

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI JEFF KIRSHBLUM**

### A Man of Conviction

**T**he Talmud in (Sotah 11a) tells us that Pharaoh had three advisers: Yisro, Iyov and Bilaam. When Pharaoh was deciding the most prudent method to exterminate the Jewish people, he sought the opinion of each of his three advisers.

Bilaam, the grandson of Lavan, was an evil man and relished the prospect of eradicating the Jewish people. It was he who advised Pharaoh to kill the male Israelites.

Iyov was opposed to any plan to destroy the Jewish nation. Rather than display his true feelings on the issue, he refrained from offering any opinion. Perhaps he knew that his objections would be met with resistance. He most likely rationalized that he could do more to help the plight of the Jewish people at a later date by remaining in his position as advisor. As a result, he decided not to oppose or accept Bilaam's proposal, but remained silent.

Yisro, on the other hand, vocally rejected Pharaoh's idea of exterminating the Jewish people. Yisro believed it was wrong that these people should be made to suffer for no crime other than being Jewish. Yisro's loud protests angered Pharaoh and Yisro had to flee Egypt in order to save his life.

The Talmud continues by telling us that each of the three advisers was rewarded or punished according to his deed. Bilaam, who encouraged the execution of thousands of innocent Jews, was killed by the very people he sought to exterminate. Iyov, who remained silent in the face of Jewish oppression, was afflicted with a life of pain and suffering. Yisro, who fled because of his opposition, sacrificing his position of leadership and life of comfort and wealth in Egypt, eventually became the father-in-law of Moshe and his descendants became prominent judicial leaders of the Children of Israel. We know that a very basic tenet of Judaism is that G-d repays a person measure for measure. Therefore, we can clearly understand the reward and punishment of Yisro and Bilaam. However, why was Iyov's punishment so severe? Iyov did not support the decree of persecution against the Jewish people. In fact, even if Iyov had objected, Pharaoh would have still enacted his decree. Iyov's only sin was remaining silent. Why then did he have to suffer such a harsh life, one where tragedy followed tragedy?

The Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, explains that the infliction brought upon Iyov was indeed a punishment measure for measure. Iyov reasoned that he would not accomplish anything by objecting to Pharaoh's decree, therefore he did not raise his voice against it. As a punishment for his silence, G-d brought upon him terrible pains and suffering. Due to his terrible plight, Iyov was provoked to cry out to G-d and complain. Wasn't Iyov the same person who chose not to raise his voice to Pharaoh's decree? Didn't Iyov believe that protesting accomplishes nothing? If this is so, then why was Iyov objecting now?

Iyov raised his voice in protest now, because it was Iyov who was personally suffering. When one suffers, he instinctively yells out in pain. Although yelling may not alleviate the pain, it does register a strong sign of disapproval. Iyov was now raising his voice as a sign of his disapproval of his painful personal situation. He was no longer silent. Thus Iyov's punishment stirred him to react in a manner that in turn demonstrated the error of his failure to raise his voice in protest against Pharaoh's heinous plan.

The Rambam (Hilchos Ta'anis, chapter 1) states that it is a positive Torah commandment to cry out and sound trumpets when disaster threatens the Jewish people. He bases that on the verse "When you go to war in your land against an enemy who oppresses you, you shall call out with trumpets so that you shall be remembered before the L-rd your G-d and you shall be saved from your enemies" (Bamidbar 10:9).

The Rambam explains that the concept of trumpeting and calling out is not only in times of war, but for every impending tragedy. It is a signal for the individual and for the masses to evaluate their situation. They must determine if it is their own misdeeds that have brought the threat upon themselves. Without that signal, the threat will merely be accepted as a fact of life and the purpose of the tragedy will be for naught.

Today, the Jewish Nation is faced with a great many threats. There are threats from enemies on the outside and from enemies within our own ranks. Too many of us remain silent; our voices are not heard. Many of us feel that protests will not accomplish anything. They are the Iyov's of our generation. The pain of our brothers and sisters must be felt as if it is our own pain. We must sound out the trumpets of our conscience. We cannot stand by as though we are

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neutral. As Dante said: The worst place in purgatory is reserved for those who are neutral in times of crisis".

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### RABBI DOV KRAMER

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd you shall not climb stairs onto My altar, so that your nakedness is not revealed upon it” (Shemos 20:23). Because of this prohibition, the top of the altar was accessed via a ramp rather than a staircase. As Rashi points out, the Kohanim wore pants under their cloaks, so there was no real "nakedness" that might be "revealed" had stairs been used instead of a ramp. Nevertheless, taking a larger/wider step puts the legs in a position inappropriate for the sanctity of the altar. For this reason, taking large steps even when walking up the ramp (without climbing any stairs) was forbidden. "Rather, when he ascends there he should walk calmly and in awe, [the] heel (of one foot) next to [the] big toe (of the other foot)" (Chinuch, Mitzvah #41). By putting one foot right next to the other (heel to toe) at each step, the legs are never in a compromising position, a position that occurs when climbing stairs.

Last year, my then-six-year-old daughter asked me how, if climbing stairs in the Mishkan (and Temple) was forbidden, could there be stairs leading to the menorah? Indeed, there was a three-step staircase or stepstool that the kohain would use to climb up to the menorah in order to set up and light it. Like every good father, I told her what a great question it was, and that even though I didn't know the answer I would try to find out. In fact, the Moshav Zekainim (a compilation of commentaries from the Baalei Tosfos) asks why the altar was different than other vessels in this regard, but provides no answer.

The mystery actually deepens, as the Mishna (Yuma 22a) tells us that there used to be a race up the ramp to see which kohain would get the privilege of clearing away the ashes from the top of the altar. How could they "run" up the ramp if each step had to be taken by putting the heel of the lead foot next to the big toe of the other foot? So not only do we have necessarily inappropriate steps taken as the kohain climbs up to the menorah, but we have totally avoidable (by deciding ahead of time who would clear away the

ashes, as it was eventually changed to after an accident during one of the races caused a broken leg) "larger" steps being allowed on the ramp too!

If we examine the difference between the purpose of the altar's ramp and the stairs leading to the menorah, we may have the first step (pardon the pun) towards answering our question(s). The offerings were brought on the altar itself, with the kohanim walking on top of it. The ramp was the means to get onto the altar. The final step, from what would have been the staircase onto the altar, would have meant taking that larger step onto the altar (even if once on it they could limit their steps to the "heel to toe" type). By using a ramp, even that last step could be "heel to toe." On the other hand, the kohain didn't climb onto the menorah, but used the stepstool to reach it. By the time he reached the top step and had to set up and light the menorah, his feet could be (and had to be) together. At the time he was doing the actual service, his feet were not positioned inappropriately. If the problem was not taking less appropriate steps anywhere in the Temple area, but taking them on the altar itself, we can understand the difference between the stairs leading to the menorah and the stairs that would have led onto the altar. And why running up the ramp itself wasn't the problem, only that last step from the ramp onto the altar. And, in fact, the Mishna tells us that the "finish line" of the race was four cubits before the altar, so that final step could be taken "heel to toe."

The wording of the Torah, verified by the Mechilta, also indicates that what was to be avoided was taking such steps on the altar itself. We are told not to climb stairs "onto" the altar, not "to" the altar, so that we should not reveal our nakedness "upon it." This extra level of respect was required to avoid taking larger steps in a way that would compromise the sanctity of the altar itself, but not other areas of the Temple. Why was the altar singled out? We have already seen that the altar was unique in that the kohanim walked on it, putting them in a position where wider steps would be less respectful than standing next to it. This is especially relevant according to the Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:45), who says that we are forbidden to climb onto the altar in an inappropriate manner to counter the modes of idol worship (such as Peor) that used promiscuity in their service. It would be precisely on the altar, where the actual service was done, that anything that might seem inappropriate would be avoided.

But what about the ramp? Couldn't there have been a staircase with its top step on the same level as the altar, serving as a platform from which to walk "heel to toe" onto the altar, thereby avoiding taking any large step onto the altar itself? Was the entire ascent made on a ramp, and made stepping "heel to toe," just in case the kohain forgot to change from regular steps to "heel to toe" steps at the top?

The Mishna in Midos (3:4) equates the stones used for the altar with the stones used for the ramp,

indicating that the ramp is considered part of the altar. As Rabbi Peretz Steinberg, shlita, points out (on our verse), if it is considered part of the altar, then it would be included in the prohibition of taking large steps "upon it." Yet, the Talmud (Zevachim 87a) needs a source to equate the ramp with the altar regarding contact with a disqualified offering, just as it needs a source for contact with all vessels (klay shareis). If the ramp were considered part of the altar, it should have the same status even without this source. (And if this source makes it the same, shouldn't that now apply to all vessels, not just the ramp?) So which one is it? Is the ramp like the altar, which is why its stones can't be hewn (etc.) or is it considered a separate entity?

When describing the offerings brought on the altar (Hilchos Temidin u-Musafin 6:3), the Rambam writes that salt was put on the ramp so that the kohanim shouldn't slip when they bring the firewood up to the altar. "And even though the salt becomes a barrier between their feet and the ramp, since this bringing (of the wood) is not part of the service, we are not concerned about it." It would seem, then, that there are times when the ramp is used as part of the service (such as bringing the actual offering up), and times when it is just an access ramp (see Radvaz on Hilchos Beis Habechirah 1:16). It is therefore possible that it was considered part of the altar when it was used for the actual service (thereby necessitating it being made from altar-ready stones), but not at other times (thereby allowing a salt barrier).

Ascending the ramp to clean the ashes was not part of the service (see Tosfos Yeshanim), so the ramp was not considered part of the altar during the "race." Bringing the offerings up was, so every step, from the bottom of the ramp to the last step at the top - and especially the step onto the altar itself - had to be "heel to toe."

Bringing the oil to the menorah was preparation for the menorah service, but the service itself was only performed once atop the last step. Therefore, the kohain could climb stairs to get to the spot where he did the service, but needed a ramp while doing the service by the altar. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he Torah tells us that at the moment of revelation all the Jews at Sinai were able to see. (Exodus 20:15) Is it possible that of the several million there was not one single person who was blind?

Here Rashi responds and states that in fact a miracle occurred. In his words "there was not among them a single blind person." Rashi additionally points out that in fact not even one Jew was mute or deaf. After all, the Torah states "and all the people answered" (Exodus 19:8) and that the Jews declared "we will do and hear." (Exodus 24:7)

The full text of the Torah actually reads "and all the people saw the voices". It is certainly possible for one to see images, but wonders if it is possible for one to see voices. He suggests that the power of the people to see was so profound that it went beyond the usual. In his words, "they saw that which should be able to heard, which is impossible to see at any other place." In other words, at revelation, the moment was so powerful that they saw what is normally heard. Their vision was so powerful that they even saw voices.

Another thought comes to mind that differs from Rashi's suggestion. Perhaps at revelation, there were those amongst our people who were not in perfect physical shape. There may indeed have been some who could not hear. However, our text may be suggesting that even the hearing impaired were able to complement this limitation by a greater ability to see. This may be the meaning of seeing voices. Unable to hear, they compensated with their ability to see. Similarly, there may have been those who couldn't speak or who couldn't see, but were able to somehow, with G-ds help, make up for this limitation at this most amazing moment in history.

The idea that those who are handicapped have a place in Judaism is fundamental to Torah. Some of our greatest leaders struggled with limitations. Yitzchak (Isaac) couldn't see; Ya'akov (Jacob) was lame for a period of time and Moshe (Moses) suffered from a severe speaking handicap. Despite these difficulties, they rose to unbelievable heights.

Which is the greater miracle at the time of revelation? On the one hand, it certainly reflects G-ds intervention if all people, even those who couldn't see, were given sight at that moment. On the other hand, revelation, which embraces even those with limitations, makes an extraordinary statement. It teaches us that just as at Sinai, everyone was welcome so too must we do everything in our power to see to it that everyone in our community is embraced.

In the end, the test of our community is the way it reaches out to the most vulnerable—from the forgotten, to those who are often cast aside—to those with physical or emotional or learning disabilities. "And they saw the voices" reminds us that all Jews, even the most vulnerable, stood at the foot at the most holy space of all—the foot of Mt. Sinai. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**A**lthough Traditional Judaism teaches that the Bible is the word of G-d -and as such every Biblical word is sacred - this week's portion of Yitro certainly contains one of the most inspiring and influential passages of all of our Scriptures. After all, it contains the revelation of G-d at Mount Sinai, the universally known Ten Commandments, which are the

cornerstone of our faith as well as our morality and serve as the basis for all of our 613 commandments. Is it then not rather strange that such a Key portion is named after a Gentile, and a Midianite Priest Gentile at that, rather than after a descendant of Abraham and a leader of the Israelites?!

Now you might well argue that since it was Yitro who suggested to Moses the Judicial system of organization which would make the Ten Commandments and their multiple extensions enforceable within Israelite daily life and conduct, it is supremely logical that the portion of the Ten Commandments be named after him. However, careful reading of the Biblical text demonstrates that Yitro's suggestion for judicial reform could not have been made earlier than four months after the Revelation, in the period of the aftermath of the construction of the Tabernacle, which should have been recorded in the latter portions of the Book of Exodus rather than in its present placement after the Splitting of the Reed Sea and directly before the Revelation at Sinai.

Yes, it is true that Yitro makes his appearance on the Israelite scene when he comes to Moses with his daughter (Moses' wife Zipporah) and their two children - who had apparently been left behind by the prophet of G-d and liberator of his people after the splitting of the Reed Sea. Yitro's purpose is to unify the family and announce his praise for the G-d who had wrought such miracles during the era of the exodus (Exodus 18:1-12). However, Yitro's key contribution of judicial reform comes "on the morrow", when he points out that unless there is an organized judicial system, Moses together with his laws will collapse under the heavy weight of the many cases which simply had to be adjudicated on time if they were to be taken seriously (18:13-27). Now when does this "morrow" or following day, fall out?

Rashi, citing the midrash (ad loc 18:13), insists that it was the morrow of the Day of Forgiveness (Yom HaKippurim), the tenth day of Tishrei, after Moses received the second tablets four months after the initial Revelation on the sixth day of Sivan. There was absolutely no time for adjudication until then, since immediately after the Revelation, Moses entered the supernal realms atop Mount Sinai for forty days when he received the Sacred Tablets; he then came down from the mountain to the golden calf idolatry when he smashed the tablets (17th of Tammuz), after which he prayed for forty days for Divine forgiveness, and then received the Second Tablets as a sign of that forgiveness forty days following that (on the 10th of Tishrei).

Hence, it could not possibly have been until the eleventh of Tishrei that the Israelites lined up for Moses' adjudication - because until that time the master of all prophets had been unavailable to the people because of his total preoccupation with revelations from and prayers to G-d. Only after those four months had passed, "from the morrow (of Yom Kippurim), when

Moses sat to judge the nation, and the nation stood upon Moses from morning to evening"(18:13), would Yitro have cause to explain, "You will surely become worn out, yes, worn out, you and also this nation of Yours, because this matter is too weighty for you, you will not be able to do it by yourself... You must seek throughout the nation people of strong reputations, those who fear G-d and are people of truth who despise ill-gotten gain, and appoint them as district judges (to adjudicate) for thousands, for hundreds, for fifties, and for tens..." (18:13,14,18,21). But if so, why precede the Revelation with this advice four months before its time, thereby causing the name of the Biblical portion of the Decalogue to be after a Gentile Midianite Priest?

Apparently it was important for the Bible to stress - as a prologue to the Decalogue - that the Divine Revelation was meant not for the Israelites alone but for the Gentile world as well! Our mission, our very *raison d'etre*, is "to perfect the world in the Kingship of G-d, "to inspire not only the Jews but also the Gentile leadership to declare, "Blessed is the Lord who has saved you from the hand of Egypt. Now I Know that the Lord is greater than all other Powers, because the very object which they used sinfully (the Nile River, which they made repository for drowned Hebrew male babies) was turned against them (when it became transformed into blood - Ex 13:10,11)". The world must recognize a G-d who detests - and ultimately vanquishes - injustice and enslavement.

The Biblical message is even more striking, because our sacred text juxtaposes two types of Gentiles: at the conclusion of last week's portion we meet Amalek, the Gentile terrorist enemy who strikes out at the weak, the aged and the infirm, and we must remember to extirpate that enemy of Israel and humane civilization from the world (Exodus 17:8-16, cf. Deut. 25:17-19); and at the beginning of this week's portion of the Decalogue we meet another type of Gentile, one whom we must inspire and from whom we have much to learn. It is this latter prototype of Gentiledom for whom our Holy Temple eventually beckons, when in the Messianic Age, he and his compatriots will flock to Jerusalem to hear the word of G-d and beat their swords into ploughshares (Isaiah 2, Micah 4).

And finally there is one last lesson to be derived from Yitro: We do not insist that the Gentiles convert to Judaism; it is quite sufficient that they adopt the seven Noahide laws of ethical conduct, the morality of the Decalogue. Hence the prophet Micah declares that in the Holy Temple at the end of the days, "everyone will call upon his G-d, and we shall call upon the Lord our G-d forever" (ibid). Indeed, it would seem from the literal reading of the text that Yitro never actually converts to Judaism. When the Israelites are initially poised in the desert to enter the Promised Land, Moses importunes his father-in-law to remain with them, to be one of their leaders ("for us as our eyes" - our visionary, our guide, Numbers 10:31); Yitro, however, seems to refuse,

denying the possibility of his becoming a second Abraham, with the words, "I shall not go (with you), but to my land and my birthplace shall I go" (Numbers 10:30; Genesis 12:1). Perhaps, however, Yitro's deletion of his returning also to his father's house implies that although he will not convert to Judaism, neither will he revert to the idolatry of his forbears. Nevertheless, (and perhaps only coincidentally) when Yitro leaves the Jewish encampment, the Israelites degenerate into squabbling, rebelling factions which leads to the demise of that entire generation in the desert.

The message of Yitro is codified eternally in the teachings of Maimonides, who rules that while "the Almighty bequeathed to Moses to impart the 613 commandments only to Israel..., He similarly bequeathed to Moses (the obligation) to even force the Gentile world to accept the seven commandments of morality"(laws of Kings, 8,10). In a global village, when Islamic Fundamentalism threatens to engulf the world with their fanatical message of Jihad, to anyone who is not a Moslem, no message is more crucial than this Biblical teaching of religious pluralism, morality and world peace. © 2006 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**M**oshe shows great leadership qualities in this week's parsha. When his father-in-law Yitro criticizes him for the manner in which he conducts the judicial system of the people of Israel - Moshe was basically a one-man judge and jury and counselor - Moshe responds positively to the unasked for advice that Yitro volunteered. It is not easy for someone to accept criticism and advice from anyone else, especially not from a father-in-law. But the mark of greatness in leadership is exactly that trait - the ability to listen to others, to admit mistakes and to adopt new policies and actions to help the situation. Throughout the career of Moshe we find this great trait of his evident. His brother Aharon will contradict a halachic ruling of Moshe regarding eating from the sacrifice while he was yet an onan on the day of the tragic death of Aharon's two sons. Moshe will immediately admit his error and agree with Aharon's interpretation. Moshe will later accommodate himself to the wishes of the tribes of Gad and Reuven and allow them land east of the Jordan River even though it is clear to all from the reading of that parsha that Moshe originally disagreed vehemently with their request and decision. And, as in the case of the request of the daughters of Tzafchad to receive the inheritance of their father, when Moshe does not have an immediate answer to the question posed before him, he nevertheless admits this openly and candidly and states that he has to consult with G-d, so to speak, before giving a definitive answer.

Moshe's greatness of spirit and wise ability to admit mistake stems from his superior trait of modesty. The Torah describes Moshe as being the most humble of all human beings. It is always our ego, hubris and arrogance that prevent us from climbing down the tree of bad ideas or wrong formulations. Since if one believes that "I am always right" it is well nigh impossible for anyone to grant advice, let alone criticism, to a person with such an attitude. Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, the great sage of nineteenth-century Lithuania and the founder of the Mussar movement, always prayed that he should have the ability and patience to hear what his critics have to say and to incorporate their ideas and thoughts in his decision making process. Sycophants who curry favor with the leader by encouraging his ego and downplaying other opinions that disagree with the leader's policies always surround people in power. The great men of Israel always strove to rise above this situation and to accept advice and truth from whatever source it came. The give and take of halachic discussion, the differences in approaches to solve problems that beset the Jewish community in all times and places, are the hallmarks of traditional Jewish history. Moshe's example remains the paradigm for Jewish leaders throughout the ages. It is clear that this is why the Torah places emphasis on this incident between Yitro and Moshe, not only for its story content, but also mainly for its transcendent message of the requirement of true leadership of Israel. © 2006 *Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).*

#### **MACHON ZOMET**

### **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

*by Rabbi Amnon Bazak*

**A**fter all the preparations are made for the revelation of G-d at Mount Sinai, the great moment arrives: "And G-d called Moshe to the top of the mountain, and Moshe ascended" [Shemot 19:20]. The natural continuation to be expected is for the Almighty to immediately begin to hand over the Ten Commandments, which is the reason that Moshe was called to the mountain. However, surprisingly, what the Almighty does is to tell Moshe to descend, in order to give a warning to Bnei Yisrael. "Go down and declare to the nation that they should not rise up to G-d to see, lest many of them fall. And let the Kohanim who approach G-d also sanctify themselves, lest G-d be angry with them." [19:21-22]. Moshe, who it can be assumed was completely primed and ready to receive the Torah, tries to convince the Almighty that there is no need for renewed warning. "And Moshe said to G-d: The people cannot climb on Mount Sinai, for you have commanded us, saying, make a border around the mountain, and

sanctity it." [19:23]. However, G-d refuses to accede to this request, and He adds a new commandment, which was not given before: "And G-d said to him, go down, and you will ascend together with Aharon. And let the Kohanim and the people not climb the mountain, lest G-d will be angry with them." [19:24]. Why was Aharon now told to accompany Moshe onto the mountain?

Evidently, the key to understanding this matter is related to the words that preceded the command about Aharon, "Go down." This specific phrase appears only one more time in the Torah, also as a command to Moshe on Mount Sinai. After the sin of the Golden Calf, the Almighty speaks to Moshe. "And G-d said to Moshe, Go down, for your nation which you lifted up out of Egypt has become corrupt" [32:7]. Is there a connection between these two commands?

The sin of the Golden Calf showed how difficult it was for Bnei Yisrael to continue to worship G-d in the abstract, without Moshe's presence. As long as Moshe was there, the people could accept him as a channel for their contact with the Almighty. But when Moshe leaves them to ascend Mount Sinai, they need a physical entity to represent G-d, and for this reason they make the calf. It is created in response to the pressure of Bnei Yisrael by Aharon, who was left behind, leading to his being the one responsible for making the calf. It is thus reasonable to assume that at the beginning of the events there was already a fear that in Moshe's absence the nation would attempt to go beyond the permitted limits because of their great desire to see something physical on the mountain. In order to demonstrate the problem to Moshe, the Almighty gives a command that Aharon should also leave the people, so that he would not be forced to withstand any pressure and allow them to climb the mountain, similar to the pressure he would later feel with respect to the Golden Calf.

Thus, the fact that Moshe descended from the mountain, responding to a command to take Aharon with him, prevented an outburst by the people at the most critical moment of the events on the mountain. In the end, it was not enough: The needs of the people were not fulfilled, and the great crisis was simply delayed for forty days

### All of Us Together

by Rabbi Shaul David Bucheko,

According to the well known passage in the Talmud, ""They stood at the bottom of the mountain' [Shemot 19:17] - this teaches us that He placed the mountain over them like a bowl and He said: If you accept the Torah all is well, but if not, this is where you will be buried." [Shabbat 88a]. This is very difficult to understand: What is the value of accepting the Torah under duress?

The Tosafot explain that there is a difference between "accepting the Torah" - "kabalah" - and "maintaining the Torah" - *kiyum*. To accept the Torah is

a good thing even if it is forced, and even if afterwards it will not be maintained. But this is not clear either. What is the point of accepting the Torah if it will not be observed afterwards? What benefit is there to be obtained by accepting the Torah and then putting it aside without making use of it?

Evidently, the concept of "accepting the Torah" includes observing the mitzvot, because otherwise the action has no meaning at all. The other term, maintaining the Torah, is broader than simply observing the commandments. The Ramban explains that the verse "Cursed is he who does not maintain the words of this Torah" [Devarim 27:26] refers to anybody who does not take action to maintain the existence of the Torah, even by causing evil people to support it. "Even if a person is completely righteous in his actions but he could have caused evil people to maintain it, he will be cursed." It is not enough for a person to take care of his own soul. The Torah teaches us that one who worries only about himself has lost his own credit, since he has not fulfilled his obligation with respect to the world. This obligation requires actions to maintain the Torah in general. "Accepting the Torah" is obligatory, even if it comes about as a result of force, but "maintaining the Torah" can only be valid if it is done in a voluntary way.

When the Torah was given, it was accompanied by a new obligation: To make sure that it would be maintained by all sectors of the community. This is the real meaning of the concept that G-d "placed the mountain over them like a bowl." The entire nation has been put together under one upside down bowl, completely surrounded by the walls of the bowl. It is as if the walls tell the people: You are a single body, every single one of you is responsible both for himself and for the entire community. "If you accept the Torah" - in its general way, when everybody can be considered as being together in the same bowl - "all is well, but if not" - if you do not want to be part of the community but rather to leave the bowl and take care of your own interests - "this is where you will be buried."

Let us hope and pray that we will accept with all our hearts the obligation to maintain the Torah in all walks of life.

### RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

## Haftarah

This week's haftarah reveals to us the unlimited potential of the Jewish soul. The prophet Yeshaya shares with us his astounding vision of Hashem's throne of glory. He says, "Fiery angels stand before Hashem in service ... They call to one another and say in unison, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is Hashem the master of the legions whose glory fills the entire world'" (6:2,3) Yeshaya saw one of the loftiest visions ever to be seen by man and responded in the following manner, "Woe to me for I remained silent because I am a man of impure lips...and my eyes beheld the Divine

Presence itself." (6:5) This verse displays Yeshaya's humble response to his awesome experience feeling unworthy of catching the faintest glimpse of Hashem's magnificent glory. Yet, Yeshaya was troubled by his personal silence during those lofty moments unable to participate in the angels' glorious praise. (see Radak ad loc) He attributed this to his personal imperfection and inadequacy. Apparently, his speech was impure and sinful and rendered him unworthy of uttering a sound in Hashem's holy presence. The vision continued and Hashem commanded one of His fiery angels to deliver Yeshaya a burning coal. Yeshaya said, "And with tongs the angel removed the coal from the altar, touched my mouth and said...Your sin is removed and your error forgiven." (6:6,7) Immediately following this, Hashem asked, "Whom shall I send?" and Yeshaya responded and said, "Here I am; send me." (6:8) Yeshaya's awesome vision together with his humble response initiated him into prophecy. After this initial cleansing, he became worthy of transmitting Hashem's penetrating message to His people. In addition, Yeshaya's cleansing process allowed him to join the ranks of the angels and converse with Hashem in His actual presence. (Radak ad loc)

This intriguing incident suggests the unthinkable, that man can rise to the lofty status of Heavenly beings. Although Yeshaya was privy to the inner most levels of spirituality he sensed his mortality and felt unworthy of associating with such elevated levels of holiness. Alas, he was a human being and not a spiritual entity. He identified with impurity and sin and didn't deserve to see such revelations or sing Heavenly praises. Hashem revealed Yeshaya that he had the potential and after minor refinement he would personally attain those lofty levels. Interestingly, when we reflect upon this incident we tend to side with Yeshaya. We also wonder, "What position does an impure mortal occupy amongst Heavenly angels?" How could man even consider participating in Heavenly praise? Although angels reflect Hashem's glory what can be said about man?!

The answer to these is found in the essential discussion of mortality between Hashem and the angels. The Sages relate that the angels complained to Hashem when He chose to share His precious Torah with His people. They argued, "Your glory (Your Torah) should remain among the Heavenly beings. They are holy and Your Torah is holy, they are pure and Your Torah is pure and they are everlasting and Your Torah is also." Hashem responded that the Torah could not remain amongst them because they are perfect spiritual beings with no mortality, impurity or illness. Hashem's true glory would ultimately come from man plagued by impurity and mortality. (Midrash Shochar Tov 8) This response also troubles us because, in truth, we side with the angels. Isn't perfect fulfillment of Hashem's will the greatest tribute to His honor? What could be more glorious than the angels' purest praises? How could

mortality and impurity serve as positive factors in Hashem's ultimate glory? The Sages' words in this week's haftorah provide deep insight into this. Rashi reflects upon the burning coal and notes that the fiery angel held it with tongs. This suggests that the coal's heat was too intense for an angel to hold. Surprisingly however, Yeshaya's lip endured direct contact with the coal without being harmed. Rashi quotes the Sages who explain a human being's potential truly surpasses the status of an angel. They support this with a verse in Yoel that says, "For His camp is massive but mightier are those who do His word." (Yoel 2:11) Chazal interpret Hashem's massive camp to refer to His angels and those who fulfill His word to refer to His prophets. This teaches us that, in truth, a devout prophet is greater than an angel. (Rashi 6:7 from Midrash Tanchuma)

The upshot of this is based on man's equal ability to obey or disobey Hashem. An angel's clear perception of Hashem basically leaves no room for anything but perfect behavior. Man, on the other hand, is plagued by impurity, weakness and temptation. His perfect adherence to Hashem's will is undoubtedly true testimony to Hashem's greatness. Man's absolute negation for Hashem's sake displays the true power of His word. The spiritual ascent of a prophet proves that free thinking man can be so subservient to his master that he transcends all physical barriers. Maimonides explains that the basic qualifications of any prophet demand full control over all passions and emotions never succumbing to any physical desire. After achieving this he continues to detach himself from worldly matters totally focusing his mind on spirituality while training it never to stray into frivolity or vanity. He continues developing until his mind becomes transfixed on Hashem's innermost secrets thus deeming one worthy of Hashem's contact. During prophecy one realizes that he transcended all human barriers and joined the ranks of the angels. (see Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 7:1) This incredible accomplishment by man supersedes indeed the Heavenly angels even during their loftiest praises to Hashem. Man, unlike angel, begins far from perfect but can actually refine himself and attain the spirituality of the Heavenly hosts themselves.

We now understand that the human being sings the "praise of all praises" through his enormous efforts overcoming his human imperfections. Yeshaya originally felt unworthy of participating in the Heavenly display of Hashem's glory due to his human limitations and imperfections. Hashem responded that his conscious decision to totally subject himself to Hashem's will surpassed the Heavenly praise. Once Yeshaya's personal speech was totally cleansed he was worthy of participating in the loftiest of all praises. He could now speak in Hashem's presence and even rise above the angels and display, through his total subservience, Hashem's greatest honor.

This lesson has great bearing on our times. Chafetz Chaim raises the classic concern how the latest generations consider meriting the advent of Mashiach? If previous generations who were undoubtedly more pious than ours did not merit Mashiach how could our shameful generation merit him? Chafetz Chaim answers that, on the contrary, no generation ever qualified for Mashiach as much as ours. He explains that in previous times Mitzva observance was, basically, a foregone conclusion. It did not require endless self sacrifice and had therefore had relatively limited value. In our days, however, foreign influences are so rampant that even basic Mitzva observance requires tremendous devotion and sacrifice. In present times, we may add, morality has fallen so low that attaining any level of purity and self negation is a tremendous accomplishment. In this light every mitzva has such great value that we, above all, display Hashem's greatest glory. Hashem undoubtedly tells His angels, "Look at My people who manage to remain moral and pure even in their corrupt and free thinking environment." "Can anyone bring Me greater glory than them?!" © 2002 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

### **Man Over Moses**

**P**arshas Yisro begins by relating how impressed its namesake, Yisro, (Jethro) is upon hearing the amazing events that transpired to the nation led by his son-in-law, Moshe. He decides to convert to Judaism. Yisro sends word to Moshe that he will soon be arriving at the Israelite camp. Yisro wants Moshe to leave his post and greet him in the desert before he arrives at the Israelite camp. The Torah tells us that Moshe did go out to greet Yisro: "the man bowed and kissed him and asked the peace of his dear one." (Exodus 18:8)

Rashi is bothered by the ambiguity. "Who bowed to whom? Who kissed whom? Who was the one to make the gesture? Was it Yisro, the father-in-law, who kissed Moshe, or did Moshe, the son-in-law, leader of millions of people, run to greet his father in-law a Midianite priest, and bow and kiss him?"

Rashi quotes the Mechilta which refers us to Bamidbar (Numbers 12:3) where Moshe is called "the man Moshe" obviously the words, "the man bowed and kissed him" in our portion must mean that same man - Moshe. Why, however, did the Torah choose a seemingly convoluted way to tell us that Moshe prostrated himself before his father-in-law? Would it not have been easier to tell us that "Moshe man bowed and kissed him and asked the peace of his dear one"? Why did the Torah use the words "the man" and send us to the Book of Numbers to learn who "the man" was?

Last year my brother, Rabbi Zvi Kamenetzky of Chicago, tried to contact a friend who was vacationing at Schechter's Caribbean Hotel in Miami Beach, Florida.

After about 15 rings, the hotel operator, an elderly, southern black woman, who worked at the hotel for three decades politely informed my brother that the man was not in the room. "Would you like to leave a message?" she inquired.

"Sure," responded Reb Zvi, "tell him that Rabbi Kamenetzky, called."

The woman at the other end gasped. "Raabbi Kaamenetzky?" she drawled. "Did you say you were Raabbi Kaamenetzky?" She knew the name! It sounded as if she was about to follow up with a weighty question, and my brother responded in kind. "Yes." He did not know what would follow. "Why do you ask?"

"Are you," asked the operator, "by any chance, related to the famous Rabbi Kamenetzky?"

There was silence in Chicago. My brother could not imagine that this woman had an inkling of who his grandfather, the great sage. Dean of Mesivta Torah Voda'ath to whom thousands had flocked for advice and counsel, was. She continued. "You know, he passed away about ten years ago at the end the wintah?" She definitely had her man, thought Reb Zvi. Still in shock, he offered a subdued, "Yes, I'm a grandson."

"YOOOU ARE?" she exclaimed, "well I'm sure glad to talk to ya! Cause your grandpa -- he was a real good friend of mine!"

My brother pulled the receiver from his ear and stared at the mouthpiece. He composed himself and slowly began to repeat her words, quizzically. "You say that Rabbi Kamenetzky was a good friend of yours?"

"Sure! Every mornin' Raabbi Kaaamenetzky would come to this here hotel to teach some sorta Bible class (It was the Daf-Yomi.) Now my desk is about ten yards from the main entrance of the hotel. But every mornin' he made sure to come my way, nod his head, and say good mornin' to me. On his way out, he would always stop by my desk and say good-bye. Oh! Yes! He was a great Rabbi but he was even a greater man. He was a wonderful man. He was a real good friend of mine!"

The Torah could have told us the narrative an easier way. It could have told us that Moshe bowed before, and kissed Yisro. It does more. It tells us that it was a man who kissed Yisro. True, it was Moshe that performed those actions. But they were not the actions of a Moses, they were the actions of a mentch!

Often we attribute acts of kindness, compassion, and extra care to super-human attributes of our sages and leaders. The Torah tells us that it is the simple mentch that performs them. Inside every great leader lies "the man." Little wonder that the words "and the man Moses" that Rashi quotes from the Book of Numbers begin a verse that fits our explanation quite well. The verse reads "and the man Moses was the exceedingly humble, more than any one on the face of the earth." (Numbers 12:3) It was the man Moses, who was exceedingly humble, more than any one on the face of the earth. © 1998 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org