Yitro 5774 Volume XXI Number 20

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

This week's parsha consists of two episodes that seem to be a study in contrasts. In the first, in chapter 18, Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, a Midianite priest, gives Moses his first lesson in leadership. In the second, the prime mover is G-d 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 G-d 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 and it is an important one. The forms and structures of governance are not specifically Jewish. They are part of chokhmah, the universal wisdom of humankind. Jews have known many forms of leadership: by prophet, 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 is the principle of the covenant at Sinai, that Israel is the only nation whose sole ultimate king and legislator is G-d 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. 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 G-d himself.

Despite the contrast, however, there is one theme in common to Yitro and the revelation at Sinai, namely the delegation, distribution and democratization of leadership. Only G-d 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, where G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d, 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.

In the next chapter, prior to the revelation at Mount Sinai, G-d commands Moses to propose a covenant with the Israelites. In the course of this, G-d 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 G-d" (Gen. 14:18). The story of Joseph mentions the Egyptian priests, whose land was not nationalised (Gen. 47:22). Yitro was a Midianite

TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM

TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL (973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM

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 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. (Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, called Jews "a nation of philosophers," reflecting the same idea. This idea re-appeared in Protestant Christianity in the age of the Puritans, the Christians who took most seriously the principles of what they called the "Old Testament," in the phrase "the priesthood of all believers.")

Yet in what sense were Jews ever a kingdom of priests? The cohanim 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 cohanim, "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 principle that later became known as the idea that kol Yisrael arevin zeh ba-zeh, "All Israelites are responsible for one another." Jews were the people who did not leave leadership to a single individual, however holy or exalted, or to an elite. They were the people every one of whom 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 democratized.

That is what made Jews historically hard to lead. As Chaim Weitzmann, 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 it 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 an extraordinarily high percentage of leaders in any given field of human endeavour.

To be a Jew is to be called on to lead.

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.

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. G-d 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 G-d to see Him..." (that is, the people may not go up close to G-d). (Even) the Kohanim (priests), 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 (G-d) 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 G-d tells Moses to come up in order to hear that he must go down? Moses argues that the people cannot come up, G-d 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 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 G-d and Moses. G-d 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 G-d, "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 G-d; in this Revelation, G-d 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 G-d 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. G-d 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 G-d into the kitchen and dining room; the laws of family purity bring G-d into the bedroom; the laws of business bring G-d into the work-place; the laws of interpersonal relationships bring G-d into all political forums. Our Torah is meant to perfect and sanctify every aspect of our material world.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

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

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

Another idea comes to mind. The altar symbolizes a central place of spirituality. The ramps connecting the ground with the altar teach that in order to reach the higher world of the spirit one must be in constant motion. Ramps imply perpetual movement, whereas steps can offer rest. Similar to the ladders of Jacob's dream, in the world of the spirit-one can either ascend or descend-never can one stand still.

Another important contemporary lesson can be learned. The presence of ramps can be viewed as a symbol of accessibility. Once there is accessibility in the place of the spirit, either in the altar or in today's synagogue, it sends a message that all places should be open to the handicapped. Not only do ramps send a message of welcome to the physically challenged, but they also send to one and all, even to those not in wheelchairs, that everyone, regardless of affiliation, health or station in life is welcome.

For me, the ramps to the altar powerfully remind us what makes a synagogue beautiful. I have heard Jews with a passion for architecture, debate this question at length. Some may advocate an ultra-modern structure with a skylight over the ark, while others may prefer a more traditional structure. Personally, the first items I look for in a shul are ramps. If the synagogue is accessible, it is beautiful.

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

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

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

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And Yisro rejoiced over all of the good that G-d did for Israel" (Sh'mos 18:9). In the Mechilta (quoted by Midrash HaGadol), Rabbi Eliezer describes the "good" that Yisro was told applies to the Children of Israel: "They said to him, 'G-d is going to give us the Land of Israel, the World to Come, a New World, the Kingship of the House of David, Kehuna and Leviya." Rav Yitzchok Sorotzkin, sh'lita (Rinas Yitzchok al HaTorah I) asks how the World to Come could be included with the good that is designated for Israel if righteous gentiles merit the World to Come as well (see Rambam, Hilchos T'shuvah 3:5 and Hilchos M'lachim 8:11). He then points us to what he wrote in his commentary on Rambam's Hilchos T'shuva and his commentary on Rus (2:12) for further discussion.

In his commentary on Rus he quotes a similar question asked by Rav Meir Soloveichik, sh'lita, as elsewhere (Hilchos Isuray Biya 14:4), Rambam says that the World to Come is "hidden" (or "waiting") only for members of the Jewish nation. This question can, IMO, be answered rather easily, as from the context there (as well as from the continuation of the Talmudic statement that Rambam is based on) it seems that who is able to merit a share in the World to Come is not what's being discussed. Rather, it is the kind of share received in the World to Come, and how it is affected by the amount of suffering experienced in this world. This aspect, that the bulk of a person's reward and punishment is not given in this world but in the next world (where everything ultimately balances out), does not apply to non-Jews -- even if non-Jews can merit a share in the next world. Nevertheless, this difference would not explain how Yisro is told that meriting the World to Come is something reserved only for Israel.

In order to answer the question posed by Rav Soloveichik, Rav Sorotzkin quotes the Talmud (B'rachos 34b), where Rabbi Yochanan is quoted as saying that all of the prophecies stated regarding the World to Come can only be about the share merited by those who have sinned and repented (or are in the process of repenting); the World to Come that will be merited by the completely righteous, on the other hand, cannot be seen/understood by the human eye/mind. Although Rambam (Hilchos T'shuva 7:4) quotes the

opinion that the Talmud says argues with Rabbi Yochanan (as it seems to be saying that those who have sinned and repented are on a higher level than those who never sinned), Rav Sorotzkin suggests that the two types of "Worlds to Come" described by Rabbi Yochanan (see Maharsha) can be applied to the different worlds awaiting the righteous Jew and the righteous gentile. If so, Yisro could have been reacting to the higher-level World to Come that awaits members of the Nation of Israel. [For further discussion on possible differences between the World to Come awaiting righteous Jews and the World to Come awaiting righteous gentiles, see Ramchal, Derech HaShem 2:4:7 and Tiferes Yisroel, Sanhedrin 10:2, although the latter's approach is difficult to fit within the context of the Mishnayos that limit which Jews get a share in the World to Come.]

In his commentary on Rambam's Hilchos T'shuva (G'vuras Yitzchok, Yomim Nora'im), Rav Sorotzkin also tries to reconcile Rambam's saying in one place that righteous non-Jews can merit a place in the world to come while indicating elsewhere that it is only for Jews. First he quotes Sefer Ha'Ikarim (4:30) regarding Rambam's position that there are two kinds of "worlds to come," one referring to after the resurrection of the dead and the other where only the soul continues to exist. (Actually, there would be three or four stages; after death but before the body decomposes, after the body decomposes, after the resurrection of the dead, and then, according to some, the ultimate existence after that. Obviously, no one knows for sure about the nature of life after death; even though my grandfather, a"h, promised me that after 120 years he would tell me what it was like on the other side (which he did), that could only be about what things are like after death, not what happens regarding the resurrection of the dead, etc.) Similarly, Rav Sorotzkin references Ramban's position in Sefer HaG'mul that there is more than one "paradise" ("Gan Eden"), one while the soul is still somewhat connected to the physical world and one after the soul has completely disconnected from it. If there is more than one type of "Worlds to Come," Rav Sorotzkin continues, but not all of them can be merited by righteous gentiles, Rambam could be referring to one type when he says that they can gain a share in the World to Come while referring to another when he indicates that it is only for Jews. However, Rambam's wording (Hilchos T'shuvah 3:5) indicates that he was referring to the same "World to Come" for both.

Rav Sorotzkin also quotes Tiferes Yisroel's question on the Mishnah in Sanhedrin, where he asks how the Mishnah can imply that only Jews have a share in the World to Come if righteous gentiles can as well. To answer this question, Rav Sorotzkin points out that except for the listed exclusions (such as a heretic), all Jews have a share in the World to Come, even if they are wicked (which is the straight-forward reading of the Mishnah, and is explicit in Rambam's words in Hilchos T'shuvah), whereas only righteous gentiles merit a share in the World to Come. It should be noted that when Rambam elaborates on what it means to be a "righteous gentile" (thereby qualifying for a share in the World to Come), he tells us it is someone who has accepted the obligation to keep the seven Noachide laws, and keeps them because G-d commanded him or her to. This definition leaves little room for someone to meet the qualifications while being "wicked." Still, the exceptions he lists for Jews (Hilchos T'shuvah 3:6-14) don't leave much room for being wicked either, so it's difficult to pin any difference on the difference in the ability to be "wicked" while fulfilling all the requirements necessary to merit a share in the World to Come. Nevertheless, since the starting point for (religious) Jews is having a share, whereas the starting point for gentiles is having to earn a share (a difference based mostly on the starting point of how each was raised), this could theoretically explain the "good" Yisro rejoiced over.

Looking at the list of how one can lose their share in the World to Come, it becomes clear that being part of the Jewish people is the starting point to having a share, while becoming disconnected from the nation is how one loses that share. (This doesn't preclude the possibility that one who has lost his or her share because they removed themselves from the collective can still earn a share in other ways. The "share" we start with is because we are part of the "collective," and we can earn a greater share by making additional connections with the Creator. That our share in the World to Come is based on the connection we make with G-d is evident from the fact that gentiles fulfilling the Noachide laws only merit the World to Come if they are doing so because G-d commanded it; this concept would apply to Jews as well.) As a unit, we help each other develop a stronger relationship with G-d, whether by building Houses of Worship and Houses of Study, creating a market that makes keeping kosher (et al) much easier, or merely by being part of a culture that fosters spiritual growth. Every member of our "community" helps other individuals earn their share in the World to Come (at least to some extent), and therefore gets credit for doing so. Because we each help others gain a share in the World to Come, we automatically get to partake in it as well (besides being able to earn shares in our own right (with the help of others). As long as one has not removed him or herself from being part of the community, merely being part of the community qualifies as being "righteous," and therefore merits getting a share in the World to Come. (A similar concept may work for a community of Noachides, but they must build their own community; we had the foundation for our community built for us in the merit of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs.)

When Yisro came to Sinai and heard "all that G-d had done for Israel," it referred to the structural foundation that would allow us to become "a kingdom of

priests and a holy nation." Rabbi Eliezer (in the Mechilta) listed the specifics of that foundation: a land suited for spiritual growth that we can call our own, the ability to build a "new world," i.e. a society that would be like no other, a righteous government that would oversee this society to ensure that it followed G-d's guidelines, a family designated for Temple service that wouldn't be distracted by having to work the land for survival, and a Tribe similarly designated to support them and to teach others how to live their lives properly. Included in this "good" was the culture that was being created that not only made it easier to merit the World to Come, but bestowed upon each member of the nation a share in that world just for being a supporting member of that culture. This aspect only applies to our nation, and when Yisro understood how beneficial this system was for every individual who was part of it, he rejoiced.

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals to us the unlimited potential of 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?!"

RABBI YAAKOV NEUBERGER

TorahWeb

The fervor that the picture communicates is in and of itself striking. On the day that Moshe returns to his people, one day after the Torah has been revealed for a second time, he is immediately besieged by throngs of Jews, all waiting on line from dawn to dark for his sagacious words. Some come with questions, some come with disputes and many come to bare their hearts and seek his counsel and prayers (Ramban.)

The same picture evokes Yisro's great concern for his son in law's stamina, as Yisro observes Moshe respond to the questions and travails of every Jewish family with little more than the skeleton crew of Aharon, Chur and seventy elders (Rashi.) "Navol tibol -- you will certainly become exhausted, you and those who are with you, as you have over-extended yourself; you cannot do it alone."

One has to wonder why Yisro is worried about the physical capacity of someone who just completed three forty day stints with no sleep, no food and no water! Furthermore, has Yisro not been around long enough to expect that communal curiosity and excitement will eventually abate once Moshe has been home for a little longer?

Perhaps that is why the Rashbam interprets "navol tibol" to say that Moshe may confuse the various questions that the Jews raise and his responses may not be as accurate and as personal as Yisro thinks our people deserve. Perhaps Yisro wants to be assured that every Jew will feel Moshe's "humanness" as he listens to them and responds to them. Yisro might be concerned that Jews will be unsure of the advice they receive from one who brings the super human blessings of his divine encounters to this world, one who never tires and never falters, and they will forever wonder if they can rely on Moshe rabbeinu's judgment.

Yet Yisro's words display fear about the commitment of the Jewish people even as he is troubled by the schedule of his daughter's husband. "Also the people who are with you" is interpreted by Chazal as referring to the little team that Moshe had with him but, as the Ohr Chaim suggests, it can also refer to the Jewish people whose patience is being tested as they stand in long lines for hours and hours. Even Rashi (13:18) sees in Yisro's earlier words that he is bothered that the questioners are not accorded the respect that leadership has to show its constituents.

Thus it seems to me that Yisro is neither worried about Moshe's physical endurance that has been tested time and again, nor about the pressures of a people who within time may have to be inspired to ask respectfully or may well find wisdom among Moshe's students. Rather, Yisro was unsure of a system that did not sustain the passion to ask or the preciousness of inquiry. If there was only one address for questions

regarding an entirely new body of knowledge that needed to be understood and applied, or even a few addresses, and those addresses would reasonably be perceived to be overextended, and there were terribly long lines to access them -- could questions and clarity really be so important? It would almost seem that we really did not want questions, despite Moshe using all his strength to teach otherwise.

After all, Yisro's driving mission in life included the hot pursuit of questions and curiosities, pursued with rigor and vigor. Indeed Yisro, as Chazal deduce from various references, lived a life of intellectual integrity largely unsatisfied with the "truths" of his milieu. His readiness to sacrifice prestige and position was well proven and it now brought him, and he alone, to our people. Entire nations were awed by krias Yam Suf and countless tasted the runoff waters of the mon, but Yisro alone changed his life to seek "new" truths. He alone may have worried that a religion that would not enthusiastically embrace questioners and their inquiries would not inspire confidence in its teachings and wisdom, would not lead adherents to penetrate its depths, and its depths would not penetrate its adherents.

The joy that undoubtedly surged inside Yisro as he witnessed the dedication of the people to understand was possibly only muted by his anxiousness to maintain that excitement and preserve it for all time. We can well understand the alacrity with which Moshe accepted Yisro's perspective and perhaps that is why to this day students of Torah are often more impressed by an incisive question than an answer of equal insight.

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.