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Let Them Leave, Let Them Live

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 24, 1976)

When Jethro and Moses meet after a long separation, and Moses tells his father-in-law all that had occurred to him and to his people, Jethro responds:

ברוך השם אשר הציל אתכם מיד מצרים ומיד פרעה, אשר הציל את העם מתחת יד מצרים.

“Blessed be God who hath delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh, who hath delivered the people from the yoke of the hand of Egypt”
(Exodus 18:10)

The most distinguished commentators—including Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Seforno—are puzzled by the redundancy in this verse. Why does Jethro repeat his expression of gratitude “אשר הציל,” saying first that God had saved Israel from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh, and then repeating that He had saved the people from under the hand of Egypt? Each of these exegetes offers his own answer.

This morning permit me to recommend a solution suggested by a modern Sage, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, in his “מי מרום.” Jethro repeats himself, because he is referring to two different acts of salvation or הצלה. One of them is for the exodus of Israel from Egypt. The second is his expression of gratitude that Israel has managed to retain its own identity, its spiritual integrity, even during the long sojourn in Egypt; he offers a prayer of thanks that Israel managed to survive the pressure of Egypt’s culture, religion, and civilization, and that Israel was not drowned in the seas of Egypt’s immorality. Hence, it was necessary to repeat אשר הציל, “that He has saved you,” from the political and military threat of Egypt, and also from its cultural and religious imperialism.

I mention this insight, because it is important as world Jewry will shortly begin to devote its serious attention to

a significant problem. In the international Jewish meeting shortly to take place in Brussels, concerning the issues of Russian Jewry, the following question will be very high on its agenda: until now, Jews in the free world, including Israel, America, and other countries, have emphasized the theme of emigration from the Soviet Union. We have agitated, protested, exercised all our political and diplomatic leverage, in order to prevail upon the government of the Soviet Union to permit its Jews to leave if they wish. We have rallied public opinion in an attempt to force the Russians to liberalize their restrictive anti-Jewish policies. The question is, shall we now continue in the exact same pattern that we have followed before, or shall we begin to emphasize the quality of Jewish life in the Soviet Union? Shall we use whatever influence we possess to prevail upon the Communists to allow the Jews who want to stay in the Soviet Union, to print Hebrew texts of Jewish religious literature, to establish at least some Jewish schools?

Such efforts have been undertaken by individuals and organizations during the past years. Groups such as Geulim, Chamah, and others, have concentrated on the religio-cultural adjustment of Russian Jews who have come to Israel or America, and some of this literature has found its way back into the Soviet Union. But, by and large, our large organizations have been geared to the emigration issue only, and have not really emphasized the insistence that the Soviets allow Jews to develop greater Jewish consciousness and education within the Soviet Union.

This was one of the main points emphasized by the Chief Rabbi of England in his recent, controversial visit. Many of the militants, in Israel and elsewhere, have criticized this point of view. They maintain that raising these matters deflects public attention from the real issue, which is emigration. They are even suspicious of the Government

of Israel, fearing that in a move towards Israeli-Russian rapprochement, Israel will relax its efforts and those of Jews elsewhere towards emigration from Russia, and thus abandon those Jews who aspire to leave, and especially the “refuseniks.” Only increased emigration, they say, will assist those who remain to enhance their Jewish identity.

Now, these Russian Jewish militants must be taken seriously. They are amongst the authentic heroes of the Jewish people in our days. Yet, they are not infallible, and the subject demands clear and deep analysis.

I do not by any means believe that we may let up on our demand for Jewish emigration—even if the Israelis should decide on such a policy. But I definitely do believe that we must emphasize the freedom for the Jews who remain in Russia—and they will be the overwhelming majority—the right to develop and enhance their Jewish identity. We must bear in mind not only the *אשר הציל* (salvation) of Exodus, but that as well which has to do with Jews remaining Jews wherever they are. We must work to enhance Jewish identity and national and religious feelings of all Jews everywhere. That such identity amongst Russian Jews heretofore has been exceedingly weak, we in New York know full well. Unfortunately, most of the Russian Jews who have come here—and we admire them and love them—have been highly assimilated. It is a pity that they have struggled so hard, and yet are hardly aware of the lofty cause for which they have sacrificed.

But now, something is happening amongst Russian Jews. There is movement in the direction of greater Jewish consciousness and awareness. I am not speaking of the Sephardic Jews, such as the Georgians; not of the children or grandchildren of traditional Jews in Russian occupied Poland or Baltic countries, those who still remember in their families what it meant to be a Jew; certainly not of the Lubavitch groups whose heroism is still an untold story. I am referring to the so-called “real Russians,” those whose parents and even grandparents were totally assimilated. These are the people who are the intellectuals and the professors in Moscow—and Jews from an inordinately large proportion of this group—and who have been almost totally devoid of any Jewish awareness all their lives. Yet now they are beginning to quest and question and ponder their own Jewishness.

The reasons for this are manifold. First, there is the endemic anti-Semitism that is a part of the legacy of the whole of Russian history. Then, there is the feeling on the part of many Jewish intellectuals that Russian society is

reaching a crisis stage, and will look for scapegoats—and what better scapegoats are there than the traditional scapegoats of the Western world, the Jews? But even more important than these, is a new spirit that has gripped many nationalities from amongst these intellectuals: the search for roots. Jews, along with others, are beginning to search out those roots, to look for them, and to want to grasp them. (See the recent article by Professor Alexander Voronel in *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, Volume 5, Number 2.)

It is remarkable that, unlike just ten years ago, the most sought-after underground literature today is: Bibles and religious texts. Moreover, this has resulted in a widespread interest in religion that has focused on Christianity. In a way, this is a good symptom, because it leads Russian Jews to investigate their Judaism. In another way, it is rather sad: there have been a number of important conversions by Jews to Russian Orthodoxy—although, ironically, some of them who have become priests now suffer from anti-Semitism by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy which can’t forgive them the fact that they were once Jews! And Jews, even those who have no immediate desire to emigrate, are looking all over for Hebrew texts, religious texts, books on Jewish philosophy!

Hence, we have before us a historic challenge and opportunity, and a moral obligation, to assist in this search for Jewishness where it exists—and to help create it where it does not. As Jethro said, *ברוך השם*, “Thank God,” for two salvations, so must we continue on both avenues: we must not let up on our insistence to the Russians concerning their Jews that, “let them leave,” and we must now insist with equal vigor, “let them live” as Jews!

In a sense, this dual approach is indicated in our prayers which we recite thrice daily, in the Amidah. There are two blessings in this prayer which, at first blush, seem redundant, for both are prayers for redemption. In one we say *ראה נא בענינו וריבה ריבנו...ברוך אתה ה' גואל ישראל*, “See our affliction, take up our cudgels for us...blessed art Thou O Lord who redeems Israel.” The second blessing is *תקע עמו ישראל בשופר גדול לחרותינו ברוך אתה ה' מקבץ נדחי עמו ישראל*, “Sound the great Shofar for our freedom...blessed art Thou O Lord who gathers together the dispersed of Israel.”

Are these not really identical prayers for the redemption of Israel?

The answer is that here too we find a fundamental difference. One commentator (R. Jonathan Eibeschutz, in his “*ערות דבש*”) maintains that although all the blessings are phrased in the present tense, not all refer to the present.

Most are petitions for the future. The first of the two blessings under discussion, however, refers specifically to the here and the now. The blessing of גואל ישראל is a plea to God to continue to redeem Israel right now, to grant us that whole spectrum of factors that insure our survival as Jews wherever we are. The second blessing, that of מקבץ נדחי עמו ישראל, is directed to the future: it is a plea for national liberation, for exodus from the lands of our dispersion, for the final and complete and comprehensive ingathering of exile—even from the United States!

Moreover, the first blessing refers to the survival of Jews as both individuals and community, but more in the spiritual and cultural sense, rather than the political and historical. Whereas the second blessing is concerned exclusively with the historical element—the political redemption of our people. This is indicated by the fact that in the first blessing, גואל ישראל, Israel is mentioned as such: ישראל, not as עם ישראל, the People of Israel. In the second blessing, however, we clearly identify ourselves as the People or Nation of Israel: מקבץ נדחי עמו ישראל, “Who gathers together the dispersed of His people Israel.”

So, we need both, and we must not allow any one of these issues to claim our exclusive attention to the detriment of the other.

This is relevant not only to Russian Jewry, but to

American Jewry as well. For a long time, Israelis erred in assuming that the entire function of Diaspora Jewry was to contribute money and to go on Aliyah to Israel—and they completely brushed aside our very proper concern with enhancing our own Jewish life here. They were almost contemptuous about American Jewish needs. It is only in recent years, largely as a result of the late and lamented Pinchas Sapir, that the Israeli Government circles began to realize the importance to Israel of an American Jewry that will be aware, alert, and Jewishly strong. On our part, we must not at all ignore Israel, and not ignore the importance of Aliyah. Both must be emphasized by us.

Ironically, the same might be said for Israel itself. We must pray תקע בשופר גדול לחרותינו—for Israel’s national and military success, its achievement of the goal of peace and the ingathering of the exiles, so that it can devote itself to its inner upbuilding. And we must pray as much for גואל ישראל, for the survival in the State of Israel of Jewish consciousness, awareness, and religious depth and growth.

May the time come that the Redeemer of Israel will answer both our prayers, and with the final redemption bring about our inner and outer salvation, our religious and national redemption.

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Stop People, What’s That Sound

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

Before the revelation at Mt. Sinai, God tells Moshe to set bounds around the mountain and warn the people not to touch it, on penalty of death. He then tells Moshe, “When the blast of the ram’s horn is drawn out, they will ascend the mountain” (Shemos 19:12-13). The Talmud (Beitzah, 5a) explains that the prohibition of touching Mt. Sinai was operative only as long as the divine presence rested there, during the revelation. When the shofar was sounded, marking the withdrawal of the divine presence from the scene, the prohibition ended, and anyone who wished to touch Mt. Sinai, or to ascent it, was permitted to do so. In light of this teaching of the Talmud, an incident that took place shortly after the Six-Day War in 1967 is thrown into sharper relief.

A short time after the war, Rabbi Shlomo Goren, then Chief Rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces, and later Chief Rabbi of Israel, announced that he would be making an expedition to climb up what he believed to be Mt. Sinai,

since it was now in Israel’s possession. Many people were puzzled by this projected trip, because of the Talmud’s statement that Mt. Sinai had special significance only as long as the divine presence was there during the revelation. Some cynics, still upset over Rav Goren’s foray onto parts of the Temple Mount generally considered unapproachable because of our impure status generated by contact with corpses, quipped that he wanted to climb up Mt. Sinai in order to give the Torah back ! (It should be noted, in Rav Goren’s defense, that he marshaled halachic sources to show that what he did was permissible). Rav Goren himself explained that Mt. Sinai still has special significance, because, as we read in Pirkei Avos (6:2), Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, ‘Every day a heavenly voice issues forth from Mt. Choreiv (Sinai) saying, ‘Woe to the ‘briyos’ (people) on account of their neglect of Torah.’ Interestingly, Rabbi Yisroel Lifshitz, in his commentary Tiferes Yisroel, notes that he heard from geographers that a rumbling sound is

regularly emitted from the mountain commonly identified as Sinai, and that is what the beraysa is referring to. Although this remark is certainly fascinating in its own right, it does not, in itself, tell us much about the meaning of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's statement. What, then, is the significance of the voice emanating from Sinai?

Rabbi Moshe Einstadter of Cleveland, in his recently published book *Yesodos of Sefer Shemos*, presents a lengthy, beautiful essay on the words of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. The upshot of his remarks is that the essence of the Jewish soul was defined by the revelation at Mt. Sinai, so that the Jewish psyche, since that time, is a reflection of the mitzvos of the Torah. The voice that emanates from Sinai, referred to as a 'bas kol,' or, or, literally, the daughter of a voice, is the reverberation of the original revelation within the psyche of the Jew. A Jew who does not engage in torah study, and who does not observe the mitzvos of the Torah, is not responding to the voice of his own soul. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi goes on to say that a person is considered free only if he engages in Torah study. Freedom means to be able to bring out one's own inner self, and, therefore, a Jew who does not observe the mitzvos of the Torah is not really free. The voice reverberating from Sinai, thus, bids us to be true to our inner self, as members of the Jewish people, engaging in Torah study and observing its mitzvos.

Although Rabbi Einstadter does not mention this, perhaps we can expand on his approach with a further insight from a verse in parshas Vaeschanan. Moshe, in describing the revelation at Mt. Sinai, tells the nation, "God spoke these words to your entire assembly on the mountain from the fire, the cloud and the fog, with a great voice, 've-lo yasaf' (which did not end)" (Devorim 5:19). Rashi there, in his first interpretation of the words, 'velo yasaf, explains them as Targum Onkeles does, and as we have translated them, to mean 'which did not stop.' The Maharal of Prague, in his super-commentary to Rashi, Gur Aryeh, explains that God is constantly imparting wisdom to people, and in this sense His voice never stops. Rabbi Yehoshua Hartman, in his notes to the Gur Aryeh, directs our attention to the remarks of Maharal in his work *Nesivos Olam, Nesiv HaTorah*, chapter seven, where he notes that in the blessing for learning Torah that we make each day, we refer to God as the 'Nosein HaTorah' - the One Who gives the Torah, in the present tense, rather than the One Who gave the Torah, in the past tense, because He is constantly giving us Torah. This is the meaning, he says, of Moshe's description of the voice heard at Sinai as one

that never stops.

Expanding on the teaching of the Maharal, we may add that Rav Soloveitchik often spoke of the unique role that each person has in revealing new explanations of Torah, and that one can never know who will teach us the meaning of a particular part of Torah. This is the meaning of the prayer we say at the end of each Shmoneh Esreh, asking God to grant us our portion in Torah. In light of Rabbi Einstadter's explanation of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching, then, perhaps we can add that the voice reverberating from Sinai is that of God teaching each person the unique part of Torah that defines his unique role among the Jewish people in revealing the true meaning of the Torah.

I would like to suggest another, completely different explanation of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's statement about the voice reverberating from Sinai. As we noted, the voice says 'Woe to the briyos on account of their neglect of Torah.' Although Rabbi Einstadter understands the word 'briyos' to refer to the Jewish people, it may well refer to mankind in general. Rabbi Goren, in his work *Toras HaMoadim* (pages 42- 43), discusses the term 'ahavas habriyos,' often found in Talmudic literature, and demonstrates that, while 'ahavas Yisroel' refers to love of one's fellow Jew, 'ahavas habriyos' refers to love of mankind, in general. Perhaps, then, we can explain the term briyos in the statement 'Woe unto the briyos due to the neglect of the Torah' in the same way. The Jewish nation was charged, at Mt. Sinai, to be a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Shemos 19:6). As we have noted in the past, Rav Kook explained this to mean that our task is to demonstrate holiness within the context of a nation, to show all nations that a life of holiness is not restricted to people living alone on a mountain, but is something that has relevance to a nation involved in all the various aspects of life necessary for a nation to exist. On the individual level, too, then, connecting oneself to God in daily life can, and should, be realized in all areas of life, by all people. When the Jewish people neglects the Torah and does not live up to the calling it was given at Sinai, all of mankind suffers, and the reverberating voice coming from Sinai declares, 'Woe to mankind due to the neglect of the Torah.'

On a further level, perhaps we can add that Rabbi Naphtoli Tzvi Yehudah Berlin - the Netziv - in the introduction to his *Ha'amek Davar*, notes that the book of Shemos is called, by the author of *Halachos Gedolos*, 'Chumash Sheni,' or the second book. That author,

known as the Bahag, does not attach a number to any of the other five books of Moshe in assigning them names. The Netziv explains that, according to the Bahag, there is an intrinsic connection between the first two books of the Torah. Whereas the book of Bereishis describes the physical creation of the universe, the book of Shemos, or ‘the second book,’ in the terminology of the Bahag, describes, in its presentation of the redemption from Egypt and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the spiritual completion of the universe. The Netziv explains that this is because the creation of the world was not complete

Real Change

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Feb 13, 2020)

The first Rashi in Parshas Yisro says: Va-Yishma Yisro. And then he quotes a Gemora in Zevachim: Mah shmua shama u-ba? Krias Yam-suf and Milchemes Amaleik. What did Yisro hear that inspired him to come? He heard about the Splitting of the Sea and the Battle with Amaleik. This should be obvious—before this Parsha, we had the story of Milchemes Amaleik, and Krias Yam-suf before that. But it is still a little peculiar. A lot has happened in this timeframe. After all, what about the whole story of Yetzias Mitzrayim and the Makos, etc.? And there was a story of mann before Amaleik. He must have heard about them too. So, what was it about Krias Yam-suf and Milchemes Amaleik that stirred Yisro to make the journey?

There are many different answers to this question—al derech ha-Drush. The Kotzker has a very sharp explanation. He says: What happened at Krias Yam-suf? We sang—in Az Yashir—Shamu amim, yirgazun. Chil ochaz yoshvei Ploshes. Oz nivhalu alufei Edom. Eilei Moav, yochazeimo ro’ad. Namogu kol yoshvei Kenaan. Tipol aleihem eimasa va-pachad. Bigdol zro’acha yidmu ka-aven. The Torah describes how all the nations in the Near East were petrified, shuddered, and deathly afraid of Hashem after Krias Yam-suf. And what happened just a few days later? Va-yavo Amaleik va-yilachem im Yisroel be-Refidim—Milchemes Amaleik. And as we know from Parshas Zachor, later in the Chumash, what characterized Amaleik’s actions? Lo yerei Elokim. They were not afraid of Hashem. Forget whether they were nice or not nice people, whether they were ba’alei madreiga or not. Right after Krias Yam-suf, every nation was quaking in their pants. Yet

until the Torah was given to the Jewish nation. (For more on this, see Netvort to parshas Bo, 5760, available at Torahheights.com). Thus, when the Jewish people neglects the study and observance of Torah, all of creation suffers. Perhaps that is why, as Tiferes Yosreol notes, an actual rumbling is heard from Mt. Sinai each day. This rumbling indicates that creation itself is incomplete as long as the Jewish people does not properly observe the Torah and fulfill its function in the world as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, influencing all of mankind to live in accordance with the guidelines God has mandated..

Amaleik came—and they seem to have forgotten the whole thing, entirely. Not only were they not inspired to spiritual improvement, but they forgot the entire lesson, which was intended for their own protection, as well.

Says the Kotzker: What did Yisro conclude from here? He looked at Kriyas Yam-suf leading to Milchemes Amaleik and said to himself: From now on, I am a different person. I understand something that I have not understood before. If Amaleik could come to fight Bnei Yisroel only a few days after Krias Yam-suf. And they could completely forget what happened and be back at square one—not having any yiras Elokim. (And then they lost. It was not so smart of them. They abandoned basic caution and prudence.) Then, no matter how amazing your experience was, no matter how mispo’el you were from something. No matter what historical event you see that makes a roshem on you. A week or two later, it’s going to wear off. And what’s the only way for inspiration to last? If you make a lifestyle change because of your experience—and you don’t just leave it in your phone and your memories. The only way to change is if you do something every day, every afternoon, or evening—if you build something new into the routine of your life. Yisro imagined that he could sit back and be inspired by hearing about Yad Hashem in history—that he could just be a good person. And then he realized that no matter how incredible of an experience someone had, that does not change them. What really changes you is the day-to-day hard work of a Torah lifestyle routine and asiyas ha-mitzvos. And that’s what inspired him to go into the midbar to join Klal Yisroel and receive

the Torah with them. We know that people have amazing experiences. They are great to have, and everyone should continue looking for them. But if you take your experience and say: Ok. That was great. I had it. Now I can go on my merry way and I don't need to work anymore. If you say that, you can chas ve-shalom end up like Amaleik. What

Yisro is telling us is: Yes. Take the amazing experience but use it as an inspiration to change your life. Reinforce it by doing the right things. By doing more and better avoda every day. By being more attentive and careful with what you do. That will mechazeik you every day. And then, you will really change into a different kind of person.

The Fading Dream of 'One Man and One Heart

Rabbi Josh Blass

There are pesukim that reflect critical concepts that are ingrained into the psyche of the Jewish people. Stop any even semi-educated member of the Tribe and they can identify certain ideas that we have all been collectively weaned on. In a parsha filled with seminal ideas perhaps none has gotten more attention than the comment of Rashi on Shemos 19:2.

וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְבַר סִינִי וַיַּחֲנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וַיַּחַן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר
כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד, אֲבָל שָׂאֵר כָּל הַחַנִּיּוֹת בְּתַרְעוּמוֹת וּבְמַחְלָקוֹת:

While other encampments both prior to and after ma'amad Har Sinai were infused with machlokes once Bnei Yisroel arrived at this moment they were unified like a single organism with a single purpose. This wasn't just incidental. Rather achdus in body and spirit was the prerequisite for HKB'H decision to give the Torah in the first place. As is beautifully expressed in Derech Eretz Zutra:

גדול הוא השלום. שבכל המסעות כתיב ויסעו ויחנו. נוסעין במחלוקת וחונין במחלוקת. בזמן שבאו לסיני חנו חנייה אחת. ויחן שם ישראל (שמות י"ט:ב'). אמר הקב"ה הואיל ושנאו ישראל את המחלוקת ואהבו את השלום ונעשו חנייה אחת הרי השעה שאתן להם את תורתך.

What a powerful idea. Seeing that you as a nation hate controversy and you love peace and you have made a united encampment this is the time to give you the Torah. Words to indeed study, imbibe and fully live by. It is from this statement and other statements like it in which the entire ethic of collective ahavas yisroel takes shape. It's not just a nice idea - let's all sit around the campfire, sing kumbaya and love each other. Rather it is the sine qua non of Jewish life and the entire reason that we warranted the Torah in the first place. Ahavas Yisroel is not some theoretical idea, expressed by the Rishonim and hung on banners in classrooms throughout the Jewish world. כאיש אחד בלב אחד infuses an entire worldview and an ethic of being.

I would like to make an admission. Normally ahavas Yisroel is not a mitzvah I struggle with. There are obligations that for me are more difficult, but loving people

and especially Jews is not one of them. With that said, I have been feeling less than generous over the last months as I observe the behavior of many of our coreligionists. We are always confronted by the specter of interacting with segments of the Jewish world who for a host of reasons are totally different than us and typically it is not a challenge to be able to say some variation of 'to each their own' and 'live and let live'. It has been harder personally to say that and feel that during these last many months while witnessing behavior that has often been insensitive at best and life threatening and criminal in its extreme form. What then of the mantra of 'like one man and one heart'. How does one feel that spirit of oneness when tolerance and compassion have withered?

Perhaps one can argue that the mitzvah of ahavta l'reiecha kamocho doesn't apply in a situation in which a person is not acting like rei'echa and are not upholding the laws and principles of the Torah. Indeed, the haghos maimoniyos and others comment on the pasuk of ואהבת ואהבתך. With that said it does not feel appropriate to evaluate another person if they are or are not acting in judgment of another person or of another community. Additionally, there are many Rishonim, chief among them the Yad Rama, who argue that the mitzvah of ahavas Yisroel applies regardless of how the other Jew might be acting. So once again one is left with an age-old question - how do we feel a sense of genuine ahava for Jews who carry the banner of Torah but who's behavior seemingly is so abhorrent.

There is a lot to be said on this topic and I would genuinely appreciate any of your feedback in how you navigate through this conundrum. I was thinking this week that my efforts in sincere ahavas Yisroel are aided by my efforts in ahavas atzmi. What I mean by that is the following. Reb Aryeh Leib Heller in his introduction to the Shev Shemaysa notices contradictory statements in Chazal. On the one hand the gemarah in Niddah 30b records that

אפילו כל העולם אומרים עליך שאתה צדיק – הוי בעיניך כרשע

On the other hand, the Mishnah says in Avos that - אל תהי רשע בפני עצמך. So which one is it. Should our self-perception be critical or should it be positive and accepting - תהי רשע? These are complicated questions which get to the heart of man's self-perception, sin, healthy shame versus unhealthy shame, self-love and other related categories.

Rav Heller beautifully writes that Chazal's encouragement to view ourselves as רשעים is relegated only to one's behavior. I can look in the mirror and honestly evaluate what is looking back at me. I can have a critical eye towards the truth of how I have acted and towards the deeds that I am forced to claim as my own. But, said Rav Heller that's only the outer צורה of what one perhaps rightly sees in the mirror. The real essence of a person is uniquely beautiful. His or her aspirations are typically pristine. One's heart calls out for a relationship with HKB'H and desires meaning, purity, goodness and overall הנפש. He writes so beautifully that:

והנה כל מה שאינו בעצמות רק בתואר ובמראה אינו אלא מקרה והמקרה לא תתמיד, לכן זרע אברהם אף אם ידיהם מפוחמות, השחרות לא תתמיד, ובהכרח יתלבנו וישובו ליופים ולעצמותם, אבל מעשיהם הטובים הם עצמותם.

And that which is in the appearance is only incidental, and that which is incidental will not be permanent. Therefore with the descendants of Avraham, even if their hands are charred, the blackness will not be permanent; and they will necessarily be whitened and return to their beauty and their essence.

Helping Others, Helping Yourself

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In the very beginning of this week's parsha, Parshas Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, Yisro comes to the Israelite camp in the desert. After hearing about the miracles G-d wrought and how He saved the Israelite nation from the Egyptians, split the Reed Sea, gave them manna from heaven, water from a rock, and saved them for Amalek, Yisro journeys to Moshe and the people.

After a celebratory meal of thanksgiving, Yisro sees Moshe sitting from morning till evening judging the people, with them standing around Moshe bringing him their halachik questions and legal disputes. As the verse says: ויהי ממחרת וישב משה לשפוט את העם ויעמד העם על משה מן הבקר והיה עד הערב - and it was the next day, and Moshe sat to judge the

Without sounding simplistic, the measure in which we can apply this to ourselves is often the measure in which we can find ourselves compassionate and loving towards other people. Who are we in essence? What is our עצמות? Can we deeply and truly love and affirm that internal and eternal piece of ourselves? Can we see beyond the 'blackness' and embrace the inner self while at the same time feeling healthy shame for our misdeeds?

If so than let us attempt the same with people and communities whose behavior we find abhorrent. We can acknowledge that the תואר and מראה of some of our coreligionists have been occasionally 'blackened'. We can have discussions of the societal circumstances that have birthed that reality. We can rightly condemn publicly and privately certain behavior. At the same time, we can affirm the עצם of who people are and acknowledge the positive internal values and aspirations that often give way to problematic behavior. We would like in the words of Rav Kook to be able to see the שפע אור ה' שמאיר בכל אחד.

That recognition of the overflow of G-d's light is really the cornerstone of our own sense of self. It is a light that penetrates past the layers of our own inadequacies and shortcomings. I hope that it is a light that can shine onto and be seen in others during dark days that require the שפע אור ה' for illumination. Like 'one man and one heart' only if we are able to bring our gaze squarely onto our own heart and to the heart of others.

Kein yehi ratzon that we should see peaceful and redemptive times in the days ahead.

and the nation stood upon Moshe from morning till evening; וירא חתן משה את כל אשר הוא עשה לעם ויאמר מה הדבר; והנה אשר אתה עשה לעם מדוע אתה יושב לבדך וכל העם נצב עליך והנה הדבר אשר אתה עשה לעם - and the father-in-law of Moshe saw all that he was doing for the nation, and he said: what is this matter that you are doing for the nation? Why are you sitting alone and the entire nation is standing upon you from morning till evening? that which you are doing is not good; נבל תבל גם אתה גם העם הזה אשר עמך כי כבד ממך הדבר לא; Weary, you will surely become weary, also you, also this nation that is with you, because the matter is too heavy for you, you cannot do it alone (Shemos 18:13-18).

Yisro proceeds to give Moshe important and pertinent

advice to set up lower judges to hear the ‘small claims,’ while ‘big claim’ matters that the lower judges cannot answer, will still be brought to Moshe. וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה לְקוֹל אָמְרוֹ - *and Moshe listened to the voice of his father-in-law and he did all that he spoke* (v.24).

There are many insights, divrei Torah and lessons to be derived from this passage. However, Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, in his “Growth Through Torah,” offers a piercing, important and novel interpretation of Yisro’s advice to Moshe. Rabbi Pliskin writes, “Yisro saw that Moshe took total responsibility for helping the Jewish people in spiritual matters. He foresaw that Moshe would eventually wear himself out. Therefore, he advised Moshe to delegate authority and by this means share the burden with others.

“People who devote their time to helping others needs to learn from this. It is very easy for an idealistic person to suffer from burnout by accepting too great a burden on himself. One must be aware of his limitations. If you are not careful and you overextend yourself in helping others, you are likely to wear yourself out. Not only will you suffer, but all the people you could have helped if you have not burned yourself out will also suffer.”

Hence, Yisro told Moshe: נָבַל תִּבְלֵנָּה גַּם אַתָּה גַּם הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ - *wear, you will surely become weary, also you, also this nation that is with you.* Wearing oneself out when helping others ultimately benefits no one, and then, both the giver, and receiver, will suffer.

Continues Rabbi Pliskin, “If you help others, make certain to schedule yourself in a way that you will be able to help others for many years to come.” This will only happen if you yourself first stay healthy.

“Note that Moshe did not come to this awareness himself. Yisro had to point it out to him. When a person is idealistic and feels the obligation to help others, it is very easy to think that what you are doing is not enough and you should even be doing much more than you are. But an outsider is likely to be more objective. He might notice how you are wearing

yourself out even though you do not yet feel it. While there are well-meaning people who might try to discourage you even though you are not really burning yourself out, there are times when you actually might be doing so.

If someone points out to you that you will not last if you keep up your present pace, try to weigh the matter objectively. If you really are doing too much yourself, it’s time to share the responsibilities that you have with others who can alleviate your load and burden” (Growth Through Torah, p.183-184).

We are a nation of rachmanim, bayshanim and gomlei chassadim - a merciful, modest nation who excels in acts of loving kindness towards others (Yevamos 79a). Furthermore, we know that one of the pillars that upholds the world is gemilus chessed - doing for others (Pirkei Avos 1:2). Without this pillar of doing for others, the world would cease to exist. And so, we have Gemachs (free-loan funds) for every need under the sun! We have organizations dedicated to filling what others lack, and many volunteers to fill the need. We have well-stocked hospital respite rooms, for those who are with loved ones in hospitals. We have Hatzalah and Chaveirim, Hachnasas Orchim and Bikur Cholim. וְיִמִּי כְעַמְךָ כְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גּוֹי אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ - *Who is like Your nation, O Israel! A unique, singular nation on earth* (Shmuel II 7:23).

And yet... the maxim that “cheded begins at home” is a truism we must remember and live by. If we become too taxed, too tired, too worn out and too discouraged from our extensive efforts to help others, then we will suffer, and those we want to help will suffer as well. We must always find balance, the *shevil ha'zahav* (golden path of moderation) in our avodas Hashem. When we live by this path and ideal, we will be a nation ready to accept the Torah and mitzvos.

Only when we are personally healthy - spiritually, emotionally, and physically - can we best use our kochos to serve Hashem and help those around us.

Trust Me. Trust is a Good Thing

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The crossing of the sea and the delivery of the Torah are each monumental events in Jewish history. As we crossed a swirling ocean Hashem’s awesome power was on clear display. As we stood beneath a billowing mountain hearing the divine voice,

Hashem’s word was finally delivered to a human audience. Stylistically, it would make sense for these two stories to be read together, side-by-side. Surprisingly they are not.

For some reason, the Torah inserts “intervening” stories, between these two great events. These seemingly trivial

stories feel anticlimactic and they deflate the energy of the crossing of the sea. In these stories, we read about Moshe's ongoing efforts to feed a massive nation in a barren desert. We witness a heartwarming reunion between Moshe and his family, who have been ferried back by Moshe's father-in-law. Evidently, the outstanding events atop Sinai cannot proceed before these storylines about Moshe are detailed.

The religious traditions of Sinai are pivoted upon Moshe's credibility. This man, alone ascended heaven, and delivered the word of G-d to a human assembly stationed below. The foundations of our faith are premised upon the texts Moshe delivered and interpretations of that text which he performed. If his integrity is suspect the entire process will crash. For Har Sinai to commence, Moshe must first earn the trust of the people. Without this trust faith will not survive.

Each of these introductory stories, establish Moshe's credibility. By providing food and water to a starving nation, he earns their loyalty. Watching Moshe spearhead the victory against violent Amalek warriors, builds even more national trust. Subsequently, we observe Moshe's packed schedule: from early dawn to late at night he tirelessly mediates quarrels. When he isn't busy arbitrating disputes, he patiently counsels a young nation about life and the "ways of G-d."

Meeting Moshe's family lends him even greater credibility. Even the most charismatic leader is transparent to his own family. No man is a hero to his children or to his spouse. Seeing Moshe as a father and a husband, and not just as a miracle maker, makes him more human and more believable. Moshe has now earned the trust of an entire people and, at this stage, Sinai can commence.

Trust is the cornerstone of faith and of religious tradition. Very little, if anything, about religious belief is scientifically verifiable. Faith is based upon our embracing truths delivered to us from previous generations, who themselves accepted these traditions from their ancestors. If we can't trust the source, the transmission will collapse. Thousands of years later we still trust the man who ascended a burning mountain and we live the faith he taught us. Likewise, we trust our parents and teachers who lovingly passed along these truths across the generations.

Trust is also vital for healthy relationships. Solid and lasting relationships are always built upon communication. Trust allows us to more honestly and openly communicate with each other. Additionally, successful relationships demand "conflict navigation" and forgiveness. It is easier

to forgive those whose intentions we intuitively trust. Cultivating trusting and secure relationships is crucial for our emotional well-being.

Finally, successful communities cannot be constructed without unity of purpose and mutual trust. If we trust others to act morally we, ourselves are more likely to behave selflessly toward common good. While the legal system may protect against crime, it cannot fashion communities of compassion, collaboration and commitment. These must be built voluntarily based upon mutual trust. Law is "impositional", communities must be voluntary.

Recently, the Jewish world has been rocked by scandal, and is currently struggling through a crisis of trust. Terrible crimes of abuse have been perpetrated and thankfully, have been broadly and loudly condemned. These terrible crimes have raised greater awareness about the danger of sexual predation and other forms of exploitation. In response, communities, schools, and synagogues are crafting important guidelines to protect ourselves and our children from all forms of abuse. Included in these guidelines are warnings about the danger of naïve or unconditional trust—especially toward public figures. This is a crucial message, but one which we better get right. The terminology we employ and the tone of this conversation will impact our religious identity and shape our communities. We must be precise and judicious about how we discuss "trust". We must be sensitive not to diminish the importance of living our life with trust. We are standing at a delicate precipice....

Human beings always self-inflict great harm when they overreact to threat or fear. Napoleon's ruthless and belligerent regime was an overreaction to the French revolution. The rise of Nazism was, in part an overreaction to the wounded German pride after the surrender of WWI. Markets overreact to negative financial reports, sending stocks into dizzying freefall. Overreaction often ruins relationships and reputations. We have learned the dangers of a cytokine storm, when the body's immune system overreacts to infection. Beware the perilous effects of disproportionate reactions, for they are often more hazardous than the initial threat.

In our attempts to caution against blind trust in leaders, we must not react disproportionately. The horrendous crimes must be loudly condemned and there must be zero tolerance for any abuse. Additionally, we must adopt aggressive guidelines to insure against further exploitation.

Here is where it gets tricky. Can we successfully caution against blind trust, while still upholding the overall value

of trust in general? If our message isn't nuanced it will be distorted and misinterpreted as a denunciation of any form of trust. Will we all become distrustful people?

Sadly, we live in an age of distrust. Scandals always existed, but in the age of social media and public voyeurism we are exposed to them more frequently. We have witnessed a lineup of celebrities, politicians, and other public figures who have behaved dishonestly, committed grievous crimes and violated our public trust. If we further cultivate an attitude of distrust, it will weaken our ability to transmit our faith and its traditions. If we foster suspicion what will become of our personal relationships, which already bear the strain of internet addiction and the static of social media? How can we build cohesive and embracing communities if we fail to believe in each other? Worse, than any of these consequences is the potential fall into a

A Lesson from Yitro

Rabbi Jared Anstandig

Our parshah is fairly straightforward. Before the climactic Revelation at Si-nai, we learn of a simple conversation between Moshe and his father-in-law, Yitro. The Torah tells two key aspects of this conversation. First, Yitro expresses awe over the nation's salvation by the hand of G-d. Second, upon seeing that Moshe serves as the sole judge of Israel, Yitro suggests that Moshe change the way disputes are addressed. His idea is that Moshe should establish lower courts that would hear most cases. Only the most difficult would be reserved for Moshe. The subsequent chapters of the parshah describe the leadup to, and the actual revelation on, Har Sinai.

Taken at face value, we would understand that the conversation between Moshe and Yitro occurred before the Torah was given at Sinai. This seemingly uncontroversial view is taken by many, including Ramban. (See his comment to Shemot 18:1.)

Yet, many commentators, such as Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, argue that the events of Chapter 18 occurred sometime after those of Chapters 19 and 20. Among Ibn Ezra's proofs is the fact that during their conversation, Moshe describes to Yitro that he teaches the nation, "the Laws of G-d and His teachings." (18:16) This comment would only make sense if the Torah had already been given. Accordingly, argues Ibn Ezra, this conversation between Moshe and Yitro happened after the Torah was given.

life of cynicism. There is a thin line between caution and cynicism and we best not cross it. If, in our attempt to avoid the vulnerabilities of naiveté, we become cynical and pessimistic, we will have forfeited our better selves, thereby multiplying the "casualties" of these crimes. Eric Hoffer, an American philosopher wrote "Someone who thinks the world is always cheating him is right. He is missing that wonderful feeling of trust in someone or something." Trust is a wonderful feeling and we better not lose it.

This is an opportunity to positively affirm the value of trust in our lives, while carefully discriminating between those who deserves our trust and those who does not. This is an opportunity to probe the limits of trust, even in honest people who we have faith in. This is the time for refined conversation not simplistic slogans. This is a time for trust, not for distrust.

But Ibn Ezra still has a problem – Why would the Torah break its chronology here? He answers that the Torah wished to juxtapose Yitro's arrival with the earlier war against Amalek in chapter 17. Doing so contrasts Amalek, who reacted to Israel's success with violence and hatred, with Yitro, who reacted with excitement. By presenting the stories in this manner, we have a deeper appreciation for Yitro.

Perhaps we can expand Ibn Ezra's suggestion and see an even deeper message from Yitro's appearance at this point. In his commentary to Shemot 18:11, Rashi notes that Yitro was an idolator par excellence, having worshipped every single god and deity in existence. While this may appear to be an insult, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Broide, former Rosh Yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva, explains in his *Sam Derech* that this was a compliment. Rabbi Broide writes that Yitro went from idolatry to idolatry in a constant quest for Truth. No matter how much Yitro had already invested in a new belief system, he never stopped exploring it. And, when he eventually found it lacking, he moved on. That is, until he found the Torah.

Rabbi Broide contends that no one else in Yitro's generation ever bothered to reflect on their beliefs. They passively received and practiced, never probing the deeper significance of their beliefs and actions. Yitro was unique in his active and serious approach to religious experience.

Perhaps this is the reason that the Torah has Yitro and

this story to precede the events at Sinai. Before we can receive the Torah, we must learn about

Yitro, a role model for religious growth. Yitro was committed to genuine study and understanding. We ought to apply this same approach to our study of To-rah.

Rabbi Alex Israel, in an essay on this parshah, similarly presents Yitro as a pre-Sinai role model. He points out that Yitro's suggestion of a system of lower courts is not such an impressive idea. There is no need for Divine intervention to come up with such a plan. Indeed, Rabbi Israel argues, this is the entire point. If all we had was Har Sinai, we

would believe that we are all passive recipients of Torah, with no ability or permission to think, analyze, or initiate. By opening with Yitro and his rather simple suggestion, we see that we, like Yitro, are called upon not only to observe but to participate.

In the shock and awe of the revelation at Sinai, it is easy to sit back and believe that we are all merely passive recipients of the Torah. By putting Yitro at the start of this parshah, we learn that nothing could be further from the truth. Torah is not a spectator sport. In fact, we are called to join in.

Proving G-d's Existence

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In Exodus 20, in this week's parasha, parashat Yitro, we read the first of the two versions of the "Ten Commandments" that appear in the Torah.

The name "Ten Commandments" is actually a misnomer, since in Hebrew these texts are known as the עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרוֹת – Aseret ha'Dibrot, not Aseret ha'Mitzvot. That is why they are more properly referred to as the "Decalogue," which means Ten Statements, a nomenclature that is closer to the original Hebrew. According to the Babylonian sage, R. Saadiah Gaon, the name "Ten Commandments" is also inappropriate, because all 613 commandments are subsumed within the Ten Statements.

The first of the Ten Statements, Exodus 20:2 reads: אָנֹכִי אֶלֶּה־אֶתְּךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים, הַשֵּׁם אֲלֹהֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאֲתֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים, I am the L-rd your G-d who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. While some commentators argue that this first statement reflects the commandment to believe in G-d, others strongly disagree. They maintain that this statement is not a commandment, but merely an affirmation of an historical event—the Exodus from Egypt. They note the rabbis of the Talmud strongly declare, Brachot 33b: הַכֹּל בְּיַד שָׁמַיִם, הוֹצֵא מִן שָׁמַיִם שְׂמֵימָם, Everything is the hands of Heaven—G-d can make a human being do anything—except believe in Him. Because if belief in G-d is coerced, it clearly is not belief. Belief must be the result of a personal desire and stem from free will.

While many like to speak of "proofs" of G-d's existence, Judaism does not really encourage this intellectual exercise, simply because the finite human mind cannot really comprehend the Infinite. But while there may not be any "ultimate" proofs of G-d's existence, there surely

are many, many indications and abundant evidence of G-d's existence. Indeed, a most persuasive case from many different disciplines can be made for G-d's existence.

There is a fascinating "Argument of Wager" formulated by Pascal (d. 1662) in which the Jesuit thinker argues that if a person who is a believer leads a righteous life, helping others and performing acts of kindness, and discovers at the end of his days that he was wrong—and that there really is no G-d, then what has he lost? But if a person leads a non-believing and non-righteous life, and at the end of his days discovers that he was wrong, then he's in deep trouble! In other words, according to Pascal: Hedge your bets. It's much safer to be a believer!

When Jews speak of G-d, they don't often speak of "knowledge" of G-d, but rather of "belief" in G-d. Rabbi Joseph Albo wrote in his Sefer HaIkarim, chap. 2:30: לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הַיִּתְיּוֹ — "If I knew G-d, I would be G-d!"—powerfully underscoring the intellectual limitations of the human mind. That is why Jews declare: אֲנִי מֵאֵמִין, "I believe in G-d." "Belief" implies doubt, a lack of certainty and definitiveness. It's that "leap of faith" which makes belief in G-d so intriguing, and it is for the effort to achieve faith that humans are rewarded. We Jews are a questioning people, because questioning leads to growth, and intellectual challenges result in greater understanding.

As previously noted, there are many indications of G-d's existence, and in arguing for the existence of G-d, the opening statement of the Decalogue is invaluable. And, when the evidence is examined in its aggregate, it forms a powerful and compelling argument for G-d's existence.

"I am the L-rd your G-d, who brought you out of the

land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” First and foremost, this text asserts that those who wish to know G-d, must study Jewish history—just study Jewish history! Even a cursory review of Jewish history underscores the inevitable conclusion that there is a G-d. In an 18th century conversation between Prussia’s King Frederick II, and the Danish diplomat Count Reventlow, the King asked for the one proof of G-d’s existence that has not yet been refuted. The Count replied, “The Jews, your majesty, the Jews.”

In essence, we must all ask ourselves, “How is it possible that our people have survived—against all odds?” In every generation they rise up to destroy us, and yet, we’ve made it! We are still here! The original Egyptians, the Babylonians, the ancient Chinese, the ancient Romans, the most powerful and most advanced nations of old are no longer, yet the Jews survive! In every single generation Jews have been at the precipice of annihilation, and yet we remain. Can the finger of G-d and the Al-mighty’s involvement in the survival of the Jewish people be more obvious? Not only is Jewish survival beyond rational comprehension, the people of Israel appear to play the central role in all of human history. Even today, we see that an overwhelming (we may even say obsessive) number of the major deliberations of the United Nations concern Israel, and therefore the Jews. How is it possible that this demographically insignificant and numerically infinitesimal people play so prominent a role in the world? We cannot but conclude that Jews are a very special people, and that the Al-mighty surely directs their destiny!

Furthermore, students of the Bible are well aware of the fact that the Bible is always brief on verbiage and never verbose—without significant reason for the extra words. Nevertheless, the first statement, “I am the L-rd, your G-d, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,” seems to be redundant. After all, everyone knows that the land of Egypt was the “house of bondage,” and that the house of bondage was the “land of Egypt.” The repetition comes to teach a most profound lesson. Ancient Egypt was considered the “Cradle of Civilization”. The Egyptians developed the use of cuneiform and papyri, and their embalming skills are still unmatched even today. Their advanced engineering and mathematical skills enabled them to build the unparalleled pyramids. Egyptian civilization was rich with opera and theater—it was truly the most advanced civilization of its time. Nevertheless, this same “advanced” and “cultured”

people were able to take little Jewish children and cast them into the river, or plaster them into walls when the Israelite slaves did not produce enough bricks.

The extra verbiage and the unusual syntax of the first statement of the Decalogue is really positing one of the most profound and revolutionary ethical principles of humanity: Don’t ever confuse culture with civilization! In this brief statement, we are presented face-to-face with but one of hundreds of revolutionary ideas that are introduced by our Torah. Among the numerous unique ideas contained in the Hebrew Bible, which by all accounts is over 3,000 years old, are not causing undo pain to animals, concern for the environment, the concept of a day of rest, numerous laws regarding honesty and probity in business, the concept of tzedaka—of righteousness and charity. There are cultures that, to this very day, do not subscribe to the idea of helping strangers or of coming to the aid of orphans or widows or fellow human beings. They believe that helping others in need may in fact be defying G-d’s will that these people suffer. Yet, over 3,000 years ago, the Torah revolutionized civilization by introducing these incredibly radical concepts. The inability to distinguish between culture and civilization (which seems so self-evident), is what made it possible in our times for German Nazis to cry when they read the poetry of Goethe and Schiller or heard the music of Wagner, and be completely indifferent to the cries of Jewish children who were trampled to death or asphyxiated in gas chambers. Don’t ever confuse culture with civilization!

So, if you really want to find G-d, look into His Torah, acknowledge the miracle of Jewish survival and recognize the utter brilliance of the numerous revolutionary concepts that the Torah introduced to the world. The first statement of the Ten Commandments is a good place to start. It may be short on verbiage, but it is of infinite value.

We, the decedents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the so-called “People of the Book”, may justifiably delight in the vast and unparalleled wisdom that is to be found in G-d’s book.