the springboard to the next set of prohibitions.

Rashi's second interpretation picks up on a similar theme. The debate as to whether the heavens came to Sinai or vice versa again cannot be understood plainly. As has been stressed to this point, the event at Sinai was extraordinary. With that said, the very suggestion that communication on such a vast scale between the Jewish people and God could be a "natural" phenomenon is the focal point of this debate. Both Rabbi Akiva

and Rebbe agree that there had to be some type of significant alteration in the norm to allow for this clear communication to take place. The question then is the nature of this transformation. According to Rabbi Akiva, the idea of the mountain rising up to the heavens refers to a change in the Jewish people. They did not have the natural means of attaining this level of knowledge; thus, God ensured there was a raising of their overall level of thinking to allow them to perceive this reality. Rebbe, though, maintains that God altered the normal mechanism of prophetic communication to reach the level of the people as they were. This type of prophecy took on a different quality than other communications, allowing for the Jewish people to receive the ideas in a clear manner. Either way, the point that emerges from this debate is that God deemed it necessary to ensure there was the clearest possible comprehension of His truth.

It is difficult to imagine what the event at Sinai was like, let alone to internalize the level of clarity the Jewish people experienced during that seminal period of history. The Divine Revelation had a profound effect on those who witnessed it, setting in stone the exclusive existence of God. While we ourselves today did not physically experience it, the reality of the moment has been passed down from generation to generation, an unbroken chain of history. As we read about the giving of the Torah this week, we should reflect on how truly unique the moment was in God's relationship with mankind.

## Accepting the Torah (Even if We Have To) and Perfecting the World

*Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai*

One of the better known Midrashic comments about Matan Torah is the description of the somewhat less than voluntary nature of Bnei Yisrael's acceptance of the Torah. In describing their preparation for receiving the Torah, Bnei Yisrael are described *ויחצבו בתחתית ההר*—and they stood at the foot of the mountain. But when read more literally, translates to: they stood underneath the mountain. Famously, the Gemara (Shabbat 88a) explains that indeed Bnei Yisrael stood under the mountain. Hashem raised Har Sinai above their heads while He asked them if they wished to receive the Torah. It was a deal that they couldn't refuse: either they agreed or Hashem threatened to drop the mountain.

The Gemara finds this entire narrative rather troubling, since it effectively gives any and every sinner an 'out' if

confronted as to why they didn't keep the Torah—they never really agreed to it in the first place. Halakhah doesn't recognize coerced agreements since they don't actually reflect a person's will and as such, anybody in the future could claim that he or she never really agreed to Hashem's deal and therefore shouldn't be held accountable or responsible. Responding to this notion, the Gemara acknowledges that indeed, this is a defensible claim. However, the Jewish people wholeheartedly and willfully reaccepted the Torah at the end of the Purim story—and thereby obligating all future generations in this voluntary acceptance.

But even while technically explaining away any deflective claims of not wanting to follow the mitzvot, why was this necessary at all? Couldn't Hashem have given the

Torah in a more straightforward manner? And if He was planning on forcing its acceptance, why did Hashem ask Bnei Yisrael for their acceptance?

Maharal explains that what lies beneath this idea is a fundamental notion of the relationship of Torah to this world and of Hashem to Bnei Yisrael. As a thought experiment, he challenges us to envision a world where Hashem really meant what He asked—a world where Bnei Yisrael could have chosen not to receive the Torah and one in which the Revelation at Sinai would never have happened. The very concept, particularly for Maharal, is difficult to imagine, since throughout his writings, he describes the Torah as both the blueprint and the completion of this world. If the Torah is the means by which the world achieves perfection and the method by which humans are elevated to their highest state of being—a world without Torah would simply be incomplete.

In fact, Maharal explains that this is exactly what Hashem presented to Bnei Yisrael. The alternative to

accepting the Torah wasn't simply that Bnei Yisrael would be buried alive beneath the mountain, but that Hashem would destroy the entire world—because it would no longer have any purpose.

The symbolism behind this strange spectacle is precisely that—the Torah is a necessary, and therefore obligatory, part of this world. It's for this reason that the very next discussion in the Gemara describes how, at the very outset of Creation, Hashem conditioned Creation on Bnei Yisrael's future acceptance of the Torah. Meaning, for the world to continue to exist, Bnei Yisrael needed to accept the Torah.

Sometimes, when we experience a sense of struggle or difficulty in performing a mitzvah and nonetheless do the right thing, we feel that we've personally accomplished something on a spiritual level, that our soul is now more complete. What we may not realize is that we aren't just making ourselves better, but also doing our part in perfecting the entire world.

## Seeing G-d As Our Father

*Rabbi Yosef Goldin*

**I**n this week's parsha, Am Yisrael receive the Ten Commandments from G-d, engraved on the two Luchot Habrit, the stone "Tablets of the Covenant."

Many commentaries point out that if we look closely, a pattern emerges within the commandments, a natural split between each of the tablets. The first five commandments, those listed on the first tablet, are mitzvot bein adam laMakom, laws between man and G-d, whereas the latter five commandments, those listed on the second tablet, are mitzvot bein adam Lachaveiro, laws between man and his fellow man. This division, suggest the commentaries, points to the crucial balance that we must develop within our own lives. We are challenged to lead lives that focus both on our relationship with G-d and on our relationship with those around us.

Other commentaries argue, however, that, upon further reflection, this analysis does not compute. While the first 4 commandments do, in fact, fall into the category of commandments between man and G-d; the 5th commandment, "Honor your father and your mother", seems to break the pattern. This commandment apparently exists within the realm of bein adam lachaveiro, between man and man. Why, then, is the commandment found in

the first tablet, which is meant to contain mitzvot that are bein adam lamakom?

The commentaries answer by quoting a crucial idea that emerges from the Gemara Kiddushin 30b. The gemara explains that there are three partners in the creation of man- G-d, mother, and father. Therefore, concludes the gemara, when a person honors his parents, it is considered as if Hashem was also present and therefore honored as well. With this in mind, we can now understand why the commandment of honoring one's parents is included in the list of mitzvot bein adam lamakom. Due to the unique partnership between G-d and parents, the mitzva of Kibbud Av Va'eim contains elements of both bein adam lachaveiro and bein adam lamakom. In fact, perhaps we can suggest that this mitzvah is uniquely situated as the 5th of the Ten Commandments, at the end of the mitzvot bein adam lamakom, in order to represent the transition between those mitzvot that are bein adam lamakom to those that are bein adam lachaveiro.

This message highlights the fundamental partnership that we as parents have with Hashem. Clearly, G-d does not simply partner with us in the physical creation of our children, but He partners with us in raising them as well.

As we mentioned in our piece on Parshat Vayishlach, many aspects of child-rearing are beyond our control- and concerning those aspects, our recourse is to daven to Hashem that He guide us and our children on the correct path.

An even deeper, crucial message, however, emanates from this Talmudic passage. As parents, it is our responsibility to cultivate the sense within our each of our children that G-d is his/her Father.

We relate to G-d in many ways. Perhaps the two most basic of these ways is expressed in the famous tefilla אבינו מלכינו - “our Father, our King”. At certain times in our lives we relate to Hashem as our King, a higher authority whom we are commended to obey, and can reward or punish accordingly. Other times, we relate to Hashem as our Father, a caring parent who loves us and takes care of us. Throughout our

lives, our connection to G-d vacillates between these two extremes, as life experiences shape the nature of this special relationship.

But what about our children- which image of Hashem should we stress to them- the image of Hashem as a King or as a Father? For while we clearly need to teach them both, where should the emphasis be placed?

In previous generations, the image of Hashem as King was the more dominant theme educationally and religiously. The concept of an all-seeing G-d who oversees a system of “reward and punishment” was central to religious education. We were encouraged to do the right thing primarily to attain a favorable judgement from the “heavenly court.” This approach ultimately led to the proverbial “Jewish guilt” with which we are familiar. One could argue, however, that this was the correct approach at the time- as it encouraged generations of Jews to follow G-d and His mitzvot.

I would suggest, however, that for today’s generation, a fundamental shift is required in how we present G-d to our children. Rather than focusing G-d as King, we must focus on G-d as our Father. We need to raise our children with a sense of deep connection to an Almighty who cares about them deeply, and who loves them as a parent loves a child. Our children must be taught to actively strive to feel G-d’s presence in their daily lives and they must be given the sense that He, in turn, yearns for a deep relationship with them. More than anything else, our children need to feel the warm embrace of G-d.

Of course, we cannot neglect to impart to our children that Hashem is also our King, who has commanded us Mitzvot and has expectations, and even demands, of us as people and as Jews. But we must make sure that this awareness does not turn into a method for “guilting” our children into doing the things. Such a method will ultimately backfire. Rather, we should help them realize that the Mitzvot and demands of our tradition are to not burdens borne in response to Hashem’s authority, but rather as gifts rising out of His relationship with us, and His desire for a connection with each of us.

On a personal note- I mentioned in an earlier piece that on each Friday night, after giving each of my children the standard Shabbat bracha that fathers give to their children, I take a minute to share a more personal bracha with each of them. While the content of the personal bracha varies from week to week, I end every bracha with each child with the following words- “and always remember that no matter what, Abba, Eema, and Hashem love you so much”. In my mind, these words capture the message that I feel is so important for the children of this generation- that as parents, we will always love them no matter what, and that Hashem, as their Father in Heaven, will always love them as well.