

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he revelation at Mount Sinai -- the central episode not only of the parsha of Yitro, but of Judaism as a whole -- was unique in the religious history of mankind. Other faiths (Christianity and Islam) call themselves religions of revelation, but in both cases the revelation of which they spoke was to an individual ("the son of God," "the prophet of God"). Only in Judaism was God's self-disclosure not to an individual (a prophet) or a group (the elders) but to an entire nation, young and old, men, women and children, the righteous and not-yet-righteous alike. From the very outset, the people of Israel knew something unprecedented had happened at Sinai. Moses had no doubt that it was an event without parallel "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?" (Deut. 4:32-33).

For the great Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, its significance was primarily epistemological. It created certainty and removed doubt. The authenticity of a revelation experienced by one person could be questioned. One witnessed by millions could not. God disclosed His presence in public to remove any possible suspicion that the presence felt, and the voice heard, were not genuine.

Looking at the history of mankind since those days, it is clear that there was another significance also -- one that had to do not with religious knowledge, but with politics. At Sinai a new kind of nation was being formed, and a new kind of society -- one that would be an antithesis of Egypt, in which the few had power and the many were enslaved. It was to be, in Abraham Lincoln's words in the Gettysburg Address, "a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the

proposition that all men are created equal." Indeed without the covenant at Mount Sinai, Lincoln's words might have been inconceivable. For nowhere else do we find anything like the politics of Mount Sinai, with its radical vision of a society held together not by power but by the free consent of its citizens to be bound, individually and collectively, by a moral code and by a covenant with God.

Standard works on the history of the politics of freedom trace it back through Marx, Rousseau and Hobbes to Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics, and the Greek city states (Athens in particular) of the fifth century BCE. This is a serious error. To be sure, words like "democracy" (rule by the people) are Greek in origin. The Greeks were gifted at abstract nouns and systematic thought. However, if we look at the "birth of the modern" -- at figures like Milton, Hobbes and Locke in England, and the founding fathers of America -- the book with which they were in dialogue was not Plato or Aristotle but the Hebrew Bible. Hobbes quotes it 657 times in *The Leviathan* alone. Long before the Greek philosophers, and far more profoundly, at Mount Sinai the concept of a free society was born.

Three things about that moment were to prove crucial. The first is that long before Israel entered the land and acquired their own system of government (first by judges, later by kings), they had entered into an overarching covenant with God. That covenant (Brit Sinai) set moral limits to the exercise of power. The code we call Torah established for the first time the primacy of right over might. Any king who behaved contrarily to Torah was acting *ultra vires* (beyond legitimate authority), and could be challenged. This is the single most important fact about biblical politics.

Democracy on the Greek model always had one fatal weakness. Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill called it "the tyranny of the majority." J.L. Talmon called it "totalitarian democracy." The rule of the majority contains no guarantee of the rights of minorities. As Lord Acton rightly noted, it was this that led to the downfall of Athens: "There was no law superior to that of the state. The lawgiver was above the law." In Judaism, by contrast, prophets were mandated to challenge the authority of the king if he acted against the terms of the Torah. The classic example is the accusation God tells Elijah to make to King Ahab for seizing Naboth's vineyard: "Thus says the Lord: Would you murder and take possession?" (1



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Kings 21:19).

Individuals were empowered to disobey illegal or immoral orders. The first example was the Hebrew midwives who "feared God and did not do what the Egyptian king had commanded" (Ex. 1:17). Another key moment was when King Saul ordered his servants to kill the priests of Nob, who had given shelter to David, "But the king's servants would not raise a hand to strike down the priests of the Lord" (Samuel 22:17). It was on this tradition that Calvin -- inspiration of the seventeenth-century Puritan radicals in England and America -- drew, when he said "prophets and teachers may take courage and thus boldly set themselves against kings and nations." It was on the same tradition that Thomas Paine based his pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), widely credited at the time as the inspiration that led to the American revolution. Historically, it was the covenant at Sinai and all that flowed from it, not the Greek political tradition, that inspired the birth of freedom in Britain and America, the first people to take that road in the modern age.

The second key element lies in the prologue to the covenant. God tells Moses "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel. 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now, if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, you will be My treasured possession, for the whole earth is Mine. You will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...'" (Ex. 19:3-6)

Moses tells this to the people, who reply: "We will do everything the Lord has said" (Ex. 19:8). Until the people had signified their consent, the revelation could not proceed. The principle at stake was that there is no legitimate government without the consent of the governed, even if the governor is Creator of heaven and earth. I know of few more radical ideas anywhere.

To be sure, there were sages in the Talmudic period who questioned whether the acceptance of the covenant at Sinai was completely free. There is a famous statement in the Talmud "And they stood under [normally translated as, 'at the foot of'] the mountain" (Ex. 19:17) -- this teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a cask and said to them, "If you accept the Torah, it is well, but

if not, this will be your burial place."

What the sages are doing here is to question whether the Israelites really had a free choice at Sinai. They had not yet entered the land. They were dependent on God for their food, water and protection. Where could they go, and to whom could they turn, if they said no to God?

The Talmud itself says that "Nonetheless, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus," that is, at the time described in the book of Esther -- one of the only two books in the Bible that does not contain the name of God. In that context there could be no question of divine coercion. However, at the simplest level, this is the significance of the two covenant renewal ceremonies, one at the end of Moses' life, as the Israelites were about to enter the land (Deut. 29-31), the other at the end of Joshua's life, when the people had conquered the land (Joshua 24). The covenant was renewed precisely so that no one could say that it had been entered into coercively when there was no alternative.

At the heart of Judaism is the idea -- way ahead of its time, and not always fully realised -- that the free God desires the free worship of free human beings. God, said the rabbis, does not act tyrannically with His creatures.

The third, equally ahead of its time, was that the partners to the covenant were to be "all the people" -- men, women and children. This fact is emphasised later on in the Torah in the mitzvah of Hak-hel, the septennial covenant renewal ceremony. The Torah states specifically that the entire people is to be gathered together for this ceremony, "men, women and children" (Deut. 31:10-13). A thousand years later, when Athens experimented with democracy, only a limited section of society had political rights. Women, children, slaves and foreigners were excluded. In many respects this held true until very recently. In Britain, women did not get the vote until 1918. In America, women's surage was complete only in 1920, though some states had enacted it earlier.

According to the sages, when God was about to give the Torah at Sinai, He told Moses to consult first with the women and only then with the men. This is the meaning of the verse "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel" (Ex. 19:3). The house of Jacob, our sages tell us, refers to the women. The Torah, Israel's "constitution of liberty," includes everyone. It is the first moment, by thousands of years, that citizenship is conceived as being universal.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to the politics of the Hebrew Bible was given by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in an unpublished manuscript discovered after his death "The Jews provide us with an astonishing spectacle: the laws of Numa, Lycurgus, Solon are dead; the very much older laws of Moses are

still alive. Athens, Sparta, Rome have perished and no longer have children left on earth; Zion, destroyed, has not lost its children.... What must be the strength of legislation capable of working such wonders, capable of braving conquests, dispersions, revolutions, exiles, capable of surviving the customs, laws, empire of all the nations...to last as long as the world?...any man whosoever he is, must acknowledge this as a unique marvel, the causes of which, divine or human, certainly deserve the study and admiration of the sages, in preference to all that Greece and Rome offer."

With the revelation at Sinai, something unprecedented entered the human horizon, though it would take centuries, millennia, before its full implications were understood. At Sinai, the politics of freedom was born. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

"**A**nd Jethro the Priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard all that God had done for Moses and his people; that He had taken Israel out of Egypt." (Exodus 18:1) This Torah portion records how Jethro, Moses' Midianite father-in-law, heard of God's great wonders in redeeming the Israelites from Egypt and came to Moses amidst great praise to the Lord. Upon witnessing Moses' difficult workload in rendering judgments from dawn to night, Jethro gave sage advice in organizing and delegating a graduated judicial system, with only the most complex cases to come before Moses. One of the issues dealt with by the biblical commentaries is the exact time when Jethro arrived on the scene: Was it before or after the Sinaitic revelation?

In terms of the chronological sequence of the biblical account, it would appear that Jethro came to Moses immediately after the splitting of the Reed Sea and before the commandments were given at Sinai.

However, both Nahmanides and Ibn Ezra point out that since Moses could not have been occupied to the point of exhaustion with rendering biblical rulings before the Bible had been given, logic dictates that Jethro arrived and made his wise suggestion after the revelation at Sinai. But if so, why does the Torah record the advent and advice of Jethro before the account of the revelation, and why name the portion which includes the content of the divine words after a Midianite priest, especially since he came on the scene after that revelation took place!

Ibn Ezra explains: Since the Bible has just mentioned the evil which Amalek did to the Israelites [at the end of Exodus Chapter 17 as the conclusion of the previous portion of Beshallah], the Bible must [immediately thereafter] mention in contrast the good

advice which Jethro gave to the Israelites [at the beginning of Chapter 18 in the opening of the portion of Yitro].

I would add that the Bible is contrasting two very opposite reactions to the miracle of the Exodus. In general, the nations of the world heard of the stunning rebellion of the Hebrews and became terrified:

Nations heard and shuddered; terror gripped the inhabitants of Philistia...Fear and dread fell upon them; at the greatness of Your Arm they fell silent as stone. (Exodus 15:14–16)

Two peoples, however, do not merely respond by panicking. Amalek, "first among the gentiles" (Num. 24:20), set out to make war against this emerging new star with the intent of heading them off at the pass. And Amalek played "dirty": Remember what Amalek did to you...when they encountered you...when you were tired and exhausted, and they cut off those who were lagging to your rear [the old, the young and the infirm]. (Deut. 25:17, 18)

Jethro, on the other hand, is filled with admiration and praise: "And Jethro was overjoyed at all of the good which the Lord accomplished for the Israelites in saving them from the hand of Egypt. And Jethro said, 'Praised be the Lord who has saved you from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh...Now I know that the Lord is the greatest of all of the gods...'" (Ex. 18:9–11). In effect, the biblical juxtaposition is teaching us that all gentiles should not be seen in the same light: there is the gentile who is jealous and aggressive (Amalek), but there is also the gentile who is admiring and willing to be of help (Jethro).

We are still left with the question as to why the biblical portion of the divine revelation should be referred to by the name of a Midianite priest – and I believe that herein lies one of the most profound truths of the Jewish faith. Undoubtedly the Torah was given to the Jewish people, as Maimonides teaches, "Moses our Teacher bequeathed the Torah and the commandments only to Israel, as it is written, 'a heritage to the congregation of Jacob,' as well as to anyone who may wish to convert [to Judaism]..."

But in the very same breath Maimonides continues to legislate: And similarly Moses was commanded by the Almighty to enforce upon the gentile world for everyone to accept the seven Noahide laws of morality. (Laws of Governments 8:10)

Maimonides concludes his religio-legal magnum opus Mishneh Torah with the "Laws of Governments," which climax in an optimistic description of the messianic age, a period of unusual peace and harmony when "nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war anymore" (Laws of Governments, Chapters 11, 12). Jewish redemption is seen within the context of world redemption; the God of justice, compassion and peace must rule the world, with Israel accepting the 613 commandments and

every nation accepting His seven commandments of morality, especially "Thou shalt not murder."

The paradigm for redemption, indeed the first example of Israel's liberation, was our exodus from Egypt. There are a number of lessons which must be extracted from this prototype. First of all, the Israelites must win the war against oppression; the God of Israel will only be respected if His people succeed. Second, the message of Israel must be a moral one: "I am the Lord thy God who took you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage." Israel is entitled to live in freedom – and must be willing to wage battle against autocratic, Amalek-like governments which themselves utilize terrorism against innocent citizens and which harbor, aid and abet terrorists. And Israel must establish Jethro-like partnerships with those who – although they may still follow their individual religions – recognize the over-arching rule of the God of justice, compassion and peace.

The portion of the revelation at Sinai is called Yitro ( Jethro); only if the Jethros of the nations of the world accept fealty to the God of peace will the ultimate vision of Torah become a reality for Israel and will the world as we know it be able to survive and prosper.

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#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he fact that the Torah has seen fit to provide such a detailed narrative about the visit of the father-in-law of Moshe to the camp of Israel at the beginning of their sojourn in the desert of Sinai, teaches us a valuable lesson in life and human behavior. The truth is that all of us want to be validated by others. It is not enough that we believe in our cause or that we know what type of person or nation we want to be -- it is necessary that others recognize this as well and express it to us and validate our emotions, policies and life values.

This is expressed in all areas of human endeavor. The validation from others is a form of emotional therapy and conviction reinforcement that human beings desire and seek. It is the key as to why so many people pursue publicity, even publicity that is questionable and not necessarily positive. People desire to be recognized. Simply being ignored leads to depression and other severe consequences.

One of the problems that schools often encounter is that they are rarely able to validate the feelings and accomplishments of all their students. There is only one valedictorian and not everyone can get an 'A' in every subject. Resentment often results, and insecurities can lead to rebellion and even violence from this lack of validation. There was once a school of psychology that simply had the therapist repeat everything the client said. This was supposed to bring about a feeling of validation that would bring the patient

to a more stable view of one's self and of the world generally.

The Jewish people have witnessed great and powerful miracles. They had been delivered from centuries of Egyptian bondage and from experiencing the waters of the sea split before them. They were eating 'manna' that fell from heaven daily, which was enough to sustain them physically and spiritually. They have the greatest leader in the history of mankind, our teacher Moshe, as their leader. Yet, Jewish tradition teaches us that they did not really feel comfortable with themselves until a person from the outside -- the very outside, a former idolater -- came and confirmed to them the godly powers that they had witnessed and the correctness of their belief in the universal God of Israel.

It has always been that the Jewish people craved validation from the outside world for principles and beliefs that we know to be valid and correct but with which we feel uncomfortable unless others are willing to agree with us on these matters. Moshe realizes this and therefore he will plead with Yitro to remain with the Jewish people and enter the land of Israel with them. Moshe says to him that he will be the eye of Israel. If he validates the land of Israel as a Jewish homeland, the Jews will do so as well. So deep was their need for validation from the outside. We should think about these matters when considering our own pursuit of validation from the non-Jewish world.

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#### **RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ**

### **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**T**he Torah states: "And Yisro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that the Almighty did for Moshe and to Israel His people" (Exodus 18:1). Rashi cites the Talmud (Zevachim 116a): "What did Yisro hear to make him come to join the Jewish people? He heard about the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek." What was so unique about what Yisro heard? Didn't all the other surrounding nations hear about this also?

"The answer is," said Rabbi Yehuda Leib Chasman, "that they heard and remained the same. Yisro, however, didn't merely hear, he took action. Others were moved and inspired for a few moments, but stayed where they were. Yisro picked himself up and changed his life."

Everyone has moments of inspiration. The difference between a great person and an ordinary person is that the great person acts upon his inspirations. When you obtain an important awareness, let it move you to actual changes in your life.

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian asked a question on this

Rashi: We can understand how the miracles at the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds influenced Yisro. However, what was so moving about the war with Amalek? He replied, "At times the best way to appreciate Torah values for living is to observe the behavior of those who lack those values. Amalek also heard about the crossing of the Red Sea. They themselves were in no danger from the Israelites, nevertheless they cruelly tried to wipe them out. Hearing and observing this, Yisro was moved. He concluded differently and realized how much one needs the Almighty in his life for basic values. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2019 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**R**ight at the outset of the Aseret Hadibrot, the ten declarations (commonly translated as the Ten Commandments), God declares "I am the Lord your God 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 God 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 God," really means "I am to be the Lord Your God." 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 God," 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 God at the sneh (burning bush). There, God 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, God is teaching how the Jews can come to believe in Him. Tell them, God 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 God who took you out of Egypt," tells us that "I, the God who took you out of the Egyptian exile now continue the redemption process by giving you the Torah." Here again, God says, that through this experience, the Jews will come to know Him.

In this sense, belief in God 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 God by experiencing Him.

Perhaps the most powerful experience of God

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 God.

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 God.

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 God, the God of our history, "the Lord who took us out of Egypt." © 2019 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

### **ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

## **Halacha L'Moshe M'Sinai**

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**T**he statement of "Halacha L'moshe M'sinai (the undisputed law from Sinai) expresses the belief that these laws were given by word to Moshe at Sinai and though not specifically enumerated in the Torah, were passed down by tradition (mesorah) by word of mouth from generation to generation. According to Maimonides these laws are undisputed.

What is the difference between a law that was passed down by Moshe and those that are specifically stated in the Torah? Laws openly written in the Torah but there are questions to its interpretation are decided stringently (l'achumra). On the other hand if the law is Rabbinic in nature and there are doubts to its interpretation, then we decide leniently (l'akula). What would be the law regarding doubt when dealing with "Halacha l'moshe m'sinai"?

For example all the measurements (shurim) are "halacha l'moshe m'sinai" (Measurements such as an Ammah or a Tefach). However the controversy arises as to what the exact length of these measurements are

(the Chazon Ish or Rav chaim Naeh), or how long should the Lulav be or how thick should the Matzah on Pesach be?

According to the interpretation of Maimonides by the Ramban and the Rivash, in a situation of doubt with "halacha l'moshe m'sinai" we decide leniently. However both the Ramban and the Rivash themselves believe that the stringent way should be followed (L'chumra).

The explanation according to the Rambam might be that when there is a question regarding a Torah law one really should be lenient. It was the Rabbis who stated that one should go l'chumra when there is a question of Torah law. However when we are interpreting Halacha l'amoshe m'sinai, we would follow the lenient view. Thus in the case of the Lulav for example (which according to Jewish law the taking of the Lulav on the first day is dictated from the Torah), we would be permitted to choose the lenient view.

However this interpretation is difficult. For the Rambam himself states, in his interpretation of the Mishnayot (perush Hamishnayot Mikvaat 6,6), that if the Mitzvah stems from the Torah and if one is in doubt as to the "Shiur" (the amount) which is Halacha l'moshe M'sinai", one should follow the stringent view. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **What's News**

**T**hough the marquee event of this week's portion surrounds the epic event of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, there are still many lessons to be learned from every pasuk of the parsha, even the seemingly innocuous ones. Rabbi Mordechai Rogov, of blessed memory, points out a fascinating insight from the following verses that discuss the naming of Moshe's children.

"Yisro, the father-in-law of Moses, took Zipporah, the wife of Moses, after she had been sent away, and her two sons -- of whom the name of one was Gershom, for he had said, 'I was a sojourner in a strange land.' And the name of the other was Eliezer, for 'the God of my father came to my aid, and He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'" (Exodus 18:2-4).

After Moshe killed the Egyptian taskmaster who had hit the Hebrew slave, Pharaoh put a price on Moshe's head. The Medrash tells us that Moshe's head was actually on the chopping block but he was miraculously saved. He immediately fled from Egypt to Midian. In Midian, he met his wife Zipporah and there had two sons.

The question posed is simple and straightforward: Moshe was first saved from Pharaoh and only then did he flee to Midian and become a "sojourner in a strange land." Why did he name his first child after the events in exile his second son in honor of the miraculous salvation from Pharaoh's sword?

Rav Rogov points out a certain human nature about how events, even the most notable ones, are viewed and appreciated through the prospect of time.

Chris Matthews in his classic book *Hardball, An Inside Look at How Politics is Played* by one who knows the Game, tells how Senator Alben W. Barkley of Kentucky, who would later serve as Harry Truman's vice president, related a story that is reflective of human nature and memory. In 1938, Barkley had been challenged for reelection to the Senate by Governor A. B. 'Happy' Chandler, who later made his name as Commissioner of Baseball.

During that campaign, Barkley liked to tell the story of a certain rural constituent on whom he had called in the weeks before the election, only to discover that he was thinking of voting for Governor Chandler. Barkley reminded the man of the many things he had done for him as a prosecuting attorney, as a county judge, and as a congressman and as a senator.

"I recalled how I had helped get an access road built to his farm, how I had visited him in a military hospital in France when he was wounded in World War I, how I had assisted him in securing his veteran's benefits, how I had arranged his loan from the Farm Credit Administration, and how I had got him a disaster loan when the flood destroyed his home."

"How can you think of voting for Happy?" Barkley cried. "Surely you remember all these things I have done for you!"

"Sure," the fellow said, "I remember. But what in the world have you done for me lately?"

Though this story in no way reflects upon the great personage of Moshe, the lessons we can garner from it as well as they apply to all of us.

Rabbi Rogov explains that though the Moshe's fleeing Pharaoh was notably miraculous it was still an event of the past. Now he was in Midian. The pressure of exile from his parents, his immediate family, his brother Ahron and sister Miriam, and his people, was a constant test of faith. Therefore, the name of Moshe's first son commemorated his current crisis as opposed to his prior, albeit more miraculous and traumatic one.

Sometimes appreciating the minor issues of life take precedence over even the most eventful -- if that is what is currently sitting on the table. ©2019 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

#### **RABBI DAVID LEVINE**

## **The Need for Separation**

**P**arashat Yitro is probably one of the best known parshiot because of the inclusion of the Aseret Hadibrot, the Ten Utterances, which are better known to us as the Ten Commandments. The words preceding the giving of the Torah include several laws. Hashem asks Moshe to prepare the people to witness Hashem's presence. "And Hashem said to Moshe, go to the nation (v'kidashtem) and make them ready today

and tomorrow and they shall wash their clothes.” The Ibn Ezra suggests that the word here means to bathe oneself as a form of preparation. This is problematic based on the last words of the pasuk which say to wash one’s clothes, but this always means that one needs to wash oneself also. Therefore, there must be another meaning of the term v’kidashtem. The Ramban opines that it means to separate oneself (kodesh, set aside) from one’s wife and from things that might make one impure. But this idea is covered later when Moshe instructs the people, “be prepared for three days, do not come near your wife.”

The concept of separating by washing one’s clothes means that one needs to wash one’s body also is interesting. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains this concept in the following way. The body is like the clothes of the soul. The commandment to wash one’s clothes automatically includes the next step which is washing the body. Washing is always a means of purifying. We wash our hands before we say prayers, before we eat bread, and before we perform any service in the Temple. We also wash hands before we begin our daily activities immediately after arising from sleep. Though it sometimes seems like a “simple” ritual it emphasizes to us that the ultimate goal of our washing is to remind us to keep our souls pure.

For another separation Hashem told Moshe, “and you shall set boundaries around (the mountain) saying guard yourself from going up the mountain or touching its edge for he who touches the mountain shall surely die. A hand shall not touch it for he shall be stoned or he shall be cast down, whether animal or man he will not live, (only) when the blast of the shofar horn is drawing out, may they ascend the mountain.” Here we see a separation given with a warning. The people are cautioned even about their animals lest the animals touch the mountain and die. Only Moshe was permitted on the mountain and even he did not ascend to the peak of the mountain to where Hashem had descended.

Rav Sorotzkin explains why Moshe was the only one allowed on the mountain. Moshe is the representative of the people and all of the people are receiving the Torah. Since all of the people have become completely purified, why should they be excluded from the mountain? Rav Sorotzkin answers his own question by drawing an analogy to the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. He quotes the Gemara Yoma (44) which says that when the Kohen Gadol performed the service by himself, even the other Kohanim (who were certainly pure and normally would assist in every aspect of the service to Hashem) would exit from the sanctuary when the Kohen Gadol was burning the incense and sprinkling the blood inside and outside of the sanctuary. The Kohanim exited not only from the sanctuary but also from the outer courtyard where the outer altar was located. The Kohen Gadol acted as the

messenger of the people for each of these acts. Yet since the Kohen Gadol was alone with Hashem inside the Holy of Holies, everyone else, even the holy Kohanim, had to be careful to separate themselves and not encroach on this area.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains the need for this separation. When Moshe relayed the people’s readiness to receive the Torah it was with a mistaken confidence that the people had reached a moral and spiritual level that was high enough to receive the Torah on an equal footing with him. Hashem instead presented a list of demands that prevented them from coming close. This was to make them realize that there was a huge gap between the level of morality and spirituality that they had reached compared to the actual level of morality and spirituality of the Law that they were to receive. Hashem also wished to demonstrate to them that the Law emanated from outside of them rather than from their midst. Other religions were initiated by Man. They were a reflection of what a group of people at a given time conceptualized as their god and their moral system. Only Judaism was morality emanating directly from Hashem.

There is a message to each of us from the separation at Har Sinai and in the Temple on Yom Kippur. We are privy to a unique experience each time we daven in shul. This experience is not as evident when we daven by ourselves. Above the Aron Kodosh in many shuls we see the words, “da lifnei mi ata omeid, know before Whom you are standing.” These are not merely words; they are a sign to us that Hashem is present when we stand in prayer. We learned from Har Sinai and from the Temple that when Hashem is having a conversation with Moshe or the Kohen Gadol it is a private meeting and others must leave. Yet when we daven to Hashem, the same private meeting is taking place, but we don’t leave. The private meeting between Hashem and each individual who is participating in prayer continues even while others are present. How then is our conversation private? We each must concentrate on our prayers and our private conversation while not interrupting the prayers of others. This limits our personal conversations during prayer. Men often place the tallit over their heads during certain portions of the prayers for privacy and concentration. Women sometimes cover their faces with the siddur or face a wall to avoid looking at others and being drawn into a conversation. This enables us to concentrate on Hashem’s conversation with us.

This conversation with Hashem is guaranteed. Hashem is always there when we pray together with other Jews. The more that we are able to improve our own spirituality, the more we are able to sense His presence as we pray. We must keep in mind to allow others the quiet and “separation” to receive Hashem’s

conversation with them. May we all attempt to raise our own levels of righteousness and concentration and enable others to do the same. © 2019 Rabbi D. Levine

### RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

## Mei Marom

**H**ashem's Will and His deed are, for all intents and purposes, synonymous. Nothing separates the former from the latter. What He wills -- becomes. There are no barriers, no limitations, no preconditions to carrying out what He wishes. Human experience is quite different. We do nothing that mimics the Divine experience.

Almost nothing. The exception is naasheh v'nishmah. Essentially, those words expressed a determination that the willingness of Klal Yisrael to observe the demands of the Torah would translate into deed and action. Here as well, there would be no white-space between intent and accomplishment; will and deed would become one. The possibility of this connection is what stands behind the gemara's (Sanhedrin 65B) contention that if they wished, tzadikim could create worlds, and in the future will in fact do so. (Zohar, Medrash Neelam, Toldos, 135A) They can tap into that unification of will and deed, and act upon it.

The identity between will and deed would have remained the rule, had not Amalek opened a space between them. Even after Amalek, however, bits of it remain. For example, once Klal Yisrael evidenced their deep-seated desire for and commitment to a particular mitzvah, no subsequent event or enemy would come between them and their faithful performance of it.

The collective will of Klal Yisrael creates more than worlds. It can, in a manner of speaking, add to Hashem's Holiness. (The Zohar (Emor 93A) differentiates between two similar descriptors that we attach to Him: kodesh and kadosh. The former speaks of His actual essence. The latter tells of our ability to change the way His holiness is appreciated and perceived. "You are kadosh, sitting in the praises of Yisrael." (Tehilim 22:4) When we desire it, we can add on, kivayachol, to the holiness of G-d Himself.

This may be the most surprising "add-on," but there are several more. We add on to the kedushah of Shabbos by accepting it earlier that its legal starting time. The gerim who join us increase the total kedushah of Klal Yisrael through the addition of their souls.

When Yisro reached the Jewish camp, he

joyfully exclaimed, "Baruch Hashem Who saved you...." (Shemos 18:10) Chazal (Mechilta; Sanhedrin 94A) see this blessing as a black mark on the record of Klal Yisrael -- none of the Jews had risen up to bless Hashem until Yisro came along! Now, it is clear that this cannot be taken at face value. The nation that sang shirah certainly had no shortage of people who effusively thanked Hashem for all He had done. Chazal, however, mean the particular kind of blessing that we've been discussing. The very word brachah reflects adding on, enhancing. Klal Yisrael at the time had not elevated themselves to a place where they could add, so to speak, to Hashem's manifest kedushah. To get there, they needed to be added on to themselves -- through gerim. Yisro arrived as the father of future gerim. He was able to offer an element of addition -- a brachah to the most High.

Just as the Divine Will became evident and actualized in the process of Creation, so too it continues to manifest itself in Torah she b'al peh. This, however, requires the participation of Klal Yisrael. With this we come to the long lines standing before Moshe. Moshe welcomed them. They afforded him an opportunity to interact with the people about halacha -- to teach, inspire, and create within them the will to observe. (Although Amalek had done his damage of driving a wedge between will and deed -- essentially by planting some of his evil inclinations within them -- Moshe hoped that he could at least pave the way for the future reunification of will and deed.)

Yisro objected. "It is not good, the thing that you do." (Shemos 18:17) We have to see the emphasis upon the word "you."

Yisro argued that as the ish ha-Elokim, (Devarim 33:1) the godly man, the one through whose voice Hashem Himself spoke, Moshe could not bring the Jewish people as a whole to fulfill their role as partners with G-d in reunifying will and deed.

The progress would have to come from the people themselves. While it is true, he said, that Moshe was the equal of all of Israel, it is also true that the people of Israel are the equal of Moshe! Therefore, they needed a collective effort. The smaller items should be processed and adjudicated by the people through the lower courts. The weightier issues would still come to Moshe.

Together they would engage Torah in a powerful manner, creating a force of will that would, at least in the future, become inseparable from deed. (Based on Mei Marom, Shemos, Maamar 43.) © 2019

Rabbi Y. Adlerstein

