



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Yitro 5783

Caught Napping

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered February 8, 1969)

The world is growing ever stranger, more alien, and more ominous for the Jew. The older we get, the less we seem to understand. Certainly, the last 25 years have been some of the stormiest of Jewish history, what theologians would call “apocalyptic” – revealing something terribly unusual, a new dimension, the “finger of God” intruding into the affairs of man. All of us have a sense of great meaning impregnating the life of our times, but it is all terribly vague and we do not quite know what that meaning means. We know in our bones that the history of our age is extraordinarily significant, but we do not know exactly what that significance signifies.

For the State of Israel, events peaked during June 1967, and they have remained on a high plateau since. Diaspora Jewry has been in a state of disarray and disorientation during the last several months with the news from Poland and France, from the Arab countries, and now the United States.

The question is: How are we going to react? Indeed, even more fundamentally, are we going to react at all, other than the hysteria and resentment which seized us during the recent crisis? Our present nervous outbursts are understandable, maybe necessary, but not necessarily creative or even adequate. I am afraid that we will be distracted by all the shouting and the demonstrating, by the limited political victories we have won in this city, and we will fail to confront the consequences of our new condition and to spell out their implications.

The reason for this fear is the perverse tendency of human nature to lapse into lethargy the moment that the greatest alertness is required of us. We somehow turn drowsy when great initiatives are needed. As we reach the very point of the climax of a crisis, when we have the opportunity to direct history and mold events and take

matters into our own hands and become the masters of our own fate, we fall into a paralyzing coma, and allow events to direct us as we hypnotize ourselves with the belief that things will not change, that the “good old times” will continue into the future.

After three days of preparation for the giving of the Torah, we read *ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבוקר ויהי קולות ויהי וקול שופר חזק* ... *וברקים* ... and on the morning of the third day Moses came to his people, and there was thunder and lightning and the voice of the shofar was very strong. Why the need for this eruption of nature and all this noise? The Rabbis (שיהש"ר פ"א י"ב) answer, somewhat surprisingly, that the Israelites overslept on the morning of revelation. The Jews were caught napping! And the Sages apply to them the words of God, as reported by the Prophet Isaiah (50:2), *מדוע באתי ואין איש קראתי ואין עונה*, “*Why when I came, was there no man? When I called, was there none to answer?*”

It is for this reason, according to some of our authorities, that we have the custom of staying awake all night and studying Torah on the eve of Shavuot – it is a kind of compensation for having overslept the morning of the first Shavuot when the Torah was given. For this reason, too, I believe, the shofar is considered today a kind of divine alarm to rouse us from our slumber; indeed, this is the famous explanation offered by Maimonides as to the meaning of shofar: *עוררו ישנים משנתכם*: “Wake up ye slumberers from your sleep.”

It is a sad commentary on human nature that its most reprehensive gesture in response to crisis is not the clenched fist, symbol of resistance and determination; not the open hand, sign of generosity and brotherliness; not the furrowed brow, and indication of deep thought and clear analysis; but – a yawn. *באתי ואין איש קראתי ואין עונה*.

Jewish history unfortunately supports this symbolic

criticism of Israel by the Sages. Too often was it true that God came and found no man, called and heard no answer; indeed, even the קולות וברקים ושופר frequently failed to rouse them. Nature's and God's own alarm clocks went unheeded and failed to shake us from our slumbers. Hitler published his determination for a "final solution." As the holocaust gathered momentum, there was still time to save many, many lives. But who would believe it? It was, in truth, too terrible to believe. So we assumed that the whole business was an aberration, that things would go on as they always had in the past, that if we closed our eyes to it and dreamed a bit, the bad specter would go away. Even today we sometimes think about it in utter disbelief. We sleep.

Today, we find a not dissimilar reaction to the fate of Russian Jewry. Despite all we are doing, we are not doing anywhere near enough. Young Jewish students, almost totally without funds, seem to be doing more than the entire organized adult Jewish community, with the exception of a few individuals who have performed heroic service in giving voice to the "Jews of Silence." מדוע באתי ואין איש קראתי ואין עונה.

Now we learn that the Jews in Egypt and Iraq and Poland have overstayed their visits, they have overslept. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all is that of one of the Jewish victims of Iraq brutality, whose brother in America bemoaned the fact that the victim considered himself more Iraqi than Jewish, that he made it a point not to have any contacts with Israel. Here is a man who lulled himself into an assimilationist trance, into a patriotic stupor – and the sleep was not at all comfortable, for it turned into a ghastly nightmare! Consider the tragic dimensions of that story: Here is a man who could have died defending the freedom of his own people in his homeland, the Holy Land of Israel. Even better, he could have lived heroically and with dignity as a Jew in the State of Israel. But he didn't, and when the time came to leave Iraq, he marshalled together all the rationalizations necessary for him to remain. So he slept. And in the end, his limp body dangled before the barking dogs of that mad Baghdad crowd, God rest his soul.

But let us not speak only of others. We American Jews are beset by problems that we, in our remarkable naivete, thought had long been solved and no longer existed. We too are dormant: our noises and demonstrations do not mean that we are really awake to the realities. We are exercised terribly over Black anti-Semitism. I am more concerned over the White anti-Semitism that it evokes and

will yet evoke, the latent Jew-hatred that will come crawling out of the white woodwork in response to the Black charmers. Black anti-Semitism may be crude and loud and even primitive. White anti-Semitism is subtler, quieter, more gentle and more "gentlemanly" – and therefore a hundred times more pervasive and more dangerous.

Jewish destiny on this continent and throughout the world is tied in with the State of Israel. Justly or unjustly, we have reason to feel the identity of anti-Semitism with much of anti-Israelism. We are all up against the Wall of Silence. Who can doubt the quiet, brooding, and profound animosity against us as Jews that lies just under the surface of so many non-Jews.

Furthermore, anti-Semitism is only a part of the problem. Worse yet is the disintegration of a major part of the Jewish community. Jewish identity itself has come into question. All the chickens of betrayal and apathy are coming home to roost after the years of ignorance and neglect of Jewish education. Thus we find an alarming increase in intermarriage, in attrition from our ranks, and in genuine self-hatred of Jews on the campus. If, as is true, Orthodoxy is growing in many areas and is stronger than it was before, it nevertheless is true that the major part of the Jewish community is progressively becoming more alienated. And while we ought to be happy that Jewish observance and learning is being strengthened in our own circles, that we are gaining somewhat, it nevertheless is most depressing to note that the largest segment of the community is gradually disappearing.

We American Jews must, at this point of our story, snap out of our slumber and begin to confront our perilous conditions. If we hear the קולות וברקים ושופר, then we must wake up and respond – and not with a yawn.

First, we must make massive efforts at Jewish education. All that has taken place before is only a drop of the bucket. And this means not only money, and a great, great deal of it, but also a determined effort to show new respect and status for scholars and for Jewish knowledge and for the knowledge of Torah. Professor Leonard Fein of Boston, in an address to the organization of American Jewish federated charities, made a telling point when he asserted that all the money will be misspent if Jewish youngsters observe that honor and status is accorded exclusively to people of wealth and politics and society, and that people of learning are neither recognized nor consulted as to the direction of the community. Actions speak louder than

words, even than budgets. As long as young people see that it is the socially and economically prominent man who, alone, is respected by the community and whose leadership is solicited for it, then all the money we put into Jewish education may be wasted.

Second, we must give new and serious thought to Aliyah as a major alternative to our condition. Of course, the very idea of Aliyah as a serious option for American Jews is repugnant to the cherished dogma of American Jewish middle-class liberals; but I suspect that these dogmas will not survive for long anyway.

I feel I would be derelict in my duty as a Rabbi if I did not forcefully bring to your attention the matter of Aliyah – for your sake and for the sake of your families. Reject the idea if you will, but think about it first. I do not want to sound alarmist. Quite possibly, things will quiet down and the country will get back to its old ways and recapture its old strengths.

Perhaps those people who say: “Don’t get excited, it will blow over,” are right. Perhaps it will “blow over.” But the word “blow” may be taken in its transitive and not only in its intransitive sense – and instead of the storm “blowing over” in the sense of spending itself, it will “blow over” all that we have built and accomplished and achieved in all these decades in America, that it will utterly destroy everything from our great institutions to our most precious values.

I make no predictions about the future of Jews in this country. But I do know that all the easy assumptions that all will go well because all has gone well in the past are a dangerous illusion. They are the marks of sleep, and it is a sleep that is comatose. Besides, the notion that all “has gone well” in the past is a pretentious fallacy. The “good old days” never existed.

No longer must Aliyah be the stuff of the ethereal and endless debates. No longer must Aliyah be the idle speculation of “Zionists,” who have been defined as two people who decide that a third should give money so that a fourth should emigrate to Israel. No longer must Aliyah be considered as idealism, as a mitzvah – most unfortunately, the time for that too is almost past. Now is the time to consider Aliyah as a real urgent option for our own good and security and safety and future. This is our God-given opportunity for us by and for ourselves, to determine our future, and not to be tossed about by the tempests of history without as much as taking leave of us.

Maybe we shall decide against Aliyah. I suspect that most of us will. So be it. But let us do the deciding, let us do it with full knowledge and understanding, and let not our decisions be made for us by the impersonal forces of history. We must act or refuse to act – but we must do so responsibly.

When history opens a door for us, inviting us to walk through to new chambers and new corridors, let us consider carefully whether we shall take the step. But let us not be paralyzed into somnolence and remain asleep at the doorstep. For that door may close, never to open again.

I cannot get out of my mind the picture of the limp body of the Iraqi Jew swinging from the scaffold in Baghdad, surrounded by the howling mobs. How loyal he was to Iraq, how little he suspected what would happen. How gently he slept while the storm gathered. Neither can I get out of my mind the picture of that young Jewish student in a Pacific Northwest university, of whom I spoke two or three weeks ago, who damned Israel because it did not adopt his attitude to Vietnam, one of a number of Jewish students possessed of great moral passion who use that moral passion to denounce Israel and the Jewish community. They symbolize the two great threats – of physical and spiritual extinction – to which we must respond.

We must respond, and we must not sleep. We must neither shout nor yawn. We must do. At the very least, we must seriously consider. We must urge Aliya as a living alternative. And we must, at the very same time, give new life to the spiritual regeneration of American Jewry. Both, though they seem to go in opposite directions, are necessary for each other.

Now is the time to wake up. We may now be confronting destiny. Let us be men, and let us be prepared to answer. When God comes, let us be there; when He calls, let us respond.

For if we sleep, then God too, כביכול, may be inert to us, and we shall be moved to lament, with David, עורה ה' למה תישן, “*Arise, O Lord, why dost Thou sleep?*” It is a question which has no answer.

But if we are alert and seize the initiatives historically and spiritually, we shall be able to proclaim, again with David, הנה לא ינום ולא ישן שומר ישראל, “Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers.”

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Celebrating Success

Dr. Erica Brown

Yitro might best be described as recorded history's first consultant. He is an outsider who pays a visit, observes Moses, and tells his son-in-law that he's going about his business all wrong. Moses spends all day adjudicating issues and answering questions for the long line of people waiting for him. Yitro watches the spectacle in disbelief. The dialogue between these two leaders of different faiths and generations is fascinating:

"What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one party and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God." But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. (Ex. 18:14-18)

Yitro does not initially feel sorry for Moses. He feels sorry for all the people who suffer while waiting for Moses. When Yitro questions Moses, Moses has a ready answer. It's not his fault. He is the human face of God's law. This is his divine assignment. There is no one else to whom he can delegate the work to relieve him of his responsibilities. Perhaps because Yitro was an outsider to Judaism, he did not accept Moses' reply. "The thing you are doing is not right." It may seem right to you, but it will eventually impoverish you and your people of vital energy and efficiency. Yitro appealed to Moses' concern for others by mentioning the people first. Moses might have dismissed his own burden but could not ignore what his overworking was doing to those around him.

Yitro, in effect, tells Moses he is suffering from compassion fatigue, a common problem for mission-driven leaders. The mission never ends so the work never ends so the leader never stops.

This has a modern-day correlate. In *The Five Choices*, authors Kory Kogon, Adam Merrill and Leena Rinne talk about the productivity paradox. We live in an age where technology has allowed us to be more productive than ever but has led to people feeling more overwhelmed than ever. The day seems to never end. There are no boundaries between work and home life. Exhaustion is

high. Satisfaction is low. Energy ebbs. "You feel it every day when you come home frazzled, uncertain if you accomplished what you needed to, worried about things you've left undone, and dreading the day ahead... You feel it when you think of your potential and the great goals you have, but then feel battered and bruised by all the incoming tasks and demands that seem to always keep you from focusing on more important things."

What's a hard-working person to do? We turn back to our Torah reading. Often, when we read Parshat Yitro, we focus on the above dialogue and Yitro's recommendations. But what we miss in doing this is something Yitro taught Moses that may have been even more important than delegation: celebration. When Yitro showed up at Moses' tent door from Midian, Moses welcomed Yitro in and the two began a crucial conversation about what had happened since they were last together: "Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything that God had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how God had delivered them" (Ex. 18:8). Moses never recounted this information to Aaron and Miriam or to the people. They all had the experience together. There was no need.

Or was there?

The visit of an outsider enabled Moses to look back. Yitro's presence and his curiosity empowered Moses to reflect on his immense leadership accomplishments. When you lead people, you always look forward to the next stop, the next project, the next marker of success. The drive of ambition keeps driving non-stop. But this leadership engine and the intensity it generates can resolve itself in exhaustion and self-recrimination. Why am I not doing more? David Villa in his *Forbes* article, "What's next?" How Celebrating Success Can Lead To More Of It" (May 12, 2022) writes that "often we are so busy and so consumed with trying to reach our goals that when we finally do, we simply say, 'What's next?'"

Yitro, however, helped Moses pause, savor and celebrate all that Moses had done; the young man who believed he was inadequate to the task had realized a dream: "And Yitro rejoiced over all the kindness that God had shown Israel when delivering them from the Egyptians" (Ex. 18:8-9). This rejoicing was followed and enhanced by a festive

meal: “And Yitro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses’ father-in-law” (Ex. 18:12).

“Celebration is an essential part of motivating,” writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his essay “Celebrate” (*Vayakhel-Pekudei, Covenant & Conversation*). “When we celebrate the achievements of others, we change lives.” When we stop to celebrate, it allows us time to recognize all of the people involved in each accomplishment. Leaders never work in a vacuum. As a leader, you may believe that you don’t need recognition or celebration and, thereby, deprive

All In a Day’s Work

Rabbi Joshua (*The Hoffer*) Hoffman z”l

Moshe’s father-in-law, Yisro, upon hearing of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, takes his daughter and grandchildren and comes to see his son-in-law Moshe, who is encamped, with his people, by the ‘Mountain of God.’ Moshe then gives him an account of what had occurred, and Yisro praises God, brings some animal sacrifices and partakes of them in a meal that he shares with Moshe, Aharon and the elders of the nation. This entire process is seen, by the midrash, as one of conversion, as elaborated upon by Rabbi Nachman Levine in his article, *The Gentile Priest, The Gentile Prophet: Two Biblical Narratives in Jewish Thought* (volume 4, number 2, 5756). Rabbi Levine, in his article, notes that there is a dispute in the Talmud whether this episode with Yisro occurred before the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, or afterwards. Rabbi Levine suggests that if we assume that it occurred after the giving of the Torah, it is mentioned before that event as a prelude to the Torah’s account of the giving of the Torah, because the Talmud understands that episode as constituting the collective conversion of the Jewish people, a process which entailed *bris milah*, which was done in Egypt before bringing the Pesach sacrifice, immersion in a body of water that constitutes a *mikvah*, and the bringing of a sacrifice. Rabbi Levine cites various rabbinic sources that prove all these elements were present in both conversion processes. I would like to expand on his presentation to show the wider implications of the placement of Yisro’s process of conversion in this parsha, as a prelude to the collective conversion process undertaken by the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai.

others who need to feel valued and want to celebrate.

Celebrating success is more than sending out an email or giving people a few hours off. It’s a conscious, detailed recognition of the meaningful contributions of each member of a team that is followed by rejoicing. Rabbi A. J. Heschel once wrote, “People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation.”

So, what do you need to celebrate right now and who would benefit from more celebration?

My teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveichik, zt”l, pointed out an apparent discrepancy in regard to the point in history at which the status of Jew was first attained. On the one hand, the Talmud (*Kerisos 9a*) derives the requirements of conversion from the process that the Israelites underwent at Mt. Sinai. On the other hand, another passage in the Talmud (*Kiddushin 18a*) tells us that Eisav had the status of a ‘Yisroel mumar,’ or a Jew addicted to a certain sin, which implies that the concept of Jewish identity already existed in his time. Rav Aharon explained that, in fact, there are two kinds of ‘kedushas Yisroel,’ or two levels of Jewish status, each of which began at a different point in history. Ramban in parshas Emor says that from the time that Avrohom entered into the covenant, meaning, from the time he circumcised himself, the status of Jew was created. Rav Aharon interpreted this to mean that *kedushas Yisroel* of the individual was initiated at that point. A second level of Jewish status, collective *kedushas Yisroel*, was created through the collective conversion that was undertaken at Mt. Sinai. Inherent in every Jew, says Rav Aharon, are both of these levels of *kedushas Yisroel*. Perhaps, then, we can explain, simply, that the individual conversion of Yisro was placed in this week’s parsha, which relates the collective process of conversion at Mt. Sinai, to remind us that there are, in fact, two levels of *kedushas Yisroel* that every Jew has within him. I believe, however, that there is a more significant message being imported by the contiguity of these two conversion episodes.

The Rambam, in his Commentary to the Mishnah in Chulin, chapter seven, writes that we observe mitzvos only

because of God's command at Mt. Sinai as transmitted through Moshe. Thus, we do not observe bris milah because Avrohom did, but because God commanded us through Moshe, at Sinai, to observe bris milah, as Avrohom did. We need to understand this formulation of the Rambam. If the sole reason that we observe bris milah is because God commanded us through Moshe at Sinai to observe it, why is Avrohom's bris milah mentioned at all? I believe, however, that there is an important message being conveyed here. Rav Kook writes in his seminal work, *Oros*, that what distinguishes a Jew from a non-Jew in terms of religion is the national character of one's religious commitment. Although other nations have had great spiritual personalities, their relationship with God was basically a private matter, unrelated to any connection to a particular people. For a Jew, however, even one's personal relationship with God is effected by his relationship with his people, and must be seen through the prism of the collective of the Jewish nation. Translating this observation into the terms we have been discussing, each Jew must view his personal relationship with God, his individual kedushas Yisroel, through the prism of his collective commitment, his collective kedushas Yisroel. While every person has his own, personal mission in life to fulfill, he must understand how that mission figures in the wider picture of the destiny of the Jewish nation. When the Jewish nation underwent its collective conversion at Mt. Sinai, this is exactly what happened. The collective dimension of kedushas Yisroel was intertwined with the individual aspect, creating a unique kind of religious commitment, merging the individual with the community. Perhaps, then, this is what the Rambam means when he says that we observe the mitzvah of bris milah because God, through Moshe, commanded us to do so at Mt. Sinai, as Avrohom had done.

Based on our understanding of the interplay of the two instances of conversion in our parsha, we can explain

A Contrast with Amalek

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Feb 16, 2017)

Parshas Yisro is named so, of course, because the first third of the Parsha discusses how Yisro came to Moshe in the desert, and his contribution to establishing an efficient judicial system in Klal Yisroel. As

another incident concerning Yisro and Moshe, recorded by the Torah after its account of Yisro's conversion. This incident, the Talmud tells us, occurred after the giving of the Torah, even according to the opinion that the first incident with Yisro mentioned in the parsha occurred before the giving of the Torah. The Torah here tells us that Yisro observed Moshe judging the people from morning until evening, entirely by himself. Yisro rebuked Moshe and said, "This thing you do is not good. You will surely weary - you, as well as this people that is with you." (Shemos 18:17-18). He then goes on to advise Moshe to set up a system of courts that will try some of the cases that arise. Ostensibly, one might think that Yisro was simply worried about the huge work load that Moshe took upon himself, and that, in the end, he would not be able to handle it, and thereby disappoint the people who were seeking litigation, as well. Rav Dovid Feinstein, however, points out, in his *Kol Dodi* on the Torah, that Yisro was primarily interested in the honor of the people. This is apparent from the fact that he did not say, 'What are you doing to yourself?' but, rather, 'What are you doing to the people?' He was telling Moshe that if he took all of the work of judging solely upon himself, he would not give others a chance to develop their own skills at judging, and thereby realize their potential, or, in the terms we have been using, his own mission in life. This mission was important in terms of the wider destiny of the people, as well, because there was a need to inculcate the notion that the people would ultimately be responsible, after Moshe's passing, to keep the tradition of Torah teaching and living alive. Yisro himself made his own contribution to the nation in this respect by advising Moshe to set up a court system, and this advice was incorporated in the Torah. In this way, Yisro, himself, merged his own individual kedushas Yisroel with that of the nation, and taught others to do so, as well.

we know, there is a big machlokes among the Rishonim—which has roots in a similar machlokes in Chazal—as to when the story happened. When did Yisro really come? On the one hand, the story of Yisro's coming is found

before Matan Torah, and therefore, we can surmise that that is when he came. On the other hand, since we see that Moshe Rabbeinu was teaching Hashem's laws and judging them, it might make sense to say that it happened after Matan Torah. There are various other proofs for each side, as well.

The Ramban here argues, *ke-darko ba-kodesh*, that *yeish mukdam u-meuchar ba-Torah*. He says that it is clear that Yisro came before Matan Torah. Why would Torah place this story here if it didn't happen in that order? The story is here because that's when it happened. First, there was a war against Amaleik, and later there was Matan Torah. And in between, the only important thing that happened was that Yisro came. And therefore, we see that the whole story is written in order.

Ibn Ezra disagrees and says that really Yisro came later, and Torah put this story here for some special reason. There are many explanations for what reason the Torah might have for inserting Yisro's arrival here, even though this is not when it happened. Ibn Ezra suggests that the Torah put the story of Yisro here, in order to juxtapose it to the war against Amalek at the end of last week's Parsha. Why? Because one might think that the Mitzrim enslaved them, didn't let them go, chased them, and tried to kill them at the Yam Suf. Then Amaleik comes out of nowhere in the desert and tries to kill them for no reason. You know,

the classic narrative of those evil goyim. One might be tempted to throw all the goyim in one category of they are all evil and want to kill us—and that would be the moral of the story of the Jews traveling through the desert. So the Torah, right after the story of Amaleik—before you ever get a chance to take this idea to its logical extreme—says: No. There is also a story of Yisro, who was kind to the Jews and cared for Moshe's wife and kids during Yetzias Mitzrayim. He took Moshe in when he ran away. And not only that, but he also appreciated Hashem and wanted to be oved Him. And not only that, but as soon as he came, he says: How can I help and contribute to Klal Yisroel? And I have a he'ara that can possibly help you run your judicial system better. And therefore, Ibn Ezra says: The Torah wants to teach us that, yes, there are those people out there who are our enemies who just want to kill us—antisemites who hate the Jews. But there are also people who may not be Jewish but who really appreciate the truth of Hashem, the uniqueness of Klal Yisroel and would love to help in any way possible. And just because we came out of Mitzrayim and got the Torah, and they didn't, we cannot stereotype and automatically have a negative view of every gentile. We must judge everyone for who they are. Some people are good, and some are bad. We can only judge people for their actions, and not just based on their ethnic or national origin. Shabbat Shalom.

Movement from Above and Movement from Below

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

In this parsha, Hashem speaks to the entire Jewish nation and tells them the Aseres Hadibros, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments include the entire Torah, as the commentaries explain. In this sense, the Jewish People accepted the whole Torah at Har Sinai. By accepting the Ten Commandments, Bnei Yisrael essentially accepted the entire Torah. The rest of the Torah was taught to them in detail during their forty years in the desert.

The Shem Mishmuel cites the Gemara (Shabbos 86b), which records a dispute as to the exact calendar date of the giving of the Torah. All opinions agree, however, that Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish People on Shabbos. We mention in our Shabbos prayers that Moshe received the luchos on Shabbos. Apparently, this was an important part of matan Torah. Why was the Torah specifically given on Shabbos?

As a prelude to giving the Torah, the pasuk tells us, “*Vayeired Hashem*,” Hashem came down on Har Sinai to speak the Ten Commandments. *Vayeired* can't be taken literally, since God doesn't have a body. Motion is foreign to Him; He is everywhere. Accordingly, Targum Onkelos translates *vayeired* not as motion, but as *isgelei*, a revelation. According to Onkelos, the pasuk means that the Almighty appeared at Sinai. What does this mean?

Deep Down Under the Surface

In truth, the world is filled with God's glory—*melo chol ha'aretz kevodo* (Yeshaya 6:3). Hashem's presence is found everywhere. Since we are essentially spiritual beings, we should be able to see it all the time. However, we don't see Him everywhere, even though He is; our weak perception serves as a barrier to block our awareness of Him. If a blind person is in a room with beautiful paintings, he won't see

them because his perception is limited. Similarly, a person who can see but is wearing a blindfold won't be able to see the paintings either. At Har Sinai, Hashem removed the blindfolds that stop the human spirit from seeing Him. God let Himself be perceived. This is what Onkelos means—*isgelei*, God revealed Himself.

Chassidus teaches a basic rule of the spiritual world and the interplay between man and God. In the human experience, we oscillate between perception and non-perception of Hashem.

Surprisingly, Hashem does not control this—it is controlled by people. He would reveal Himself, but we are the ones who don the blindfolds. The prophet says, “*Avnoseichem hayu mavdilim beineichem l'vein Elokeichem*. Your sins create a barrier between you and Hashem” (Yeshaya 59:2). Our own failings prevent us from seeing the glory of Hashem. He would allow Himself to be seen if only we would remove our masks.

This human influence on the spiritual world is called *isarusa d'letata*, the movement from below. Human beings create the beginning of the movement. Then Hashem responds with an *isarusa d'le'eila*, a movement from above.

This is like two lovers who had a fight. One of them will have to make the first move towards reconciliation. If the husband comes home with flowers for his wife, then it will be easier for her to warm up to him again as well. She could also make the first move to improve their relationship. According to Chassidus, in our relationship with Hashem, we have to make that first move.

In halacha, the power of teshuva also begins from our side, from below. The Midrash (Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:2) phrases this as if Hashem says to us, “*Pischi li pesach echad shel teshuva k'chuda shel machat va'ani posei'ach lachem p'sachim sheyihyu agalos ukroniyos nichnasos bo*. Open for Me the tiniest crack of repentance [in your iron armor that is blinding you and blocking you from Me] and I will widen this crack to be wide enough for wagons and chariots to enter.” People must make that first move, and then Hashem responds with much more than what people can do themselves. The *isarusa d'letata* is the first move. It makes the first crack in the wall separating us from our Father in heaven. After we make the first move, Hashem will make the rest of the wall crumble.

The pasuk states, “*Mayim amukim eitza b'lev ish*. Deep waters are the thoughts of man's heart” (Mishlei 20:5). The Chovos Halevavos explains this pasuk. Underground,

there is a lot of water, which can nurture many people, animals, and plants. The only problem is that it is not easily accessible. We have to dig deep to find it. Many people feel that they don't have spiritual capability. This is a mistake. The human being has an amazingly deep reservoir of spirituality. Even if it is covered, it is still there under the surface. It is like an underground well waiting to be tapped to release its ample waters. In the human soul, there is a deep *eitza b'lev ish*, there is spiritual wisdom waiting to be tapped. This is where the *isarusa d'letata* comes in. Crack open a passage for those deep waters, and Hashem will widen that crack for you, giving you access to a whole world of spirituality.

As a Rebbe in a yeshiva, I see an amazing amount of spirituality sitting in the Jewish soul. We should not write people off as impossible to reach. *Mayim amukim eitza b'lev ish*. The underground water is a tremendous reservoir below the surface. Once you crack that surface, it is revealed. Each person has the ability to uncover his hidden spirituality. We must absolutely believe that we are able to do this!

I have seen people make such great changes in their lives. They did not discover something new. The power to change and grow already exists deep inside. The ability to connect to our Creator is a latent ability within us. *Isarusa d'letata* is the first step required to evoke the *isarusa d'le'eila*.

Shabbos—the Best Day to Access Your Spiritual Reservoir

The best day of the week to open our spiritual reservoir is Shabbos, a day dedicated completely to God. We totally abandon our weekday focus and burdens. On Shabbos, we don't discuss our financial needs and plans. We don't discuss divrei chol, sports, business, and recreation. It is a day dedicated to prayer and study of Torah. It is a day when families come together. The father makes kiddush and sings Shabbos songs with his children. The mother lights Shabbos candles. The parents bless their children. It is a beautiful, holy day.

The day of Shabbos itself supports the *isarusa d'letata*, the movement from below. Even this movement from below has a secret guiding hand from above. Hashem gives us the day of Shabbos, a special day to rest from the wearisome, stale atmosphere of the six days of the week. We can find our true selves on the holy day of Shabbos. It gives us the ability to open up and make the first move

towards the Almighty. For women, this may be when they light candles; for men, when they make kiddush; and for everyone, when we sing Lechah Dodi.

The day comes with so much revelation and holiness. The Jew begins the process with *isarusa d'letata* and Hashem continues with *isarusa d'le'eila*. Shabbos is the day of matan Torah because it is the day on which we are ready to make the first moves towards Hashem. On Shabbos, we connect to Him—and that's why He connects to us.

Yeish and Ayin, To Be or Not to Be?

The Shem Mishmuel goes on to explain a great concept: the problem of yeish and ayin, existence and non-existence. The question is: Do I really exist, am I real, or is Hashem the only true existence? After all, what am I compared to Him? The Shem Mishmuel explains the Chassidic understanding of the philosophical issue of man's worth in the shadow of God.

Chassidus and Torah in general take a dialectic approach to this issue. On one hand, humankind is great. People are like—and sometimes even greater than—angels. The whole world is created for people. The heavens, sun, moon, and stars were all created for people to be able to serve God. God spent six days preparing the gorgeous hotel that we call Earth. People are great, so Hashem wanted the world to be great for them. People are the goal and crown of all of creation. As the pasuk states, "*Vatechas'reihu me'at mei'Elokim*" (Tehillim 8:6), we are just a little lower than God in this world.

On the other hand, our importance fades in contrast to the Creator of it all. When faced with God, people seem absolutely worthless. As the pasuk says, "What is man that you pay attention to him" (Tehillim 8:5). Our planet is not even a speck in the universe. The stars appear to us as mere pinpoints of light in the skies. But we know they are huge. Someone standing on a planet in another galaxy would barely see our sun and would certainly never see our Earth. The Milky Way itself is a relatively small galaxy compared to others. Our sun is a relatively small star, and our planet is relatively small in comparison to the rest of the solar system. On our planet, we humans are smaller than the oceans and the mountains, the elephants, whales, trees, and many other beings. When compared to God's vastness and infinity, we are truly nothing. This is the other side of the paradox.

On one hand, Adam and Chava were direct creations of God, and the whole world was created to serve them. On

the other hand, they were infinitesimal and meaningless.

Yeish and Ayin in Our Avodas Hashem

In Chassidus, there two ways that we serve Hashem. One way is by being a *yeish*, something with tremendous spiritual kocho. We have great worth. We must serve Hashem with our powers and strengths. On the other hand, there is a service to Almighty through *bitul hayeish*, by being an *ayin*, a nothing, and losing oneself in the vastness of Hashem's infinite existence. When we lose ourselves in Him, He then takes us as *ayin*. This is a very high level of service to Hashem. This is the level of Avraham, who said "*Anochi afar va'eifer*, I am nothing but dust and ashes" (Bereishis 18:27). Hashem calls Avraham "*Ohavi*, my lover (Yeshaya 41:8)." Moshe Rabbeinu also said "*nachnu mah*, who are Aharon and I? We are nothing" (Shemos 16:7). We are just part of God's reality, which is everything in this world. According to Chassidus, this is a higher level of serving Hashem, as an *ayin*, a nothingness, rather than a *yeish*, a something.

All of us experience this dialectic. We know we have to do great things for Torah and mitzvos. We have to use our skills and abilities to achieve great things. We must face challenges and overcome them. We are *yeish*. We have an identity, we have responsibility to use our power. We must be active, get up, and conquer the world for God's sake and for Torah's sake and to make this world a better place. Each person has a responsibility to contribute to the world. We are *yeish*. We are more than anything else God created. He charged us with making this world a better place.

We must help the poor and make the world a place of spirituality. We have tremendous power to achieve, and we have great responsibility that comes with this power. We must use our great powers for good.

There is a different way of serving Hashem, as *ayin*. The thought process of *ayin* is completely different. I will let Hashem take over, since I myself am too weak. If I try too much, it is audacious. I will give myself over to the Master of the universe and let Him take me wherever He wants. This is the midda that Avraham expressed when he said, "I am nothing but dust," that Moshe expressed when he said *v'nachnu mah*. Dovid Hamelech similarly said, "*Anochi tola'as v'lo ish*, I am [insignificant as a] worm and not a man," Hashem shelters me and protects me (Tehillim 22:7).

This is how Hashem treated Bnei Yisrael when He took them out of Mitzrayim, as the pasuk says, "*Va'esa*

eschem al kanfei nesharim va'avi eschem eilayi" (Shemos 19:4). Hashem lifted Bnei Yisrael onto clouds of glory and carried them to Sinai to receive the Torah. Today, too, we are riding on His wings. We are nothing, like little children clinging to our mother's bosom, as the pasuk (Tehillim 131:2) describes, *k'gamul alay imo*. Like a baby who completely identifies with and clings to his mother, we cling to Hashem, our father and mother. From this perspective, the nothingness of a human being is his greatness, because it means he has a complete connection with Hashem.

We are all involved in this paradox between *yeish* and *ayin*. We are powerful and yet we are helpless, we are mature adults and at the same time helpless babies. We confront this paradox all the time. There are things that we should do, and there are things that are beyond our control. We have to work to get our jobs done, and we must be willing to step back to let Hashem do the work.

Shabbos and Yeish and Ayin

During the six days of the week, we are a *yeish*. We build the world and finish God's creation. We have responsibilities and work to get done. We are designed to work hard, to build this world into a better place. We may not be passive! Passivity would be criminal; *lo sa'amod al dam rei'echa* (Vayikra 19:16). We have to stop the injustice of the world. *Tzedek tzedek tirdof* (Devarim 16:20). We must pursue justice. We cannot just say it is Hashem's job. We were given the Torah which commands us to do good, *v'asisa ha'yashar v'hatov* (Devarim 6:18). We have to fight evil and increase goodness. This is our mission during the six days of the week.

Shabbos, though, is the day of the Almighty. Our labors of the six days cease. The word Shabbos comes from the word *shoveis*, to cease and to quiet down. It also is related to the word *l'hashbis*, which is the command to nullify our chametz before Pesach. On Shabbos, we make ourselves null and void. We give everything back to Hashem. He gave us the world for six days. On Shabbos, we give it back to Him and say, "It's Your world. We are null and void compared to Your great and infinite nature."

On Shabbos, people are *ayin*, nothing. The spirituality of God Himself overwhelms a person. It envelopes and surrounds us. It places us within His infinite holiness and into His shadow. It is a day of rest. Rest does not mean laziness, *batala*. It is a day of tranquility and resolution, when all the conflicts of the week are resolved. Shabbos

is pleasant and quiet. All the spiritual barriers that we ourselves created during the six days disappear, whether we had failed in our mission and sinned or lost focus on what we were supposed to do. The walls that separate us from God crumble. We are nothing, *ayin*, nullified in the presence of Hashem. We ask Him to take us back, together with the world that we relinquish to Him again.

At the beginning of Shabbos, many people have a custom to sing Yedid Nefesh. Many people sing it at the end of Shabbos, too. In this song, we beg Hashem to bring our ailing souls close to Him. We earnestly entreat Him to take us into His holy cloud that envelopes every Jew on the Shabbos day.

Since Shabbos is the day of closeness to Hashem, it is the day of Torah. Within Torah, as well, there is a dialectic between the *yeish* and the *ayin*, between the I and the not-I. Hashem gave us the Torah, and He gives us the power to study and understand it.

He even gives us the power to make decisions about Torah, the power to implement it. This starts with the talmid chocham, who interprets Torah lishma as his mind understands it. God gave it to us. It is as if He says, "My dear Jewish children, take the Torah and use it. It is yours." As the Gemara says (Kiddushin 32b), Torah dilei, the Torah of a talmid chocham is his own. This is why he can forgo his *kavod* as a talmid chocham. He is a partner in Torah with Hashem Himself. The oral Torah was given to the scholars of Israel to interpret and to try to understand it as God meant.

Elsewhere (Bava Metzia 59b), the Gemara says that Hashem said, "*nitzchuni banaiy*." Now that My children have made a decision about halacha, I must also understand the Torah as my children have explained it. The talmid chocham is special, the ultimate creation of God.

On other hand, the Gemara says (Nedarim 55a), if someone wants to merit to receive Torah in its fullest sense, he must be like the desert. You have to make yourself like a desert with no needs, no trees or flowers. A person who wants to gain Torah must not be interested in a fat bank account or luxuries. He is like a desert, which doesn't even have rain. There is nothing there but sand and dust, like Avraham said about himself. Then a person can be *zocheh* to Torah. Hashem gave it to us and gave us power to explain and develop it. As special and great as we are, though, to receive Hashem's special, incredible Torah, we must understand that a person is ultimately nothing.

Moshe was the humblest of all people. This is why he was *zocheh* to Torah. Humble people are the greatest Torah scholars and the greatest Jews.

My Rebbe, Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l, was so humble. My Rebbe Muvhak, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l, was so humble. These two great giants always had time to answer even the silliest question of a young student. They made themselves like a midbar. They were able to say, “I don’t know,” even though they had spent many years studying Torah. This is the greatness of *gedolei Yisrael*. They know the secret of being like a desert and of losing oneself in the vastness of the Torah. The Torah is the wisdom of Hashem expressed in a certain way. A person must make his ego null and void. A person cannot learn the Torah with personal interest.

We must approach Torah with the question, “What is Hashem teaching me?” We must lose ourselves in His values, goals, and teachings as expressed in His Torah.

Recognize Your Amazing Abilities

However, someone who wants to be a great student of Torah also must recognize his own abilities. He cannot say, “I’m stupid and limited.” *Mayim amukim eitza b’lev ish*. You don’t know the extent of your abilities! As a teacher, I am constantly surprised that so many students become great in Torah. Their amazing abilities lie untapped beneath the surface. Once tapped, they gush forth great fountains of

water. These are the abilities planted deep within every Jewish person.

Today in Israel, we see Jewish children gushing with Torah. Children age seven or eight know whole *sefarim* of Chumash by heart, and *mishnayos*, too. It is *mayim amukim eitza b’lev ish*. This potential is now being tapped in our Holy Land.

At the same time, we must realize we are dust at the feet of our Torah teachers. It is important to let the teacher take you on his wings up to the Torah. It is important to be humble, not a *ba'al ga'ava*. The Torah abhors pride. Like water, the Torah goes down to the lowest point. Torah seeks the humble souls.

We Jews are privileged to have received the Torah from Hashem. We received this lesson from God Almighty, of being at the same time both something and nothing, *isarusa d’letata* and *isarusa d’le’aila*. We start as a *yeish*, and God finishes, for we are also an *ayin*. God responds to us to help us remove the mask that we ourselves have put over our own eyes.

Let us hope and pray that as we read Parshas Yisro, we will be *zocheh* to the Torah of the six days of the week and the Torah of Shabbos Kodesh. May we study, learn, live, and receive the Torah, to know when we are something and when we are nothing, to be humble and great at the same time!

Shabbat in the State of Israel

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Shabbat experience is seminal to Jewish identity. By reenacting Hashem’s original schedule and ceasing from work on the seventh day we acknowledge Him as Creator of our world. For centuries, the ancient pagan mind was too confused to imagine one higher being responsible for both the diversity and dichotomy of this world. Confounded by Nature and her powerful forces, and intimidated by heavenly planets which loomed in the sky, the ancients presumed that myriad gods had fashioned this vast and mysterious universe.

Within this confused world, only our nation was able to conceive of a single Creator responsible for everything. Our steadfast Shabbat observance reaffirmed the existence of a divine Creator who had formed the world in six days and had withdrawn from creative activity on the seventh. Gradually, as Judaism spread, this confusion about creation

lifted, and the majority of humanity acknowledged Hashem as Creator. Monotheism had arrived, and humanity at large looked to at the heavens and saw their Creator. While each major religion adopted of Sabbath-like observances, the original seventh day of divine rest was preserved for the people of Hashem.

For a span of about 1800 years most of humanity remained religious, believing in a divine author of our planet. This great age of faith in creation ended about 170 years ago, as Darwin’s dramatic discoveries questioned belief in creation. Darwin concluded that our world was born out of a watery mixture of random chemicals, rather than being carefully crafted by a divine artist. Creatures weren’t created by Hashem but had descended over time, through random change and natural selection. Darwinism launched a modern era of secularism which denies Hashem

as creator and often even denies Hashem's existence. In an atheistic world in which divine creation is largely denied, Shabbat observance, and its affirmation of Hashem, is even more critical.

As Shabbat is so central to Jewish belief it was introduced even before the delivery of the Torah at Sinai. Weeks prior to Sinai at the desert encampment of Marah, we were instructed to observe a proto-Shabbat experience so that we would acknowledge Hashem as our Creator before we embraced His Torah. Before we encountered Hashem as the Lawgiver, we first recognized Him as our Creator.

Shabbat and Emancipation

In the modern era Shabbat observance has been profoundly impacted by historical shifts. Prior to Emancipation in the 19th century, Jews lived and worked on the margins of gentile society. Unable to enter classic professions, we carved out independent work environments and separate schedules, leaving us completely free to practice Shabbat observance. There were few factors pressing against Shabbat observance.

Once emancipated, Jews who were eager to join the general work force, often faced the prospect of a six-day work week and its challenges for Shabbat observance. Many Jews were forced to make the difficult decision between gainful employment and Shabbat observance. Unfortunately, many abandoned Shabbat observance to secure stable employment. Oftentimes, rejection of halachik practice in general followed in the wake of the discarding of Shabbat observance. Once Shabbat observance fell, much of the system fell with it.

Other Jews heroically struggled to maintain Shabbat observance, even in the face of strenuous financial challenges. My grandfather emigrated to the USA in the early 20th century from White Russia, joining a staunchly Orthodox synagogue in Baltimore, which itself was a predominantly religious city. He formed a club in his synagogue called the "shomer Shabbat club", which barely attracted a few members. Keeping Shabbat in the first half of 20th century America meant searching for new employment every two weeks. On the first Shabbat Jews could call in sick, but by the second Shabbat their religious preferences were clear and they were summarily dismissed from employment.

Shabbat observance became a major struggle for Jews in Western societies and Shabbat observance became the

defining feature distinguishing between observant and non-observant Jews. The term "shomer Shabbat" often became a code word for someone who was religiously observant. Shabbat continued to define Jews.

Shabbat in Israel

In the modern state of Israel Shabbat observance has become more rich but also more complicated, both halachikally and socially. Maintaining our own Jewish state, we can no longer afford to delegate vital national services such as law enforcement, public utilities, and public health to non-Jews. Where possible, we have devised creative solutions to enable these vital functions without Shabbat desecration, or with minimal violation. Technological solutions have often allowed these functions to be performed in accordance with Shabbat guidelines. Obviously when life or public security are endangered Shabbat violation is mandated.

For centuries we dreamed of our own state, but we never imagined that it would complicate Shabbat observance. It has been edifying and challenging to encounter unforeseen religious challenges as our state has turned from a dream into a reality. Dreams are always perfect, but reality leaves a lot to the imagination. After thousands of years of stable but private Shabbat experience the shift to a more public Shabbat experience has forced us to adapt.

Additionally, life in the state of Israel has raised an entirely new and delicate question regarding Shabbat observance in the public sphere. Most religious and traditional Israelis agree that the character of our Jewish state cannot be preserved without three basic features- Shabbat and festivals, national kashrut availability, and marriage and conversion supervision. Without these three basic elements of Jewish identity, our state would be hollowed of its Jewish identity and its association with our illustrious past, our national rituals and our collective memory. For Israel to be the historical homeland of the Jews, Shabbat must be maintained in the public sphere.

Yet, even given the broad support for a general Shabbat ambience, most Israelis are not interested in full halachik compliance of Shabbat. Most traditional Israelis ritually mark Shabbat with festive meals, synagogue attendance and candle lighting, but have little desire for a complete shutdown of twenty-four hours and strict adherence to thirty nine prohibition, not to mention the vast array of Rabbinic injunctions.

Perspective of Religious Jews

Religious Jews hope for an era of widespread religious revival and a world in which every Jew observes full halachik Shabbat. The Gemara quotes a promise that full national compliance of two consecutive Shabbatot will herald Moshiach. That is our greatest hope.

Until that era develops however, religious Jews must be supportive of even partial Shabbat experience, even if it falls short of full halachik observance. Shabbat observance isn't binary and isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. Shabbat has many layers to it and for this reason, the laws and rituals of Shabbat were delivered in the desert in piecemeal fashion, signifying that even partial Shabbat experience is valuable.

All this presents us with the following challenge: how to preserve general Shabbat spirit in the public domain while not superimposing restrictive Shabbat policies upon a disinterested sector of non-observant Israelis. Generally, unilateral imposition of religious enforcement boomerangs, engendering dislike and distaste for religion. How can Shabbat spirit be preserved in the public commons and how can Shabbat interest, which already runs high in Greater Israel, be promoted in a non-threatening manner? Hard questions without any easy solutions.

Know Thine Place

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Yisro, Yisro, the priest of Midyan and father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu arrives at the Israelite encampment in the desert. After hearing about all the great miracles that Hashem did for Moshe and the Bnei Yisrael, Yisro is moved to come join the nation in the desert. Along with him, he brings Tziporah, Moshe's wife, and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer.

When Yisro sees Moshe single-handedly judging the people from morning till evening, with the nation standing around him to hear the word of G-d, Yisro realizes the situation is unsustainable. He instructs Moshe to appoint lower courts who will hear lesser claims, and the weightier matters should be brought to Moshe for judgment. In this way, Yisro says, you (Moshe) and the nation will be able to be sustained. Ever the humble servant of G-d (cf. Num.12:3), Moshe Rabbeinu takes Yisro's advice.

It's extremely curious to note that the opening verses of the sedra repeatedly stress that Yisro is Moshe's father-in-law. In a Torah where every single word is measured, and

The challenge is especially delicate in Israel, which still maintains a five-and-a-half day work week, leaving Shabbat day as the sole time for recreation and relaxation. If the day is stripped of any religious element, it will become empty of any spirit and will no longer be a collective national experience. The day will quickly degenerate into consumerism and traffic jams. Sabbath experience in many Western countries has generally deteriorated into shopping opportunities and sports events, straying for its original purpose. It does afford a day of greater relaxation, but rarely provides larger spiritual moments or impacts.

How can we protect our national heritage, stretch Shabbat into the public sphere, and maintain its meaning, while avoiding unilateral imposition and strong-armed enforcement, which is always counter-productive in the long run? This is a very delicate issue and requires nuanced and gradual adjustments, rather than hasty and radical solutions. All parties should realize that we share a common interest in reaching this goal. Shabbat is our national heritage and belongs to every Jew and to our collective memory. We now have the great privilege and challenge of implementing it in the land of history. Let's get it right.

not one word is superfluous, why does the Torah repeat (almost in every pasuk!) that Yisro is Moshe's father-in-law? To appreciate the degree of repetition, it is worthy to look at the opening verses of the sedra:

וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֵתָן מֹשֶׁה - *and Yisro, the priest of Midyan, the father-in-law of Moshe heard all that G-d did for Moshe and Israel* (Shemos 18:1);

וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֵתָן מֹשֶׁה אֶת-תִּצְפּוֹרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ מֹשֶׁה (18:2);

וַיָּבֵא יִתְרוֹ חֵתָן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר - *And Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe came, and the sons and the wife of Moshe, to the desert* (18:5);

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֲנִי חֵתָנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלֶיךָ - *and he said to Moshe, I am your father-in-law Yisro, coming to you* (18:6);

וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה לְקִרְאָתוֹ חֵתָנוֹ - *and Moshe went out to greet his father-in-law* (18:7);

וַיֹּסֶפֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֵתָנוֹ אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' לְפָרְעוֹה - *and Moshe told his father-in-law all that Hashem did to Pharaoh* (18:8);

וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ הַתֵּן מִשָּׁה עֲלֶיהָ וּזְבָחִים - *and Yisro the father-in-law of Moshe took sacrificial offerings* (18:12);

וַיֵּרָא הַתֵּן מִשָּׁה אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה לָעָם - *and the father-in-law of Moshe saw all that he was doing for the nation* (v.14);

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחִתְנוּ כִּי־יָבֵא אֵלַי הָעָם לְדַרְשׁ אֲלַיְכִים - *and Moshe said to his father-in-law, because the nation will come to me to seek out (the word of) G-d* (v.15).

The repetition is astonishing! In a Torah where every single word is measured, and not one word is extra or wasted, what is the message the Torah is teaching us in repeating over and over again that Yisro is Moshe's father-in-law? It cannot simply be telling us the relationship between the two men, because that is already abundantly clear.

When I posed this question, my father-in-law (how apropos! and no pun intended), Mr. Norman (Naftali) Horowitz amu"sh, suggested a beautiful answer. He pointed out that in the opening section of the sedra, whenever Yisro's name is mentioned vis-a-vis Moshe, or their interaction, he is listed as the father-in-law of Moshe. But when a verse mentions his name NOT in connection to Moshe, it only says Yisro - because there is no direct relationship in those verses to Moshe (see 18:9,10).

What's the lesson? A person must always know his place and position when interacting with, and in the presence of, a great person and one greater than himself. The Torah is teaching us a lesson in kavod, respect, honor and dignity for our elders, teachers, rabbonim, leaders, and parents. One can never get too comfortable with a great person - our awe must always remain intact and in place - so we show them the proper respect.

Every time Yisro interacted with, or spoke to, Moshe, the Torah reminds us that he was the father-in-law of

Moshe. The respect Yisro had remained, and did not diminish over time. He did not become complacent or so "used to" Moshe that he forgot before whom he stood. As my father-in-law suggested, "Yisro never got 'too comfortable' to not give Moshe the kavod." No matter how great Yisro was, he always remembered that Moshe was greater, and acted humbly and with reverence before him.

As much as Rav Dovid Feinstein zt'l (1929-2020) knew and as fluently as he knew it ... he completely nullified his own opinion to that of Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt'l (1910-2012). He had a designated seforim shelf for Rav Elyashiv's teshuvos and he would give personal funds to the Rav's grandson to help print the Torah of R' Elyashiv.

Once, when he was unable to find a single proof in all of Shas to *pasken* a *shailoh*, he recommended the questioners go ask Rav Elyashiv. One of the men spoke up, "With all due respect to R' Elyashiv, if the Rosh Yeshiva (Rav Dovid) cannot find a proof, is it likely that R' Elyashiv will find one?" "No," answered Rav Dovid, "he probably will not find a proof either. But when there are no *raayos* (proofs), no sources in Chazal to direct us, then the practical decisions have to come from a gadol baTorah, and he is a real gadol!" (Reb Dovid, Artscroll, p.166).

Yisro always knew his position and gave Moshe the *kavod* he deserved, never becoming accustomed (or dulled) to the greatness of Moshe. From here we further learn a lesson vis-a-vis the *pachad* and *yirah* one must strive to feel towards the RS"O. If such is the respect we must give our teachers, elders and gedolim, how much more so - *kal v'chomer ben beno shel kal v'chomer* - to the *Melech Malchei Ha'melachim, HKB"H*, the Source of all blessings and all good.

Don't Just Point Out Problems – Solve Them!

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Commenting on the first pasuk of Parshas Yisro, Rashi writes that Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, had seven different names. Rashi proceeds to list all the names and explain their meanings. One of the names, Rashi writes, is יתר, and Yisro was given this name because יתר פרשה אחת בתורה – a section of the Torah was added in his merit. As we read later, Yisro observed Moshe spending the entire day singlehandedly resolving the people's disputes, and he recommended appointing a network of judges to work alongside Moshe. This story was included

in the Torah, such that an "extra" (יתר) portion was added due to Yisro.

In presenting this explanation, Rashi refers to the added section in the Torah as the section of ואתה תחזה. These are the words that Yisro used in offering his recommendation that Moshe appoint competent and worthy individuals to serve as judges (... ואתה תחזה מכל העם אנשי חיל יראי אלוקים ... 18:21).

Rav Moshe Shternbuch, in Ta'am Va'da'as, notes that these words do not actually begin the story. Yisro opened

his advice to Moshe with the words *לֹא טוֹב הַדְּבַר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹשֶׂה* – “*That which you are doing is not good*” (18:17). However, the title Rashi chose for this section is not these words, but rather *וְאַתָּה תַּחֲזֶה*, the content of Yisro’s recommendation. The reason, Rav Shternbuch explains, is that we do not earn credit for simply saying *לֹא טוֹב הַדְּבַר*, for pointing out problems. Sitting around and complaining does not help. The real praise for Yisro is that he said *וְאַתָּה תַּחֲזֶה*, that he did not just criticize, but offered a solution, giving constructive advice.

Threat or Shelter?

Rabbi Jared Anstandig

Much of the lead-up to the giving of the Torah is choreography – who stands where, and when? According to Shemot 19:17, the people stood “*b’tachtit hahar*.” The Hebrew word *tachtit*, like the word *tachat*, would appear to suggest the bottom. Indeed, Rashi, in his first explanation of this expression, explains that “*tachtit ha-har*” means, “*beraglei hahar*,” at the foot of the mountain.

However Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein observes (Torah Temimah Shemot 19:17, note 36) that the word “*tachtit*” generally refers to something that is physically underneath something else. Accordingly, “*tachtit hahar*” doesn’t mean that Bnei Yisrael stood at the foot of the mountain. Rather, they stood underneath the mountain. So explains Rashi in his second explanation to these words – “That the mountain was uprooted and suspended above them like a barrel.” In an image that may be familiar to some of us, Bnei Yisrael actually stood underneath the mountain.

In his comment here, Rashi leaves out a crucial piece of information that appears in his primary source. According to the Talmud (Shabbat 88a), there’s more to the story – “Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and He said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.” (adapted from the Steinsaltz translation) In other words, G-d threatened the people – “If you choose not to accept the Torah, then I will drop this mountain on you and kill you all.”

This is only one version of the story, though. Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael (Shemot 19:17) has a slightly different version. It begins as the Talmudic passage began: “The

It is easy to sit around a Shabbos table and point out problems that we see in the shul, in the school, in the community, and so on. But pointing out problems isn’t enough – we need to get involved to help solve them. If somebody truly wishes to help, then instead of just complaining, he should take the initiative, sit on committees, volunteer, brainstorm and work toward finding effective solutions. We make our mark not by complaining about problems, but by going out there and trying to solve them.

mountain was uprooted from its location.” What happens next, though, is noteworthy: “They drew close and stood under the mountain ... About this it says in Shir HaShirim (2:14), ‘O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, Hidden by the cliff, Let me see your face, Let me hear your voice; For your voice is sweet And your face is comely.’” (JPS translation). According to the Mechilta, the mountain over their heads is far from a threat. It seems to be much more affectionate, as though Israel is hiding itself under the rock and G-d is coaxing them out.

Is there a way to reconcile these differing narratives? Did G-d use Har Sinai as a means to coerce Bnei Yisrael to receive the Torah? Or did Har Sinai serve almost as a protective canopy over them?

An answer, perhaps, can be seen from the words of the Tur’s long commentary to the Torah. He cites Rabbi Yosef Kimchi, who asks a question regarding the Talmudic version: why were the people coerced at all? According to the traditional timeline of parshiyot Yitro and Mishpatim, the Jews had already accepted the Torah with “*naaseh venishma*,” “We will do and we will listen.” (Shemot 24:7) Why was it necessary now to force them to accept the Torah? Rabbi Kimchi answers, “They had already accepted the Torah. And after that, He suspended the mountain over them, to show His love of them ...” He continues, explaining that G-d was happy that Bnei Yisrael had accepted the Torah, because had they not, He would have been forced to destroy them. The world cannot exist without Bnei Yisrael accepting the Torah. By hanging the mountain over their heads, G-d was demonstrating how important it was for them to accept the Torah.

Ultimately, according to Rabbi Kimchi, both narratives

can coexist. On the one hand, the giving of the Torah was a major act of love of G-d to Israel. Out of His immense love for us, He drew us out from the protective cliffs and gave us the Torah. And, at the same time, still out of His love for us, He overturned nature, hanging a mountain over our heads,

so that we would understand the importance of the Torah.

May we be able to appreciate both aspects of Matan Torah – The feeling of love that G-d feels towards us, such that He gave us the Torah, and the special significance we have, that we accepted it.

Why G-d Can Not Share the Limelight

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Yitro, the Al-mighty reveals Himself to the People of Israel on Mt. Sinai and proclaims what is colloquially known as the "Ten Commandments."

The name "Ten Commandments" is actually a misnomer, which is why traditionalists generally refer to these verses as the עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרוֹת—Aseret Hadibrot—the Ten Statements or the Decalogue. According to tradition, the first statement may not be a commandment. It reads (Exodus 20:2): אָנֹכִי אֶלֶּיְכֶם אֶלְקִים, *I am the L-rd, thy G-d who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.* On the surface, it doesn't appear to be a commandment at all, but rather a factual historical statement.

The rabbis of the Talmud (B'rachot, 33a) declare: הַכֹּל בְּיַדֵּי שָׁמַיִם חוּץ מִיִּרְאַת שָׁמַיִם, *Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven.* The Al-mighty can make a person do anything, except believe in Him—because belief cannot be coercive.

Obviously, if the first statement is not a commandment, then these verses, Exodus 20:2-14, are not Ten Commandments, but rather, one Statement and nine Commandments! R. Saadiah Gaon has stated that all 613 commandments are subsumed within the Ten Statements, and that each Statement is a basic principle from which many other commandments emanate.

One of the most perplexing of the Ten Statements is the so-called "second commandment"—the prohibition of idolatry. The Torah states (Exodus 20:3-6), לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים, אֲחֵרִים עַל פְּנֵי, *You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make yourself a carved image or any other likeness of that which is in the heavens above or that is on the earth below or in the water beneath the earth. You shall not bow down to them, or worship them, for I the L-rd your G-d, am a jealous G-d, who visits the sins of fathers upon children to the third and fourth generations for my enemies; but who shows kindness for thousands of generations to those who love Me and observe My commandments.*

Even a cursory reading of this text raises many questions. Why isn't the declaration of a monotheistic deity that is expressed in the first statement of the "Ten Commandments" sufficient? Why is it necessary to go into the "gory details" of the varied forms of idol worship—carved images, likenesses of that which is in the heavens, the earth or the water? Is the Al-mighty "afraid" of those who worship the sun, the moon, or the trees? What is the grave danger in this "alien" worship that renders idolatry a capital crime in Judaism? It does, after all, appear to be only an unsophisticated form of primitive worship.

I would like to suggest that there are actually two aspects of idolatry with which the Torah is concerned. The first is the primitive worship of sky or the earth, moon or water, which reduces the human being from Judaism's exalted status of being created in the "image of G-d" and possessing potential G-d-like qualities, to being a creature of no purpose. From the very outset, the Torah (Genesis 1:27), promotes the concept of a human being who is created בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים—"B'tzeh'lem Eh'lo'kim"—in the image of G-d, and is bidden to emulate the positive and charitable qualities of the Al-mighty, known in philosophy as Imitatio Dei. Just as G-d is compassionate, so are human beings bidden to be compassionate. Just as G-d is forgiving, so are human beings urged to be forgiving. As G-d is just, so are human beings called upon to be just (Shabbat, 133b). Of course, when one worships a tree or a stone, one cannot emulate their "qualities." And so, the fundamental element of righteous and moral behavior is absent from those who practice idolatry.

A second major issue that is raised by the second statement of the Ten Commandments, is the fact that once there are multiple deities—such as sun or moon, then there are, of necessity, multiple sources of ethical truths. For Judaism, the idea of a monotheistic G-d is not only that there is a single Deity, but also that there is a single source of ethics that may not be challenged or impeached

by any other source. Once there are multiple deities, there are multiple sources of ethics, truth and definitions of right and wrong. One “god” can declare that killing under certain circumstances is murder. Another “god” may state that such actions are surely not murder, in fact, they are entirely justified.

Although most of us no longer live in cultures that practice idolatry in the ancient manner, the question of absolute ethics is a burning question even today. Those who live in democracies are in a position, made possible by the democratic vote, to legislate changes in ethics. What may have been absolutely unacceptable 50 years ago, by popular vote may suddenly be declared acceptable today. In many instances, these changes are meant to advance society, such as the prohibition of slavery and racial discrimination. In other instances, these changes are clearly a step backwards. The Scandinavian countries that legislated the right to perform euthanasia and permit physicians to assist in suicides, raise very serious moral issues for us, and the world. With the declaration of the

second commandment, our Torah unequivocally posits that we may not subscribe to so-called “situational” ethics. For observant Jews, and for ethical monotheists in general, there are, in most instances, absolutes—such as the sanctity of family, property, and human life. These are the values upon which the Jewish people are not prepared to compromise.

And so, we see, that the declaration of a monotheistic Deity alone (the first commandment without the second commandment) is simply not sufficient. What is important for the Jew and for all civilized societies is to maintain the awareness and possess sufficient knowledge to reject any source that may compromise Judaism’s cherished absolute beliefs.

The profundity of these concepts cannot be overstated. In fact, that is why the Al-mighty Himself, rather than Moses, spoke these two commandments on Sinai. They ensure that the Divine values will be protected and heeded until the end of time.