

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The quintessential Jewish expression of thanks, gratitude and acknowledgment is Baruch Hashem, meaning "Thank God," or "Praise be to the Lord."

Chassidim say of the Baal Shem Tov that he would travel around the little towns and villages of Eastern Europe, asking Jews how they were. However poor or troubled they were, invariably they would reply, Baruch Hashem. It was an instinctive expression of faith, and every Jew knew it. They might have lacked the learning of the great Talmudic scholar, or the wealth of the successful, but they believed they had much to thank God for, and they did so. When asked what he was doing and why, the Baal Shem Tov would reply by quoting the verse: "You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:4). So every time a Jew says Baruch Hashem, he or she is helping to make a throne for the Shechinah, the Divine Presence.

The words Baruch Hashem appear in this week's parsha. But they are not spoken by a Jew. The person who says them is Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law. Rejoining Moshe after the Exodus, bringing with him Moshe's wife and children, and hearing from his son-in-law all that had happened in Egypt, he says, "Praise be to the Lord [Baruch Hashem], who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians" (Ex. 18:10).

Three people in the Torah use this expression - and all of them are non-Jews, people outside the Abrahamic covenant. The first is Noach: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem" (Gen. 9:26). The second is Avraham's servant, presumed to be Eliezer, whom he sends to find a wife for Yitzchak: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Avraham, who has not abandoned His kindness and faithfulness to my master" (Gen. 24:27). The third is Yitro in this week's parsha.

(There are two other oblique examples. Laban calls Avraham's servant, "You who are blessed by the Lord" (Gen. 24:31). Avimelech king of Gerar says of Yitzchak, "You are blessed by the Lord" (Genesis 26:29). Again note that neither of the speakers is part of the covenant.)

Is this significant? Why is it that this praise of God is attributed to Noach, Eliezer and Yitro, whereas from the Israelites, with the marked exception of the

Song at the Sea, we seem to hear constant complaints? It may be simply that this is human nature: we see more clearly than others what is lacking in our lives, while others see more clearly than we do the blessings we have. We complain, while others wonder what we are complaining about when we have so much to be thankful for. That is one explanation.

It is, though, possible that a more fundamental point is being made. The Torah is signalling its most subtle and least understood idea: that the God of Israel is the God of all humankind, even though the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humankind. As Rabbi Akiva put it: "Beloved is humanity, for it was created in the image of God. Beloved is Israel, for they are called children of God." (Mishnah Avot 3:14)

We believe that God is universal. He created the universe. He set in motion the processes that led to stars, planets, life, and humanity. His concern is not limited to Israel. As we say in the prayer of Ashrei, "His tender mercies are on all His works." You do not need to be Jewish to have a sense of reverence for the Creator or recognise, as Yitro did, His hand in miraculous events. It would be hard to find another religious literature that confers such dignity on figures who stand outside its borders.

This is true not only of the three notable figures who said Baruch Hashem. The Torah calls Avraham's contemporary, Malkizedek, king of Shalem, a "Priest to God Most High." He, too, blessed God: "Blessed be Avram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High who delivered your enemies into your hand" (Gen. 14:19-20).

Consider also, the fact that the title of our own parsha this week, which contains the Ten Commandments as well as the most significant event in all of Jewish history, the covenant at Sinai, carries the name of a non-Jew. What is more, immediately prior to the revelation at Sinai, the Torah tells us how it was Yitro the Midianite Priest who taught Moshe how to organise the leadership of the people.

These are remarkable expressions of spiritual generosity to those outside the covenant.

Or consider Tishri, the holiest month of the Jewish year. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, as well as reading about the birth of Yitzchak, we read of how an angel came to the aid of Hagar and Yishmael. "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up

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and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation" (Gen. 21:17-18). Yishmael was not destined to be a carrier of the covenant, yet he was rescued and blessed.

On Yom Kippur, in the afternoon, after we have spent most of the day fasting and making confession, we read the book of Yonah, in which we discover that the Prophet uttered a mere five Hebrew words ("In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed") and then the entire population -- Assyrians, Israel's enemies -- repented. Tradition takes this as the model of collective repentance.

On Succot we read Zechariah's prophecy that in days to come all the nations will come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of rain (Zech. 14:16-19).

These are three stunning examples of universalism. They do not imply that in the fullness of time everyone will convert to Judaism. Rather, that in the fullness of time everyone will recognize the one God, Creator and Sovereign of the universe. That is quite a different thing.

This idea that you can stand outside the faith and still be acknowledged by people within the faith as someone who recognizes God, is very rare indeed. Far more common is the approach of one God, one truth, one way. Whoever stands outside that way is Godless, unsaved, the infidel, unredeemed, a lower class of humanity.

Why then does Judaism distinguish between the universality of God and the particularity of our relationship with Him? Answer: because this helps us solve the single greatest problem humanity has faced since earliest times. How can I recognize the dignity and integrity of the 'other'? History and biology have written into the human mind a capacity for altruism toward the people like us, and aggression toward the people not like us. We are good, they are bad. We are innocent, they are guilty. We have truth, they have lies. We have God on our side, they do not. Many crimes of nation against nation are due to this propensity.

Which is why Tanach teaches otherwise. Noach, Eliezer and Yitro were people of God without being members of Israel. Even the people of Nineveh became an example of how to heed a Prophet and repent. God blessed Yishmael as well as Yitzchak. These are powerful lessons.

It is hard to think of a more compelling principle for the 21st century. The great problems humanity faces -- climate change, economic inequality, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence -- are global, but our most effective political agencies are at most national. There is a mismatch between our problems and the available solutions. We need to find a way of combining our universal humanity with our cultural and religious particularity.

That is what the Torah is doing when it tells us that Noach, Eliezer and Yitro said Baruch Hashem. They thanked God, just as we, today, thank God. God is universal. Therefore humanity, created in His image, is universal. But the revelation and covenant at Mount Sinai were particular. They belong to our story, not the universal story of humankind. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd now, if you will surely hearken to my voice and observe My Covenant, then you shall be for Me a chosen treasure (segulah) from amongst all the nations, because all of the earth is Mine And you shall be for Me a Kingdom of Priest-teachers and a holy nation... (Ex. 19:5,6)" In our Biblical portion of Yitro, we have the Religious Covenant between God and the Israelites, a Divine agreement that if this newly-formed emerging nation will accept the moral and ritual commandments, they will become God's treasured people, a holy nation of priest-teachers to all of humanity. Hence the prophetic fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, chosen because he was commanding his household after him to act with compassionate righteousness and moral justice, that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. (Gen. 18:18-19; 12:3).

From this perspective, the Covenant at Sinai may be seen as the Bar-Bat Mitzvah of the Jewish Nation at the very dawn of their history. Indeed, it is a commitment -- consecration ceremony, which can be ratified only after the Israelites publicly accept the challenge -- or the gift -- which God is placing before them, "And (the Israelites) said, 'all that the Lord has spoken we shall perform and internalize' -- and then Moses took the blood (of the earlier sacrifices) and sprinkled it upon the nation, and he said, 'behold, the blood of the Covenant, which the Lord has cut with you on all these words.'" (Ex. 24:7-9) As should be expected, this ratification comes after the lengthy portion of Mishpatim, replete with a sampling of the moral and ritual commandments which have always been seen by our Sages as part and parcel of the Revelation at Sinai.

This ratification of the Covenant includes the youth of Israel who brought whole burnt offerings and peace offerings – and a celebratory meal for the leadership (Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Avihu and the Seventy Elders), at which they ate and drank in the presence of the Divine. (Ex. 24:11). Biblically, sacrifices of whole burnt offerings and peace offerings are generally identified with Festival celebrations (for example, Num. 10:10).

As we have seen, there is also the sprinkling of blood upon the nation, which is reminiscent of the circumcision ceremony, by which every male baby enters into the Covenant of Abraham and must include the loss of some blood from the male sexual organ of propagation; so it is that every single birth, male and female, is accompanied with the significant loss of blood: our Talmud teaches that “women are considered to be naturally circumcised,” because with every birth they put their lives on the line and shed much blood!

The profound reason for this is difficult, but very true.

Every worthwhile idea or ideal requires commitment (*mesirut nefesh*), even commitment unto death. It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said that anyone who has not found an ideal for which he would sacrifice his life is not living a worthwhile life! As the prophet Ezekiel taught, “And I see that you are rooted in your blood, and I say to you “by your blood shall you live, by your blood shall you live” (Ezek. 16:6).

The great paradox of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac was God’s telling Abraham that only if he was willing to risk his future through his son Isaac would he be worthy of having a future with covenantal seed. God Himself (as it were) is invested in Israel’s commitment, even commitment unto death, to the Covenant, because unless Israel succeeds in teaching the world ethical monotheism, our global village will have no future! That is why in picturing God’s participation in the celebratory meal at Sinai, what I believe the Bible is trying to express metaphorically is that God has chosen us as His partners, to be His witnesses to the world, to help Him save humanity from self-destruction.

The Talmud records (B.T. Tamid 32a) that “Alexander of Macedon asked the Elders of Tzfat: ‘What ought a person do if he wishes to die?’ They responded, ‘Let him attempt to keep on living,’ because he will surely die sooner or later; nobody has yet left this world alive! ‘And what ought a person do if he wishes to remain alive?’ They responded, ‘Let him slay himself’ for the sake of an eternal value, of a lofty ideal, and he will continue to live as long as the value or ideal remains alive in the world.”

To be a committed Jew means that although you may be engaged in a dangerous occupation, there is no more privileged way to live your life. Yes, it is a great joy to be Jewish. And even if you experience a

temporal “oy,” that is certainly worth the eternal “joy” of participating in God’s vineyard dedicated to perfecting the world. © 2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

We once again see in this week's Torah reading the Torah's penchant to use outsiders and their ideas to advance the welfare of the Jewish People. After the granting of the Torah on Sinai, Moshe attempts to institute a one-man -- himself -- system of justice for the Jewish people. In theory, this is the ideal system, for everyone would wish to be heard and judged by Moshe. There cannot be anyone better or wiser to hear disputes and render clarifications of Torah ordinances and values than Moshe Rabbeinu. Yet, like many, if not even the greatest ideas in theory, do not usually work out in practice in the messy world of everyday human behavior and life.

It is the complete outsider, Yitro, who immediately grasps the danger to the people and to Moshe that is inherent in his role as the sole judge of the Jews. Yitro cautions Moshe that under such a system, Moshe and the people will wither away because of the impossible physical, emotional and organizational strain. Yitro proposes an alternate system of justice, more bureaucratic and cumbersome but infinitely more workable than the one Moses proposed. And Heaven agrees with the outsider, and Yitro's proposal becomes the accepted norm for justice for that generation of Jewish people. Moshe himself agrees with the wisdom of Yitro's words. The fact that Yitro is a complete outsider in Jewish society of that time in no way disqualifies his observations and suggestions.

Generally, people ignore and even resent the comments and opinions of outsiders on internal or domestic matters. What can an outsider possibly know about how we should behave or how we should run our home, business or society? Yet, as the professional fields of counselling in all sectors and disciplines in our society continue to grow and expand, we are witness to the value of outside guidance. It is their 'outsiderness' that provides a perspective that the person or society cannot achieve by itself.

The rabbis of the Talmud phrased it succinctly and correctly: "A prison inmate cannot free himself by himself from his incarceration." As it was in the case of Yitro, it is the outsider -- oftentimes the ultimate outsider -- who may be the key to progress and who offers a better perspective on the challenges facing us. We should never deliberately close our ears to what is being said about us or to advice given, even if it is not requested.

The great unmatched humility of Moshe allowed him not only to accept the words and advice of Yitro, but also to cherish them, and even openly credit

Yitro for his insight and wisdom, Moshe will say to Yitro later in the Torah, "you have been to us our guide and eyes," Only outsiders can free us from the bonds of our own self-imposed subjectivity. This is one of the great subliminal teachings that fill the Torah and instruct us about life. ©2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The last sentence of this week's portion states that ramps should lead to the altar. (Exodus 20:23) Why are ramps used and not steps?

The issue may be one of modesty. In the ancient Near East nudity was associated with ritual activity. This link is rejected by Torah. If there were steps, the robe of the priest would be pushed up when he climbed them, revealing the nakedness of his limbs. As Rashi points out, with ramps, this would not occur.

Another idea comes to mind. The altar symbolizes a central place of spirituality. The ramps connecting the ground with the altar teach that in order to reach the higher world of the spirit one must be in constant motion. Ramps imply perpetual movement, whereas steps can offer rest.

Another important contemporary lesson can be learned. The presence of ramps can be viewed as a symbol of accessibility. Once there is accessibility to the altar or in today's synagogue, it sends a message that all are welcome – everyone, regardless of affiliation, health or station in life is welcome.

There are those who believe that a synagogue's beauty is dependent on its traditional look, or its ultra-modern structure or a skylight over the ark. For me, the first thing I look for in a synagogue are ramps. If the synagogue is accessible, it is beautiful.

To those who feel themselves far removed from the issue and believe it has nothing to do with them, let it be said that none of us are immune from the misfortunes that befall others. There is no such thing as the sick and the well, there are only the sick and the not yet sick.

A photograph in my office says it all. It is of a man sitting in his wheelchair at the bottom of a flight of steps, leading up to the entrance of the synagogue. Over its door, is emblazoned the sentence, "Open the gates of righteousness for me, I will enter through them." (Psalm 118:19)

The man sits with his back to the doors, unable to enter. As a Jewish community we have failed him. Our task is to learn from the ramps that led to the altar in the tabernacle. They teach that we must make sure that this person can face the door and be welcomed as he makes his way in. ©2020 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 DAVID S. LEVIN

Hearing and Seeing

When the B'nei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai, Moshe went up to the mountain and Hashem gave him instructions. "Like this you will say to the House of Yaakov and you will tell the Children of Yisrael." This instruction was meant to be inclusive. Rashi tells us that the Beit Yisrael refers to the women since they are the establishers of the house. By inference this also then includes the children since the mothers will tell their children as well. The B'nei Yisrael then refers to the men, since the men pass on the inheritance to their children. It was important for all to be present for the words from Hashem.

Hashem continues, "You saw that which I did to Egypt and I carried you on eagles' wings and I brought you to me." This pasuk describes the only other incident of revelation before the entire nation, the splitting of the Red Sea. Yet even though that revelation was a significant one, the fact that Hashem did not directly appear to them as He did here on Har Sinai meant that the miracle at the Sea did not accomplish all that Hashem wanted for the Jewish people. Rashi explains the importance of the first two words in the pasuk, "you saw," It is not a tradition in your hands, I did not send you a verbal account, I did not have testimony presented to you by witnesses, rather you have seen (yourselves) what I did to Egypt, for the Egyptians owed me for several sins before they attacked you, but I only exacted punishment through you." Rashi's statement carries several implications. The splitting of the Red Sea was a revelation before all of Israel to teach them several lessons. The Red Sea was not only to show Hashem's greatness and power but also something that would be witnessed by them directly so that they would not need to accept a proof of it by any means other than their own eyes. The Talmud brings down the concept that "ein domeh shmiya l'r'iya, there is no comparing the validity of hearing testimony to witnessing an event (lit., there is no comparison of hearing to seeing)." Here the Jews saw with their own eyes the events that occurred. The Red Sea also demonstrated to the Jews that Hashem did not choose to punish the Egyptians for previous sins until He punished them for their cruelty in enslaving the Jews. This was to be part of that special relationship that Hashem had with the Jewish people. But this was not enough for the future of the Jewish people and their partnership with Hashem.

Judaism is not a religion based on philosophy and thought alone. It is a religion of Law, tradition, and custom of practice of that Law. It is a codification of rules and regulations that covers almost every aspect of human life. These laws had to be communicated to

the people in a way that they would clearly see them emanating from Hashem. Hashem knew that it would be impossible to enable the Jewish people to witness the entire Law being passed to Moshe at Har Sinai because of their fears. Even though the B'nei Yisrael had reached the highest level of righteousness, only Moshe was at a level of concentration that he could stand before Hashem for forty days and nights, learning His Torah. Moshe was on a different spiritual level than the people. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Hashem appeared before the people as a cloud, much like the vision of a prophet other than Moshe. But the people were witnesses, not prophets. According to ibn Ezra, at this time the entire concept of prophecy was not totally accepted or understood by the people. They had doubts that anyone could speak to Hashem and live. One reason for this experience now was to prepare the people for prophecy in the future.

When Hashem brought the B'nei Yisrael to Har Sinai, He wanted them to have an experience that would give them complete faith. He wanted them to be in such a position that "vaya'aminu Bashem u'v'Moshe avdo, that they would believe and trust in Hashem and in Moshe His servant." This necessitated all of the regulations that Hashem imposed on the people for purifying themselves and for establishing borders around the mountain. The people had to separate from their wives and purify themselves and their garments. They and their animals needed to avoid approaching the mountain or they would die. Hashem needed the people to be present and to hear His voice so that they were engaged both in sh'miya and r'iya, hearing and seeing. Only through a combination of both these senses could the people have an experience that would bring about total faith in Hashem and in Moshe.

One proof of this combination of sh'miya and r'iya occurs immediately after the Ten Commandments are given. The Torah says, "And all the people saw the sounds and the lightening, the sound of the shofar and the smoking mountain, the people saw and they moved (away) and they stood from afar." The Torah chooses its words carefully. The Torah literally speaks about seeing sound. This is the combination of these senses that changed this experience and raised it to a much higher level. When the people comprehended the full extent of their experience, they were able to understand and have faith in Moshe and all future prophets.

We know from Science that the nerves for both these senses are in close proximity in our heads. With the proper stimulation of sound, we can be made to see colors. The sense of smell is also found in the same area. Certain sounds can trigger a memory of tastes or aromas even without those stimuli being present. Certain smells can trigger a set of visual and auditory memories that we may attribute subconsciously with that smell. Hashem created our whole being in such a way that we can maximize our experience of His

presence. In this way we can serve Hashem with our entire body because we can sense Him with every fiber of our being. May we learn to increase our awareness of Hashem in the sights and sounds that surround us daily: the chirping of the birds, the aroma of flowers, snow on the mountains, a beautiful sunset or a plush meadow. In that way may we emulate the prophets of old and our own ancestors who were present at Sinai. Their experience enabled them to become more attuned to Hashem's presence. May we also strive to attune ourselves to this gift of revelation. ©2020 Rabbi D.S. Levin

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Halacha L'Moshe M'Sinai

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The 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 Ramban 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

RAV SHLOMO WOLBE Z"L

Bais Hamussar

When Yisro saw the tremendous effort that Moshe Rabbeinu invested in judging Bnei Yisrael, he suggested that Moshe divide the responsibility between a number of people. After receiving approval from Hashem, Yisro's advice was accepted and criteria were set to determine the qualifications for a judge: "You shall discern from among the entire people, men of accomplishment, God-fearing people, men of truth, people who despise money, and you shall appoint them leaders" (Shemos 18:21).

Rashi explains that the "despising of money" mentioned in the pasuk refers to money that is truthfully theirs, but due to a lack of evidence can be extracted from them in a court of law (see Ramban's clarification of Rashi). Only a person who despises such money would be qualified to judge Bnei Yisrael. What would compel a person to not only willingly forfeit money which is rightfully theirs, but to also despise the money in question?

Rav Wolbe cites the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 116:7) which mentions that an especially punctilious person will not eat meat from an animal that had a questionable shechita, even if the animal was rendered kosher by a competent halachic authority. The very fact that he must rely on a human's decision detracts from the "glatt kosher" standard that he wishes to maintain. Just as there is glatt kosher meat there is also glatt kosher money. Money which can be extracted from a person via a court decision does not conform to the high standards which a Jewish judge sets for himself.

Most people are very careful about what they eat. They will make sure to check for a hechsher on every product, and something with questionable verification will not make it into their shopping cart. Yet, when it comes to monetary issues they do not demand that their revenues carry the same level of verification. It would seem that the difference is in the emphasis that parents place on the kashrus of food when children are young. It behooves us to impress upon our children that they should be as careful with what enters their pockets as with what enters their mouths. Conveying this idea to others will sharpen it in our own eyes and aid us in attaining a glatt kosher bank account.

Moshe ascended Har Sinai and Hashem instructed him to tell Bnei Yisrael the following: "You have seen what I did to Mitzrayim and that I carried you on the wings of eagles and I brought you to Me" (ibid. 19:3). Rashi explains that Hashem was telling Bnei Yisrael that they do not have to rely on testimonies or

hearsay since they witnessed Hashem's wonders with their very own eyes.

Rav Wolbe cites the Sefer Kuzari which elaborates on this idea. The sefer revolves around the king of Kuzar's search for religious fulfillment. He discussed religion with a Christian, a Muslim and a Jew. When he asked the Jew about his beliefs, he responded, "We believe in the G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, Who redeemed Bnei Yisrael from Egypt in an awesome display of miracles, sustained them in the desert and conquered the Land of Canaan for them."

The king asked the Jew why he described his G-d as, "The One Who redeemed Bnei Yisrael from Egypt," and not as, "The One Who created the world," as He was described by the Christian and Muslim. The wise Jew responded that while other religions believe in G-d relies on hearsay, Jewish belief is based upon occurrences that took place in front of the eyes of the masses.

The foundation of our beliefs is rock solid. Millions of people experienced Yetzias Mitzrayim and heard Hashem speak at Har Sinai. Truth be told, if we pay close attention we can also see it now in the twenty-first century: He runs the world, He runs our lives, and we can feel His hand guiding us through the maze of life. ©2020 Rav S. Wolbe & The AishDas Society

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"Moshe ascended to God, and God called to him from the mountain, saying, 'You shall say to the house of Ya'akov and tell the sons of Israel...'" (Shemos 19:3) On a recent trip to the United States, a book cover caught my eye in an airport store. It was a pocketbook with a white cover that had "Mindfulness" written in caps. It was simple but elegant, and I picked it up primarily with the idea of doing something similar with a future book of my own.

However, I bought it because the topic of mindfulness has interested me for some time now. I'm always interested in ways of improving brain usage and quality of life. From the cover, it seemed to be something that could help with this.

I began reading the book on the plane, but was quickly disappointed to find out that there wasn't much new for me. After pointing out that "Mindfulness" is a buzzword today, it spent most of the time explaining how it has been used to greatly increase productivity in the workplace, and in life in general. Much of the information I already knew, or just found obvious. So, after just skimming the rest of the book, I put it away.

Then something occurred to me. The reason why so much of the material was familiar, was because I already lived a life based upon mindfulness. It's built in, from the moment I wake up in the morning and start

with "Modeh Ani Lefanecha..." and go to sleep at the end of a day after "Krias Shema al HaMittah."

Then there are the myriad of mitzvos that I get to perform in-between those two times. I'll have to doven three times a day, and make a brochah after using the bathroom each time. I'll have three meals, and a couple of snacks, and all of them will require blessings before and after them.

And all of those mitzvos will take place against a backdrop of six constant mitzvos, like love and fear of God, incumbent on every Jew every waking moment of everyday of their lives. They're supposed to inspire me to act my Godliest at every moment, to make sure that when I do my mitzvos, I am MINDFUL of them, and what they need from me to do their job.

Of course, there is always the danger of performing mitzvos mindLESSly, or what they call "by rote." The person knows they have an obligation, and they would not think of not performing it. They just don't think about what they are doing while doing it, performing the mitzvah on auto-pilot instead.

The number one problem? Distraction. We're easily distracted, and life is very distracting. There's always something going on around a person to shlepp their attention away from the mitzvah at hand, especially at the last moment. Dovid HaMelech only died because he became distracted away from his learning just long enough to fall and fatally hurt himself.

In fact, Amalek's chief method of attacking a Jew is distraction. When we left Egypt, he attacked us as a nation. Since then, the reality of Amalek has attacked us in many different ways, but always with the same purpose. He just wants to stop a Jew from living a meaningful and mindful Torah life.

Hence, Amalek was the first nation to attack the Jewish people, and he did so right before we arrived at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. He knows that HIS existence depends upon a weak connection between a Jew and Torah. This is why the name of the place of his first attack was "Refidim," which means "weak in the hands." He was able to attack the Jewish people because Torah was weak in their hands.

Therefore, if the Torah was given to the Jewish people to promote mindFULness, then it is Amalek's sole purpose to promote just the opposite, mindLESSness. It could be something as simple -- but terribly wasteful -- as a person losing their focus at precisely the time they need to have intention for a mitzvah. Or it can be something far more profoundly damaging such as subscribing to a mistaken idea. Either way, a person will miss out on moments of reality.

Because that is what it is all about, being in the moment, ALL OF YOU. Life is a VERRRRRY long string of moments, each with its own potential to impart to its user additional life. Time moves so fast that we barely ever notice it, unless something happens to

make us take note. Before we know it, a lifetime has passed, and we can barely remember most of it.

What we do remember best and quickest are the events that demanded the most from us. Whether it was a traumatic experience, or one that we wished would never end, we "invested" in it. We were intellectually AND emotionally there, and that seemed to engrave the experience deeper into our memory.

This is why so many people are prepared to take tremendous risks just to have "fun," or spend so much money just to do things like having an amazing eating experience. The more exciting something is, the more of us it pulls into the moment. The more moments we become mindful of, the more ALIVE we feel.

Movie producers know this and take full advantage of it to get people to pay good money to watch their films. This is what makes "good" entertainment so, well, entertaining. It has the ability to draw our intellect and emotions in, leaving us with the sense of life we live to experience, even if only two hours at a time.

When it comes to Torah, few people think about it as being entertaining. On the contrary, for many, Torah is very unentertaining. Some even have a difficult time paying a small fee just to access it, feeling that it should be free since they are making the supreme "sacrifice" of looking at it.

Others, albeit a small minority, know differently. They know that Torah is the MOST entertaining of all, not in the secular sense of the term, but in the ULTIMATE sense of the term. They are drawn to Torah and have a very difficult time parting from it.

Hence the Torah says:

"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring will live..." (Devarim 30:19)

Choose life? Would a healthy person choose anything else? Yes, if they did not fully understand what living means. Yes, if they thought that it is better to give in to the body and sleep in, than listen to the soul and get up on time for minyan. Yes, if they thought that it is more enjoyable to space out while praying than working hard to concentrate and FEEL the words of prayer.

Funny how when it comes to making money or becoming famous people accept this. They make great sacrifices and focus intensely on what they are doing. Their success requires it, and if they want one they know that they have to accept the other, and all the many "rituals" that come with it.

But not when it comes to religion, and especially the 613 mitzvos of Torah. They don't buy what the rabbis have written:

"The Tablets are the handiwork of God, and the script was God's script engraved -- charus -- on the Tablets. Do not read 'charus,' but 'cheirus' -- freedom. For you can have no freer person than one who engages in Torah study." (Pirkei Avos 6:2)

But that's because they do not understand TRUE freedom. There is freedom and then there is freedom. There is the freedom to do whatever you feel like doing, which is usually a yetzer hara thing. Then there is the freedom to be the very best you can be, a yetzer tov thing, and what the Torah speaks to.

In short, Torah focuses a person on the greatest part of being human, and provides the most effective path to achieve it. It demands that a person be mindful of their time and opportunity of life. It defines what is good and what is bad, so that a person will know what is worth their attention and what should be ignored. Torah encourages and inspires the one who lives by it to live up to their full potential.

Can there anything more liberating than that?

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RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Yisro heard all that G-d did to Moshe and Israel his nation when Hashem took Israel out from Egypt." (Shmos 18:1) The Gemara asks, "What did Yisro hear, which prompted him to come to Moshe?" It answers that he heard of Krias Yam Suf, the splitting of the sea, and Milchemes Amalek, the war with Esav's descendants, Haman's antecedents, the nation of Amalek. These things happened, as our verse finishes, "when Hashem took Israel out from Egypt."

What specifically about these two miracles drew Yisro in? The Ramban asks why it doesn't say that he heard about the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah. He answers that perhaps Yisro came before Sinai, when the Jews were in Refidim, and thus it was the miraculous war which took place there that affected him.

We'd like to suggest a different approach based on a general rule of syntax. The word 'ki,' can be utilized in four different ways. It can mean, "if," "when," "because," or "that." In our posuk we've explained it as "when." But what if in this case we utilized it as "because?" That would open an entirely new approach to the impetus driving Yisro to come to the camp of Israel.

When Hashem took us from Egypt, He became responsible to care for us. Just as a person who gives birth to or adopts a child accepts upon himself to care for the child, even if not in so many words, Hashem accepted to take care of us. We were not Moshe's nation, but Hashem's! BECAUSE of this, when the Egyptians chased us, Hashem split the sea and orchestrated their destruction.

BECAUSE of this, when Amalek attacked, and it was our own fault for getting lazy in our spirituality, Hashem enabled us to cleave to Him and beat back the threat. What impacted Yisro was the power of the idea that Hashem took



ownership of us and would do great, open miracles to care for us. But he had no idea how far it went.

Moshe spent a lot of time with his father-in-law, and recounted all that had transpired to the Jews, from the thirst and hunger to Hashem's miraculous salvation. Yisro got the insider's tour of what happened to the Jewish People. While he was at first impressed that Hashem would work miracles to save us, he now came face-to-face with the mind-boggling reality that Hashem doesn't just save us en masse, but is intimately involved in our everyday individual struggles!

BECAUSE Hashem took us out of Egypt and acquired us as His own, He is responsible to care for all our wants and needs, and this is a responsibility that He takes very seriously.

A Jewish woman was walking on the shore with her grandson. Suddenly, a huge wave washed over them and carried the young boy out to sea. The woman was beside herself with shock and grief.

"Master of the Universe!" she pleaded. "This child is a good boy. He should not be taken away like this! Please, have mercy on our family and on him and return him to us. In Your great compassion, show pity and do not let him die this way."

Just then, another wave crashed onto the shore and deposited the lad beside his grandmother. She looked Heavenward and cried, "Thank you G-d! ...but he had a hat!" © 2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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, in Majesty of Man, explains 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 (in terms of converting them), 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 is. If we expressed the Yitro that we undoubtedly have within us, those around us are bound to be moved. © 2016 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.