

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The name of this week's parsha—one of the most important parshiyot of the Torah since it describes the seminal moment of Jewish life, the granting of the Torah at Sinai—bears the name of one of the most enigmatic figure in the Torah, that of Yitro. Yitro is the father-in-law of Moshe and a respected person in world society. The Midrash counts him as one of the main advisers to Pharaoh. His objection to the Egyptian ruler's treatment of the Jews forces him to leave this prestigious position and flee to Midian. There he also ascends in rank being described in the Torah as being the "priest of Midian."

The Midrash sees him as an idolater during that time, even forcing Moshe to commit one of his sons to his care and education. After the exodus from Egypt occurs, the subsequent miracles of the manna from heaven and the defeat of Amalek, Yitro apparently has a change of heart and mind. He now becomes a convert to Judaism of sorts and comes to join the Jewish people in their desert sojourn. He is accorded great honor in the Jewish camp due not so much to his own personal achievements as to his being the father-in-law of Moshe.

Yet it his advice to Moshe and Israel that establishes the judicial and governmental system for the Jewish people while they remained in the Sinai desert. Yitro will appear again later in the Torah when he decides to return to Midian and ignores Moshe's plea to remain with the Jewish people and help guide them into the Land of Israel. Later in Tanach, in the books of Yehoshua, Shoftim and Shmuel we read of his descendants who did live in the Land of Israel and were part of the general society there.

It is hard to get a handle on Yitro. He is the paradigm of many non-Jewish friends of the Jewish people who are well meaning, altruistic and apparently sincere in their support. Yet Yitro is not viewed in

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in honour of
Ari's bar mitzvah
with love from his parents
Roger and Debra
and sister Eliana**

especially heroic terms in Jewish tradition. Something is lacking there. He is a friend and a supporter, an adviser and guide, but he does not seem to understand the Jewish people and its mission and purpose. In a paradoxical way, he loves the Jewish people and certainly his immediate family, but he finds it difficult to identify himself with them.

This is the striking difference between his attitude, statements and behavior and those of Ruth, the righteous convert. Her attitude towards the Jewish people is not only one of admiration and support, but rather it is one of complete identification. Yitro finds it difficult to cross that emotional and mental bridge. The truth be said, we need friends like Yitro in the world. And they are currently in rather limited supply. But we should not expect from them more than admiration and limited support. For they never seem to really identify with us—with our circumstances and position. To the end, they remain as enigmatic to us as Yitro himself.
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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

It is fascinating to note that the central portion of the Bible, the narrative which tells of the divine revelation at Sinai in the form of the ten commandments which are the basis for all human morality, is named after the Mideonite Priest Yitro and even opens with a meeting between Yitro and Moses. "And Yitro, the Priest of Mideon, the father in law of Moses heard all that G-d had wrought for Moses and for Israel his nation since the Lord took Israel out of Egypt"(Exodus 18; 1) It is fascinating to query what it was that actually brought Yitro to leave his Mideonite home and meet with Moses? What was his primary intention in coming?

The very next verse would certainly imply that Yitro was actually confronting Moses as a father in law, with familial interest to remind his son in law of his lapsed obligations towards his wife and children. "And Yitro, the father in law of Moses, took Tziporah, the wife of Moses after he (Moses) had sent her away and her two children....and Yitro, the father in law of Moses, came with his (Moses') sons and wife to Moses to the desert...." (Exodus 18:2-5) Note that in these five

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verses Yitro is referred to as Moses' "father in law" three times.

If I were to recount the situation, I would suggest initially- when Tzipporah and the two sons returned without Moses to her father Yitro's home in Mideon, Yitro was not at all upset. It is difficult to imagine that this Mideonite Priest was very impressed - or even accepting- of this Moses as a son in law. Not only did he speak of a strange G-d, Y-HVH, but he was a renegade from Egypt where he had murdered an Egyptian official, a taskmaster of the suspect Hebrews. Indeed, this Moses himself belonged to that accursed Hebrew race which had become delegitimized as a proliferating fifth column by the Egyptian leadership. Certainly, Yitro had hoped for more for the daughter of an individual so well respected in Mideon.

If Yitro had not been sorry to have received Tzipporah back home, our commentaries provide fascinating differences of opinion as to why Moses was interested in sending her home to her father. Rashi, citing the earlier verse wherein G-d gives Moses the green light to return to Egypt since those Egyptians seeking to punish Moses by taking away his life had all died, actually sites the verse "and Moses took his wife, and his sons and placed them upon the donkey to return to the land of Egypt" (Exodus 4:19,20) This classical commentary is therefore perplexed as to when and why Moses apparently changed his mind and sent his family back to Mideon. He therefore sites a midrash which suggests that when Aaron came out to meet Moses on his way back to Egypt, Aaron took a look at the strange woman and two sons accompanying his brother and enquired after them. Moses explained that these were his Mideonite wife and children who he was bringing with him back to Egypt. Aaron then suggested that since we Hebrews now regret the fact that we came to Egypt in the first place, why now add to the Egyptian slaves? Moses accepted Aaron's position and forthwith returned his wife and children to Mideon (Rashi to Exodus 18:2).

The Ibn Ezra adds another argument to Aaron's plea. If Moses were now to bring his wife and children into Egypt, the Hebrews would never believe that he was really serious about taking them all out of Egypt. Why bring in your wife and children only to soon take them out again?

And the Ramban gives a third reason. You will remember that earlier on in the book of Exodus, just when Moses had begun his journey back to Egypt together with his wife and sons, Tzipporah herself took a flint and circumcised Eliezer (Exodus 4:25). Apparently, says the Ramban, Moses was so agitated and emotionally immersed in his upcoming visit with Pharaoh and the responsibility of taking the Jews out of Egypt that he had actually forgotten - or perhaps lacked the emotional energy- to circumcise his own son. It was at this point that Moses decided to send his wife and children back to Mideon where they would be taken care of properly.

But whatever Moses' reasoning may have been, he sent his wife and sons back to Mideon and Yitro had not been unhappy to receive them.

But now the situation had changed. However it was that Yitro heard - Mideonite Times, CNN, Desert Fox News or mouth to mouth reportage - Moses has now emerged an international hero who has succeeded in vanquishing the most important power in the Middle East, the Pharaoh of Egypt. All of a sudden, this Hebrew renegade son in law, with his strange G-d takes on almost superhuman proportions. Yitro therefore decides that Moses is after all the best son in law he could ever have hoped for and so he takes his daughter and his two grandsons on a difficult but necessary journey to remind the international hero, Moses, that he still has a wife and two sons for whom he is responsible.

Obviously Moses understands the entire picture and so when Moses tells over the narrative to his father in law, he makes certain to place G-d at the center, saying that G-d wrought what He did not for Moses and his nation, Israel (as in 18:1) but rather for Israel - leaving Moses out as a central figure all together in the drama of the Exodus (Exodus 18:8). And Yitro himself seems to understand Moses' message. He rejoices and praises G-d for all that he did for the Hebrew people and he now understands that G-d is truly the greatest of all powers of the cosmos. (Exodus 18:9-11) Yitro now has an added reason for returning his family to his son in law: he is deeply impressed with the fact that they believe in the very unique G-d of Israel and the world. Is Yitro impressed enough to cause himself to convert as well? Perhaps we will continue this discussion next year please G-d.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Right at the outset of the Aseret Hadibrot, the ten declarations (commonly translated as the Ten Commandments), G-d declares "I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of the Land of Egypt." (Exodus 20:2) One can't help but note that this statement is written unlike all the others. Each of the

other declarations are written as commandments, i.e. "Honor your father and mother," (Exodus 20:12) or "Thou shalt not steal." (Exodus 20:13) In contrast, the first statement is not written as a commandment. One wonders, is belief in G-d a mitzvah?

Rambam argues, indeed, that belief is a commandment. For Rambam, the verb "to be" is often read into the text. Thus, "I am the Lord your G-d," really means "I am to be the Lord Your G-d." In other words, we are commanded to believe.

Commentators like Rashi (quoting the Midrash) disagree. After all, belief is a feeling, and feelings are neither right nor wrong, they just are. For Rashi, "I am the Lord your G-d," is not a commandment, rather it provides a formula through which one can come to believe.

The formula is first mentioned when Moshe (Moses) meets G-d at the sneh (burning bush). There, G-d tells Moshe that His name is Ehyeh asher Ehyeh, literally "I will be that which I will be." (Exodus 3:14) Through this name, Rashi insists, G-d is teaching how the Jews can come to believe in Him. Tell them, G-d says: "I will be with you in this time of distress, even as I will be with you in other times of distress."

In a similar fashion, Rashi explains, "I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of Egypt," tells us that "I, the G-d who took you out of the Egyptian exile now continue the redemption process by giving you the Torah." Here again, G-d says, that through this experience, the Jews will come to know Him.

In this sense, belief in G-d is similar to knowing you are in love. Just as you cannot prove you're in love, it can only be experienced, so can one come to believe in G-d by experiencing Him.

Perhaps the most powerful experience of G-d emerges when assessing how against all odds, we as a people have endured. Historian Arnold Toynbee once remarked that a rational assessment of the forces of history would lead to the conclusion that Judaism today should be fossil. We would respond that Jewish history is not logical or rational. Indeed, the scope and unique nature of Jewish history points to the existence of G-d.

The Egypt experience can serve as a prototype of our entire history. After all, Mitzrayim doesn't only mean Egypt. Coming as it does from the root tzara (suffering), or tzar (distress), it suggests that there would be other Egypts in history (inquisitions, pogroms and more) that we would miraculously survive.

Jewish ritual can be seen as a re-enactment of Jewish history. On Passover for example we do not only recall the Exodus, we simulate and re-enact the event. The truth is that a mitzvah may not be the result of one's belief but rather the means to come to believe. So too Jewish history can be a vehicle that inspires belief in G-d.

Years ago, Menahem Begin, then Prime Minister of Israel, addressed a large assembly of

Holocaust survivors. Looking out at the thousands who had emerged from the camps, he emphatically and emotionally declared, "Mir zinnem da-we are here." This is yet another, and arguably one of the greatest manifestations of G-d, the G-d of our history, "the Lord who took us out of Egypt." © 2007 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“Honor your father and your mother, in order that your days will be lengthened” (Shemos 20:12). Rashi adds that the Torah does not just mean that your days will be lengthened if you honor your parents but will remain the same if you don't. Rather, just as your days will be lengthened if you honor them, they will be shortened if you don't.

In his comments on the Mechilta (Yisro 8, Rashi's Midrashic source), the Har Efrayim points out that this seems to contradict what Rashi says on the Talmud (Chullin 110b). There, a story is told of someone who didn't honor his parents. The judges of the town were about to punish him (or force him to comply) when a visiting scholar pointed out that there is a tradition that if the reward for fulfilling a commandment to do something is written next to the commandment, we (i.e. the courts) don't get involved. Since the Torah spells out the reward for honoring parents ("lengthened days"), the person who didn't honor his parents was set free. Rashi explains that, "for this reason was the reward spelled out, to teach us that if [the commandment] is not fulfilled, this is the punishment, [i.e.] that this reward won't be received." If (according to Rashi) the Talmud is saying that the "punishment" for not honoring parents is not getting the reward that could have been earned, how can Rashi tell us (on our verse) that the "punishment" is more than just not being rewarded, but having one's days shortened? (The Har Efrayim leaves this question unanswered.)

The Taz asks a different question on Rashi. Earlier (20:1) Rashi had explained why the Torah introduced the "10 commandments" using the name of G-d that signifies His being a Judge: "Since there are portions in the Torah that a person receives a reward for doing them but doesn't get punished for not doing them, it might have been thought that this is true of the 10 Commandments as well, so the Torah said, 'and Elokim spoke,' [i.e.] a Judge that punishes." If using the name "Elokim" teaches us that one is punished for not keeping the 10 Commandments, why did Rashi need to point out a second time that one will get punished for not honoring parents? If anything, the first reference to G-d punishing for not fulfilling should apply specifically

to honoring parents, one of the only commandments to do something (as opposed to a prohibition not to do something) of these 10. After all, the only reason Rashi suggested we would think otherwise is because there are other positive commandments (such as bringing non-required offerings) that are not punishable for not being fulfilled; we would never have considered that there was no punishment for violating a prohibition. Why was the fact that there is a punishment for not honoring parents repeated?

"The reward for fulfilling [G-d's] commandments is not [given] in this world" (Kiddushin 39b), but is saved for the world to come. As the Maharal explains (Tiferes Yisroel 13), "Because of the high significance of the commandments and their intrinsic value, it would be inappropriate for the payment of the reward [for doing them] to be in this (lowly) world." Honoring parents, the Maharal continues, is one of the exceptions, "since [it] benefits man who is in this world, it is appropriate to enjoy the dividends (of fulfilling the commandment) in this world" while the main reward is still waiting for the next world. Since the reward for fulfilling the commandments, and the punishment for violating them, is primarily in the world to come, when the Torah teaches us that we will be punished for not keeping the 10 Commandments, it must mean that we will be punished in the next world. While this is true of honoring parents as well, the Torah added an additional reward for fulfilling this commandment—living longer. We might have thought that this "bonus dividend" works only one way (living longer for fulfilling the commandment), so Rashi needed to point out that the corollary is true as well, and besides being punished in the next world for not honoring parents, there is a punishment implemented in this world too—shortened years. Even though the bulk of reward and punishment is saved until the world to come, the Torah mandated the courts to enforce the fulfillment of the commandments, punishing those that violate them (after appropriate warnings and proof). By fulfilling this mandate, there is now a vehicle for punishment in both worlds;

G-d punishes those who deserve it in the next world while the courts provide motivation to fulfill the commandments in this world. The tradition that the visiting scholar pointed out was that there is an exception to the courts' mandate of enforcement, i.e. when the Torah told us that there is already a means of being compensated in this world. Because the Torah promised "lengthened days" in this world, the courts are no longer mandated to enforce fulfillment. Rashi was coming to explain why this is so; by stating the reward next to the commandment, the Torah was limiting the consequences in this world for not fulfilling it. Rashi was not necessarily saying that these consequences do not include being punished (by G-d) for not fulfilling it, only that it is not up to the courts to enforce it. G-d will

punish those that don't honor their parents, whether in this world (by shortening the violator's days) or the next (as with all violations) -- or both.

We can therefore reconcile what Rashi says on our verse with what he says in the Talmud. G-d will reward those that fulfill the commandments and punish those that don't. Honoring parents will bring the additional reward of "lengthened days" while failing to do so will bring the additional punishment of "shorter days." Because of this additional reward or punishment, the courts are not mandated to enforce the fulfillment of this commandment. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI ADAM LIEBERMAN

A Life Lesson

Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, came to see Moses after he had heard all of the miracles that G-d had performed for the Jewish people. Jethro saw that a countless number of Jews were all standing in line to speak to Moses with questions they had. Jethro then told Moses: "Why do you sit alone with all the people standing by you from morning to evening?... You will surely become worn out... as well as this people that is with you...." (Exodus 18:14-17)

Jethro couldn't believe that Moses was the only person who was able to give advice and answers to the Jewish people. Jethro knew that this lack of hierarchy was destined for failure. So he advised Moses how to establish a system whereby the Jews would first go to other knowledgeable people and only seek out Moses for the most complicated and difficult questions and cases.

This method of delegation is in place in virtually every company, army, and government around the world. In fact, it's vital for any large entity to ever run effectively. Even though the power of delegation can be just as effective in our own lives, many of us have a difficult time delegating certain important tasks to others. The reason for this is that the moment we ask someone else to do something for us we immediately lose a sense of control. Even though we all have very capable people around us, many of us live with a belief that the best outcome can only occur when we do something ourselves.

But ironically, the exact opposite is true. This is because the only way ever to achieve greatness is to be able to go "outside yourself" and be humble enough to realize that others are extremely capable and many times can actually do a better job than you can. Also, allowing others to assist you in the countless tasks that they're very capable of doing will immediately increase your self-esteem. This is because it will reign in your egocentric belief that you're the best one to do everything and demonstrate that you have the ability to trust others to get a job done. And all of this will then free you up to do the things that no one else really can't do.

Additionally, there are times when we would love to delegate something to someone else but the other person simply lacks the knowledge to do it. So we say to ourselves, "it's easier if I just do it myself." Again, this is a debilitating belief. While initially it might take some time to teach others a new set of skills or knowledge, investing a few minutes with them now will enable and empower them to know exactly what to do in the future.

So fight the urge, and delegate important tasks by asking someone to do something that you ordinarily would only do yourself. This will prevent you from "surely becoming worn out" and allow you to focus your energies only on the things that have the potential to make you great. © 2007 Rabbi A. Lieberman and aish.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In the beginning of this week's Torah portion, we are told about how Yitro arrived at the camp of Bnei Yisrael, mentioning also Moshe's two sons: "And Moshe's father-in-law Yitro took Moshe's wife Tziporah, after he had sent her away, and also her two sons, one who was named Gershom, because 'I was a stranger in a foreign land,' and the other named Eliezer, 'because my father's G-d helped me and saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'" [Shemot 18:2-4]. This large amount of detail is somewhat surprising. First of all, the explanation of Gershom's name was already written before, using exactly the same words: "And she gave birth to a son, and he called him Gershom, for he said I was a stranger in a foreign land" [2:22]. (Note that in the earlier case there is a hint of another possible reason for the name, as a reminder of the events that led to Moshe's marriage to Tziporah: "And the shepherds came and chased them away? 'vayegarshum'? and Moshe rose up and saved them, and he watered their sheep" [2:17]. In addition, it is not clear why the Torah goes into detail here about the names of the boys, since the purpose of the story is to tell about when Yitro came to meet Moshe.

Evidently, there is much to be learned about Moshe from the names that he gave his two sons. Gershom's name is interesting in that when Moshe said "I was a stranger in a foreign land" he was referring to Midyan, a foreign land with respect to Egypt. Remember that this name was given before G-d revealed Himself to Moshe, and while Moshe, after growing up in the home of Pharaoh's daughter, acted exactly like "an Egyptian man" [2:19], except for his national identification with his own people. Thus, this name expresses Moshe's connection to Egypt, and it shows that he was sorry that he had been forced to leave.

Eliezer, on the other hand, was evidently born only after G-d's revelation. Then, the Almighty

presented Himself to Moshe by saying, "I am the G-d of your ancestors, the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, and the G-d of Yaacov" [3:6]. And again and again G-d told Moshe to use this name? "G-d of your ancestors"? when speaking to Bnei Yisrael (see 3:13, 3:15, 3:16). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Moshe gave a name based on the fact that "my father's G-d helped me and saved me from Pharaoh's sword" after the events of the burning bush. The name also emphasizes Moshe's religious personality and his relationship with the Almighty, which became fully established after G-d was revealed to him.

With this as a background, we can return to the main figure in this week's portion, Yitro. At some point, Tziporah returned with her two children to her father in Midyan. The names of the two sons reveal the spiritual revolution that had occurred in their father's personality. It is possible that the name of Eliezer, which expresses Moshe's belief that G-d saved him from Pharaoh's sword, had an influence on Yitro too. The spiritual change that came over Moshe at the time of the burning bush thus seems to have influenced his father-in-law, who in the end reached the proper conclusion: "Blessed is G-d, who has rescued you from Egypt and from Pharaoh. Now I know that G-d is greater than all the other deities." [18:10-11].

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah 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 haftarah 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?!" © 2007 Rabbi D. Siegel & Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a quote from the Zohar: "Shabbos sums up the entire Torah". The Sfas Emes bolsters this point by bringing a halachic ruling in support of this Zohar. If someone does not believe in Shabbos, halacha regards him as a person who does not believe in the entire Torah.

What does the Sfas Emes have in mind when he tells us that Shabbos sums up the whole Torah? I suggest that the Sfas Emes is directing our attention to a unique feature of Shabbos. Clearly, Shabbos brings to mind the fact that HaShem created the world of nature. (The Sfas Emes refers to the natural world by citing the Asara Ma'amaros-the ten utterances with which HaShem created heaven and earth.). Likewise, Shabbos, with its rich content of hilchos Shabbos, also embodies and evokes the Torah (to which the Sfas Emes refers with the shorthand phrase of "Aseres Hadibros"-the Ten Commandments). Thus, Shabbos highlights Torah and Creation coming together.

More importantly, as the Sfas Emes emphasizes, not only are these key topics juxtaposed; they are also interdependent. In the world of creation, Nature obeys the laws of science that HaShem established to govern its behavior. But Creation and the world of nature can exist only if we obey the laws that HaShem gave us to govern our behavior-i.e., the Torah.

The Sfas Emes elaborates on this point by alluding to a comment in Gemara Shabbos (88a). The context there is Matan Torah. Chazal tell us that when HaShem offered us the the Torah, He said: "If Klal Yisroel accepts the Torah, Creation will exist.. But if Klal Yisroel do not accept the Torah, I (HaShem) will return the world to the state it was in before creation, -- i.e., to chaos". The Sfas Emes continues with this line of thought; that it is only our acceptance of the Torah that renders the natural world-i.e., the world without Torah-liveable. (If you think he is exaggerating, look at a newspaper and see how a world looks when people no longer accept "Aseres Hadibros".)

In a final comment on the need for Torah to make the world of nature liveable, the Sfas Emes refers

to another ma'amar of Chazal (Avodah Zara, 9a). The Gemara there tells us that HaShem arranged human history in a special sequence. First would come 2,000 years in which only Nature (Teva) was apparent. Chazal refer to that period as one in which the world was in a state of "tohu va'vohu" (R. Hirsch: 'confused and tangled.'). Only later was Torah introduced into the system, to clear away the confusion and tangle of lives lived in a world of nature alone. By letting people know that all life comes from HaShem, the Torah made it possible for the world "le'hischadeish" -to begin life anew.

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another line of thought. A posuk in Shir Hashirim (5: 6) says: "Nafshi ya'tzah bedabro imi." (That is, "My soul took leave of me when He spoke to me".) Chazal apply this posuk to our encounter with HaShem at Matan Torah, when He gave us the Torah.. As the Almighty proclaimed the first Dibra (Commandment), the experience was so awesome that our souls took leave of our bodies. That is, Bnei Yisroel expired. What restored life to our people? The Torah did. Thus, a posuk in Tehilim (19: 8) tells us that: "Toras HaShem temima, meshivas nafesh". (That is, "HaShem's Torah... restores life".)

You may say: "A nice thought; but how did this process actually work-in the real world? " How did the Torah revive our people? The Sfas Emes explains that the Torah has this restorative effect because the Torah is the vehicle through which HaShem chose to make His Presence manifest in the physical world. Thus, by adhering to the Torah we are connecting to HaShem. This is what the posuk means when it says that the Torah restored our souls. The Torah enabled us to re-establish our intertwined relationship with HaShem. Note the chiddush (innovation)that the Sfas Emes has introduced here. (I say "note" because the Sfas Emes does not tell us that he is construing the posuk in a radically new way.). The simple, conventional understanding of the phrase "meshivas nofesh" is: ["When our souls took leave of our bodies at Matan Torah"] the Torah returned our souls to our bodies.. However the Sfas Emes is reading "meshivas nafesh" as: "returned our nefashos to their previous close relation with HaShem".

Mention of the words "meSHiVas nefesh" leads the Sfas Emes to thoughts about SHaBBoS. TheSfas Emes reminds us that our soul has three parts: nefesh, ruach, and neshama.. Of these three, "nefesh" is the closest to our physical reality, and hence, easiest to engage and repair. In fact, a properly spent Shabbos can restore a person's nefesh.. Note, further, another connection between Shabbos and nefesh. The posuk in Shemos (31,17) tells us that on Shabbos the Almighty: "shavas. va'yiNaFaSH". R'. Hirsch translates this phrase as: "... (He) ceased to create on the seventh day and withdrew into His own essence". I suggest that "His own essence" is ruchniyus (spirituality). So, too, on

Shabbos our nefashos can be raised, bringing us closer to HaShem.

Why? How? Because our expanded Avoda on Shabbos gives HaShem nachas ruach (joy). And HaShem's joy, in turn, gives our nefashos new life. Thus, HaShem's "Va'yinafash" on Shabbos has an impact on a person's nefesh. The Sfas Emes takes us even further. He emphasizes that closer contact with our source (HaShem) on Shabbos permits the vibrancy of Torah to reach the workaday world as well.

The possibility of reaching a higher state of ruchniyus on Shabbos should not be taken for granted; for it is truly a remarkable phenomenon. Accordingly, the Sfas Emes devotes more effort to explaining it. The Torah (Shemos, 20:11) tells us: "Va'yanach bayom hashevi'. Al kein beirach..." ("He ceased to create on the seventh day.. For this reason, HaShem blessed the seventh day..."). The Sfas Emes understands this pasuk as providing further explanation of the remarkable phenomenon just mentioned.. We can return to a closer relation with HaShem on Shabbos because HaShem invested Shabbos with a special beracha (blessing).

The Sfas Emes sees this beracha in the posuk just cited, specifically in the word "Va'yanach." Mainstream Hebrew grammar reads this verb as a construction in binyan kal.. That construction gives us "Va'yanach" as: "He rested (ceased to create) on the seventh day." By contrast, the Sfas Emes reads "Va'yanach" as formed in hif'il-the causative construction. This gives us: He caused (enabled) to rest. The Sfas Emes's non-pshat reading of "Va'yanach" permits him to show us two special dimensions of the beracha that HaShem has given us with Shabbos. One is: a feature that we have already noted. That is: HaShem has granted us the possibility of achieving menucha (repose) to come closer to Him on Shabbos. The second beracha that the Sfas Emes shows us may come as more of a surprise, He says: "Va'yanach... nitan zeh ha'ko'ach le'ham'shich m'imekor ha'berachos le'chol ha'olam". That is: HaShem has given us the capability to extend this blessing to the entire world. © 2007 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi?

After the Torah relates G-d's giving the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, (Exodus 20: 1-14) it goes on to describe some aspects of that monumental event as it was experienced by the Jewish people. "And all the people saw the sounds and the flames, the sound of the Shofar and the mountain smoking; and the people saw and shuddered and stood at a distance." (Exodus 20:15)

"Saw the sounds"-RASHI: "They saw that which is [ordinarily] heard; that which is impossible to

see otherwise." Rashi is telling us to take the word see (in Hebrew 'ro'im') literally. They literally could see the sound waves of the voice of G-d as He spoke. In modern psychology, this is called synesthesia, when the sense experience crosses over to another tract. See the Ibn Ezra who describes this occurrence as a given fact. While the Ibn Ezra, being somewhat of a scientist in his time, considers seeing sounds as a conceivable possibility, Rashi saw it as a miracle. Actually the Hebrew word ro'im can also mean to perceive, which is to receive information through any one of the five senses. And this is what Rashi is stressing: 'Ro'im' does not mean to perceive as in to hear the sounds, which would be quite a normal experience; instead says Rashi, it means to see the sounds, which is a miraculous event.

With this in mind, what would you ask of Rashi? A Question: Why does Rashi reject the more natural interpretation here, which would seem to be closer to P'shat, and opt for the miraculous interpretation? Rashi certainly strives for P'shat interpretations, when they are appropriate.

Can you think why he choose seeing sounds over hearing sounds in this verse? An Answer: While hearing sounds is certainly more normal, Rashi deliberately chose a supernatural explanation because we are talking about the most supernatural event that ever occurred in history-the Divine Revelation at Sinai. Rashi is following a principle of Torah interpretation which is central to a fuller understanding of the Torah. That principle is to see a verse within its larger context. Once our verse is seen as part of the story of the Sinai revelation, then hearing sounds is but a minor miracle in relation to the larger event which took place at that time.

Let us pursue this interpretation further, to see its deeper implications. The late Lubavicher Rebbe gave the following insightful interpretation of this Rashi-comment: Our two senses of seeing and hearing have different advantages and disadvantages. Seeing affords us a very clear and certain perception of the world. None of our other senses can give us the kind of knowledge about something in this world that seeing can. On the other hand, hearing affords us a different benefit. Hearing enables us to learn about concepts, abstract ideas. These cannot be seen, but can be understood though hearing.

In summary, seeing has an advantage for things in our material world. Hearing has an advantage for things in the spiritual, abstract world.

At Sinai, says the Lubavicher Rebbe, the Jew saw the sounds of G-d's voice. For the Jew present at Sinai, G-d's ideas (Mitzvos) had the same clarity and certitude about that which he heard as if he had actually seen them. Seeing is believing and the Jew saw the Divine mystery at Sinai. © 2007 Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.com