

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L**

### Covenant & Conversation

*Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.*

**T**his week's parsha consists of two episodes that seem to constitute a study in contrasts. The first is in chapter 18. Yitro, Moses' father-in-law and a Midianite Priest, gives Moses his first lesson in leadership. In the second episode, the prime mover is God Himself who, at Mount Sinai, makes a covenant with the Israelites in an unprecedented and unrepeated epiphany. For the first and only time in history God appears to an entire people, making a covenant with them and giving them the world's most famous brief code of ethics, the Ten Commandments.

What can there be in common between the practical advice of a Midianite and the timeless words of Revelation itself? There is an intended contrast here and it is an important one. The forms and structures of governance are not specifically Jewish. They are part of chochmah, the universal wisdom of humankind. Jews have known many forms of leadership: by Prophets, Elders, Judges and Kings; by the Nasi in Israel under Roman rule and the Resh Galuta in Babylon; by town councils (shiva tuvei ha-ir) and various forms of oligarchy; and by other structures up to and including the democratically elected Knesset. The forms of government are not eternal truths, nor are they exclusive to Israel. In fact, the Torah says about monarchy that a time will come when the people say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," – the only case in the entire Torah in which Israel are commanded (or permitted) to imitate other nations. There is nothing specifically Jewish about political structures.

What is specifically Jewish, however, is the principle of the covenant at Sinai, that Israel is the chosen people, the only nation whose sole ultimate

king and legislator is God Himself. "He has revealed His word to Jacob, His laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know His laws, Halleluyah." (Psalm 147:19-20) What the covenant at Sinai established for the first time was the moral limits of power.<sup>1</sup> All human authority is delegated authority, subject to the overarching moral imperatives of the Torah itself. This side of heaven there is no absolute power. That is what has always set Judaism apart from the empires of the ancient world and the secular nationalisms of the West. So Israel can learn practical politics from a Midianite but it must learn the limits of politics from God Himself.

Despite the contrast, however, there is one theme in common to both episodes, to Yitro and to the revelation at Sinai, namely the delegation, distribution and democratisation of leadership. Only God can rule alone.

The theme is introduced by Yitro. He arrives to visit his son-in-law and finds him leading alone. He says, "What you are doing is not good." (Ex. 18:17) This is one of only two instances in the whole Torah in which the words lo tov, "not good", appear. The other is in Genesis (2:18), where God says, "It is not good [lo tov] for man to be alone." We cannot lead alone. We cannot live alone. To be alone is not good.

Yitro proposes delegation: You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to Him. Teach them His decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as Judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. (Ex. 18:19-22)

This is a significant devolution. It means that among every thousand Israelites, there are 131 leaders (one head of a thousand, ten heads of a hundred, twenty heads of fifty and a hundred head of tens). One in every eight adult male Israelites was expected to undertake some form of leadership role.

<sup>1</sup> For the original illustration of this idea, please see Rabbi Sacks' comments on Shifrah and Puah in "Women as Leaders" (Shemot 5781).

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In the next chapter, prior to the revelation at Mount Sinai, God commands Moses to propose a covenant with the Israelites. In the course of this, God articulates what is in effect the mission statement of the Jewish people: You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.' (Ex. 19:4-6)

This is a very striking statement. Every nation had its priests. In the book of Genesis, we encounter Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, described as "a priest of the most high God." (Gen. 14:18) The story of Joseph mentions the Egyptian priests, whose land was not nationalised. (Gen. 47:22) Yitro was a Midianite priest. In the ancient world there was nothing distinctive about priesthood. Every nation had its priests and holy men. What was distinctive about Israel was that it was to become a nation every one of whose members was to be a priest; each of whose citizens was called on to be holy.

I vividly recall standing with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz zt"l in the General Assembly of the United Nations in August 2000 at a unique gathering of two thousand religious leaders representing all the major faiths in the world. I pointed out that even in that distinguished company we were different. We were almost the only religious leaders wearing suits. All the others wore robes of office. It is an almost universal phenomenon that priests and holy people wear distinctive garments to indicate that they are set apart (the core meaning of the word kadosh, "holy"). In post-biblical Judaism there were no robes of office because everyone was expected to be holy<sup>2</sup> (Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, called Jews "a nation of philosophers," reflecting the same idea.<sup>3</sup>).

Yet in what sense were Jews ever a Kingdom of Priests? The Kohanim were an elite within the nation, members of the tribe of Levi, descendants of Aaron the first High Priest. There never was a full democratisation of keter kehunah, the crown of priesthood.

Faced with this problem, the commentators offer two solutions. The word Kohanim, "Priests," may mean "princes" or "leaders" (Rashi, Rashbam). Or it may mean "servants" (Ibn Ezra, Ramban). But this is precisely the point. The Israelites were called on to be a nation of servant-leaders. They were the people called on, by virtue of the covenant, to accept responsibility not only for themselves and their families, but for the moral-spiritual state of the nation as a whole. This is the

<sup>2</sup> This idea reappeared in Protestant Christianity in the phrase "the priesthood of all believers," during the age of the Puritans, the Christians who took most seriously the principles of what they called the Old Testament.

<sup>3</sup> See Josephus, Against Apion 1:22.

principle that later became known as the idea that kol Yisrael arevin zeh ba-zeh, "All Israelites are responsible for one another." (Shavuot 39a) Jews were the people who did not leave leadership to a single individual, however holy or exalted, or to an elite. Instead, every one of them was expected to be both a prince and a servant; that is to say, every one of whom was called on to be a leader. Never was leadership more profoundly democratised.

That is what made Jews historically hard to lead. As Chaim Weizmann, first President of Israel, famously said, "I head a nation of a million presidents."

The Lord may be our shepherd, but no Jew was ever a sheep. At the same time, this is what led Jews to have an impact on the world out of all proportion to their numbers. Jews constitute only the tiniest fragment – one fifth of one per cent of the population of the world – but they make up an extraordinarily high percentage of leaders in any given field of human endeavour.

To be a Jew is to be called on to lead.<sup>4</sup> *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2021 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shall you work and do all acts of physical creativity; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord your God, on which you shall not do any act of physical creativity' (Ex. 20:8-10) Undoubtedly the greatest gift of the Jews to the world is our Bible, the 24 books from Genesis to Chronicles, the quintessential centerpiece of which is the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments.

If enlightened Western culture emerged from the twin influences of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian literatures, the "mother of human and humane morality" is the "Ten Utterances" (Aseret Hadibrot in Hebrew) expressed by an invisible and ineffable God from atop a desert mountain before a newly freed slave people, who adopted these ethical norms as the Declaration of Independence of their newly forming nation.

Indeed, in the past 3,500 years, no philosopher or theologian has come up with a more inclusive or trenchant moral code which says it better than the Divine Words uttered at Sinai: "Honor your father and your mother..." (basic gratitude to those who gave you life and nurture)

"You shall not murder."

"You shall not commit adultery."

<sup>4</sup> In the upcoming essay for parshat Kedoshim, we will delve further into the role of the follower in Judaism.

"You shall not steal."

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

"You shall not covet" (that which belongs to another).

Here, in very few words, is set down the basic inviolability of every human being; if society would only adhere to these principles, the world would become a Garden of Eden.

But I must ask two important questions. I have listed the last six commandments; the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," the prohibition of "working" on the Sabbath, with which I opened this commentary, doesn't seem to belong with the rest. What transgression against the integrity of another human being do I commit by opening up my business on Saturday morning? Moreover, if the essence of what was commanded at Sinai was principles of morality, why must the first three commands deal with God, the God who took us out of Egypt, the God who demands exclusivity of fealty, and the God whose name dare not be taken in vain? Is it not possible to be ethical or moral without necessarily believing in God?

Let us begin with the first of the "Ten Utterances," not so much a commandment as it seems to be almost a definition of God's "essence": "I am the Lord who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage," I am the Lord who insists that every human being be free! We must remember that the Book of Exodus emerges from the Book of Genesis, where God describes the creation of the world and creation of the human being. And what is remarkable and unique about the creation of the human is that he/she—unlike all other creatures of the universe—is created in God's image, is inspirited with the soul of Divine life, is endowed with a portion of essence from God on High (Gen. 1:27, 2:7).

This means further that the human being was created to have freedom of choices, to be empowered to do even that which God would not have wanted him to do (Seforno ad loc, and the story of the eating of the forbidden fruit). Yes, God charges the human to develop and take responsibility for the world, to perfect the imperfect world which God created (Gen. 2:15; Isa. 45:7) and God believes that the human, created after all in His image, will eventually succeed in doing that (Isa. 2; Mic. 4). But let no one dare enslave the human, whom God made to be free, and let no one dare to violate the human created in the Divine image (Gen. 9:7). Herein lies the force of these three "commands."

This Divine basis for human freedom and inviolability—for our biblical morality, if you will—is not at all self-evident. It was not only the Greek pagans who modeled the gods of Mount Olympus after humans, but it was also the Greek philosophers who accepted the right of the conqueror to acquire slaves,

the right of the victor to take the spoils, the justice of the powerful controlling the weak. But it was Moses and the later prophets who articulated the responsibility of the rich and powerful to care for the poor and the weak, it was Abraham who articulated "God's path of compassionate righteousness and moral justice," and it was the author of the Book of Job who reminded the Jewish master to remove the injustice of owning a gentile slave; after all, "did not the one who made the Jewish master in His belly also make the gentile slave, did not the womb of the same One prepare them both?" (Job 31:15 and Maimonides, Laws of Slaves, last law).

Now we can understand the majestic significance of the prohibition of working on the Sabbath; the Sabbath reminds us that God created the world, that God created the human being in His Divine Image, and that the human being is inviolate and free. Herein lies the ultimate value and equality of every human being, in both a moral as well as a political sense.

God demands that no totalitarian ruler may enslave his subject, may reduce him to slave labor seven days a week, may control his thoughts and beliefs.

God is our Ultimate Employer, who guarantees our ultimate freedom, who doesn't allow us to work on the seventh Sabbath day! This is why, when Moses repeats the Decalogue in the Book of Deuteronomy, he links the Sabbath rest not to the creation of the world but rather to our exodus from Egypt: "Observe the Sabbath day... in order that your male gentile servant and your female gentile servant may rest like you, so that you remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there..." (Deut. 5:12-15).

It is the necessity of Sabbath rest which precludes slavery and thereby ensures universal freedom! ©2021 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

One of the basic lessons learned from this week's Torah reading, though barely discussed by the commentators, is that there is no perfect system of justice if it involves human beings and judges. After the granting of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, our teacher Moshe allows himself to become the sole judge regarding disputes that arise in the camp of the Israelites. He is besieged by claimants and litigants from early morning until sunset. Naturally, anyone who had the ability to appear before such a judge as Moshe would wish to take advantage of that opportunity.

Though Moshe possesses supernatural wisdom and insight, he is known to be incorruptible, fair, equitable and decisive. What other qualities can one expect or hope for in a human judge? None. Nevertheless, as his father-in-law Yitro points out to

him, the judge may be as perfect as can be, but the judicial system that Moshe has instituted is far from perfection. Yitro warns that by being the sole judge and having everyone wait their turn to have their claims adjudicated by him alone, both Moshe and the people will eventually become exhausted and wither away. What is needed is a tiered system of judges, courts, police, and other officials of the judicial system that must be appointed and empowered.

This signifies the creation of a bureaucracy, with all the attendant fields that it contains and necessarily entails. But it is the only practical way of dealing with this issue of sustainability that will allow Moshe and the people of Israel to continue to function. In effect we are being taught that attempting to achieve perfection in this instance will lead to exhaustion and eventual destruction.

One of the great lessons of the Revelation at Sinai was and is a simple basic understanding of the true nature of human beings, both individually and in society. The Lord is perfection, while humans are doomed to operate within an imperfect and frustrating world. Sometimes better is the enemy of good, in the attempt to achieve perfection, and only leads to greater imperfection, frustration and even violence.

Moshe aspired to give every Jew who came before him a perfect answer, a judgment that would harmonize with ultimate truth and nobility. He realized that this could not be done through the establishment of a bureaucracy. Within that system, there would be many cooks in the kitchen, and power would be diffuse. Personal interests could govern all decisions, no matter how noble the intent of the persons involved. His father-in-law agreed with Moshe's goal, but Yitro told Moshe, based upon his own life experience as being the chief executive priest of Midian, that Moshe's goal was unachievable in this world.

In this world one can only deal with practicalities, and practicalities always spell imperfection, compromise and the possibility for error and wrong decisions. But that is the human condition, and one must operate within that condition and accept imperfection as one of the basic tenets of human life and society. ©2021 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**W**atching 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 down—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 change. Rather than dealing exclusively with major matters, Moshe tells Yitro that he will judge the most difficult (kasheh) cases. (Exodus 18:26).

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. (Zevachim 116a) 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, but those viewed as less important.

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. ©2021 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 LeMoshe MiSinai

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**T**he phrase "*Halacha LeMoshe MiSinai*" is used to refer to laws which were given directly by G-d to Moshe at Sinai, but which are not recorded in the written Torah. Rather, they were transmitted orally throughout the generations. These traditions are so

strong that the Rambam asserts that these laws are undisputed.

Why does it matter whether a law was orally transmitted or written down in the Torah? If an uncertainty arises about a biblical law, we follow the more stringent opinion (*safek de-oraita le-chumra*). In contrast, if an uncertainty arises about a rabbinic law, we follow the more lenient opinion. (*safek de-rabbanan le-kula*). What then is the law regarding doubt when dealing with *Halacha LeMoshe MiSinai*?

For example, all weights and measures (*shiurim*) of halachic significance are deemed *Halacha LeMoshe MiSinai*. (These include *kezayit*, *kebeitzah*, *amah*, *tefach*, and more). There are disagreements nowadays as to how these measurements translate into ounces and inches. (The *Chazon Ish* is famous for his relatively large *shiurim*, while Rav Chaim Naeh is famous for his relatively small *shiurim*.) The questions then are along these lines: How long must a *lulav* be? What volume of matzah must be eaten on *sefer* night?

Many (including Ramban and Rivash) understand the Rambam as maintaining that when there is uncertainty regarding a *Halacha LeMoshe MiSinai*, we rule leniently. However, both the Ramban and the Rivash themselves say that we should rule stringently.

This interpretation of the Rambam may be based on the following. The Rambam believes that even when there is an uncertainty relating to a Torah law, the requirement to be stringent is only a rabbinic one. The Rabbis did not extend this stringency to the category of *Halacha LeMoshe MiSinai*. If this is correct, it would seem that in his opinion, we can be lenient when it comes to the length of the *lulav* (even though on the first day of Sukkot, using the *lulav* is biblically mandated).

We should note, however, that there is a difficulty with this interpretation. The Rambam states in his commentary on the Mishnah (*Mikva'ot* 6:6) that if a mitzva is biblical, and the doubt pertains only to its *shiur*, one should be stringent. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

**RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

## Migdal Ohr

"And he said to Moshe, "I am your father-in-law, Yisro, come to you, and your wife, and her two sons with her." (Shmos 18:6) When Moshe went to Egypt to take out the Children of Israel, he left his family behind in Midian, at his father-in-law's home. Now that the Jews had been saved, and were traveling to The Promised Land, Yisro, who had been impressed by Hashem's truth, came to Moshe.

It is unusual for a person to come to someone he knows and introduce himself, especially to one so close as his own son-in-law. Therefore, the commentaries explain that Yisro had actually written a

note to Moshe, which was delivered by a messenger. In it, he identified himself and asked for an audience with Moshe.

The Mechilta explains the unusual listing of Moshe's family. Yisro wanted to meet with Moshe. He felt that perhaps Moshe would not meet with him simply because he wanted an audience. He therefore mentioned his role as father-in-law, one that carries with it a certain amount of respect and deference.

If Moshe would not meet with him on his own account, then he would perhaps come out on account of his wife. If Moshe would not come out for his wife, perhaps he would come out for his two sons, or on account of his wife AND the two sons with her. Now that Moshe was a VIP, Yisro was unsure of how to get to see him.

Moshe's response teaches us a fundamental lesson about value in Judaism. Because each person has limitless potential, each person is valuable and important. Even if they will not do great things, perhaps one of their children or descendants will, and they must be acknowledged for that. Moshe had demonstrated this previously when he "looked this way and that" before he killed the Mitzri, and saw that no good would ever come of this man or his descendants.

Therefore, "Moshe went out to greet his father-in-law Yisro," making sure that Yisro knew that he was worth Moshe's time and attention. This lesson hit home, as Yisro recognized the greatness of Hashem. He understood that Hashem does not merely sit in Heaven and cast lightning bolts. Rather, He is intimately involved in the life and growth of each of His creations. This is how Hashem looks at the world and Moshe emulated Him.

We, too, would do well to recognize the potential and worth of everyone we encounter, and treat them with the respect and deference they deserve as a child of the Al-mighty and a potential follower in His footsteps.

R' Leib Chasman, famed mussar giant of the Chevron Yeshiva in Jerusalem in the early twentieth century, was speaking to a boy who had come to him asking how to improve his service of Hashem. After some discussion, R' Leib asked the bochur to go to the Rebbetzin in the kitchen and ask her for a cup of tea for him. The boy jumped up to do as he was asked.

As he did, R' Leib grabbed his arm. "Wait! Why did you jump up so quickly?" The boy hesitated, thought a moment, and then replied, "I guess I ran because I have the opportunity to serve a Talmid Chacham!"

"Oy," sighed R' Leib. "It is exactly as I thought. A young man is presented with the chance to improve his Avodas Hashem by doing a true kindness for another and bringing a feeble old man a cup of tea. However, instead of focusing on doing kindness for its own sake, he chooses to focus on other considerations

*like serving Torah scholars, which in my case is even questionable.” © 2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr*

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## The Importance of a Blessing

**O**ur parasha begins with the reunion between Moshe and his father-in-law, Yitro, who returns to Moshe his wife and his two sons. Moshe had sent them to Yitro as he approached Mitzrayim (Egypt) so that they would not be influenced by the evil of Mitzrayim. There is an opinion that he actually brought them into Mitzrayim for a short distance and then returned them so that they would technically have been part of the exile, as this experience was necessary for receiving the Torah at Har Sinai. Our Rabbis debate whether Yitro rejoined Moshe before the receiving of the Torah, or after it?

When Yitro meets Moshe the Torah tells us, “And Yitro rejoiced over all the goodness which Hashem had had done for Israel, that He had delivered them out of the hand of Egypt. And Yitro said, ‘Blessed be Hashem, Who delivered you from the hand of Mitzrayim and from the hand of Par’oh, and Who delivered the people from under the hand of Mitzrayim. Now I have recognized that Hashem is greater than all the gods, for in that thing in which they had schemed against them.’ Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe took an olah offering and peace offerings for Elokim, and Aharon and the elders of Yisrael came to eat bread with the father-in-law of Moshe before Elokim.”

It is not entirely clear why Yitro rejoiced. Mizrachi tells us that the normal word that is used in this context would have been a form of the word samei’ach, he was happy, instead of vayichad. The Gemara Sanhedrin (94a) brings a dispute between Rav and Shmu’el based on the word vayichad. Rav interprets the word vayichad to mean “he caused a sharp blade to be drawn over his flesh”, namely he circumcised himself and converted to the belief in Hashem. Shmu’el interprets the word vayichad to mean “his flesh became covered with goose bumps”, namely it upset him to hear of the destruction of Egypt. Rav explained Shmu’el’s interpretation to say that one should be careful about insulting a foreign, idolatrous nation in the presence of a convert who had once believed in idols. The Or HaChaim says that the goose bumps were signs of excitement and joy. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch believed that it bothered Yitro that Egypt had been totally destroyed even though overall he rejoiced. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin says that perhaps Yitro was not completely joyous at the news of the destruction of Mitzrayim. He tells us that there are three examples of joy at the going out from Egypt: (1) Moshe and the B’nei Yisrael sing the Shira after crossing the Yam Suf because their entire souls were

overjoyed and the song burst forth, (2) Miriam and the women added the tambourines and the lyres to this joy to raise the level of that spontaneous song, and (3) the blessing of Yitro, which may have been less overwhelming in its joy.

It is very important to note that Yitro uses the word baruch (blessed) in his thanks to Hashem. The Gemara B’rachot (54a) explains that when seeing the place of a miracle or the people for whom this miracle was brought one needs to recite a blessing. We also learn that a tanna taught in the name of Rav Pappias that Moshe and the B’nei Yisrael are reprimanded for not reciting a blessing upon the miracles which Yitro responded to: “it is to the discredit of Moshe and the sixty myriads that they did not recite a b’racha.” The Torah Temimah explains that the Shirat Hayam was a spontaneous song of praise to Hashem and does not qualify then as a b’racha of thanks. The Mei’am Lo’eiz argues that the b’racha was said because of the miracle which Hashem performed for Moshe and Aharon, and only later for the miracle that He performed for the people. Moshe and Aharon were fortunate that Par’oh did not kill them during the plagues so that the reason for those plagues would disappear. Only then did Yitro thank Hashem for the miracle of extracting the B’nei Yisrael from Egypt.

But what is so important about the recitation of a b’racha as opposed to a song of thanks? According to Hirsch, Yitro finally grasped the difference between Hashem and the other gods for whom he had recited praise. Yitro was first called Kohein Midyan at the beginning of Sh’mot. The Midrash tells us that there was not a single act of idolatry that Yitro had not performed in his search for a Superior Being. Hearing from Moshe “revealed Hashem to him not only as an All-Highest power, but as Hashem, Who sees the inner thoughts of men, nations and princes, and by His mode of government teaches and educates them.” The word baruch was “the immediate response to his becoming conscious of this proximity of a god, who examines and weighs up human beings. For by uttering baruch, a man examines his giving up all his completely free powers of action to do solely that which will please and give satisfaction to Hashem.” This is that newfound knowledge that causes Yitro to proclaim atah yadati, now I know.

This is the week in which we celebrated Tu B’Shvat, the New Year of the Trees. There is a custom to recite b’rachot over the fruits of Yisrael on this day. We must understand what that b’racha indicates about our relationship with Hashem. Whether we recite a b’racha over the food that we eat or when witnessing a daily miracle or as part of our prayers, we are acknowledging that Hashem is the Provider of all that we have and all that is. It is a verification of that understanding and an acknowledgement of that truth. But it is not enough for us to accept Hashem’s gifts

without being willing to fulfill our responsibility towards Hashem. When we make a b'racha, we understand that we must then fulfill Hashem's laws and treat Hashem in the way prescribed within His Torah. Our recitation carries with it our need to perform His mitzvot and steep ourselves in the study of that Torah which will guide our paths. The more we learn of Hashem, the easier it is to emulate Him and His actions to make this a more perfect world.

May we learn to praise Hashem through the special quality of our b'rachot. May we continue to recite b'rachot daily, and may that recitation improve our understanding of Hashem and His special relationship with the world. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

### **LeLamed Weekly Dvar**

**P**arshat 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. ©2012 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

#### **RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

### **Haftorah**

**T**his week's haftorah reveals to us the unlimited potential of the Jewish soul. The prophet Yeshaya shares with us his astounding vision of Hashem's throne of glory. He says, "Fiery angels stand before Hashem in service... They call to one another and say in unison, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is Hashem the master of the legions whose glory fills the entire world'" (6:2,3) Yeshaya saw one of the loftiest visions ever to be seen by man and responded in the following manner, "Woe to me for I remained silent because I am a man of impure lips...and my eyes beheld the Divine

Presence itself." (6:5) This verse displays Yeshaya's humble response to his awesome experience feeling unworthy of catching the faintest glimpse of Hashem's magnificent glory. Yet, Yeshaya was troubled by his personal silence during those lofty moments unable to participate in the angels' glorious praise. (see Radak ad loc) He attributed this to his personal imperfection and inadequacy. Apparently, his speech was impure and sinful and rendered him unworthy of uttering a sound in Hashem's holy presence.

The vision continued and Hashem commanded one of His fiery angels to deliver Yeshaya a burning coal. Yeshaya said, "And with tongs the angel removed the coal from the altar, touched my mouth and said...'Your sin is removed and your error forgiven.'" (6:6,7) Immediately following this, Hashem asked, "Whom shall I send?" and Yeshaya responded and said, "Here I am; send me." (6:8) Yeshaya's awesome vision together with his humble response initiated him into prophecy. After this initial cleansing, he became worthy of transmitting Hashem's penetrating message to His people. In addition, Yeshaya's cleansing process allowed him to join the ranks of the angels and converse with Hashem in His actual presence. (Radak ad loc)

This intriguing incident suggests the unthinkable, that man can rise to the lofty status of Heavenly beings. Although Yeshaya was privy to the inner most levels of spirituality he sensed his mortality and felt unworthy of associating with such elevated levels of holiness. Alas, he was a human being and not a spiritual entity. He identified with impurity and sin and didn't deserve to see such revelations or sing Heavenly praises. Hashem revealed Yeshaya that he had the potential and after minor refinement he would personally attain those lofty levels. Interestingly, when we reflect upon this incident we tend to side with Yeshaya. We also wonder, "What position does an impure mortal occupy amongst Heavenly angels?" How could man even consider participating in Heavenly praise? Although angels reflect Hashem's glory what can be said about man?! The answer to these is found in the essential discussion of mortality between Hashem and the angels. The Sages relate that the angels complained to Hashem when He chose to share His precious Torah with His people. They argued, "Your glory (Your Torah) should remain among the Heavenly beings. They are holy and Your Torah is holy, they are pure and Your Torah is pure and they are everlasting and Your Torah is also." Hashem responded that the Torah could not remain amongst them because they are perfect spiritual beings with no mortality, impurity or illness. Hashem's true glory would ultimately come from man plagued by impurity and mortality. (Midrash Shochar Tov 8) This response also troubles us because, in truth, we side with the angels. Isn't perfect fulfillment of Hashem's will the greatest tribute to His

honor? What could be more glorious than the angels' purest praises? How could mortality and impurity serve as positive factors in Hashem's ultimate glory?

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

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

rise above the angels and display, through his total subservience, Hashem's greatest honor.

This lesson has great bearing on our times. Chafetz Chaim raises the classic concern how the latest generations consider meriting the advent of Mashiach? If previous generations who were undoubtedly more pious than ours did not merit Mashiach how could our shameful generation merit him? Chafetz Chaim answers that, on the contrary, no generation ever qualified for Mashiach as much as ours. He explains that in previous times Mitzva observance was, basically, a foregone conclusion. It did not require endless self sacrifice and had therefore had relatively limited value. In our days, however, foreign influences are so rampant that even basic Mitzva observance requires tremendous devotion and sacrifice. In present times, we may add, morality has fallen so low that attaining any level of purity and self negation is a tremendous accomplishment. In this light every mitzva has such great value that we, above all, display Hashem's greatest glory. Hashem undoubtedly tells His angels, "Look at My people who manage to remain moral and pure even in their corrupt and free thinking environment." "Can anyone bring Me greater glory than them?!" © 2021 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

#### SHLOMO KATZZ

### Hama'ayan

"I am Hashem, your Elokim..." (20:2) R' Yaakov ben Asher z"l (1269-1343; the "Ba'al Ha'turim") writes: This is a mitzvat aseh / affirmative commandment that requires us to know and believe that there is a G-d, that He exists and always existed, that everything that exists comes from Him, that He is our Elokim, and that we are obligated to serve Him. The verse continues, "Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt," because that fact is evidence of His existence and His will, for He took us from there with yedi'ah / knowledge of what is happening in our world and with hashgachah / providence. The Exodus also is proof of Creation, because, if the world had existed forever, it necessarily would be unchanging. And, it is proof of His ability to do whatever He pleases, which, in turn, is proof of His Uniqueness. (Peirush Ha'Tur Ha'Aroch) © 2016 S. Katz & torah.org

