

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he parsha of Yitro records the revolutionary moment when God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, entered into a mutually binding agreement with a nation, the Children of Israel, an agreement we call a brit, a covenant.

Now, this is not the first Divine covenant in the Torah. God had already made one with Noah, and through him all of humanity, and He made another with Abraham, whose sign was circumcision. But those covenants were not fully reciprocal. God did not ask for Noah's agreement, nor did He wait for Abraham's assent.

Sinai was a different matter. For the first time, He wanted the covenant to be fully mutual, to be freely accepted. So we find that -- both before and after the Revelation at Sinai -- God commands Moses to make sure the people do actually agree.

The point is fundamental. God wants to rule by right, not might. The God who brought an enslaved people to liberty seeks the free worship of free human beings.

"God does not act toward His creatures like a tyrant." (Avodah Zarah 3a) So at Sinai was born the principle that was, millennia later, described by Thomas Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence, the idea that governors and governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." God wanted the consent of the governed. That is why the Sinai Covenant was conditional on the people's agreement.

Admittedly, the Talmud questions how free the Israelites actually were, and it uses an astonishing image. It says that God suspended the mountain above their heads and said, "If you agree, well and good. If you don't, here will be your burial." That is another topic for another time. Suffice to say that there is no indication of this in the plain sense of the text itself.

What is interesting is the exact wording in which the Israelites signal their consent. To repeat: they do so three times, first before the Revelation, and then twice afterwards, in the parsha of Mishpatim.

Listen to the three verses. Before the Revelation: "All the people answered as one and said, 'All that God has spoken, we will do [na'aseh]." (Ex. 19:8)

Then afterward: "Moses came and told the people all of God's words and all the laws. The people all responded with a single voice, 'We will do [na'aseh] every word that God has spoken.'" (Ex. 24:3)

"He took the Book of the Covenant and read it aloud to the people. They replied, 'We will do [na'aseh] and we will hear [ve-nishma] all that God has declared.' (Ex. 24:7)

Note the subtle difference. In two cases the people say: all that God says, we will do. In the third, the double verb is used: na'aseh ve-nishma. "We will do and we will hear, (or obey, or hearken, or understand)." The word shema means 'to understand', as we see in the story of the Tower of Babel: "Come, let us descend and confuse their speech, so that one person will not understand another's speech." (Gen. 11:7)

Now note that there is another difference between the three verses. In the first two cases there is a clear emphasis on the unity of the people. Both phrases are very striking. The first says: all the people answered as one. The second says, The people all responded with a single voice. In a book that emphasises how fractious and fissiparous the people were, such declarations of unanimity are significant and rare. But the third verse, which mentions both doing and listening or understanding, contains no such statement. It simply says: They replied. There is no emphasis on unanimity or consensus.

What we have here is a biblical comment on one of the most striking features of all in Judaism: the difference between deed and creed, between asiyah and shemiyah, between doing and understanding.

Christians have theology. Jews have law. These are two very different approaches to the religious life. Judaism is about a community of action. It is about the way people interact in their dealings with one another. It is about bringing God into the shared spaces of our collective life. Just as we know God through what He does, so God asks us to bring Him into what we do. In the beginning, as Goethe put it, was the deed. That is why Judaism is a religion of law, because law is the architecture of behaviour.

When it comes, however, to belief, creed, doctrine, all the things that depend on shemiyah rather than asiyah, understanding rather than action: on this Judaism does not call for unanimity. Not because Judaism lacks beliefs. To the contrary, Judaism is what it is precisely because of our beliefs, most importantly

the belief in monotheism, that there is, at least and at most, one God. The Torah tells us in Bereishit about creation, in Shemot about redemption, and in this week's parsha about revelation.

Judaism is a set of beliefs, but it is not a community based on unanimity about the way we understand and interpret those beliefs. It recognizes that intellectually and temperamentally we are different. Judaism has had its rationalists and its mystics, its philosophers and its poets, its naturalists and its supernaturalists: Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva, Judah Halevi and Maimonides, the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov. We seek unanimity in halachah, not in aggadah. Na'aseh, we act in the same way, but nishma, we understand each in our own way. That is the difference between the way we serve God, collectively, and the way we understand God, individually.

What is fascinating is that this well-known feature of Judaism is already signalled in the Torah: in the difference between the way it speaks about na'aseh, "as one," "with a single voice," and nishma, with no special collective consensus.

Our acts, our na'aseh, are public. Our thoughts, our nishma, are private. That is how we come to serve God together, yet relate to Him individually, in the uniqueness of our being. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Torah Lights**

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

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

However, both Nahmanides and Ibn Ezra point out that since Moses could not have been occupied to the point of exhaustion with rendering biblical rulings before the Bible had been given, logic dictates that Jethro arrived and made his wise suggestion after the revelation at Sinai. But if so, why does the Torah record

the advent and advice of Jethro before the account of the revelation, and why name the portion which includes the content of the divine words after a Midianite priest, especially since he came on the scene after that revelation took place?!

Ibn Ezra explains: “Since the Bible has just mentioned the evil which Amalek did to the Israelites [at the end of Exodus Chapter 17 as the conclusion of the previous portion of Beshalach], the Bible must [immediately thereafter] mention in contrast the good advice which Jethro gave to the Israelites [at the beginning of Chapter 18 in the opening of the portion of Yitro].”

I would add that the Bible is contrasting two very opposite reactions to the miracle of the Exodus. In general, the nations of the world heard of the stunning rebellion of the Hebrews and became terrified: “Nations heard and shuddered; terror gripped the inhabitants of Philistia...Fear and dread fell upon them; at the greatness of Your Arm they fell silent as stone.” [Exodus 15:14–16]

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

Jethro, on the other hand, is filled with admiration and praise: “And Jethro was overjoyed at all of the good which the Lord accomplished for the Israelites in saving them from the hand of Egypt. And Jethro said, ‘Praised be the Lord who has saved you from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh...Now I know that the Lord is the greatest of all of the gods...’” (Ex. 18:9–11).

In effect, the biblical juxtaposition is teaching us that all gentiles should not be seen in the same light: there is the gentile who is jealous and aggressive (Amalek), but there is also the gentile who is admiring and willing to be of help (Jethro).

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

But in the very same breath Maimonides continues to legislate: “And similarly Moses was commanded by the Almighty to enforce upon the gentile world for everyone to accept the seven Noahide laws of

morality.” [Laws of Governments 8:10]

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

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

The portion of the revelation at Sinai is called Yitro (Jethro); only if the Jethros of the nations of the world accept fealty to the God of peace will the ultimate vision of Torah become a reality for Israel and will the world as we know it be able to survive and prosper. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin’s book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. © 2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he Ten Declarations are inscribed on two tablets. The first contains laws that govern our interaction with God. The second deals with interpersonal relationships. Why, then, is the commandment “honor your father and your mother” found on the tablet that deals with our connection to God? (Exodus 20:12).

Nachmanides notes that the child-parent relationship is unique, as one can have only one biological mother and father. Hence, the mitzvah of honoring parents intersects with the mitzvah of honoring God. Just as there is only one God, so too does one have only a single set of parents. In fact, in Jewish law, the laws of how to respect parents parallel the way one

honors God (Nachmanides, Exodus 20:12).

Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a different suggestion. “Through father and mother, God gives the child not only physical existence” but also the knowledge of “the Jewish mission,” i.e., the spiritual message of Judaism. After recording the commandments regarding God and the Sabbath, which remind us that God is the source of all creativity, the Torah tells us to honor our parents, as they are best positioned to teach their children about God and His revelation. This idea speaks eloquently to the importance not only of biological parents but of adoptive and stepparents as well.

For this reason, when we lose a parent, the laws of mourning are more intense than after the loss of other relatives. For example, the mourning period for a parent is one year, not thirty days; the Kaddish is recited for eleven months, not thirty days; and the garment rent for parents is on the left side (the side closer to the heart) and not the right.

Perhaps these heightened mourning rituals reflect not only the intensity of loss but an expression of gratitude, both to our parents, without whom we would not be alive, and to our parents for teaching us Jewish values. Indeed, we owe thanks to our parents – even those with whom we have complicated or difficult relationships – in ways we do not owe thanks to anyone else.

Thus, the placement of the mitzvot of honoring parents and honoring God on the same side of the tablets is deeply purposeful, as honoring parents intersects with honoring God (Kiddushin 30a). © 2024 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 BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**here are two different viewpoints as to the timing and to the nature of the visit of Yitro to the Jewish encampment in the desert of Sinai. One opinion is that he came before the revelation of God to the Jews and the granting of the Torah to them. The other opinion is that he came after Sinai and the Torah revelation. I think that these two different opinions really delve into the character and nature of Yitro himself, as much as they deal with chronological events recorded for us in the Torah.

Rashi indicates that Yitro came because of his awareness of the miracle of the splitting of Yam Suf and of the subsequent battle between Amalek and Israel. If so, as Rashi seems to indicate by not mentioning the Torah revelation as one of the causes for his leaving his country, his position and his faith to come to join Israel in its journey, then it seems that Yitro’s “conversion” to Judaism was motivated by seemingly outside influences rather than by personal soul-searching.

If however Yitro arrives at the camp of Israel after the revelation at Sinai, then one can justifiably argue that it was an inner recognition of the veracity of the newly revealed Torah. Recognition of the truths of its monotheistic moral code that Sinai represents would have motivated his abandonment of past idols and ideals and drove him to his new attachment to the God and people of Israel.

In this seemingly pedantic discussion on the timeline of events that befell the Jewish people in their forty year sojourn in the desert of Sinai, lies a very deep and relevant understanding of the Jewish world and its obstacle laden path to faith and belief.

Throughout Jewish history there have been many who were influenced by outside, historical events that made them wonder in amazement at the survival and influential presence of the Jewish people. The Jew was always outnumbered and discriminated against by world society. It has always been felt by many that it was only a matter of time that Judaism and Jews would finally ceased to exist. Yet from the ancient pharaohs to the modern age the survival of the Jewish people has remained a troublesome mystery to world society.

The world is aware of the miracles that have accompanied us while crossing the sea of history and of the constant battle that we have been forced to fight against Amalek. This awareness has provided us with a few allies from the outside world to aid us in our quest for equality and fair treatment. These people are valuable friends and allies but are rarely if ever true converts to Judaism. However, we have been blessed in every generation by the attachment of people to Judaism and Israel because of the appreciation and recognition of the God-given moral code that the Torah represents.

It is the inner spiritual drive of their souls that drove and drives these people to become converts to Judaism. Since it is difficult, if not well nigh impossible, for any Jewish rabbinic court to explore the inner soul of any other human being, the problems of formal conversion to Judaism, especially in our time, are many and difficult. Yet, Yitro stands as an example as to the benefits to the individual and the nation as a whole of those who are not born Jewish and who stubbornly wish to attach themselves to the people and destiny of Israel. ©2024 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)

#### 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Moshe's father-in-law saw all that he was doing to the nation and said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the nation...?" (Exodus 18:14) The Torah tells us Yisro heard all the great things Hashem did, and came to his son-in-law, Moshe, in order

to get his perspective on all of it. While at the camp of the Jewish People, Yisro took note of the goings on and was not afraid to offer advice.

One conversation took place when Yisro watched Moshe judging the Jews. Moshe sat there, alone, as the sole arbiter of Hashem's law, while the nation stood around and waited their turn to speak with him and present their questions. Moshe explained that he was judging the people and advising them of the law. Yisro suggested that this was not a good plan as neither Moshe nor the people would last very long. He suggested appointing other judges to assist Moshe.

The commentaries offer numerous opinions as to what Yisro was questioning. Some say he feared that Moshe was being unfair to the people because of the time it would take for him to hear their cases. Others suggest Yisro feared his son-in-law was remaining the sole judge out of a feeling of arrogance, as if he could not stand to share the limelight or allow other judges to rule in his presence. Perhaps it would be more appropriate for Moshe to seat one or two other sages with him so it did not appear that he was making everyone stand for him.

Regardless of what the reasoning was, we see some very interesting insights into giving criticism or advice. The Torah doesn't say it was "Yisro" who saw, but "Moshe's father-in-law." This teaches us that when you want to offer someone criticism or suggestions, you must first make sure that it is solely done for their benefit, and not because YOU want it. We often have our own ulterior motives for trying to change others, even if we are not aware of it. They must be the focus.

Further, we see that Yisro observed, "all that Moshe was doing." He didn't look at half the story and come to a conclusion. Instead, he made sure he saw the whole picture before he offered his own opinions.

Finally, he asked, "What is this that you're doing?," giving Moshe a chance to explain, and when he responded to Moshe's explanation that the people came to him seeking Hashem, Yisro said, "this thing you are doing isn't good," thereby expressing concern about the behavior, but not maligning the person.

This sensitivity and understanding were what made Yisro a valuable advisor, first to Pharaoh, and later requested by Moshe to accompany Klal Yisrael and offer his insights. We can learn a lot from how he attempted to influence people. Perhaps that is why the Torah is given in the parsha named for Yisro, because one must love others and only then can he bring them closer to Torah, in a way they can accept it.

*A fellow once came to Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, OH, and met the Rosh HaYeshiva, Rabbi Mordecai Gifter. He'd been in the Navy and got interested in his Jewish heritage. R' Gifter asked why he was there. "I came to find God," he replied. "If it's G-d you're looking for," thundered R' Gifter, "you won't find Him here. Torah? Torah you can find here, but not*

*"G-d."*

*The fellow was taken aback until another rabbi softly explained, "What the Rosh HaYeshiva means is that Judaism isn't just that you eat a kosher salami sandwich and you've arrived. It takes Torah study and time to get to know G-d, and what He wants from you; it isn't something that just happens." [The fellow ended up studying in the Yeshiva and Kollel for many years before accepting a position teaching other returnees to Judaism.] ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## **Jewish Geography**

**W**hen the Torah was given, the mountain that G-d descended upon is referred to as הר סיני (Shemos 19:11/20). Elsewhere (33:6), what seems to be the same mountain is referred to as הר חורב, with "חורב" used a dozen times in the Torah to describe where the nation was when the Torah was given. Do the two names refer to the same exact location, or does each term refer to a specific (separate) area?

The Talmud (Shabbos 89b), as well as numerous other Midrashim (e.g. Shemos Rabbah 2:4), say that both are names for the same place, with "סיני" referring to us becoming hated for having accepted the Torah and "חורב" referring to the consequences for those who didn't accept it. Several commentators say explicitly that סיני and חורב are one and the same, including Ibn Ezra (Shemos 17:9), Rabbeinu Bachye (Shemos 19:1), Chizkuni (Shemos 3:1), Rashbam (Devarim 28:69 – see Rashi there too) and Metzudas Tzion (Malachi 3:22).

Ramban (Devarim 1:6) says the two are not synonymous. Instead, חורב is the area near הר סיני, with the large desert that includes both חורב and הר סיני called מדבר סיני. [Interestingly, in the entire narrative of the giving of the Torah, חורב is never mentioned.] Nevertheless, despite his opinion that סיני and חורב are not the same, Ramban acknowledges that הר סיני is sometimes referred to as הר חורב (e.g. Shemos 33:6), i.e. the mountain that is in or near חורב.

The Vilna Gaon (Devarim 1:6) also says that חורב is not סיני, but differentiates between הר חורב and הר סיני as well. הר סיני is where the Torah was given, while הר חורב is where the nation was camped, and where the Mishkan stood. He adds (based on Chagiga 6a) that the general principles of the Torah were given at סיני while the details were given in the Mishkan (and therefore in חורב), which explains all the references to the Mitzvos being given in חורב.

Rokayach (Shemos 19:17), based on the Mechilta saying that הר סיני was uprooted from its original location and placed over the nation, says that הר סיני was placed on top of הר חורב, "as if there was a mountain on top of a mountain," with the nation camped on הר חורב and Moshe at הר סיני. No matter how we understand this Rokayach, the two terms must be referring to different mountains.

Despite these seemingly different approaches, we can synthesize Ramban with the Midrashim, with חורב referring to the area, and the mountain in that area referred to by both names. We can even add some elements of the Vilna Gaon, with the Mishkan being in חורב, next to הר סיני, and the nation camped there (in חורב) as well.



In his entry for רפידים in "Eileh Mas'ay" (Published in 5760), R' Dun Schwartz says he is following Ramban's opinion that הר סיני is not הר סיני (even though Ramban himself says that הר סיני is sometimes referred to as חורב; for our purposes חורב being separate will suffice for the point he tries to make). Because Moshe went to חורב for water while the nation was in רפידים (Shemos 17:6), R' Schwartz says חורב and רפידים must be near each other, with רפידים to the west of חורב, and הר סיני east of חורב. However, Rashi (Shemos 19:2, based on the Mechilta), says that the nation camped on the east side of הר סיני. If רפידים was west of הר סיני, in order to get from רפידים to the east side of הר סיני the nation would have pass הר סיני, going around it, which seems awkward. [This would be true even if הר סיני and חורב were one and the same.]

Because of this awkwardness, Chizkuni asks how the nation could have passed הר סיני before the Torah was given. His question is based on the assumption that the nation travelled east from Egypt towards הר סיני and then farther east on their way to ארץ ישראל (and not just from רפידים); bear in mind that Chizkuni is of the opinion that the nation didn't cross the Yam Suf, but exited on the same side they entered, travelling parallel to its northern shore from west to east. R' Schwartz (elsewhere) assumes that הר סיני is on the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula, which means they didn't only travel east, but south as well. [I know, I haven't really discussed the location of הר סיני here yet. But they were camped there for the rest of Sefer Shemos and all of Sefer Vayikra, so there's still plenty of time; stay tuned!] Since they travelled both south and east, רפידים might have been north (or northwest) of חורב, and getting to the east side of הר סיני may not have required going around it. [I will add that if there wasn't enough flat terrain on the other sides of הר סיני for the nation to camp there, going around it to get to its east side shouldn't be an issue.]

Based on our synthesis of Ramban and the Midrashim, with חורב being the area and הר סיני a mountain within חורב, the relative location of רפידים in regards to הר סיני is less of an issue. Since חורב surrounds הר סיני on all sides, and רפידים could be north (or northwest) of it, Moshe could have gone south to hit the rock in the northern part of חורב, allowing the water to flow north (or northwest) to רפידים, while the nation subsequently travelled south (or southeast) to the eastern part of חורב, just east of הר סיני, without having to go around it.

(I wrote about the location of Mount Sinai in 5776; see <https://bit.ly/4bneCTc> – although that was before Alexander Hool published his book on the topic. I don't agree with his conclusion, but he does address at least one argument I made against it, which I hope to include when I revisit the issue later this year.] ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

## Cross-Currents

**W**hen I was a teenager, I wrote a short poem that went: "All could be lies / For we see with our eyes."

Descartes, as I later discovered, beat me by some three centuries at expressing the thought that our senses necessarily mediate reality for us and thus cannot be relied upon to yield absolute truth.

That idea underlies the Rambam's approach to miracles, that they cannot, on their own, conclusively prove anything at all. In his words: "...because it is possible to perform a wonder through trickery or sorcery" (Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, 8:1).

Even the plagues in Mitzrayim and the splitting of the sea could not prove anything decisively. (And so, once, when a Christian missionary came to my door to tell me of wonders performed by the object of his veneration, I just smiled and said "That's very nice" and wished him a good day.)

What then, asks the Rambam, was it that fully convinced Klal Yisrael of Hashem's existence and role in their exodus from Mitzrayim? His answer: Mattan Torah. (ibid)

As he explains (I paraphrase here), the happening at Har Sinai wasn't something witnessed but, rather, something experienced. Our ancestors didn't hear or see Hashem; they met Him intimately. They were imbued with His presence.

Which, I suspect, is the upshot of the words "They saw the thunder and lightning" (Shemos 20:15). The people, Chazal comment on those words, saw what normally can only be heard. Because they weren't seeing or hearing at all as we normally define those words but rather experiencing the reality of Hashem. The synesthesia indicates that Hashem bypassed their senses entirely and entered their very souls.

Which is why the experience was so traumatic: The very pasuk after the one about seeing sound has the people begging Moshe, "You speak with us... let Hashem not speak with us lest we die." To use a mundane simile, they had been like overloaded electrical circuits.

But that overload was necessary, if only for the first two dibros. Because it is what established for all generations to come -- through the transmission of that experience -- the relationship between the Creator and the people he chose to fulfill His mandate and carry His message. ©2024 Rabbi A. Shafraan and torah.org

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

## The First Commandment

**P**arashat Yitro contains the Ten Commandments given by Hashem to Moshe on Mt. Sinai. These ten commandments are probably the most familiar code of conduct and belief given to Man. The commandments guide Man in his actions toward his fellowman and Hashem, giving Man a logical path towards becoming a righteous individual. The Torah contains many laws (six hundred and thirteen according to tradition), and these laws were supplemented with the Oral Law, which clarified and delineated the underlying concepts of each law which one must apply to all new situations that were not present at the time of the giving of the Torah, e.g., the use of electricity on Shabbat or the kosher laws as applied to lab-produced meat. The Ten Commandments are the foundation of these six hundred thirteen commandments and the Oral Laws as well.

The first of the Ten Commandments is an unusual statement, "And Elokim spoke all these words, to say, 'I am Hashem, your Elokim, Who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery.'" It is important to note that the first word of this sentence in Hebrew is "Anochi" as opposed to "Ani." Thou both words are translated as "I," HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains the difference in their usage. "Whereas 'Ani' indicates the speaker rather in contrast to the one addressed, as the one from whom – 'Anah' a speech emanates, 'Anochi' proclaims the speaker as that person who is intimately near to the one addressed, who comprehends and bears and keeps him, through whose personality the one addressed really gets his personal existence and his standing. Nothing is more overwhelming than the thought of how, in the midst of all the commotion, and out of the turmoil of the universe quaking in its very foundations, Hashem proclaims Himself as the 'Anochi' of the universe, through Whom alone all other existence receives the possibility and the actuality of existing, and then immediately turns to each individual Jew and says: 'I am your Anochi, Anochi Hashem Elokecha, I am the Lord your G-d.'"

The Kli Yakar remarks on the use of the two forms of speech, "vay'daber (dibur), and he spoke" and "leimor (amira), to say." One form of speech is harsh (dibur) and one form is soft (amira). The creation of the world is described by the Talmud as the Aseret Ma'amarot, the Ten Sayings, as these creations were for the establishment of a pleasant world. There were no laws for man directly attached to the creation at the time of creation. The mitzvot, commandments, were spoken in a stronger language, that of dibur, as these were rules and decrees of the King. All of the mitzvot were given using this form of speech. What we normally call the Ten Commandments are really known as the Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Statements. These were decrees from Hashem, spoken in stronger language to

emphasize the importance of following these laws. Since our sentence beginning with Anochi follows the sentence using dibur, it must be considered one of the commandments.

A major question about the sentence, "I am Hashem, your Elokim....," is its very inclusion among the commandments. One would assume that any commandment would require an action (guard the Sabbath) or the avoidance of an action (do not commit adultery). Our Rabbis all agree that there is a command within this sentence, namely, to believe in Hashem. Ibn Ezra adds to this that, "the commandment, Anochi, I am, is the source, meaning that one should make Him one's G-d, to Whom one cleaves. Also, one should admit that He brought him out of Egypt." HaRav Hirsch explains that, "as this verse is not to be taken as a declaration, but as a mitzvah, as one of the commandments, it does not mean 'I, Hashem am your G-d' but 'I, Hashem am to be (should be) your G-d.' This makes the foundation of our whole relation to Hashem to be that demand which our sages express in the term, kabbalat ol malchut shamayim, taking on oneself the duties which are involved by considering G-d as one's King." Hirsch continues, "Not the fact that there is a G-d, also not that there is only one G-d, but that this One, unique, true G-d, is to be my G-d; that He created and formed me, placed me where I am, and goes on creating and forming me, keeps me, watches over me, leads and guides me; not that my connection with Him should be through ten thousand intermediaries as a chance product of a universe which He brought into being eons ago, but that every present breath that I draw and every coming moment of my existence is to be a direct gift of His Almighty and Love, and that I have to live every present and future second of my life solely in His service."

One must ask why the second half of the sentence, "Who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery," is the justification used for acceptance of the first half of the sentence, "I am Hashem, your Elokim." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why "because I created you" was not a better choice for demanding our allegiance. He answers that the Jewish People could have answered that Hashem did that for all of Mankind, not just the Jewish People, and then could ask why the Jewish People should be burdened with all the commandments, something that was not done to the other nations of the world. Instead, Hashem emphasized that His love for the Jewish People was such that he took one nation out of another nation to free the B'nei Yisrael from the slavery of Egypt. That love which saved the B'nei Yisrael was the quid pro quo which demanded that the B'nei Yisrael accept any Laws which Hashem would command. HaRav Sorotzkin suggests that Hashem also wished to obligate the people to Him by an event which they had experienced firsthand. Hashem, therefore, chose to bind the people to Him by the exodus from Egypt and not the Creation of the World.

HaRav Sorotzkin quotes a Midrash that all the beings of creation heard Hashem's words on Har Sinai. Birds stopped singing and ceased flying, rivers and seas became still, even the mountains gathered to hear Hashem's words. When Hashem began with the words, "I am Hashem your Elokim," Mt. Tabor, Mt. Hermon, and Mt. Carmel each claimed, "I am the one that Hashem called to." Each of Hashem's creatures on the earth, in the sky, and in the Heavens proclaimed, "I am the one that Hashem called to." Only after they all heard, "Who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery," did each acknowledge that these words were only issued to the Jewish People, for only they had experienced being taken out of Egypt.

The Midrash tells us that we, also were present at Sinai and heard Hashem's words. May we each answer, "I am the one that Hashem called to." May we accept the ol malchut shamayim, the burden of His mitzvot, with an open heart and a love for Hashem in return for His love. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

### RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

## What's News

Though the marquee event of this week's portion surrounds the epic event of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, there are still many lessons to be learned from every pasuk of the parsha, even the seemingly innocuous ones. Rabbi Mordechai Rogov, of blessed memory, points out a fascinating insight from the following verses that discuss the naming of Moshe's children.

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

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

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

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

Chris Matthews in his classic book *Hardball, An Inside Look at How Politics is Played by one who knows the Game*, tells how Senator Alben W. Barkley of

Kentucky, who would later serve as Harry Truman's vice president, related a story that is reflective of human nature and memory. In 1938, Barkley had been challenged for reelection to the Senate by Governor A. B. 'Happy' Chandler, who later made his name as Commissioner of Baseball.

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

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

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

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

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

Rabbi Rogov explains that though the Moshe's fleeing Pharaoh was notably miraculous it was still an event of the past. Now he was in Midian. The pressure of exile from his parents, his immediate family, his brother Ahron and sister Miriam, and his people, was a constant test of faith. Therefore, the name of Moshe's first son commemorated his current crisis as opposed to his prior, albeit more miraculous and traumatic one. Sometimes appreciating the minor issues of life take precedence over even the most eventful -- if that is what is currently sitting on the table. © 2014 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

