

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

THE TORAHWEB FOUNDATION

Maintaining Equilibrium Under Stress

by Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski

Just when it seems that the economic crisis cannot get any worse, whammo! We are hit by another salvo. Even people who still have their jobs and who have not lost their investments have been affected. In addition to the actual economic losses, there has been widespread depression, in which some people whose self-esteem was largely based on their ability to earn and provide have had a loss of self-worth.

Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz cites the midrash about King Solomon, who was thrown off his throne by the Ashmidai, king of the demons. Solomon went begging from door to door for food, and when he said "I am the king," people jeered at him as a madman. The Talmud says that initially, Solomon was a powerful monarch, king over a vast empire, the greatest of the great, and when he was thrown off his throne and had to beg for food, he was "king only over his walking stick" (Sanhedrin 20b). Rabbi Shmulevitz says that in the depth of his impoverishment, Solomon was still "king over his walking stick," i.e., he never forgot that he was king. His circumstances were disastrous, but he did not allow them to crush him. He maintained his sense of royalty even when he had to beg for food.

Listen to Rabbi Shmulevitz's words: "A person must be most cautious when he suffers a fall, that he should not allow the fall to harm him even more than the actual adverse circumstances. If he will strengthen himself even in his decline and maintain his personal value under all circumstances, there is hope that he will rise and return to his former status and even higher than that" (Sichos Musar 5731:13).

This is a precious Torah insight. Sometimes we cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we react.

I realize that it is difficult to have bitachon when one has lost one's job and/or one's savings have

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evaporated. R' Moshe Teitelbaum, author of Yismach Moshe, received a dowry from his father-in-law, and gave it to someone to invest for him. Unfortunately, the investment failed, and the Yismach Moshe was left destitute, but he continued his Torah study under these difficult circumstances.

One day, as he was studying Torah, the thought occurred to him that if he were somehow able to get a significant sum of money, he would give it to someone more reliable to invest for him, and he would be able to devote himself to Torah study with peace of mind.

As he was thinking this, a deep sleep came over him, and he dreamed that he was in Gan Eden. He walked from one hall to another, until he came to one hall where a tzaddik was teaching Torah. The tzaddik shone brightly, and each word seemed to be aflame.

"Who is this tzaddik?" the Yismach Moshe asked. "That is the holy Ari z"l," he was told. The Yismach Moshe was seized with tremors of awe. Then he heard the tzaddik call to him, "Young man! If a person had ten thousand talents of silver, would he not be dependent on the compassion of Hashem? Inasmuch as a person is always dependent on Hashem, what difference does it make whether one has one gulden or ten thousand gulden?"

It is extremely important not to panic. We may have to make some difficult decisions, and panic can grossly distort our decision-making capacity.

"Hope unto Hashem, be strong and strengthen your heart, and hope unto Hashem (Psalms 27:14) Why the repetition? Because it may be difficult to hope, and one may have to gather strength to be able to hope. If a person finds that he has lost hope, he must try to strengthen his emunah so that he will be able to hope again.

Timing is Everything

by Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

The parsha begins by telling us that Yisro heard. What did he hear? Rashi cites the opinions of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua (Zevachim 116a) that he heard of the splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek, and this caused him to come and convert to Judaism.

At first glance, it is somewhat puzzling that both of these phenomena contributed to his coming. The

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splitting of the sea was an indisputable open miracle while the war with Amalek was fought in a conventional fashion. In fact, the Torah itself testifies that at times during the war (when Moshe's hands were down) that Amalek prevailed. What did the war with Amalek contribute to causing Yisro to come and convert?

The Be'er Yosef (Rabbi Yosef Salant z'l) suggests a fascinating insight. The Torah tells us as part of the Shiras HaYam-the song of praise and exaltation- that the children of Israel sang to Hashem following their miraculous deliverance, "people heard and trembled, they were mortified by Israel's ascendancy. All the inhabitants of Canaan melted in fear of destruction and conquest" (Shemos 15:14-15).

At this moment in history, the Jewish nation was invincible, impenetrable. This perception and fear did not last long. When Amalek attacked, they accomplished "asher korcha" (Devarim 25:18) which our Rabbis understand to mean in addition to 'chancing upon you,' as 'who cooled you off.' Rashi explains that the pedestal that the Jewish nation was placed upon as a result of the Splitting of the Sea was toppled by Amalek. It may be compared to a boiling hot bath into which no person could descend. One scoundrel came, jumped into it; although he himself was scolded, he cooled it off for others. Similarly, the luster of the Jewish people was now diminished.

It is thus these two contrasting events that Yisro heard. Who is this Yisro? Shemos Rabbah (1:9) teaches that Pharaoh has three advisers who sat on his executive committee, advising him what to do with his Jewish problem. Bilaam, Iyov (Job), and Yisro. Yisro is a recognized world leader and adviser. In addition, Yisro is an accomplished theologian who studied all existing religions of the day, and chose Judaism above all the rest (Tanchuma Yisro 7). Moreover, the Mechiltah informs us that Yisro was living in an environment that afforded him much honor and recognition, yet he abandoned it all to go to the desert, a place of literal desolation, to study and accept Torah.

The damage done by the war with Amalek, the blow to the honor and dignity of the fledgling Jewish nation, following miraculous salvation at the splitting of the Red Sea, was restored by Yisro's embracing Judaism. The feeling of vulnerability that Israel felt by being attacked by Amalek was now replaced with

greater self confidence and self esteem by Yisro's choosing on his own to convert to Judaism. Timing is everything!

This lesson is timeless. At different times there are different mitzvos and priorities. The Rabbis describe the mitzvah of Moshe's taking the remains of Yosef as they were leaving Egypt as "chacham lev yikach mitzvos-the wise man busies himself with mitzvos" (Proverbs 10:7). At first glance, why award Moshe with this special designation? Were not the rest of the Jewish people involved in the mitzvah of bizas Mitzrayim, fulfilling the prophecy to Avraham Avinu that the slaves will leave with great wealth? The answer is obvious! While Moshe and Bnei Yisroel were involved with mitzvos, Moshe's were more demanding, less lucrative, and he seized the moment.

We are living in special and challenging times. We can not ignore the many who are experiencing economic hardships. A genuine interested show of concern is a fulfillment of "nosei b'ol im chaveiro" (Avos 6:6). "Feeling his plight" is a warranted mitzvah of the day. Increased support of local Torah institutions is especially necessary to compensate for the many who are presently unable pay their yeshiva tuition.

Finally, this past week the Jewish world lost a Yisro in the form of Rabbi Noach Weinberg, z"l. He, like Yisro, demonstrated initiative, and at a time when the Jewish nation needed a boost to its morale, Rabbi Weinberg created the network of kiruv rechokim throughout the world. As Yisro of old, he not only restored many to their roots, but he raised the level of Jewish pride and identity.

May we follow the example of Rabbi Weinberg, like Yisro before him, and recognize our opportunities to seize the moment and involve ourselves in the performance of mitzvos. © 2009 TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe, and his (Moshe's) sons and his wife came to Moshe, to the desert where he was camped, [to the] mountain of G-d" (Shemos 18:5). When did Yisro rejoin Moshe? The Talmud (Zavachim 116a and Yerushalmi Megilla 1:11) brings two opinions, one saying that it was before the Torah was given while the other says it was after the Torah was given. The commentators discuss this dispute, with some taking sides and bringing supporting evidence for one side or the other (a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this piece; see Ibn Ezra and Ramban for starters). I would like to focus on one aspect of this dispute. Specifically, if Yisro first showed up after the Torah was given, when exactly was it?

If Yisro didn't arrive until after the Mishkan was built, or even until after they started to build it, what took him so long? There are three opinions given in

each of the Talmudic sources (ibid) and in the Mechilta (Yisro 1) as to what motivated Yisro to leave the comforts of his home in Midyan and join Moshe at Mt. Sinai: the splitting of the sea, the war with Amalek or the giving of the Torah. Since the Torah (which is the latest of the three) was given a full four months before the materials for the Mishkan were collected (from the first week in Sivan to the middle of Tishray), we would have expected Yisro to get there much sooner. On the other hand, Moshe was pretty busy from the time the Torah was given until he came down with the second set of luchos, spending the first 40 days learning all the details of the Torah atop Mt. Sinai, the last 40 days also on the mountain trying to achieve full forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf, and the middle 40 days trying to convince G-d to give the nation another chance and let them keep the Torah. Even if he didn't spend every minute of the middle 40 days on Mt. Sinai (see Radal on Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 46, #13), it would be difficult to say that he had enough time to greet Yisro, (18:7), have a long and detailed discussion with him about what had transpired since Moshe left Midyan (18:8-11), and bring offerings and sit down to a full meal with Aharon and the other leaders (18:12). This is especially true since this meal is described as being "before G-d," and during these 40 days G-d was still angry with the nation (see Rashi on Shemos 33:11 and Devarim 9:18). It would have been even more inappropriate to have this "celebration" right after the first set of 40 days (even if there was time), as Moshe was busy purging any remnant of the golden calf. It would be similarly hard to imagine that after G-d agreed to give a second set of luchos and instructed Moshe to carve them out (Shemos 34:1) Moshe would take time out to catch up with Yisro rather than hurrying back up Mt. Sinai before something happens that causes G-d to change His mind again. So, if Yisro showed up after the Torah was given, when could it have been?

Tosfos (Shemos 18:13) discusses this issue, although they do not seem to have a problem with Yisro coming several months after the Torah was given. Instead, they take issue with (the way they understand) Rashi. First of all, they say that Rashi follows the opinion that Yisro came after the Torah was given. They also understand Rashi's explanation that "the next day" (the day Yisro saw Moshe judging the people all day) was "the day after Yom Kippur" to mean that the meal with Yisro took place on Yom Kippur, the day Moshe came down with the second set of luchos (after the third set of 40 days). How could this festive meal have occurred on Yom Kippur after the Torah was given? Tosfos therefore says that we shouldn't take the term "on the next day" literally. Rather, it means a short time afterwards, i.e. in the days following Yom Kippur they ate with Yisro, and then he noticed the burden of judging the nation.

The Mizrachi takes issue with this approach, as the word "macharas" means "the very next day," not "some time afterwards" (as opposed to "machar," which can mean "a later date"). Instead, he understands Rashi to mean that Yisro arrived on Yom Kippur, and the "day after" the meal they had on Yom Kippur Yisro saw Moshe judging the nation. As far as eating on Yom Kippur, the Mizrachi says (as do other commentators) that since the reason Yom Kippur is on that day (the 10th of Tishray) is precisely because that was the day the nation was forgiven, it would only be in subsequent years that eating on the newly-minted Yom Kippur would be problematic, not the first "Yom Kippur," which was more a cause for celebration than for fasting. (The Mizrachi compares it to the Yom Kippur of the dedication of the first Temple in Jerusalem, when they also celebrated with food and drink on Yom Kippur itself, see Moed Katan 9a.)

Tosfos' assertion that Rashi follows the opinion that Yisro arrived after the Torah had been given bears further review. After all, Rashi had told us (18:1) that it was the splitting of the sea and the war with Amalek that motivated Yisro to come, and both Talmudic sources seem to equate these reasons with the opinion that Yisro came before the Torah was given. And, if Tosfos is correct, why did Rashi leave out the third opinion as to why Yisro came, that he heard about the public revelation, since he didn't come until well afterwards?

Rashi's praise of Yisro for leaving the comforts of home to learn Torah in the desert (18:5) indicates that he must have come after the Torah was given, as otherwise he would not have known about it to want to learn it. (Even though some mitzvos had been given at Marah, there was no way for Yisro to have heard about this. The splitting of the sea was something known by all, as was the war with Amalek-when the sun stood still-and the public revelation at Sinai. If Yisro knew about the Torah before leaving Midyan, he must have left after it was given.) Additionally, when Yisro rejoiced over "all of the good that G-d did for Israel" (18:9), Rashi tells us that "good" refers to the manna, the well (of water) and the Torah. This list would only be in chronological order if the "Torah" refers to the Torah given at Sinai, not the commandments given at Marah. A straightforward reading of Rashi on 18:13 also indicates that his starting point is that Yisro came after the Torah was given, as he adds, almost as an afterthought, that even according to the opinion that Yisro came before it was given there are aspects of the narrative that are not chronologically correct.

It is possible, though, that the Talmud is not fully equating the timing of Yisro's arrival with his reason for coming. When the Yerushalmi brings the dispute about when Yisro came, it knows who argued about it (Yehudah the son of Rebbe and Rabbi Yanai), but not which of them held which opinion. It therefore

brings the other dispute, about what Yisro heard, where it is Yehudah the son of Rebbe who says that he heard about Matan Torah, proving that he must be the one who said that Yisro didn't come until after the Torah was given (as he couldn't have heard about something that didn't yet happen). However, this does not prove that the other two opinions about what Yisro heard (neither of whom is Rabbi Yanai) must hold that he came before Matan Torah. Similarly, when the Bavli equates the two disputes, it may only be saying that whomever says that Yisro came before the Torah was given must admit that there is another opinion, as there was already a previous dispute where one opinion says that the reason he came was because he heard about the public revelation. According to the opinion that Yisro came after the Torah was given, it is still possible that all three of the opinions in the earlier dispute (as to what Yisro heard) agree that he came afterwards.

One of the Ramban's main reasons for leaning towards the opinion that Yisro came before the Torah was given is that the story of Yisro is told before the story of the revelation. When Rabbi Yehoshua (in the Mechilta and in Zevachim) says that Yisro heard about the war with Amalek, he adds, "which is written next to it." If the story is being taught in chronological order, being written right after this war cannot be taken as a proof that it was the cause, as the Torah is only relating things in the order that they occurred. If, however, things were not taught in chronological order, placing Yisro's story at this spot is a valid indicator that the two are connected. The same can be said if Yisro's motivation to come was hearing about the splitting of the sea; the narrative that followed could not be interrupted, but placing the story of Yisro before the giving of the Torah even though he came afterwards shows that it was not the public revelation that caused him to come. Rashi therefore combines these two reasons and leaves out the third, in order to explain why the story of Yisro was told now.

Which leaves us with our first question. If Yisro decided to join Moshe after hearing about the splitting of the sea or the war with Amalek, why was it only several months later, either on Yom Kippur or right after Yom Kippur, that he actually showed up? I would like to present two possibilities. For one thing, for all we know he did show up shortly after the Torah was given, but because of all that was going on, couldn't get to see Moshe until months later. He therefore waited patiently "in the desert where Moshe was camped" (18:5) until Moshe was able to see him. Then, after Moshe came down with the second luchos, he sent word to Moshe that he was there (18:6). Perhaps he wasn't fully aware of what was happening, and thought that Moshe didn't want to see him, so sent word that his wife and family were there too (see Rashi on 18:6). The bottom line is that we don't know that Yisro didn't arrive earlier than

Yom Kippur, only that he couldn't spend any significant time with Moshe until then.

Another possibility is that Yisro would have left much earlier, but was trying to convince his entire family to join him in converting. They were reluctant, and it was only after several months of trying that he gave up and came without them (only bringing Moshe's wife and children). After getting a full report from Moshe about all that G-d had done, Yisro felt that he was better prepared to convince his family to convert, so he "went back to his land" (18:27) "in order to convert his family" (Rashi). © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Yitro said, 'Blessed is the Lord who has saved you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh...'” (Ex. 18:9-11) In the past I've commented upon the remarkable fact that the Biblical portion which initially records the Divine Revelation to Israel at Sinai - the Ten Commandments which serve as the foundation stone of our faith and our morality - opens with praise from, and is actually named after, a Midianite Priest, Yitro. As we know, Yitro, the 'Gentile' priest and father-in-law of Moses, rejoices over the Israelite victory against Egypt, declaring, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other powers, because the very object which they [the Egyptians used sinfully, the waters of the Nile River which drowned the Hebrew babies, similar to the waters of the Reed Sea] was turned against them" (Exodus 18: 11).

This very same Yitro goes on to teach Moses how to establish a proper judicial system, putting the Decalogue - and the myriad of laws and statutes which derive from its ten categories of ritual and civil law - into daily practice (Ex 18: 13, 14, 18, 21). Given this intimate relationship between Yitro and Moses, one arrives at the inevitable conclusion that the Bible wants to teach us as clearly and powerfully as possible that its message of freedom from enslavement, its unmitigated demand for the absolute morality of "...thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery..." and its trailblazing teaching of ethical monotheism was meant not only for Israel but for the entire world.

There is a fascinating debate among the Talmudic sages as to whether or not Yitro actually converted to Judaism. After all, the Bible does tell us that after voicing his admiration and giving his advice, Yitro returns to his home in Midian (Ex. 18:27). Later on in the Biblical narrative (Numbers 10: 29-32), his departure is described in greater detail, with Moses urging his father-in-law to remain with the Israelites, promising him proper respect and reward (according to the Ramban, even land in Israel). However Yitro demurs, choosing to return to "...his land and his birthplace." Nevertheless, his descendants, the

Kenites, do join with the tribe of Judah (Judges 1:16), and the Midrash Mekhilta (to the Biblical portion of Yitro) records a dispute between R. Yehoshua, who suggests that Yitro "departed from the glory of the world," and R. Elazar HaModai'i, who maintains that Yitro went back to convert others, saying, "A candle must give light in places of darkness."

If, indeed, the message of the Bible is meant for Gentiles as well as Jews, and if Yitro was actually our first convert after the Covenant at Sinai, and he 'departed' to convert others, does this mean that we ought be 'user-friendly' towards would-be converts, that there may even be a Divine commandment for us to accept converts? Although conventional Jewish wisdom would have it that Judaism is not a proselytizing religion, many halakhic and historical sources may very well suggest a different attitude.

True, there are negative statements in the Talmud about converts, such as R' Halbo's well-known adage that "...converts are as difficult to Israel as sapahat, [leprosy]" (B.T. Kiddushin 80b), that very same word (sapahat) is used by R. Berakhiya to teach that "...the descendants of proselytes shall serve as kohanim in the Holy Temple" (Shmot Rabbah, Vilna, Parashah 19,4). Moreover, R. Elazar declares that "the Holy One Blessed Be He brought exile among the nations upon the Israelites only in order for them to gain converts (B.T. Pesachim 87b)." Indeed, the Scroll of Ruth depicts the life of a Moabite convert who becomes the grandmother of King David, progenitor of the future Messiah. The commanding position of this scroll, accepted as one of the 24 Biblical books, and the fact that it is read in most congregations on the Festival of Shavuot, our Festival of the Covenant at Sinai, should be the deciding voice in favor of our positive attitude toward converts.

The Tashbez (R. Shimon b. Zemah Duran), in his Zohar HaRaKiyah (Ot 28) maintains that there is a commandment to accept converts under the rubric of the Divine ordinance that we love the proselyte, a view seconded by Rav Y. Perla in his commentary to Rabbenu Saadyah Gaon's Book of Commandments (Positive Commands, Number 19). Maimonides, in his Book of Commandments, (Positive Commandment 3), goes so far as to include within the commandment to love G-d the "...necessity of seeking and summoning all peoples to the service of and belief in the Lord of the Universe." He cites the Sifre who defines the Biblical verse to mean, "...cause G-d to be loved by all living beings (briyot)." Rav Yehuda Gershuni (in "Kol Zofayikh," Jerusalem 5740, p. 503) concludes that this means proselytizing every human being, since Maimonides' proof text comes from Abraham, who attempted to convert everyone who entered his tent to his newfound faith and religion. The Ravad (Baale HaNefesh, the end of the Gate of Ritual Immersion, Siman 3) likewise accepts the commandment to

convert from the verse, "the souls he made in Haran." (Gen. 12:5). And Josephus documents our successful proselytizing activity throughout the Roman Empire during the Second Commonwealth (Against Apion 2, 39). Perhaps the final word on this subject is the command of Hillel for us "to love all human creatures, b'riyot, and bring them close to Torah" (Mishneh Avot 1, 12).

Returning to the Biblical message of Yitro, at the very least we are enjoined to oppose human enslavement and spread the universal Ten Commandments to the Gentile world. After all, the Midrash on the verse "...G-d came forth from Sinai [after] He had shown [his laws] to them from Seir and revealed [them] from the Mount of Paran..." (Deut 33:2) teaches that G-d initially offered His Decalogue to the descendants of Esau [Seir] and then to the descendants of Yishmael [Paran], only to have seen them rejected by all except Israel. And Maimonides rules that only Jews must keep the 613 commandments for "salvation"; it is enough for the Gentile world to accept the seven Noahide laws of morality for their salvation and share in the world to come (Laws of Kings 8,10). Thus, we must certainly proselytize every human being to keep the seven laws of morality. In our global village, this is necessary not only for our eternal souls, but also for the continued existence of our temporal bodies in a free world not polluted by the immediate threat of terrorism and the extreme threat of nuclear destruction. © 2009 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

The six hundred thousand people gathered around Mount Sinai didn't discuss it beforehand. They didn't consult with each other and decide on a consensus response. As we read in this week's Torah portion, Moses descended the mountain as Hashem's messenger and offered the Torah to the Jewish people. They asked no questions, held no conferences. And yet, they responded in one spontaneous outcry, "We will do it!"

How could such a thing happen? How could six hundred thousand people spontaneously utter the identical response? Whoever heard of even six Jewish people being of one mind, let alone six hundred thousand?

Let us read a little further in the Torah. "And Moses referred the words of the people back to Hashem." Here again, we are puzzled. Why would Moses have to convey the response of the Jewish people back to Hashem? Didn't Hashem know on His own what the Jewish people had said?

The commentators explain that we are all a composite of body and soul, material and spiritual. Our material side responds to our environment, to our

specific needs, to our situation. But our spiritual side completely transcends the physical and temporal. The spirit in its purest form is a divine spark, a blaze of eternal fire that responds only to the ultimate truths of the universe and is entirely impervious to the petty considerations of mundane existence.

Divisions and disagreements only arise when we are focused on our material sides. Since innumerable factors affect our material existence, no two people ever really experience the exact same conditions. Therefore, it is almost inevitable that there will be some differences in the way we react and respond to diverse situations. But if we step back from our material existence, if we reach deep within ourselves and connect with the divine spark that resides in all of us, we can break free of all the pettiness of the mundane world and soar into the exalted realm of the pure spirit. And in this world we are all one, luminescent divine sparks united by our perfect connection to the Source from which we are all derived. There are no divisions, no disagreements.

Had the Jewish people related to the Torah as a set of instructions to govern and improve their material lives, they would undoubtedly have responded with a plethora of questions, opinions and suggestions. But they understood that the Torah functions on a much more profound level, that it is the channel which connects the divine spark within each of us to the Master of the Universe, that it provides the wings on which our spirits can soar to the highest spheres of Heaven. In this light, there were no divisions among them, and they responded with a spontaneous consensus.

This then is what the Torah is telling us. "And Moses referred the words of the people," he explained their universal agreement, "back to Hashem," by attributing it to their total focus on connecting with Hashem.

A king was once travelling through the outlying districts of his realm. In one very remote village the people gave him a wonderful welcome, and the king was so moved that he promised them a gift. After much reflection, he decided to give them an airplane, since this would connect them to the rest of the country and improve their economy and quality of life. The airplane was delivered, and the people sent the king letters thanking him for the precious gift that had so enriched their lives.

Several months later, the king visited the village again. The people greeted him with great festivity and took him to see the airplane he had so generously gifted to them. He was taken to a lush meadow beyond the village, and there it stood in all its gleaming splendor. All around the airplane, families were enjoying picnic lunches. Teenagers sat on the wings, their legs dangling off the sides. Children scampered excitedly through the fuselage and cockpit,

sliding down the emergency chutes and running back up for another turn. Everyone was having a wonderful time. When the king appeared, they all applauded and shouted their gratitude.

"My dear people!" the king cried out. "What are you doing? This thing flies!"

In our own lives, we all appreciate the ideals and values of the Torah. We know that the timeless wisdom of the Torah is as fresh and relevant to contemporary life as it was three thousand years ago. We know that it prescribes a way of life full of wonderful benefits and rewards. But do we also realize that "this thing flies?" But indeed it does. If we connect with the Torah on a spiritual level, we can transform ourselves and enrich our lives in ways we never thought possible.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Watching Moshe (Moses) judge the Jews from morning to night, Yitro (Jethro), Moshe's father-in-law, offers sound advice. He tells Moshe that if you continue trying to judge everyone, you surely will wear away—it is too difficult a task. Yitro suggests that Moshe appoint other judges, who will share the burden.

In advising Moshe to share judicial responsibility, Yitro insists that lower courts handle less important matters, and matters of greater magnitude would go to Moshe. "And it shall be," Yitro concludes, "that every major (gadol) matter they shall bring to you, but every minor (katan) matter they shall judge themselves." (Exodus 18:22)

Moshe listens to Yitro's advice with one deflection. Rather than dealing exclusively with major matters, Moshe tells Yitro that he will judge the most difficult (kasheh) cases. (Exodus 18:28).

Hatam Sofer notes that Yitro uses the term gadol because he believes that only the more important people, only the large "tycoon" type companies should be judged by Moshe. The less important people, the small corporations, regardless of the complexity of the judicial issue, would automatically come before the lower courts.

Moshe rejects this division insisting that he would deal with the complex questions, no matter where they come from—the lower courts would handle the easier questions, no matter their origin.

Here the Torah accentuates the importance of every individual problem. No matter how low one is seen by society, his or her problem is of great importance. For this reason, depending upon the complexity of the question, every person can potentially come before Moshe.

It is ironic that Moshe teaches his father-in-law this particular lesson. According to some commentators, Yitro converts to Judaism. (See Ramban, Numbers 10:29) Unfortunately, it's not

uncommon for the convert to be treated as a secondary citizen. Moshe informs Yitro that no one's claims would be overlooked, everyone, including Yitro, is given equal attention.

An important message surfaces: The test of a community, is not the way it treats the most powerful. Rather it is the way it treats the little people, those whose problems, on the surface, seem to be insignificant.

As much as Yitro teaches Moshe by proposing the division of judicial responsibilities between higher and lower courts, Moshe teaches Yitro that even the lowly, even those who seem to be insignificant, are entitled to supreme consideration. © 2009 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 SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Yitro describes Yitro hearing of the travels and trials of the Jews, Yitro being moved to convert, coming to Moshe for the conversion, and then leaving Moshe. If Yitro was so moved, why would he ever leave a situation where he's surrounded by G-d, clouds, heavenly food, and Moshe as a teacher? And how could Moshe, as a leader, allow Yitro to just leave the camp? After all, he was the only Jew NOT to have witnessed the giving of the Torah!

Rabbi Leibowitz asked this question in Majesty of Man, and answers by explaining that Yitro was SO moved by G-d, the Torah and the Jews that he felt that he had to go back to his home to try to convert his family and friends. Yitro was willing to give up being surrounded by what he obviously believed in and WANTED to be around, just for the sake of others! If this was the determination of someone that had no responsibilities toward the people he was trying to help, how much more determination should we demonstrate when we actually HAVE a responsibility to help one another!? The Parsha is named after Yitro because he was willing to change his life for Judaism. He was so proud of it that he didn't hide his Judaism, but went out and told others how beautiful it was. If we expressed the Yitro that we undoubtedly have within us? © 2009 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The structure of Shemot chapters 18-20 is little short of astonishing. In 19-20, we read of the moment in which the Israelites received their constitution as a kingdom of priests and the holy nation. It was a unique encounter. Not only was the epiphany at Mount Sinai never repeated in Jewish history. It has

no parallel in any other religious literature. Never before or since has G-d appeared to an entire nation.

In chapter 18, by contrast, Israel receives its first system of governance: a structure of delegated authority with Moses at the top, supported by heads of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (a structure known today as subsidiarity). This, however, did not come at the bidding of G-d. It was proposed by a human being. More remarkably still, he was not Jewish. He was Yitro, father-in-law of Moses. Indeed, tradition gave him the honour of calling this entire sedra by his name.

Why was it that this important development came, as it were, from outside? It is not enough to say, simply, that this is how things happened. Tenakh is history, but not mere history. Seen through the eye of faith, things happen for a reason. Events have moral meaning. We are meant to learn lessons from them. What then was the significance of the fact that it was Yitro, not Moses, who gave the Israelites their first tutorial in how to organise a society? On this, one of the classic commentaries, Ohr ha-Hayyim (R. Hayyim ibn Attar of Morocco, later of Israel, 1696-1743) made a striking observation: "It seems to me that the reason [that this teaching came from Yitro] is that G-d wanted to show the Israelites of that generation-and of all generations- that there are among the nations of the world great masters of understanding and intellect [gedolim be-havanah uve-haskalah]. The example of this was Yitro: his advice and the way he chose to organise a society. For there are indeed among the nations people who recognise well-authenticated propositions [devarim me'usharim].

"The [divine] intention here was to show that the Israelites were not chosen because they were better-endowed with intelligence and discernment than all other nations: the proof is the intelligence of Yitro. G-d did not choose the Israelites because of their wisdom or intellect but because of His supreme kindness [hessed elyon] and his love of the patriarchs. This is all the more compelling according to the view that Yitro came before the giving of the Torah [there is a debate among the sages as to whether chapters 18-20 are in chronological sequence]. That is why G-d in His wisdom arranged that Yitro should give his advice before the giving of the Torah, in order to signal that although there are among the nations more sages than in Israel, nonetheless G-d brought the children of Israel close to Him and chose them [as his special people]. Hence we have all the more reason gratefully to praise G-d for His choice of our people in His loving-kindness. This is a fascinating insight, and points to a fundamental distinction in Judaism, between wisdom [hokhmah] and revelation [Torah]. A midrash puts it sharply: "If you are told, there is wisdom among the nations, believe it. If you are told there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it."

Judaism has an unusual dual structure. On the one hand, there is the covenant with Noah, and through him, with all humanity. On the other, there is the covenant of Sinai, specific to the Jewish people. This means that though Judaism is a particularist faith, we also believe that all human beings have access to G-d, and-if they are righteous-a share in the world to come.

Corresponding to this, Judaism has a dual epistemology (theory of knowledge). There is hokhmah, wisdom, which is the universal heritage of mankind. It flows from the definition of humanity as the image and likeness of G-d. Rashi translates 'in our likeness' as meaning, 'with the capacity to understand and discern'. On the other hand, there is Torah, the covenant binding Israel to the sovereignty of G-d. There is nothing universal about this. Torah flows from the highly specific historical experience of the patriarchs and their descendants. It sets forth a unique code of sanctity, by which the people were to govern their lives. About this, the Psalm says, 'He has revealed his word to Jacob, His laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation...' (Ps. 147: 19-20).

Among the differences are these: wisdom is the truth we discover, by reason, observation and experience. Torah is the truth we inherit. Revealed at Sinai, it has been handed on from generation to generation. Wisdom teaches us facts;

Torah teaches us laws. Wisdom tells us how the world is; Torah tells us how it ought to be. Wisdom is subject to proof; Torah requires something else, authentication, meaning that it has come down to us through the centuries by way of a reliable chain of transmission from sage to sage. That is why Moses Maimonides can write, in his Commentary to the Mishnah: 'Accept the truth, whoever says it.' The sages, by contrast, said 'He who repeats a teaching in the name of the person who first said it, brings redemption to the world.' For the sages, who said it is crucial; for Maimonides, it is irrelevant. There is, however, no disagreement between them, because they are talking about different things: Maimonides about wisdom, the sages about Torah.

There is a phrase in current circulation which is profoundly unhelpful: *limmudei chol*, 'secular studies'. Wisdom-which today would include the natural, biological and social sciences, mathematics, logic, history and literature-is not secular in Judaism. To the contrary, wisdom is a biblical category. Several books of Tenakh-especially Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job-are dedicated to it. The sages even coined a special blessing to be recited on seeing 'one of the sages of the nations of the world': 'Blessed are You, O G-d... who has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood' (my custom is to recite it on seeing a Nobel Prize winner). Despite the fact that wisdom is not Torah, nor is it (this is the Ohr ha-Hayyim's point) in any way special to the people of Israel, it is nonetheless a profoundly religious

phenomenon. The difference between wisdom and Torah corresponds to the two primary aspects of G-d: creation and revelation. By wisdom, we come to understand G-d through His creation. By Torah, we understand G-d through His revelation.

This suggests a quite new way of looking at 'secular' studies and their place in the religious life. They are not secular at all. Instead we can define wisdom as everything that leads us better to understand the universe as the work of G-d, and humanity as the image of G-d. R. Hayyim ibn Attar's remark about Yitro contains within it a profound insight. Wisdom teaches us about creation. Torah tells us about revelation. When we apply revelation to creation the result is redemption, the third fundamental category of Judaism. We cannot transform the world without understanding the world. That is why wisdom-otherwise known as the arts and sciences-has an honourable place in the intellectual landscape of faith.
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RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin

The Torah states: "And Moshe said to his father-in-law, the people come to me to seek the Almighty" (Exodus 18:15). Moshe had arranged for the people to come to him when they had questions. The prophet Shmuel, on the other hand, went to the people to deal with their needs. What can we learn from Shmuel about coming close to the Almighty?

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz comments that one's closeness to the Almighty is dependent upon one's love for other people. Shmuel's going to the people showed that he had great love and concern for them.

Where did Shmuel get this great love other people? The Midrash says that the garment that his mother made for him when he was a child was with him his entire life. This garment, say Rabbi Shmuelevitz, was made with the profound love his mother had for him. This love became such a part of Shmuel that it manifested itself in his entire way of dealing with other people.

The love a mother shows her infants and young children by getting up in the middle of the night to take care of them implants in them a deep feeling of being loved. When such a child grows older he will have love for others. Any small thing a parent does with love for his children will pay off great dividends. The greater the child becomes the more many people will benefit from that love. © 2009 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.org

