

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

The Ten Commandments are the most famous religious and moral code in history. Until recently they adorned American courtrooms. They still adorn most synagogue arks. Rembrandt gave them their classic artistic expression in his portrait of Moses, about to break the tablets on seeing the Golden Calf. John Rogers Herbert's massive painting of Moses bringing down the tablets of law dominates the main committee room of the House of Lords. The twin tablets with their ten commands are the enduring symbol of eternal law under the sovereignty of God.

It is worth remembering, of course, that the "ten commandments" are not Ten Commandments. The Torah calls them *asseret hadevarim* (Ex. 34:28), and tradition terms them *asseret hadibrot*, meaning the "ten words" or "ten utterances." We can understand this better in the light of documentary discoveries in the twentieth century, especially Hittite covenants or "suzerainty treaties" dating back to 1400-1200 BCE, that is, around the time of Moses and the Exodus. These treaties often contained a twofold statement of the laws laid down in the treaty, first in general outline, then in specific detail. That is precisely the relationship between the "ten utterances" and the detailed commands of parshat Mishpatim (Ex. 22-23). The former are the general outline, the basic principles of the law.

Usually they are portrayed, graphically and substantively, as two sets of five, the first dealing with relationships between us and God (including honouring our parents since they, like God, brought us into being), the second with the relations between us and our fellow humans.

However, it also makes sense to see them as three groups of three. The first three (one God, no other God, do not take God's name in vain) are about God, the Author and Authority of the laws. The second set (keep Shabbat, honour parents, do not murder) are about createdness. Shabbat reminds us of the birth of the

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universe. Our parents brought us into being. Murder is forbidden because we are all created in God's image (Gen. 9:6). The third three (don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness) are about the basic institutions of society: the sanctity of marriage, the integrity of private property, and the administration of justice. Lose any of these and freedom begins to crumble.

This structure serves to emphasise what a strange command the tenth is: "Do not be envious of your neighbour's house. Do not be envious of your neighbour's wife, his slave, his maid, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that is your neighbour's." At least on the surface this is different from all the other rules, which involve speech or action.

(To be sure, Maimonides held that the first command is to believe in God. Halachot Gedolot as understood by Nachmanides, however, disagreed and maintained that the verse "I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt" is not a command but a prelude to the commands.)

Envy, covetousness, desiring what someone else has, is an emotion, not a thought, a word, or a deed. And surely we can't help our emotions. They used to be called the "passions," precisely because we are passive in relation to them. So how can envy be forbidden at all? Surely it only makes sense to command or forbid matters that are within our control. In any case, why should the occasional spasm of envy matter if it does not lead to anything harmful to other people?

Here, it seems to me, the Torah is conveying a series of fundamental truths we forget at our peril. First, as we have been reminded by cognitive behavioural therapy, what we believe affects what we feel.

(This has long been part of Jewish thought. It is at the heart of Chabad philosophy as set out in Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi's masterpiece, *Tanya*. Likewise, Ibn Ezra in his commentary to this verse says that we only covet what we feel to be within our reach. We do not envy those we know we could never become.)

Narcissists, for instance, are quick to take offence because they think other people are talking about or "dissing" (disrespecting) them, whereas often other people aren't interested in us at all. Their belief is false, but that does not stop them feeling angry and resentful.

Second, envy is one of the prime drivers of violence in society. It is what led Iago to mislead Othello

with tragic consequences. Closer to home, it is what led Cain to murder Abel. It is what led Abraham and then Isaac to fear for their lives when famine forced them temporarily to leave home. They believed that, married as they were to attractive women, the local rulers would kill them so that they could take their wives into their harem.

Most poignantly, envy lay at the heart of the hatred of the brothers for Joseph. They resented his special treatment at the hands of their father, the richly embroidered cloak he wore, and his dreams of becoming the ruler of them all. That is what led them to contemplate killing him and eventually to sell him as a slave.

Rene Girard, in his classic *Violence and the Sacred*, says that the most basic cause of violence is mimetic desire, that is, the desire to have what someone else has, which is ultimately the desire to be what someone else is. Envy can lead to breaking many of the other commands: it can move people to adultery, theft, false testimony, and even murder.

Jews have especial reason to fear envy. It surely played a part in the existence of antisemitism throughout the centuries. Non-Jews envied Jews their ability to prosper in adversity - the strange phenomenon we noted in parshat Shemot that "the more they afflicted them the more they grew and the more they spread." They also and especially envied them their sense of chosenness (despite the fact that virtually every other nation in history has seen itself as chosen). It is absolutely essential that we, as Jews, should conduct ourselves with an extra measure of humility and modesty.

So the prohibition of envy is not odd at all. It is the most basic force undermining the social harmony and order that are the aim of the Ten Commandments as a whole. Not only though do they forbid it; they also help us rise above it. It is precisely the first three commands, reminding us of God's presence in history and our lives, and the second three, reminding us of our createdness, that help us rise above envy.

We are here because God wanted us to be. We have what God wanted us to have. Why then should we seek what others have? If what matters most in our lives is how we appear in the eyes of God, why should we want anything else merely because someone else has it? It is when we stop defining ourselves in relation to God and start defining ourselves in relation to other people that competition, strife, covetousness, and envy enter our minds, and they lead only to unhappiness.

If your new car makes me envious, I may be motivated to buy a more expensive model that I never needed in the first place, which will give me satisfaction for a few days until I discover another neighbour who has an even more costly vehicle, and so it goes. Should I succeed in satisfying my own envy, I will do so only at the cost of provoking yours, in a cycle of conspicuous consumption that has no natural end. Hence the bumper sticker: "He who has the most toys when he dies, wins."

The operative word here is "toys", for this is the ethic of the kindergarten, and it should have no place in a mature life.

The antidote to envy is gratitude. "Who is rich?" asked Ben Zoma, and replied, "One who rejoices in what he has." There is a beautiful Jewish practice that, performed daily, is life-transforming. The first words we say on waking are *Modeh ani lefanecha*, "I thank You, living and eternal King." We thank before we think.

Judaism is gratitude with attitude. Cured of letting other people's happiness diminish our own, we release a wave of positive energy allowing us to celebrate what we have instead of thinking about what other people have, and to be what we are instead of wanting to be what we are not. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly supported by the *Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"The Lord descended on Mount Sinai... and Moses went up... And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down'..." (Exodus 19:21) The verses immediately preceding the Decalogue Revelation at Sinai are curious, to say the least. God and Moses enter into a dialogue which appears to be a discussion between two deaf individuals, as it were: "The Lord summoned Moses to the mountain peak, and Moses went up. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down' and bear testimony to the people that they must not break the boundary towards God to see Him..." [that is, the people may not go up close to God. Even] the priest Kohanim, who [usually] come near to the Lord, must separate themselves lest the Lord wreak destruction amongst them. And Moses said to the Lord, 'The people cannot go up to Mt. Sinai; you [God] bore testimony against them, making the mountain off limits... And the Lord said [to Moses], 'Go down'. You can then [later] come [back] up along with Aaron [See 24:12, after the Decalogue is given to the nation]... And Moses went down to the nation" (Exodus 19:20-25).

How can we understand such repetitious dialogue in which God tells Moses to come up in order to hear that he must go down? Moses argues that the people cannot come up, God once again tells Moses to go down, and Moses finally goes down? And why is this the most fitting introduction to the Decalogue Revelation?

I would suggest that this dialogue is indeed setting the stage for the essential purpose of Torah. It is expressing the unique message of Torah, that which distinguishes Judaism from most other religious ideologies and even that which distinguishes Jewish philosophy from the Neo-Platonism of much of Western thought.

My revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik ztz"l, in his magnum opus *Halakhic Man*, distinguishes between three prototypical intellectual leaders: Scientific Man (Ish hada'at), for whom the only universe is the observable material world in which he finds himself; Religious Man (Ish ha'dat), who escapes from this material world of transiency and illusion, and whose real universe is in the spiritual, supernal domain of the Divine; and Halakhic Man (Ish ha'halakhah), who sees the material world as his universe of dialogue and concern, but who is dissatisfied with the world as it is. He brings to this world an eternal and transcendent Torah Guide which must shape and perfect it in accord with the supernal Divine will.

The ish ha'halakha provides the third and most acceptable perspective, which expresses the mission of Israel and the purpose of Torah: to perfect the world in the Kingship of the Divine (Aleynu Prayer).

Let us now return to the Biblical dialogue between God and Moses. God is about to provide Israel (and the world) with His Revelation. Moses, initially the prototypical "Religious Man", understands that in order to receive the Divine Revelation, one must come close to the Divine, one must divest oneself as much as possible from one's physical and material external trappings, one must at least climb to the top of the mountain.

"No", says God, "this Revelation is meant for the material world, this Revelation is not limited to the intellectual and mystical elite; in this Revelation, now to all of Israel and eventually to the entire world ("Al Ken Nekaveh," the second paragraph of the Aleynu Prayer), the people are not expected to go up to God; in this Revelation, God and His Torah will come down to the people, will come down – and hopefully suffuse, re-shape and perfect – the entire material world".

Moses doesn't quite understand. He is perplexed by the fact that the people have been forbidden from climbing to the top of the mountain to receive the Revelation. But God patiently explains that just as He (as it were) "descended upon Mt. Sinai," (19:20), so must he (Moses) descend to the bottom of the mountain. And so the dialogue ends, "And Moses descended to the nation and spoke unto them" (19:25).

And so the Talmud records that when Moses later ascends heavenwards to receive the entire Revelation of the 613 Commandments, (Ex 24:12), the angels are loathe to release their precious treasure to a mortal human being. God instructs Moses to explain to them that they were never enslaved in Egypt. that they have no desire for adultery, that they have no parents whom they must honor (B.T. Shabbat 88b). And so our Sages teach that the Holy One Blessed be He has in this world only the "four cubits of Halakhah": the laws of kashrut bring God into the kitchen and dining room, the laws of family purity bring God into the bedroom; the laws of business bring God into the work-place; the laws of

interpersonal relationships bring God into all political forums.

Our Torah is meant to perfect and sanctify every aspect of our material world. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It is well known that there is a difference of opinion as to whether Yitro's arrival in the camp of Israel in the desert occurred before or after the revelation and granting of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Even if we say that Yitro arrived before the momentous event of Mount Sinai and that the Torah is recording events in a chronological manner, it still is difficult for us to understand.

Why is this most important event in Jewish history as outlined for us in the Torah, be preceded by a rather mundane description of Yitro's arrival and reception in the camp of Israel? Would it not be more effective to highlight the revelation at Sinai immediately at the beginning of the parsha? And this appears to be especially true since the parsha goes into great detail and some length in describing the circumstances and experience of the revelation at Sinai.

Why is there such an apparent emphasis on Yitro and his arrival? And this question certainly is even more difficult if we adopt the opinion that the revelation at Sinai occurred before the arrival of Yitro. It almost seems that by recording for us the entire story of the arrival of Yitro the Torah somehow diminishes, in emphasis and focus, the narrative regarding the revelation at Sinai itself.

If there ever was a stand-alone event in Jewish and in world history it certainly would be the moment of the revelation and granting of the Torah at Mount Sinai. So what is the story of Yitro doing being involved in the immortal narrative of the most seminal event in human history?

We are all aware of the great dictum of the Talmud that proper worldly behavior precedes the Torah itself. The order of the subjects in this week's parsha reinforces this idea clearly and cogently. The Torah records for us the politeness, courtesy, respect and sensitivity extended to Yitro by Moshe and Aaron and the Elders of Israel and all of the Jewish people when he arrived in their midst.

The Torah indulges in great detail in describing the reception that Yitro received. Simple courtesy extended to a stranger is the basis of the Jewish value system. It is what separated Abraham from Sodom. The Ten Commandments and in fact the entire Torah itself cannot be understood or appreciated without a grounding in this basic idea of the worth of the human being and of the necessity to honor, welcome and help of one another.

That is why we are not to be murderers, robbers, adulterers, lying witnesses or people of greed and

avarice. The Talmud places great emphasis on the small things in life that make for a wholesome society. It records for us in great solemnity that one of the great virtues of the leading scholars of Torah of its day was that they greeted everyone, no matter who that person was, in pleasantness.

This value is emphasized over and over again in the writings of the great men of Israel, throughout the generations. Therefore the welcome to Yitro must perforce precede the law of the Torah itself for it is the value upon which the Torah itself is based. ©2023 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

Right at the outset of the Aseret Hadibrot or 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). This statement clearly differs from the others, each of which is written as a commandment, e.g., “Honor your father and mother” (20:12) or “Thou shalt not steal” (20:13). Is belief in God a commandment?

Maimonides argues that belief is a commandment. Indeed, 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 (Sefer Hamitzvot, positive commandment 1).

Commentators like Rashi (quoting the Midrash Mechilta d'Rashbi) disagree. After all, belief is a feeling, and, as I first heard at a Marriage Encounter seminar, “Feelings are neither right nor wrong, they just are.” In Rashi’s view, “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 Moses meets God at the sneh (burning bush). There, God tells Moses 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 teaches 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” (Berachot 9b).

Similarly, 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, the Jews will come to know Him through these experiences. 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 too belief in God is an experiential reality.

Perhaps the most powerful understanding of

God emerges when assessing how, against all odds, we as a people have endured. After all, as some historians have noted, a rational assessment of the forces of history would conclude that Judaism today should be a fossil. We would respond that Jewish history is not logical or rational; the improbability and vast breadth of Jewish history points to the existence of God.

The Egypt experience can serve as a prototype of our history. After all, Mitzrayim doesn’t only mean Egypt. The word derives from the root tzarah (suffering) or tzar (distress). Its plural form suggests that after the Exodus, there would be other Egypts in history (inquisitions, pogroms, and more) that we would miraculously survive.

Jewish ritual can be seen as a reenactment of Jewish history. On Passover, for example, we do not only recall the Exodus; we simulate and reenact the event. The truth is, as I first heard formulated by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the 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, “the Lord Who took us out of Egypt.” ©2023 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Yisro rejoiced over all the good Hashem did for Israel; that He saved him from the hand of Egypt.” (Shmos 18:9) The word “vayichad” is an expression of happiness, but it also has a more granular interpretation. We learn that Yisro literally had “goosebumps,” of excitement. Rashi says it was due to the destruction of Egypt, and learns from here that a convert is sensitive to his origins for ten generations. Others, like the Ohr HaChaim, say the goosebumps were from hearing the good things that happened to the Jews, much as one would get excited from some sudden piece of great news.

How could Rashi say Yisro’s response was due to the Egyptians suffering, when the simple meaning is that Yisro was happy? Further, we know Yisro heard of the miracles and came to Moshe. Now, Moshe recounted them again, and we hear of Yisro’s reaction, which included a physical response. What is noteworthy about that for us for all time?

There is a famous Sifra. Rabbi Akiva says: “V’ahavta l’rayacha kamocho – you shall love your fellow as yourself, zeh klal gadol baTorah – this is a great principle of the Torah.” The Sefer HaChinuch 243:1 says, “This is a great principle of Torah because one who loves his fellow as his own soul will not steal from him, nor take his wife, nor cause him pain with words or money, nor move his boundary, etc.” In other words, a key component to fulfilling the Torah is to care deeply

about others, and to envision them as ourselves.

The Torah wants us to know that Yisro was overcome with personal emotion. Not because it happened to him, but because he empathized with those to whom it happened. When he heard the miracles the Jews merited, he was so thrilled for them that he himself got goosebumps. At the same time, when he heard of the misfortune of the Egyptians, though they got what they deserved, his skin crawled in anguish.

The Torah says Yisro heard what "Elokim," (G-d's name of judgment) did to Israel, and here, he rejoiced at what "Hashem" (G-d's name of mercy) did for them. Moshe explained to Yisro how each of the things the Egyptians experienced was to atone for their previous actions. Now he rejoiced over what he had previously been upset about.

The bottom line is that we learn from Yisro to feel for others and to be happy for them. Others' success does not detract from our own, and the ability to want FOR them what we want for ourselves, (See Ramban on V'ahavta) is a tremendous tool for successful life as a Jew. No wonder, then, that the Torah is given in the parsha named for Yisro.

A rich businessman came to the Chasam Sofer crying that while he was once one of the most successful traders in the city, a series of bad dealings has wiped him out. He requested advice and a bracha from the Tzaddik. The Chasam Sofer said he'd heard about his terrible plight, but also knew the man had a brother living in poverty whom he had not helped.

"Please forgive me," said the man, "but right now I am not in any position to help. If Hashem helps me get back on my feet, I promise I will help my brother."

The Chasam Sofer told him, "Hashem says to Moshe (VaEirah 6:5), 'V'Gam Ani Shamati Es Naakas Bnei Yisrael; I have also heard the groaning of the B'nei Yisrael.' Who else heard the cries of Bnei Yisrael that Hashem says He has 'also' heard? The answer must be, that despite the terrible ordeal each Jew in Egypt was going through, he still managed to feel the pain of his fellow Yid and tried to alleviate it in some way." Hashem said, "B'zchus each person hearing the cries of his friend, I too will listen to each one's own tears and I will redeem them."

"Despite your difficult predicament," said the Chasam Sofer, "go help your brother right now in any way you can, and in this merit, Hashem will rescue you from your troubles." © 2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Deriving Laws from Pre-Sinaitic Sources

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"**A**nthing we prohibit or practice today is only because of the commandments which G-d gave to Moshe Rabbeinu...." We do not

undergo circumcision just because Avraham Avinu circumcised himself and the members of his household, but rather because G-d commanded us through Moshe to circumcise our sons just as Avraham circumcised his sons (Rambam, *Peirush Ha-Mishnayot, Chullin*). The Torah was given at Sinai, and Jewish law was established then. Whatever our forefathers did, they did of their own volition and not because they were given a Torah mitzva.

As a result, even though G-d said to Avraham, "Your name shall be Avraham" (*Bereishit* 17:5) and our Sages derive from this that anyone who calls Avraham by his former name Avram is transgressing a positive commandment, such a mitzva is not included in the list of the 248 positive commandments. This is because Avraham's story took place before the Torah was given at Sinai.

This principle, however, presents us with numerous difficulties. How is it that our Sages derive that one must be quick to perform a mitzva from the episode of Avraham arising early in the morning to fulfill the directive of G-d to sacrifice his son Yitzchak? How did our Sages learn from Lavan that we do not mingle *semachot*? (See the first essay in Parshat Vayetze.) How could our Sages derive the requirement of using a knife to slaughter an animal from the story of the sacrifice of Yitzchak, where the Torah says, "And he took the knife to sacrifice his son" (*Bereishit* 22:10)? There are many more examples.

A number of solutions have been proposed:

1. We do not actually derive *mitzvot* from stories about our forefathers. We do, however, derive details of how to fulfill them.

2. The only types of laws we derive from pre-Sinaitic times are those that are logical and have clear reasons behind them. We do not derive laws which are simply divine decrees (*gezeirat ha-katuv*) from this material.

3. If we have no other way to derive a law, and it does not appear among the laws given at or after Sinai, we may derive the law from material that appears before the giving of the Torah.

4. We derive the law from pre-Sinaitic sources only in cases where we can explain why this specific mitzva went into effect even before the giving of the Torah.

5. We can use pre-Sinaitic material to clarify words and other details of laws given at Sinai. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

When Was the Reunion?

A major discussion among the Rabbis concerning Parashat Yitro involves the timing of Yitro's reunion with Moshe. Moshe had lived with Yitro after he married Yitro's daughter, but he left to redeem the B'nei Yisrael from Egypt. The Torah tells us that Yitro heard

of the great things which Hashem had done for the B'nei Yisrael, but it does not tell us which great things. Those that wish to say that this reunion occurred prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments on Har Sinai say that this is speaking about the splitting of the Red Sea, the ten plagues in Egypt, and the battle with Amalek. Those that wish to say that this reunion occurred after the giving of the Ten Commandments believe that the "great things" include the Revelation on Har Sinai. This latter group justifies its opinion based on the next words of the Torah.

When Yitro met Moshe the Torah tells us, "And Yitro rejoiced over all the goodness which Hashem 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 Egypt and from the hand of Par'oh, Who delivered the people from under the hand of Egypt. 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."

Here, Yitro advised Moshe on the lower and upper court system to alleviate the bottleneck at Moshe's tent. They argue that this could come only after Moshe was given the body of Jewish Law at Har Sinai. The Torah tells us, "And it was on the next day that Moshe sat to judge the people and the people stood by Moshe from morning until night. And the father-in-law of Moshe saw all that he did to the people and he said, 'What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you sit alone with all the people standing by you from morning until evening?' And Moshe said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to seek Hashem. When they have a matter, one comes to me, and I judge between a man and his fellow, and I make known the statutes of Elokim and His Laws.' And Moshe's father-in-law said to him, 'The thing that you do is not good. You will surely become weary, you and the people with you, because the matter is heavier than you, you will not be able to do it alone.'"

Those who say that Yitro came after the Revelation at Har Sinai explain that the Laws given at Sinai were the basis of the people's need to consult Moshe at his tent. Since this passage occurs before the Revelation, these commentators support the principal of "ein mukdam u'm'uchar baTorah, there is no chronological order to the passages of the Torah." Their argument clearly justifies making use of this concept. Those commentators who either do not accept this principal or do not wish to apply it in this case are left with the question of which laws and statutes was Moshe elucidating prior to the Revelation where the body of the Torah Laws were given.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin supports those who say that this reunion took place prior to Har Sinai. He

explains that there were certain laws that were given earlier than Sinai. At Mara, just after the crossing of the Yam Suf, we are told, "there He placed for him statute and judgment." That is a clear indication that there were some laws and statutes that were given prior to Har Sinai because they were necessary immediately. These were the laws that Moshe adjudicated before Har Sinai. The Rashbam explains these statutes and judgments as a "quid pro quo." Hashem withheld water from the people until He sweetened the bitter waters and eventually produced water from Moshe striking a rock. Hashem made clear to the people that He would see to their needs and would demand that they observe His statutes and judgments. The Rashbam compares the lack of water to drink for the B'nei Yisrael to the plague of Blood, during which the Egyptians were left without water to drink. The Rashbam explains that this "quid pro quo" is the pasuk, "If you will listen diligently to the voice of Hashem, your Elokim, and you will do what is just in His eyes, and you will give ear to His commandments and observe all His statutes, then any of the diseases (plagues) that I have placed upon Egypt, I will not place upon you, for I am Hashem, your Healer."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch understands the passage about the people waiting outside of Moshe's tent as a description of daily life for the B'nei Yisrael. Since their days were not spent laboring, they were free to study Torah and to understand the world around them through Hashem's laws. The manna provided food for their families, their water was supplied to them, and their clothing did not wear out. Any questions which developed was brought to Moshe as it says, "because the people come to me to seek Elokim." Hirsch views Moshe as the teacher and the only one who could verify the laws of Hashem. This is somewhat different than Moshe's first description that he was there "to judge the people." Yet in many ways this was the practical aspect of his teaching. As he applied Hashem's laws to cases that came before him, the people became much more aware of the application of the law to their daily lives. More importantly, the B'nei Yisrael would begin to understand how Hashem had fashioned a system of Law that enabled people to create a world which was ideal and spiritually uplifting.

One final problem for those that wish to say that Yitro arrived before the giving of the Torah is that only someone who had been in Egypt to experience slavery was eligible to receive the Torah. According to the Midrash, Yitro was in Egypt and objected to Par'oh's plan. That was the reason that he fled from Egypt and went to live by Har Sinai. His daughter, Tziporah, and her sons with Moshe were not enslaved in Egypt. When Moshe returned to Egypt, she and the two sons went with him, crossed the border, and then were sent back to Yitro. That brief moment in Egypt qualified them to receive the Torah.

We were not slaves, yet we received the Torah

also. Our soles were at Har Sinai because our collective conscious enables us to experience both the slavery of Egypt and the majesty of Har Sinai. It is in our blood and in our very being. May we draw on that heritage to join us to those who experienced directly the freedom from slavery and the clarity of the proper way to serve Hashem. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
SICHA OF HARAV EZRA BICK

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

A significant portion of Parashat Yitro deals not with the Ten Commandments, but with describing Moshe's ascent to Mount Sinai, the glory of God that rested upon it, and Moshe's descent from the mountain. At the end of this account, it is stated: "And the people stood afar off; but Moshe drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (Shemot 20:17), which beautifully expresses Moshe's role as an intermediary between God and Israel. To a great extent, the Torah was given to us literally through the hands of Moshe, as the following midrash describes: "'And Moshe went up to God' (Shemot 19:3) -- This is what is written: 'You have ascended on high, you captured what had been held captive' (Tehillim 68:19) -- What is 'You have ascended'? You ascended; you wrestled with the heavenly angels.

"Another explanation: 'You ascended on high, you captured.' -- according to the custom of the world, one who enters a city takes something that the people of the city do not set their eyes upon, but Moshe ascended on high and took the Torah to which the eyes of all were set. This is: 'You have ascended on high, you captured what had been held captive.' You might say that because he captured it, he took it for free. Therefore, the verse goes on to state: 'You have taken [or: purchased] gifts for Man' -- it was given to him by way of a purchase. You might say he is obligated to pay Him money. Therefore, the verse states "gifts" -- it was given to him as a gift. (Shemot Rabba 28:1)

"Moshe ascended on high. He 'took the Torah' from there, and he brought it down to the people of Israel. Even when God Himself spoke to us, it was through the intermediacy of Moshe: 'Moshe spoke, and God answered him with a voice' (Shemot 19:19)."

Moshe's role in the giving the Torah was not only a technical matter. Chazal teach us that even for later generations, the reading of the Torah must be by way of an intermediary, a "shalish" (see Yerushalmi Megilla 4:1). Furthermore, this is true not only for the reading of the Torah, but for Torah study in general. A person should study Torah only with a teacher. All of our study is based on tradition -- each student and his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, going back to Yehoshua, who received the Torah from Moshe Rabbeinu.

There is, however, another dimension to Moshe's role. Just before the giving of the Ten Commandments, we encounter a surprising account: "And the Lord said to Moshe: Go down, charge the people, lest they break through to the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish. And Moshe said to the Lord: The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You did charge us, saying: Set bounds about the mountain, and sanctify it. And the Lord said to him: Go, get you down, and you shall come up, you, and Aharon with you. So Moshe went down to the people, and told them." (Shemot 19:21-25)

On the face of it, this is a very strange story. The verses seem to imply that God, as it were, is looking for an "excuse" to command Moshe to go down from the mountain, and Moshe in turn tries to reject it.

This finds even sharper expression in a midrash: "'And Moshe reported the words of the people to the Lord' (Shemot 19:8) -- At that time, the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give them the Torah and to speak to them, and Moshe was standing there. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: What will I do with Moshe?

"Rabbi Levi said: This may be likened to a king who wanted to issue a command without his counselor. He said to him: Do such-and-such. He said to him: It has already been done. He again said to him: Go, call So-and-so a senator so that he may come with you. When he went, the king did what he wanted to do.

"So the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Ten Commandments. Moshe was standing alongside Him. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I uncover for them the firmament and say: 'I am the Lord your God,' they will say: Who said this -- the Holy One, blessed be He, or Moshe? Rather, let Moshe go down, and afterwards I will say: 'I am the Lord.'

"So the Holy One, blessed be He said to Moshe: 'Go to the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments.' He said to Him: I have already sanctified them, as it is stated: 'You did charge us saying.' He said to him: 'Go, get you down, and you shall come up, you, and Aharon with you.' When Moshe went down, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself, as it is stated: 'So Moshe went down to the people,' and immediately afterwards: 'And God spoke.'" (Shemot Rabba 28:3)

This midrash not only articulates clearly what God was doing, but also explains the reason: Moshe's presence alongside God "delayed" the giving of the Torah, because the Torah had to be given directly by God, so that we not mistakenly think that there is someone else whose will must be considered. Our concern is to fulfill only God's will.

This episode, in which Moshe had to come down from the mountain so that God could give the Torah by Himself, has significance even today, as it emphasizes our commitment exclusively to the word of God.

This is true in Torah study. When we study

Torah and propose an idea, there are two possibilities: Either it is the word of God that was given over at Sinai, or not. If it is fitting to be the word of God, all is well, but if not, it should be abandoned, even if it is convincing.

But the principle is not limited to Torah study; it also applies to our general conduct in life. When we must decide how to behave or what to do, there is only one consideration that should guide us -- determining God's will in the situation -- and no other concerns should be taken into account.

The Torah was indeed transmitted to us and continues to be transmitted by way of a messenger, but our commitment is to God alone, and to no other entity, not even Moshe Rabbeinu. *[This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Yitro 5781.]*

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Last year, I noted what Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa says about the Sinaitic revelation, that "Hashem overturned the mountain above the Jews like a barrel [gigis] and said to them: 'If you accept the Torah, good; but if not, there will be your burial'" (Shabbos 88a).

What I suggested then was that a law in Devarim (22: 28-29) might be pertinent to that element of coercion: If a man forces himself upon a woman, he is fined, but also must (if the woman wishes) marry her and, unlike in any other marriage, cannot ever divorce her. The implication for Hashem's having "forced" His relationship with Klal Yisrael should be self-evident.

That same Gemara in Shabbos, though, also teaches that the element of "coercion" at Sinai stood as a "remonstration" against the Jewish People, for their seeming lack of full agency at the time. It was remedied

only centuries later by the Jews in Persia at the time of Mordechai and Esther.

The "coercion," the Maharal explains, was essentially the powerful nature of the experience itself, the interaction of human and Divine, which left no opportunity for true free choice.

Enter Purim.



Then, the Jews chose, entirely of their own volition, to perceive Hashem's presence where it was not in any way obvious. Instead of seeing the threat against them in mundane terms, they recognized it as Hashem's message, and responded with prayer, fasting, and repentance. By choosing to see Hashem's hand, they supplied what Sinai lacked, confirming that the Jewish acceptance of the Torah was - and is - wholehearted, sincere and pure.

The "barrel" of Rav Avdimi's description, thus, may be deeply meaningful. After all, isn't a mountain overhead not sufficiently frightening? Who needs a barrel metaphor?

A gigis, however, throughout the Talmud, contains an intoxicating beverage.

In Pirkei Avos (4), Rabi Yehudah HaNasi teaches us not "to look at the container, but at what it holds." That advice may have application here. The Jewish nation's reaction to coercion at Sinai may not have revealed our people's truest nature. What does, though, is how we express our dedication in a state of mindless purity, like ours on Purim, when we imbibe what a gigis holds. As Rabbi Elai said (Eiruvim 65b), a person's true character can be ascertained "in his cup." ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ Z"l

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your G-d in vain" (Ex. 20:7). The commandment forbids swearing falsely. The Talmud says that when G-d spoke this commandment, the entire world trembled (Shavuot 39a). What is so outstanding about this particular commandment that makes it so formidable?

The author of Chezyonos Avraham says that this commandment was a prerequisite for all the commandments that follow.

Our capacity to rationalize is remarkable. The human mind is ingenious in producing logical reasons for something one wishes to do. Rationalizations, of course, are nothing but good reasons to cover up the true reason. The danger of rationalization is that we may delude ourselves to actually believe the conjured up reasons.

People wish to satisfy their desires, so they rationalize in order to eliminate any obstacles. However, if they had to answer to the reason for a particular act, the severity of the transgression, "G-d will not absolve anyone who takes His Name in vain," might break through their self-deception. If the rationalization was eliminated, they would be discouraged from doing the forbidden act. This commandment made the Israelites cognizant of the importance of adhering to the truth. *Dvar Torah from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. ©2016 Rabbi K. Packouz z"l & TorahWeb.org*