

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he revelation at Mount Sinai -- the central episode not only of the parshah of Yitro, but of Judaism as a whole -- was unique in the religious history of mankind. Other faiths (Christianity and Islam) have claimed to be religions of revelation, but in both cases the revelation of which they spoke was to an individual ("the son of God", "the prophet of God"). Only in Judaism was God's self-disclosure not to an individual (a prophet) or a group (the elders) but to an entire nation, young and old, men, women and children, the righteous and not yet righteous alike.

From the very outset, the people of Israel knew something unprecedented had happened at Sinai. As Moses put it, forty years later: "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?" (Deut. 4:32-33).

For the great Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, the significance was primarily epistemological. It created certainty and removed doubt. The authenticity of a revelation experienced by one person could be questioned. One witnessed by millions could not. God disclosed His presence in public to remove any possible suspicion that the presence felt, and the voice heard, were not genuine.

Looking however at the history of mankind since those days, it is clear that there was another significance also -- one that had to do not with religious knowledge but with politics. At Sinai a new kind of nation was being formed and a new kind of society -- one that would be an antithesis of Egypt in which the few had power and the many were enslaved. At Sinai, the children of Israel ceased to be a group of individuals and became, for the first time, a body politic: a nation of citizens under the sovereignty of God whose written constitution was the Torah and whose mission was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Even today, standard works on the history of political thought trace it back, through Marx, Rousseau and Hobbes to Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics and the Greek city state (Athens in particular) of the fourth century BCE. This is a serious error. To be sure, words

like "democracy" (rule by the people) are Greek in origin. The Greeks were gifted at abstract nouns and systematic thought. However, if we look at the "birth of the modern" -- at figures like Milton, Hobbes and Locke in England, and the founding fathers of America -- the book with which they were in dialogue was not Plato or Aristotle but the Hebrew Bible. Hobbes quotes it 657 times in *The Leviathan* alone. Long before the Greek philosophers, and far more profoundly, at Mount Sinai the concept of a free society was born.

Three things about that moment were to prove crucial. The first is that long before Israel entered the land and acquired their own system of government (first by judges, later by kings), they had entered into an overarching covenant with God. That covenant (brit Sinai) set moral limits to the exercise of power. The code we call Torah established for the first time the primacy of right over might. Any king who behaved contrarily to Torah was acting *ultra vires*, and could be challenged. This is the single most important fact about biblical politics.

Democracy on the Greek model always had one fatal weakness. Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill called it "the tyranny of the majority". J. L. Talmon called it "totalitarian democracy." The rule of the majority contains no guarantee of the rights of minorities. As Lord Acton rightly noted, it was this that led to the downfall of Athens: "There was no law superior to that of the state. The lawgiver was above the law." In Judaism, by contrast, prophets were mandated to challenge the authority of the king if he acted against the terms of the Torah. Individuals were empowered to [The covenant at Sinai deserves to be seen as the single greatest step in the long road to a free society.] disobey illegal or immoral orders. For this alone, the covenant at Sinai deserves to be seen as the single greatest step in the long road to a free society.

The second key element lies in the prologue to the covenant. God tells Moses: "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel. 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now, if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, you will be My treasured possession, for the whole earth is Mine. You will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...'" Moses tells this to the people, who reply: "We will do everything the Lord has said."

What is the significance of this exchange? It means that until the people had signified their consent, the revelation could not proceed. There is no legitimate government without the consent of the governed, even if the governor is Creator of heaven and earth. I know of few more radical ideas anywhere. To be sure, there were sages in the Talmudic period who questioned whether the acceptance of the covenant at Sinai was completely free. However, at the heart of Judaism is the idea -- way ahead of its time, and not always fully realised -- that the free God desires the free worship of free human beings. God, said the rabbis, does not act tyrannically with His creatures.

The third, equally ahead of its time, was that the partners to the covenant were to be "all the people" -- men, women and children. This fact is emphasised later on in the Torah in the mitzvah of Hakhel, the septennial covenant renewal ceremony. The Torah states specifically that the entire people is to be gathered together for this ceremony, "men, women and children." A thousand years later, when Athens experimented with democracy, only a limited section of society had political rights. Women, children, slaves and foreigners were excluded. In Britain, women did not get the vote until the twentieth century. According to the sages, when God was about to give the Torah at Sinai, He told Moses to consult first with the women and only then with the men ("thus shall you say to the house of Jacob" -- this means, the women). The Torah, Israel's "constitution of liberty", includes everyone. It is the first moment, by thousands of years, that citizenship is conceived as being universal.

There is much else to be said about the political theory of the Torah (see my *The Politics of Hope*, *The Dignity of Difference*, and *The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah* as well as the important works by Daniel Elazar and Michael Walzer). But one thing is clear. With the revelation at Sinai something unprecedented entered the human horizon. It would take centuries, millennia, before its full implications were understood. Abraham Lincoln said it best when he spoke of "a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." At Sinai, the politics of freedom was born. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd the entire nation responded together and said, 'Everything which the Lord has spoken, we shall do.'" (Exodus 19:8) What would happen if one of the religious parties in Israel received a majority of the popular vote, or was at least in the position of leading a coalition government? Would they set up moral squads to separate amorous couples, open up prisons for those who mix meat and milk dishes, and mete out corporal punishment for Shabbat desecrators?

I truly believe that despite the fact that we believe in 613 commandments, not 613 options or possibilities, secular Israel need not necessarily fear a fundamentalist religious state. In the words of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, religious commitment and religious coercion are mutually exclusive terms.

A midrashic interpretation of a verse in Yitro seems to lead to the opposite conclusion of what has just been said: "And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain." (Exodus 19:17)

R. Abdimi bar Hama comments that the verse comes to teach us that God picked up the mountain and "held it over their heads like a barrel, threatening 'If you will accept the Torah -- good; if not, there shall be your burial.'" (Shabbat 88a)

This is a difficult commentary at the very least. After all, the plain meaning of the biblical text portrays the Israelites as having accepted the Torah of their own free will. God enters into a covenant with the children of Abraham only after they declare, "We shall do and we shall obey [na'aseh ve-nishma]." R. Abdimi's midrashic reading contradicts this description at the conclusion of the Torah portion of Mishpatim.

Based upon our earlier citation, Rabbi Soloveitchik is obviously disturbed by the ramifications of this midrash. In a footnote to one of the passages in his novella *The Lonely Man of Faith*, the sage maintains that the biblical description of freely accepted obligation is dealing with the "in general" acquiescence of the Israelites to live by divine will. The talmudic addition of coercion refers to the details of the religio-legal structure, concerning which different individuals at different times must be forced to comply.

In order to understand this position in greater detail, it is important to study a passage in Maimonides' Code of Jewish Law pertaining to divorce. Maimonides writes that if a man is ordered by a Jewish court to grant his wife a divorce and he refuses to do so, he must be forced (through financial sanctions, the removal of professional and personal licenses such as a medical license or a driver's license, incarceration or even physical beatings) to comply until he says "I want to divorce her." He then gives her a get [writ of divorce] and the get is valid [kosher]. (Laws of Divorce 2:20)

Isn't this coercion? Doesn't Jewish law require that a get be given of one's own volition? How can a court coerce an individual into saying "I want to"?

Maimonides continues, explaining the logic of the Talmud: "We do not consider anyone to be compelled unless he is forced to do something which the Torah does not obligate him to do... but someone whose evil desire encourages him to nullify a commandment or commit a transgression can be beaten until he does what he is obligated to do or until he stops doing what he is forbidden to do. This is not considered coercion because it is as if his own evil instincts compelled him to go

against the Torah. Although this individual may not want to divorce his wife, since he does wish to be a member of the Jewish people, and he does desire to keep the commandments and keep away from transgression, except that in this instance, his evil instinct overpowered him, we therefore beat him until his evil instinct becomes weakened. He then says, "I want to give her a divorce." (ibid.)

Using terminology from the Zohar, Rabbi A.Y. Hakohen Kook would explain the dilemma of this recalcitrant husband in terms of two "wills" within the human personality, a "lower will" and a "higher will." Each person must somehow orchestrate these two inclinations. An individual who is on a diet, for example, and is offered chocolate cream pie, might well say, "My lower will wants it, but my higher will does not." Similarly in this case: the lower will of the husband might want to lash out at the woman, but the Bet Din knows that the individual's higher will truly wants to do what is right.

If this indeed is the correct interpretation of Maimonides' ruling, one might fear that when it comes to the question of keeping the Shabbat in a Torah majority government with the power to enact laws, the ruling party might very well argue that the higher will of the Israeli citizenry wants to go to synagogue and not the cinema on Friday night, wants to eat kugel and not cheeseburgers, and on this basis argue that religious legislation is the higher will of every Jew in Israel. In the final analysis it is rather paternalistic to tell the secular Jew "I know that what you really want is to daven rather than disco on Friday evening!"

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, a nineteenth-century commentator on the Bible and the Mishneh Torah, interprets Maimonides' law about the forcing of a divorce differently. Maintaining that the last two sentences in the Previous citation regarding divorce seem superfluous, he interprets Maimonides to be saying that only a person who has announced that he is observant of religious law (Torah u-mitzvot) and that he wants to keep all the commandments may be compelled to listen to the sages. To return to our earlier example, if I am offered a piece of chocolate cream pie and my wife says "He does not want it," she is being paternalistic. But if I just joined Weight Watchers, she is being helpful.

Certainly, the interpretation of Rabbi Meir Simcha applies in the realm of purely religious actions, between the individual and God. In the area of interpersonal human relationships, a court of law can and must use coercion in order to establish a just society in which no one may be allowed to unjustly take advantage of the other. But in the area of religious law, of what value to God is a ritual act coerced by religious judges? Hence, only those who publicly identify themselves with the tradition may be considered to be exercising this higher will if they are coerced to perform a ritual act. The truth is that in the world at large this is exactly how we live. Assume for a moment that an

individual is caught speeding and a policeman pulls him to the side. A natural tendency might be to try to get out of the ticket by coming up with all sorts of stories, explaining that he was driving to a special occasion to which one could not be late, or pleading a momentary lapse of awareness. But no one in their right mind would argue that they are opposed to the entire system of traffic laws, that it is everyone's democratic right to drive their car as quickly as (or in whichever direction) their fancy takes them. The assumption of whoever applies for a driver's license is their acceptance of the traffic laws. People understand that these laws merely help them to keep to the regulations which they know are for everyone's good, including their own!

We constantly see how laws intervene in the actions of people if such actions endanger others. This is the unspoken agreement between all members of society. When it comes to areas of ritual law between human and God, however, any enforced action will only empty the deed of any semblance of true religious significance or divine service. Only for those who privately and publicly accept the entire system of divine commandments and rabbinic interpretation, and who are desirous of a punitive structure to help keep them on the straight and narrow in terms of specific details, does any kind of external regulation begin to make sense. Everyone ought to be punished for traffic violations, but not necessarily for Shabbat desecration. Regarding the Shabbat, one must first be convinced, not coerced. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Shemot: Defining a Nation, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at [bit.ly/RiskinShemot](http://bit.ly/RiskinShemot). © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he Torah teaches us important lessons about wealth and money in this week's parsha. In fact, many of the Ten Commandments deal directly or indirectly with money and wealth. The commandment about the observance of the Sabbath teaches us that money is not nearly everything in life.

The drive for wealth and the necessity of making a living in difficult times drove the immigrant generation in the United States, which was overwhelmingly traditional, to work on the Sabbath. This has inevitably led to the great and tragic assimilation of a great many of Americans of Jewish descent and to a wave of crippling intermarriages. There are exceptions to this rule, but generally it is true. Those who discarded the Sabbath in favor of wealth and seeming physical comfort are the unfortunate and unintentional progenitors of a generation of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who are no longer Jewish in any sense of the word.

Wealth and money are necessary parts of everyone's life. But the Sabbath trumps them – it is the most important element of Jewish life and the one guarantee of Jewish success and survival. A more direct view on the problem of money and wealth lies in the commandment not to covet. Coveting the belongings, the possessions, or the spouse of another is one of the prohibitions of the Ten Commandments. One could say it lies at the root of many of the other commandments. One cannot understand the commandment not to kill others and not to steal from them only through the prism of the commandment not to covet what belongs to someone else. It is as simple as that.

Stealing comes in many forms and shapes and circumstances. From misleading advertising to Bernard Madoff, stealing is pretty much rife in the world. The rabbis of the Talmud stated that most people eventually are found guilty of having stolen something in their lives. The drive to acquire more for one's own self, to be richer and apparently more financially secure, drives the person to steal in a myriad ways. The drive for wealth forces moral and eventually legal compromises with the pure conscience that the Torah wished us to possess. The halacha even possesses within it the concept of stealing someone else's mind and intent. One is not allowed to mislead other people in order to obtain financial reward for one's self. I knew a good person who, while selling his home, nevertheless informed the potential buyer of all of the hidden defects that existed in the house. Kosher money is harder to come by than is kosher food.

The drive for wealth, if left unchecked and untamed, can also eventually lead to murder. Many a murder has occurred in human life because of money. King Solomon stated that money can answer all problems, but nevertheless he was forced to admit in his own life that he was not exactly accurate in that assessment. It can answer many problems, but it is not all powerful. All money is fungible and impermanent. Don't take my word for it; just look around at our current world. © 2026 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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

"Anything 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

## Shabbat

As part of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to observe the seventh day of the week as a day of rest is much more involved than the words written here. The fourth commandment from Hashem is written in two different sets of words, one set in this first telling of the Ten Commandments and a second set written in the last Book of the Torah where the Ten Commandments are written again with some

slight changes. The most noticeable change is the first word of our commandment. In our parasha, the first word is “zachor, remember,” but in the retelling, the first word is “shamor, observe.” This difference will be discussed later. Both these commands lead to the Laws of Shabbat.

The Torah states: “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it. Six days shall you work and do all your work; but the seventh day is Shabbat to Hashem, your Elokim; you shall not do any work – you and your son and your daughter, your slave and your maidservant and your animal, and your convert within your gates – for in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, Hashem blessed the Shabbat day and sanctified it.”

There are a number of misconceptions concerning the commandment of Shabbat. Perhaps the first misconception is that the commandment of Shabbat is mentioned here first in the “Ten Commandments.” But Shabbat is taught to the people twice before their encounter with Hashem on Har Sinai. When the B’nei Yisrael left the Red Sea, they travelled for three days to Mara where they found bitter water. Later when the people complained of a lack of food, Hashem gave them a miraculous food, the Manna (Mon) which fell for them every morning except Shabbat. A double portion fell on Friday, which did not spoil the next day as it normally did on a weekday. The people were commanded on both these occasions on one aspect of Shabbat, both involving the holiness of the seventh day.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that these prior mentions of Shabbat were different. The command at Mara was “Shabbat shel menucha, a Shabbat of rest;” the Shabbat of the Mon was “Shabbat shel kedusha, a Shabbat of Holiness.” HaRav Sorotzkin posits that the B’nei Yisrael were already familiar with a day of rest for the body, as the Egyptians allowed them one day a week to rest. What they did not experience until the Mon was a day in which their souls could rise above the business of the weekday: a day on which even discussion of weekday business was forbidden, when carrying from a private area to a public area was prohibited, and other restrictions concerning permissible activities on weekdays were prevented, which separated this day from others. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that even though the people accepted the Shabbat of rest and of holiness, it was still unstable in their minds, as what work was restricted was still unclear until the Ten Commandments and the Oral Law which accompanied and clarified them.

Of course, most people will know that Shabbat is memorable because of the six days of Creation followed by a day of rest. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains, “Hence the Shabbat is not introduced here as a new institution, the existence of Shabbat is presumed. It was there already, had been there since Man first existed in this world, and Israel is only

commanded ‘not to forget’ the Shabbat, in the way that humanity that had gone before, as well as his contemporary fellow-men, had forgotten it, and were forgetting it.”

A condition of this Day of Rest was commanded next, “Six days shall you work and do all your work.” Only when one works six days a week can one fully appreciate a day on which work is forbidden. This does not mean that a person who works part-time or five days a week or is retired does not “work” when he does not have a formal job. That is because there is a definition of “melacha, work” which applies to these sentences. There are several general terms for work in the Torah, the two most prominent being avodah and m’lachah. HaAmek Davar explains that “avodah” is work that gives one a livelihood, such as work in agriculture or business. Often this is called “m’lechet avodah,” which again describes livelihood. HaAmek Davar suggests that “m’lachah” by itself is for pleasure, such as baking or cooking which adds pleasure to one’s life. Both forms of work must be done six days a week, but neither may be done on Shabbat. HaRav Hirsch states: “On Shabbat you strip yourself of your glorious mastery over the matter of the world, and lay yourself and your world, acknowledgingly at the feet of Hashem, your Elokim.” The work one does during the week is only to recognize that, as Shabbat demonstrates, that everything we do is in service to Hashem.

It is also important to note that the concept of Shabbat applied also to one’s children, one’s servant, one’s animal, and the convert in your midst: “you shall not do any work – you and your son and your daughter, your slave and your maidservant and your animal, and your convert within your gates.” All Jews are commanded to observe Shabbat, and even those animals or slaves who are owned by a Jew is not permitted to do work on Shabbat, even for his own benefit. Even the non-Jew who may work for the synagogue or our homes must know what work they are to do beforehand. We may not direct them on Shabbat to do work for us that was not part of that original list of tasks discussed before Shabbat.

HaRav Hirsch warns against misinterpreting Shabbat as only a day to attend the service and hear the sermon given by the Rabbi. Shabbat is a set of thirty-nine basic Laws, based on the types of work used either to build or serve in the Temple. Shabbat observance is not only prayer and rest but also avoiding any work that is deemed to be work that was done in the Temple or resembles work that was done. This is not a simple task of avoiding thirty-nine types of work; it is a way for Man to stop his use of the land and return the world to Hashem.

The Talmud remarks that Shabbat is the foundation for all of the laws of the Torah. This does not mean that the Laws of Shabbat form the other Laws of the Torah, but instead, that the concept of serving

Hashem defines Shabbat and the weekday's laws. May we observe Shabbat and understand its message.  
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#### RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

## Reflections

**O**ur ancestors' acceptance of the Torah was imperfect: It included an element of coercion. The Gemara (Shabbos 88a) teaches that "Hashem held the mountain over the Jews' heads like a gigis (barrel)." The Maharal explains that the stunning nature of the experience, the terrifying interaction of human and Divine, left no opportunity for full free will. Directly interacting with Hashem, how could one possibly refuse?

And that "coercion" remained a moda'ah, a "remonstration," against Klal Yisrael, the Gemara teaches, until... the events commemorated by Purim.

In the time of Esther, the Jews chose, without being forced, entirely of their own volition, to perceive Hashem's presence where -- diametric to the Sinai experience -- it was anything but obvious. Instead of seeing the threat against them in mundane terms, Persia's Jews recognized it as Hashem's message, and responded with prayer, fasting, and repentance.

And so, by freely choosing to perceive Hashem's hand in the happenings, they supplied what was missing at Sinai, confirming that the Jewish acceptance of the Torah was -- and is -- wholehearted and sincere.

The Gemara's image of Hashem "holding the mountain over their heads" at Sinai is a striking metaphor. But why "like a barrel"? Isn't a mountain overhead compelling enough? Who ordered the barrel?

One of the ways a person's true nature is revealed, Chazal teach, is "b'koso" -- "in his cup" -- in his behavior when his inhibitions are diluted by drink (Eruvin, 65b).

On Purim, in striking contrast to the rest of the Jewish year, we are enjoined to drink wine to excess. And what emerges from that observance, at least among Jews who approach the mitzvah properly, is not what we usually associate with inebriation, but rather a holy, if uninhibited, mode of mind.

Thus the revelation of our true nature provided by the Purim-mitzvah perfectly parallels the revelation of the Jews' wholehearted acceptance of Hashem that took place at the time of the Purim events. With our masks (another Purim motif, of course) removed, we show our true selves.

In Pirkei Avos (4:20), Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi teaches us not "to look at the container, but at what it holds."

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

Hashem doesn't look at the container -- the coercion symbolized by the barrel held over our ancestors' heads -- but rather at how Jews act when they have imbibed its contents. He sees not our ancestors'

lack of full free will at the Sinai experience but the deeper truth about the Jewish essence, the one revealed by Purim's wine. © 2026 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

#### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

**"A**nd Yisro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that G-d did to Moshe and to his nation Israel..." (Shemos 18:1) Much is written about the appellations of Yisro. He was described both as being the father-in-law of Moshe and the Priest of Midian. Most explain that his true source of honor came from his connection to Moshe, and not his own deeds.

In addition, when it says he heard about all that Hashem did to Moshe and Israel, the word, "to Moshe" is superfluous, because Moshe was included in Klal Yisrael. Therefore, Rashi tells us that Moshe was equivalent to the entire Jewish nation. Whether in spiritual greatness or some other way, Moshe is considered a counterbalance for the people, so it earns special mention here.

We'd like to suggest an approach to reconcile both of these, which teaches us a valuable lesson at the same time. Yisro was the Priest of Midian. He led his group of people, and the nation of Israel shouldn't have been of concern to him. Why, then, did their story make an impression on him? Because he was the father-in-law of Moshe.

Having a connection to Moshe, and then hearing all Hashem did for him, was a gateway for Yisro to feel connected to the entire nation of Israel. In order for us to appreciate others, we need to get to know them somehow. If we find even a small connection, it can lead to a greater one. Because Yisro knew the fine qualities of one Jew, he was able to feel for, and rejoice at the success of, the entire Jewish nation.

One of the most famous Mishnayos in Shas is, "R' Chananya ben Akashya omer, ratza HaKadosh Baruch Hu L'Zakos es Yisrael, Lefichach, Hirba Lahem Torah U'Mitzvos." R' Chananya ben Akashya says, "The Holy One Blessed Be He wanted to give Yisrael merit, therefore He gave them an abundance of Torah and Mitzvos."

The question is that if Hashem wanted us to be meritorious, why did He give us so many ways to fail and transgress? Give us a couple of easy mitzvos and we'll make them happen.

The answer is as we are saying. Hashem wants us to be meritorious and wants us to come close to Him. Therefore, He gave us so many different mitzvos, so we can each find at least one which speaks to us. Through that one, we can come closer to Hashem, appreciate Him, love Him, and grow to be enamored with the entire corpus of Jewish thought, law, and practice.

Just as Yisro knew Moshe, and through that, he came to know and love the entire Jewish People, so

should we use the small openings of connection with Hashem to create large apertures of even more connection. And when we look at our fellow Jews, finding one positive aspect to focus on will enable us to look at them fully with love and appreciation.

*Because of his burning love of all his fellow Jews, R' Avrohom Yehoshua Heschel z"l, the Apter Rav, was called the Ohaiv Yisrael, which was also the name of his sefer.*

*He posited that every Parsha contained the message of loving our fellow Jews. Someone asked him how we see that in Parshas Balak. "That's easy," he replied. "Balak is Vais, Lamed, Kuf, which stands for "V'ahavta L'Rayacha Kamocha, love your fellow as yourself."*

*"But Rebbe," the man countered, "V'ahavta is with a vov, not a vais, and Kamocha is a chof, not a kuf!"*

*"Ach," said the Rav. "If you're that exacting, you'll never be able to love anyone!"* © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

**RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**A** recent article about the famous musician John Lennon revealed that he was such a bully that his former academic institution refused to even acknowledge his attendance. "When John left, he was that much of a nuisance and a bully and that much of a poor student, the school staff didn't want to acknowledge that he ever went to the school and removed any trace of him." This is according to Tom Barry, a current teacher at Quarry Bank School in Liverpool, where Lennon attended from 1952-57.

Barry told The Independent, "They didn't want to idolize him. They didn't want students to think you can prat about and be a bit of a bully and still be successful." Consequently, "He was never spoken about; he was never acknowledged (even through all the years of Beatlemania). They just pretended that he never went there." I find it heartening that the school never capitalized on his fame; they refused to trade their values for fame and fortune.

For much of history, bullying was viewed as an inevitable part of growing up. For example, literature from British boarding schools frequently depicted bullying and hazing as a rite of passage rather than a social problem; these were social mechanisms through which boys were hardened into men. Memoirs from this period depict bullying as regrettable but inevitable -- an informal system of social regulation of sorts. It was only in the late 20th century that bullying came to be seen as a problem.

Today, bullying has expanded beyond schoolyards and into digital spaces. Cyberbullying -- harassment through social media, messaging apps, and online platforms -- has transformed the scale and intensity of peer aggression. Unlike traditional bullying,

cyberbullying can be constant, anonymous, and public, making its psychological impact especially severe. Teen cyberbullying rose from about 16% (2016) to 27% (2023) and continues to rise. There are hundreds of news stories on the devastating effects of bullying in schools, from physical and mental anguish to adolescent suicides.

Thankfully, societal awareness has dramatically increased. Schools are now implementing anti-bullying policies, social-emotional learning programs, and reporting systems. Governments have enacted laws requiring intervention and accountability. But while this may address the issue of bullying in education, it does not change the behavior and adolescent bullies often grow up to become adult bullies. Bullying is a societal issue seen in businesses, in social circles, and within religious oppression. Unfortunately, as Jews we have experienced this abhorrent behavior for three millennia.

Friedrich Nietzsche believed that human behavior is driven by the "will to power." He argued with Darwin who believed human behavior was about survival, and with Freud who believed that it was driven by pleasure. In Nietzsche's view, life is a just a struggle to become more powerful; to dominate, control, assert, shape, and overcome. He did not foresee middle school, but if he had, he probably would have written fewer aphorisms and spent more time on apology letters to future victims of this "will to power."

Thus, from a psychological perspective bullying often emerges from a desire for power, recognition, and control. In their personal lives, bullies frequently experience insecurity, emotional chaos, and repression. They often replicate aggressive patterns observed in family environments. Many psychologists note that children who experience abandonment, instability, or unresolved grief often express pain through aggression and domination. Bullying is just a way to try and take back control. By victimizing others, the bully emotionally rationalizes that he himself is no longer a victim.

John Lennon came from a broken home and his father disappeared for years. He had a history of domestic violence and in a 1970 interview with Rolling Stones magazine he admitted; "I used to be cruel to my woman, and physically -- any woman. I was a hitter. I couldn't express myself and I hit. I fought men and I hit women."

I have previously written about the well-known book, The Strong Horse by Lee Smith. The title comes from a quote by Osama Bin Laden: "People naturally follow the strong horse." The author contends that legitimacy in Arab politics usually comes from power rather than institutions, law, or democratic consent.

Lee argues that modern Arab states often function like extended clans. Leaders rule through patronage, fear, and loyalty networks. Institutions are weaker than personal power. This explains why dictatorships persist and democracy struggles to take



root. Violence is not an anomaly, but a structural feature. Civil wars, sectarian conflicts, and revolutions are not aberrations but rather they are expressions of the underlying power struggles. This is also the root cause of what happened when the US naively tried to introduce democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan -- absolute chaos reigned.

In much of Arab political culture, legitimacy comes from strength, not moral authority, democracy, or ideology. This is highlighted in Arab society by their focus of total domination over every aspect of women's lives - it's essential to keep them the weaker sex. In their warped perspective it's a zero-sum game; any rights that women gain erodes men's power.

This also explains the Arab obsession with Jews and the State of Israel -- they find Jewish success, influence, and power a direct and existential threat to them and their goal of Muslim domination and supremacy. There is no concept of live and let live. To them, there is a finite amount of power and they are hell-bent on taking it all. No one, therefore, should be surprised when they use verbal abuse and physical violence to promote their ideology. After all, dominance through violence IS their worldview.

This week's Torah portion includes the Ten Commandments and a very relevant message to this discussion. The tenth and final commandment deals with envy: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor any thing that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:14).

There is much discussion by the commentators regarding this commandment. Rabbi Menachem Meiri (1249-1316), a medieval sage of southern France, points out that whenever we have a series of ten (Abraham's Ten Tests, the Ten Plagues, the Ten Commandments, etc.) the tenth in the series is always the most intense and often encompasses the previous nine. It also often creates a new reality; e.g. when the tenth man arrives to synagogue he creates the quorum, and there is now a new entity (a minyan) present.

In a similar vein, Rebbeinu Bachya (1255-1340), the famous Spanish Biblical commentator and philosopher, states in his epic work on philosophy the Kad HaKemach, that coveting is the root of all sins. In his commentary on the Torah he says that the reason theft is not one of the Ten Commandments is because it is included in coveting. He goes on to say that it is so severe that it can lead to murder.

Maimonides, seemingly bothered by the fact that in Judaism mere thoughts are not liable for punishment, states (Hilchos Gezaila V'aveida 1:9-10), "Anyone who covets a servant, a maidservant, a house, or utensils that belong to a colleague, or any other article that he can purchase from him and pressures him with friends and requests until he agrees to sell it to him, violates a negative commandment, even though he pays much

money for it, as Exodus 20:14 states: 'Do not covet.'"

But if this is true, why do we need some of the other commandments? For example, the seventh commandment against adultery also seems to involve an illicit desire that is then acted upon. Essentially, they encompass the same issue, so why are both these commandments necessary?

In enumerating the Ten Tests of Abraham most commentators count Pharaoh and the Philistine king Avimelech taking Sarah as two separate tests. Why should this be? After all, Abraham losing his wife twice to a local overlord seems to be the exact same test!

However, if one reads the two stories carefully one sees that Pharaoh was taking Sarah because she was beautiful and he desired her. Whereas in the story of Avimelech it was about power; any woman who came into his kingdom was fair game to be taken because he was in control. Consequently, Sarah being taken by Pharaoh was an act against her, while Avimelech taking Sarah was about control and domination -- an overt act against Abraham. Thus, they were two separate tests.

So too here. If we read the tenth commandment carefully we see that it's not merely desire; it's desiring something because it belongs to your friend. It's a power move; it's about asserting your dominance over something that he owns. It's not that you want a car like he has or a home like he has -- you want HIS car, HIS wife, HIS home, HIS servant. It's about control and having the world revolve around you, which is a catastrophic character flaw and an overt act against the Almighty.

This is a common trait among self-centered leaders; they think that everything belongs to them and the clearest manifestation of this is in how they abuse the women in their orbit. Joseph Smith of Early Mormonism, David Koresh of the Branch Davidians, Jim Jones of the People's Temple, Reverend Moon of the Unification Church, and Keith Raniere of NXIVM were all abusive leaders from recent history. The historical list is practically endless.

All these leaders are essentially bullies whose sole interest is to dominate and subjugate everyone else. This is what the Torah is legislating against. Living in a theocentric universe means that we all have a King and the entirety of our personal space is subservient to His will. It's only through following the Torah -- the owner's manual for this world prepared by the Almighty -- that we will find true happiness and meaning in our lives. The Torah can lead us to actualization, but not at the expense of anyone else.

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