

# שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ



SHEMA KOLEINU: DIVREI TORAH FROM THE REBBEIM, TALMIDIM, AND FACULTY OF MTA

## Parshas Yisro

## פרשת יתרו

### Accepting the Terms and Conditions

*Yitzi Rosenbluth ('24)*

In the intricate tapestry of Jewish thought and tradition, *Parshas Yisro* stands as a pivotal moment, capturing the essence of the Jewish people's relationship with the Torah. Within its verses lie profound insights into the nature of faith, choice, and commitment. Expounded upon in the Gemara and elucidated by revered commentators like Rashi, and the Ramban, the narrative of the Jewish acceptance of the Torah at *Har Sinai* reveals layers of meaning that continue to resonate through the ages.

In explaining the words from this week's *parsha*

"*vayisyatzevu besachtis hahar*", "and they took their places at the foot of the mountain" (*Shemos 19:17*), the Gemara in *Shabbos 88a* presents a vivid image: Hashem held the mountain over the Jewish people at Har Sinai, as he compelled them to accept the Torah. Rashi points out that this sequence of events could function as a sort of justification for our struggles in fulfilling the commandments – it wasn't a voluntary choice to accept the Torah. However, the narrative doesn't end there. The Gemara continues, stating that despite the initial involuntary acceptance, the Jewish people reaccepted the Torah willingly during the time of Achashverosh, symbolized by the phrase, "*kiyimu v'kiblu*."

The Ramban raises a crucial issue: Even if the Jews willingly accepted the Torah later on, why, at previous points in time, were they punished for not following the Torah when they had only been coerced into accepting it? The Ramban further asks, if one would try to answer that despite the fact that the Torah was forced upon us, we must still follow the commandments and suffer consequences for our actions, then why was the willing reacceptance necessary? The Ramban posits that while the initial acceptance may have been forced, the subsequent possession of the land of Israel was conditional upon adherence to the Torah. This could imply that, to some degree, this acceptance of the Torah was actually a willing acceptance! However, once the Jews left Israel, it became necessary to reaccept the Torah in the time of Achashverosh. This is reminiscent of a statement in *Maseches Sanhedrin*, that a master has no control over a slave once he has been freed.

While the Ramban's inquiry addresses the potential ramifications of the premise of the Gemara, it is

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worth exploring what the Gemara actually means when it implies that Bnei Yisrael had no choice in accepting the Torah. In regard to the events mentioned by the Gemara, Rav Moshe Shapiro provides an illuminating perspective, suggesting that the imagery of the mountain symbolizes a spiritual awakening. The truth of the Torah became so palpable, so undeniable, that the Jewish people had no choice but to accept it. Here, faith converges with truth, intertwining inextricably, a fantastic example of *emes v'emunah* being delivered together.

This emotional and spiritual high was able to carry on into the era of the *Nevi'im*, when divine messages were clear and abundant, and adherence to the Torah was bolstered by direct communication with the *Ribono Shel Olam*. However, with the cessation of prophecy after the destruction of the first *Beis Hamikdash*, the Jewish people entered a new, troubled relationship with the Torah.

The reacceptance of the Torah during the era of Purim symbolizes a profound shift – a reaffirmation of commitment even in the absence of overt miracles or prophetic guidance. Rav Shapiro suggests that this reacceptance underscores the enduring bond between the Jewish people and the Torah, even when the hand of G-d may not be as visible.

In essence, the Gemara's narrative transcends mere historical events; it encapsulates the eternal covenant between the Jewish people and their Creator. It speaks to the resilience of faith in the face of adversity, the enduring power of truth, and the unwavering commitment to the Torah and Hashem, despite the vicissitudes of history.

This is a message we must all take to heart, especially during times like these, while there is a war being waged in our homeland. Although we are anxiously waiting to join our brethren in Israel with the coming of *Mashiach*, we must never forget that Hashem is always watching out for us, no matter how hard it is to see.

## Yisro's Unique Gratitude

*Yonatan Ganchrow ('19)*

This week's *parsha* begins with Moshe's father-in-law, Yisro, hearing about all the good that Hashem did for *Klal Yisrael*. Yisro takes Moshe's wife and children, and heads to the desert to join the Jewish people. Upon arriving, Yisro says to Moshe, "*baruch Hashem asher hitzil eschem miyad Mitzraim u'miyad Pharaoh asher hitzil es ha'am mitachas yad Mitzraim*"—"Blessed is Hashem, Who has rescued you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, Who has rescued you from beneath the hand of the Egyptians." (*Shemos* 18:10).

This seems to be a beautiful moment for the Jewish people, with Yisro coming, recognizing Hashem's kindness, and joining them. However, the *Mechilta* says something astonishing. The *Mechilta* says that this showed the disgrace of *Klal Yisrael*, that there were 600,000 people, and not one thanked Hashem before Yisro arrived, and said "*Baruch Hashem*." The obvious question is: What does it mean that no one thanked Hashem before Yisro arrived? Just a *parsha* earlier, didn't all of *Klal Yisroel* sing a *shira* after *kriyas yam suf*?

I heard a beautiful answer from Rabbi Shalom Rosner

## A Short Vort

*Flisha Cohen ('24)*

זכור את יום השבת לקדשו" (שמות כ:ח)

**"Remember the Shabbos day to sanctify it." (*Shemos* 20:8)**

In this *passuk*, we are commanded to remember the day of Shabbos to keep it holy. Now some ask what this might mean. How must one remember it? Rashi gives his opinion on this and says that it means you must actually verbalize and speak the holiness of Shabbos. Meaning, it's not just the mere act of keeping Shabbos that you must perform. You must also have a conscious acknowledgement and verbal affirmation of its holiness. Ramban adds that it means not only refraining from physical work, but also mentally and emotionally detaching yourself from it. One must realize why he is not working on that day and acknowledge it. These two teachings both show us that the gift of Shabbos doesn't just mean that we must keep it. Rather, we make it more beautiful by preparing ourselves emotionally, physically, and mentally for it. This enhances the spirituality and beauty of Shabbos and connects us closer to Hashem and ourselves.



in the name of the *Shemen Hatov*. The *Shemen Hatov* quotes the *Tiferes Shlomo* and explains that, in actuality, this was not the first time that anyone thanked Hashem. However, what Yisro did, thanking Hashem for what He did for others, had not been done before. *Klal Yisroel* had been very thankful for what Hashem did for them, but that was because it benefited them. Yisro was grateful for what was done for the Jewish people, not for himself. Along similar lines, Rashi explains that the words "*vayichad Yisro*" mean that Yisro rejoiced, that he was so happy to hear about all that Hashem did for *Klal Yisrael*.

Rabbi Rosner explains that we can understand the *yesod* of "*vi'ahavta lere'acha kamocha*" from this. When we take the time to think about *vi'ahavta*

*lere'acha kamocha*, it can seem to be an incredibly challenging mitzvah. How can I love someone the way I love myself? That seems nearly impossible!? The Ramban explains that *vi'ahavta lere'acha kamocha* is about feeling someone else's joy like it is your own, and feeling their pain like it's your pain. While accompanying his wife to the doctor for her knee pain, Rav Aryeh Levin zt"l famously told a doctor that "our knee hurts." This is a very high *madreiga* of *Ahavas Yisroel* that is certainly not easy to reach, but is a level that we need to work hard to achieve. May we all learn from Yisro to develop a deep *ahavas Yisroel*, and to really feel for our brothers and sisters.

## Yahrzeits & Insights: This Week in Jewish History

### *Rav Yisrael Salanter zt"l (1809-1883) - 25 Shevat*



This Sunday, the 25th of Shevat, will mark the 141st Yahrzeit of Rav Yisrael Salanter zt"l (Rav Yisrael Lipkin), founder and leader of the Mussar renaissance.

Rav Yisrael would champion and promulgate the principle that the inter-personal laws of the Torah (*bein adam lachaveiro*) bear as much weight as those obligations which are strictly Divine (*bein adam l'akom*). Rav Yisrael would teach that adhering to the ritual aspects of Judaism without developing one's relationships with others and with oneself, is an error of extreme magnitude.

Additionally, the innovative concept of "subconscious motivation" appears in Rav Yisrael's writings, already in the mid-1800s (well before a toddler named Sigmund Freud from Austria imagined that his baby bottle was nothing other than a living deputy for his mother, and his toy rattle an anthropomorphic embodiment of his noisy older sister).

Rav Yisrael wrote that it is critical for a person to identify what his subconscious motivations (known as "negios") are, and to work on understanding their roots.

There's an absolutely stunning explanation of Rav Yisrael's, which showcases his profound understanding of the human condition, while also demonstrating his signature philosophy that the Torah is replete with endless insight into human nature, thereby providing a lifetime's worth of opportunity for character refinement:

In *Parshas Shoftim* (*Devarim* 19:16-19), the Torah presents the issue of *eidim zommemin* - false witnesses. If a pair of witnesses bear false testimony on another individual, the Torah prescribes that the very same penalty which the witnesses conspired to have imposed on their intended victim should be imposed on the witnesses themselves: "*Va'asisem lo ka'asher zamam la'asos le'achiv*" - "And you shall do to him as he schemed to do to his fellow".

So, witnesses that had testified falsely are punished with the same consequence which they had attempted to inflict on their intended victim: if they had schemed to cause a man to be killed, they get killed; if they schemed for a man to get whipped, they get whipped; and if they schemed for a man to pay money, they pay money. In the latter case, Halacha dictates that the money that the false witnesses pay, they must pay to their intended victim.

The question has been asked (See *Sefer Yerei'im* 178):

Why do the witnesses pay their victim? What is the source that it is the victim who is entitled to payment? This is not a consolation prize for the defendant, it's a penalty imposed on the lying witnesses!? Why should it be any different from the penalty of getting killed or whipped, from which the intended victim has no benefit? Perhaps the witnesses should pay directly to *Beis Din*, but why should they pay the victim?

**SAYS RAV YISRAEL SALANTER, CLASSIC!**

(Rabboisai, check this out; it was worthwhile to be born just to learn this priceless understanding from Rav Yisrael!):

The Torah says "*Va'asisem lo ka'asher zamam la'asos le'achiv*" - you shall do to him as he schemed to do to his fellow. Well, says Rav Yisrael, the witnesses did not scheme merely that their victim should lose money; they schemed that he should pay money to another!

That is something else entirely! So therefore, if the witnesses would merely be fined a penalty, and pay their money to *Beis Din*, that would not be in fulfillment of the Torah's mandate of *כאשר זמם*!

Says Rav Yisrael, the Torah is showing us that a person is much more willing to part with his money, let's say, to give *Tzedakah*, or even to be fined and surrender payment to an authority, or suffer a similar loss, but to have to pay money to an opponent?! That someone else should be awarded my hard-earned money?! That is much less tolerable for a person!

It's an amazing insight into the human psyche, but also a beautiful understanding of what the Torah teaches regarding human nature!

This is the eternal legacy which Rav Yisrael bequeathed us:

The Torah is not only the repository of all truths, but it is also the ultimate and eternal fountain of wisdom for understanding the human condition, as well as the timeless guide as to how to live life properly: together with one's fellowman, with one's family, and in developing one's own character.

May we continue to use the Torah as Rav Yisrael taught us to: as a guidebook to strive for ever greater heights in altruistic and unbiased service of Hashem!

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## Parsha Puzzlers!

1. How many times is the phrase “*lo tov*” found in the Torah and what is the connection between them?
2. Who takes on the role of waiter in *Parshas Yisro*?
3. They share a common name. One was the most famous convert in the Chumash and the other was one of Yitzchak’s grandchildren. Who are the two individuals?

### Answers:

1. The phrase “*lo tov*” is found twice. Once when Hashem says that it is not good for man to be alone (*Bereishis* 2:18), and once when Yisro tells Moshe that it is not good for him to carry the weight of the nation’s problem on his own. Both instances highlight the importance of not being alone.
2. Rashi (*Shemos* 18:12) quotes the *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael* which tells us that Moshe Rabbeinu was a waiter to Aharon, the elders, and Yisro. The Midrash comments that Moshe was showing gratitude to his father-in-law for giving him his wife and the opportunity to have children.
3. The answer is Reuel. Reuel was one of Yisro’s seven names (Rashi on *Shemos* 18:1), and was also the name of one of the sons of Eisav (*Bereishis* 36:4).

These questions and answers were adapted from “Torah IQ: The Great Torah Riddle Book” with the permission of the author.

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