

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

Yisro 5774

שבת פרשת יתרו

In My Opinion :: Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog

At the end of last month I attended an all day conference here in Jerusalem commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of Rabbi Isaac Herzog's seminal Ph.D. thesis that he submitted to the University of London. The thesis was a scientific, historical and halachic review of the source of the ancient dye used to produce techelet colored wool for the priestly garments and for the tzitzit/fringes of four cornered garments worn regularly by Jews.

The conference was attended by a large and diverse audience and the presentations were of high caliber and most interesting and informative. But this article is not so much about techelet, blue dye, indigo or royal purple coloring, as it is about the author of that thesis, one of the great rabbis of the past century who in my opinion has never been given his proper due in the Torah or general world of our time.

There are probably many reasons for this lack of knowledge and approbation about him and his accomplishments. But I feel that the main reason for this is that he was much too unique, different, out-of-the-box, apolitical, fearless in his views and decisions while at the same time being humble, self-effacing and modest to the extreme in his personal and private life.

For various reasons, psychological, theological and historical, the Jewish "establishment" world does not easily tolerate such people. They make us "normal" people, conditioned by dogma, preconceived notions and societal conformity, uncomfortable, and they force us to think. And, that can be a painful experience.

Rabbi Herzog was a linguist, having a grasp of a dozen languages including many ancient ones such as Sumerian and Acadian as well as the classical Greek and Latin. He was a biblical scholar of note, a Hebrew grammarian and a scholar of Talmud, rabbinic writings and halachic decisions, of enormous proportions. His memory and genius were of a prodigious nature.

He also explored the sciences such as zoology, botany, astronomy, physics and chemistry with diligence and perspective. But his main passion, intellectual, emotional and commitment wise, was Torah in all of its variety and ramifications. His many volumes of response as well as his opinions on halachic issues and cases brought before the High Court of the Chief Rabbinate here in Israel during his years as its head judge and Chief Rabbi are a treasure trove of Torah erudition, hard-headed logic and a practical and yet compassionate worldview of life, people and Jewish society.

Worldlier than his predecessor Rav Kook, Rav Herzog was the Chief Rabbi during one of the most turbulent and decisive times in Jewish history - from 1936 to 1959. He saw the Jewish world destroyed and rebuilt during his tenure in office. He never flinched or faltered in front of the pressures exerted upon him by the non-Jewish world generally, the Catholic Church particularly, the then avowedly and militantly secular Zionist leadership of the emerging state, the violent zealots of Jerusalem who opposed him without truly knowing him, the British rulers of the country and the complexities of being the Chief Rabbi for hundreds of rabbis of different personalities, ideologies and ambitions. His gentle personal nature belied his iron determination and stubborn love for Torah and the Jewish people.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel today is no longer that of Rav Kook or Rav Herzog. Though always subject to political competition – Rav Herzog had to defeat Rav Charlop in a hard fought election campaign in 1936 to become the Chief Rabbi – it has further deteriorated now, becoming seen

as almost a purely political office instead of being one of spiritual vision and national leadership.

The recent unfortunate scandals that have surrounded the office have only further diminished its original luster. There is always nostalgia present when looking back at previous generations and their leaders. Yet I believe that no one would disagree as to the statement that the Chief Rabbinate of Israel has never again achieved the dignity and widespread support of all sections of the Jewish world that it had during the tenure of Rabbi Herzog. And we are all the poorer because of this decline of an important institution in Israeli and Jewish life. The Talmud teaches us that superior people are not an easily found commodity. Therefore the Lord, so to speak, scattered them throughout the ages and implanted them in certain separate generations. Rabbi Herzog was such a superior person implanted by God at a special time and in a special generation of Jewish history. His contributions to Jewish scholarship, life and rebirth remain today and we are all in his debt.

Shabat shalom

Weekly Parsha :: Rabbi Berel Wein

Yitro

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.

Shabat shalom

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Yitro

For the week ending 18 January 2014 / 17 Shevat 5774

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

Taking Off Your Gloves

You hurry down the platform. You have to take the next train out of town. The train whistles. It's about to leave. To open the door of the carriage you need to remove your glove. As you do so, the glove slips from your grasp, floats neatly between the bottom of the train and the platform, and lands on the track. There's nothing you can do. Either you lose the train and save the glove, or lose the glove and catch the train.

What would you do? Miss the train and save the glove? Or save the glove and miss the train? Well, this is what one of the great figures of the Mussar movement did:

He took off his other glove and threw it under the track.

If you look in the written Torah you'll be hard pressed to find a single mention of the word 'rights'. Obligations – of these, the Torah is full. Obligations of a master to a slave; the obligations of a child to its parents; of a pupil to his teacher and vice versa; of a community to the poor; of the individual to the community; obligations to the orphaned, to the sick, to the convert; the obligations of man to G-d. 'Rights', however, are something that the Torah hardly mentions. Why?

You can construct a legal system that spells out people's rights ("...all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...") or you can write a code, like the written Torah, that spells out their obligations. You'll get to the same place. The end result will be the same because to the extent that you have obligations you don't need rights, and vice versa. The end result will be the same.

With one big difference.

If you base a system of law on rights you turn people into takers; if you base it on obligations you turn them into givers.

The Torah wants to create a nation of givers, a nation who will throw the other glove under the train so the person who finds it will have another to complete the pair.

Author's note: If anyone is familiar with the "glove" story and can let me know who this was, please email me at yasinclair@gmail.com – thank you.

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Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parshas Yisro

And Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, heard about everything that G-d had done for Moshe and for his people, Yisrael. (18:1)

When Ariel Sharon, military leader and eventual prime minister of Israel, lost a son in a tragic accident, he was overcome with grief. A mutual friend approached Horav Aryeh Levine, zl, and asked him to invite Sharon to his home. Perhaps the general would be moved by the tzaddik's divrei nechamah, words of comfort. Thus far, no one was really having much luck in reaching him. Sadly, this was not Sharon's first encounter with tragedy, having lost his first wife and a son in a road accident.

The tzaddik absolutely refused to have Sharon come to his house. "It is my mitzvah to comfort the bereaved," Rav Aryeh said. "I will go to his house." This is part and parcel of the mitzvah of nichum aveilim, comforting mourners.

"But the Rav is not well," his friend countered. Apparently, this meeting took place during one of Rav Aryeh's illnesses, when he was extremely ill. "It is no matter. I am going." Rav Aryeh rose from his bed, and, with great determination, went to visit Ariel Sharon. The Rav walked into his home and encountered a broken man. The grief had taken its toll on him. Rav Aryeh spoke at length about the meaning of tragedy and made a strong attempt at alleviating some of the sadness from Sharon's life. After returning home to Yerushalayim, Rav Aryeh purchased mezuzos in silver cases and had them sent to Sharon as a gift. Apparently, when he was there, he had not noticed mezuzos on any of the doorposts.

Ariel Sharon never forgot Rav Aryeh's act of kindness. The well-known tzaddik of Yerushalayim was a busy man. Yet, he made time to comfort a bereaved father. He would never forget this gesture. Rav Aryeh was so ill that he was later admitted to Hadassah Hospital for a while, during which time Sharon made a special trip to visit him.

Rav Aryeh was profoundly moved by this act of kindness. He was a man who commanded the entire Israeli army, the soldiers for whom Rav Aryeh regularly prayed. He would say, "They are angels; not one of us know how to appreciate or to value them properly."

Excited and very pleased to see his visitor, Rav Aryeh embraced the general with unusual warmth. Then Rav Aryeh thought to himself, "What am I to tell him?" It is not as if the two had very much in common. That Shabbos was Parashas Yisro. So, Rav Aryeh decided to discuss the first pasuk of the parsha. "We read Parashas Yisro this Shabbos: 'And Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, heard about everything that G-d had done for Moshe and for his people Yisrael.' Rashi asks, 'What did Yisro hear that motivated him to leave his home in Midyan and trek to the wilderness and join the Jewish People?' Rashi replies: 'He heard about the parting of the Red Sea, and the battle between the Jewish People and Amalek.'

"Why was it necessary for Yisro to hear about two miracles to inspire his coming to the Jewish People? Why was not the Splitting of the Red Sea sufficient reason for him to come? Was this not a great miracle, indeed, unparalleled in human history? Nothing like this had ever happened before, and, for that matter, never since then has the sea split, allowing for an entire nation to walk through on dry land."

"Still", Rav Aryeh continued, "it seems that it was not enough. For when Yisro heard about it he thought, the Almighty indeed wrought a miracle, but a miracle is something extraordinary, unusual; it happens only once. One cannot predict what the future of Klal Yisrael will be from one miracle. Will they always have miracles if they need them?"

"But now, when Yisro heard about the battle with Amalek - a real, actual battle, which the Children of Israel fought with courage and bravery - that it happened through plain warfare, he understood that Klal Yisrael is a unique nation. Then he was convinced that it was necessary and worthwhile for him to come and get to know this firsthand." Rav Aryeh paused a moment, and then added, "Well, what happened once will happen once again!"

Now I know that G-d is the greatest of all deities; through their very plots, He rose above them. (18:11)

Yisro was overwhelmed with the miracles Hashem wrought against the Egyptians. Rashi explains that what impressed Pharaoh most was the middah k'neged middah, measure for measure, aspect of the punishment the Egyptians received. Ki ba'davar asher zadu aleihem, specifically in the very plot which they (the Egyptians) had intended for them. The Egyptians attempted to use water as the weapon of destruction. Instead, they themselves drowned in the Red Sea. In other words, it was not "simply" that Hashem punished them "any old way." No! He turned the tables on them. The water which was supposed to drown the Jews - drowned the Egyptians.

Horav Aryeh Leib Heyman, zl, questions Rashi's exposition from its source, the Talmud Sotah 11a. Chazal say: Havah nischakmah lo, "We must deal wisely with them." The Egyptians were plotting to do away with the Moshiyan shel Yisrael, the one who would be the Jews' savior. Apparently, they knew that Hashem punishes middah k'neged middah,

deriving this from the punishment meted out to the generation of the Flood and that which was administered to the people of Sodom. They asked, "How shall we destroy him? With fire? We know that Hashem employs fire as a punishment. [So that will not work.] Shall we use the sword?" The Egyptians knew that they needed to choose a form of destruction which Hashem would not use against them. Since He is committed to punishing middah k'neged middah, if they would select a weapon which Hashem would not employ against them, they would be able to eradicate the savior and not worry about repercussions. "Let us employ water. Hashem promised never again t

o destroy the world through the medium of water." They did not know that Hashem would not destroy the entire world with water, but an individual nation, He would destroy. Alternatively, He will not bring water against them, but they could fall into a pre-existing body of water, like the Red Sea.

This is the meaning of, Ki badavar asher zadu aleihem, "Specifically through the very plot which they intended for them." This is like one who is cooking a pot of hot water, and he falls into it. The pot that he was preparing became his own executioner. Interestingly, on that same page, the Talmud relates that three advisors were involved with Pharaoh concerning that fateful decision: Iyov, Yisro and Bilaam. Thus, Yisro was quite aware of Hashem's method of middah k'neged middah. If so, why was he so impressed with Krias Yam Suf, the Splitting of the Red Sea? What added insight did he receive as a result of this miracle?

Rav Heyman explains that Yisro became aware of a new understanding concerning the depth of the middah k'neged middah principle. During the Flood, everyone drowned in the fiery waters. In his commentary to Parashas Noach, Rashi elucidates the measure for measure aspect of the Flood punishment. Hashem has said, Rabbah roas ha'adam ba'aretz, "Man's wickedness on earth was increasing." (4:5) Coinciding with this, we find, Nivkeu kol maayanos Tehom rabbah, "All the wellsprings of the great deep burst forth" (Bereishis 7:11). The Flood waters raged for forty days and nights, which coincides with the forty-day gestation period during which a child is formed. Through their adulterous liaisons, the people of that iniquitous generation troubled Hashem to create mamzeirim, illegitimate children, which take forty days to form. Last, as their sins were often carried out with heated passion, they were judged through the medium of fiery waters.

Hashem visited His punishment on Sodom middah k'neged middah. The Zohar HaKadosh enumerates a number of parallels between Sodom's sin and the punishment that they received, one of which was taking away their lives as punishment for refusing to give tzedakah, charity, which is the lifeline of the poor. Both of these punishments have one thing in common: Every sinner was punished equally, despite the fact that some sinners were worse than others. Yet, they all drowned together, or were destroyed by the fire and brimstone that Hashem rained upon the Sodomites.

The drowning of the Egyptians represented a completely new hanhagah, manner of acting, from Hashem. At this point, the Egyptians were divided into categories; their evil categorized and their punishment commensurate with their individual sins. Some Egyptians sunk like lead, not floating down needlessly, while others went down like stone, being battered before they sunk to the deep. The last group, the most egregious Egyptians, went down like straw, being thrown around in the water for a while before finding their resting place at the bottom of the sea. Yisro saw not only Hashgachah, Divine Providence, but he was also privy to Hashgachah Pratis - individualized, personalized Divine Providence.

Moshe led the people out of the camp toward the Divine Presence. They stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain. (19:17)

In a statement that has become endemic to Kabbolas haTorah, the Acceptance of the Torah, Chazal state that Hashem raised Har Sinai above the heads of the Jewish People and declared: Im mekabl'im atem es haTorah mutav - v'im lav - sham tehei kevaraschem, "If you accept the Torah - good - and if not - there will be your burial." The question is obvious: If they are standing beneath the mountain, the correct term would have been: Po, "here will be your burial." What is the meaning of sham,

"there"? Where is there? Furthermore, why wait? If they did not accept the Torah, their burial would be here and now .

Horav Yaakov Galinsky, Shlita, offers an explanation that has great practical meaning. He explains that there is a "place" called sham - "there" - which is a graveyard. What does this mean? A young boy entered primary school and began to study alef bais. He found it difficult, but did not despair, since he thought he could catch up in elementary school. "There" he will soar; "there" he will excel in his studies. Elementary school brought about very little opportunity for change. The teacher just was not the right match; the principal just did not understand him. There was still hope. In yeshivah gedolah, high school, "there" he would succeed in growing into a Torah scholar. High school did not work out as well as he had expected, but there was always bais medrash, where the students are more mature and there is greater leeway in learning; "there" he would mature to his potential.

Regrettably, at bais medrash, he did not achieve his expectations - nor did he in Eretz Yisrael. There was still one remaining option: marriage. How little he realized the various pressures that are part and parcel of married life. Responsibility to a wife and family, coupled with parents, who, albeit they stayed out of his business, still wanted to know everything and offer an opinion - whether it is solicited or not. Kollel, versus earning a more lucrative living, is always a wonderful topic open to discussion. While no one has the correct answer for each individual case - everybody has an opinion, and all of this added to the young man's decision to put off excellence in Torah scholarship to the next milestone in life. When he arrives "there," things will be better. This goes on throughout life until he reaches the final "sham." He is now "there," at the cemetery, where he is the star attraction. Only now, it is too late. He can no longer push it off until later, or until

he gets "there." Sham tehei kevaraschem, "There will be your burial," If one does not accept the Torah now - later, it will be too late.

One should not fault the place in which he is, the teacher that he has, or the environment in which he finds himself. We must stop playing the game and begin to accept responsibility. "There" will not save him. He is the problem. It is neither the place, nor is it the time; it is the person. Rav Galinsky quotes the Imrei Chaim of Vishnitz, who interpreted the pasuk instructing Moshe Rabbeinu to gather weapons and battle with Amalek: V'tzei hilachem ba'Amalek machar, "And go out and battle with Amalek tomorrow" (Shemos 17:9). The Rebbe explained a unique form of Amalek, a specific power of spiritual contamination, called Amalek machar - Amalek tomorrow. This powerful koach ha'tumah, contaminated power, encourages us to perform a mitzvah, to have that hislahavus, fiery passion, for mitzvah observance, but not to have it "today." Tomorrow would be much better. Only tomorrow is too late. The passion has dissipated; the fire has cooled.

Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, related that he heard a thought from his father concerning an incident which took place in Volozhin. A student was a masmid atzum, very diligent, and a scholar who possessed a photographic memory. One day during lunch, a question was posed to the young men who were sitting around the table. Each one gave his opinion, as did the diligent young man. Suddenly, one of the young men raised his hand and rendered his opinion: "I am surprised that all of you are unaware of a p'sak, an opinion, rendered by Tosfos." Our young man was visibly shocked. How could he have overlooked a Tosfos?

The student immediately put down his portion, stood up and left for the bais medrash. Seven years went by, as he reviewed the entire Talmud a number of times, until he was proficient in its every nuance. He later became a member of Klal Yisrael's spiritual elite. Someone asked the Rosh Yeshivah, the venerable Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl, how could a ben Torah leave a meal before benching, saying the grace after meals. Rav Chaim explained that had he waited five minutes to bench, the yetzer hora, evil inclination, would have had already cooled his desire for growth in Torah. The Amalek of machar, tomorrow, would have had a field day and probably would have succeeded in preventing a seven-year sojourn in the yeshivah. Torah scholarship neither brooks excuses, nor does it allow for

pretext and mitigation. One does what he is supposed to do with his own G-d-given abilities.

In closing, Rav Galinsky relates that Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, once asked his rebbe, Horav Eliyahu Lopian, "Rebbe, please tell me a shmuess, ethical discourse." (Apparently, Rav Sholom felt the need for some form of "inspiration" from his revered mentor.) "Nu, if you want to hear a shmuess, bring over a shtender, lectern. If we are going to do it, we may as well do it properly." Rav Sholom brought over a shtender and sat down in a chair. He was the audience, and the Rebbe was the speaker. Rav Elya arose and took hold of the shtender with both hands, which was his usual stance when he spoke. He said, "Rav Sholom, if I would have a beard as dark as yours (if I would be as young as you), I would know how to spend my time!" Rav Elya sat down. This was his discourse. The bottom line is: One does not waste time. Tomorrow is not today. We begin with now - not tomorrow. This idea applies to all of us as well.

They stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain. (19:17)

As Klal Yisrael stood at the foot of Har Sinai, waiting anxiously for the Torah, they were united as one, with a sense of unity described by Chazal ask, k'ish echad, b'lev echad, "like one man with one heart." This phrase has since become the catchword for describing unity at its apex. All of Klal Yisrael were focused, intent on accepting the Torah with a firm commitment, a common aspiration and uniform purpose. All of Klal Yisrael stood together as one to accept the Torah. It is the term b'lev echad, "with one heart", that begs to be elucidated. Does one heart manifest a stronger sense of unity than one brain? Why, then, is their unity not described thus: k'ish echad b'moach echad; "Like one man with one brain"? Perhaps we might suggest the following: The brain controls the body's movements, while the heart is the seat of a person's passions, attitudes, emotions. To say that Klal Yisrael was united in mind implies that they were all doing the same thing which, in this circumstance, was accepting the Torah. They were all committed. It does not speak, however, to their individual level of emotion, their personal attitude, their individual desire. They might all be standing together, but were they all on the same page attitude-wise?

We are being told that not only was all of Klal Yisrael there, but they all wanted the same thing. They were united in attitude, emotion, purpose and commitment. This is why k'ish echad, b'lev echad is the paradigm of harmony among people. All too often we may discover that while two people stand together in purpose, in attitude they stand miles apart. Each will have his own individual reason for doing a mitzvah. For example, two people will give the same donation to tzedakah, but they are not unified in mind and spirit. One gives because he wants to help; the other gives because he seeks prominence. One gives because he believes in the goals and objectives of the organization or institution; the other gives out of embarrassment. One wants to remain anonymous; the other wants his name emblazoned on a plaque. To the public eye, they are both equal. Hashem, however, is nireh l'eivav, sees into the inner recesses of the heart. To be unified before Hashem is to be united in both mind and spirit.

You shall not ascend My Altar on steps. (20: 23)

Rashi explains that a ramp was used for the Kohanim to ascend to the Mizbayach, Altar, as a provision to circumvent any suggestion of immodesty. A ramp allows for the legs to move evenly, thereby not allowing any inappropriate exposure of one's self. I think we might be able to add a homiletic interpretation to the closing pasuk of Parashas Yisro.

The Mizbayach symbolizes sacrifice. Indeed, to study Torah, to live a Torah lifestyle, does require a certain element of sacrifice. Before I continue, the sacrifice is only in the eyes of the beholder. A true ben Torah does not view his devotion to Torah as sacrifice. The correct word should be dedication. Every moment dedicated to Torah is a supreme moment of ecstasy. Sacrifice is in the eyes of the world, who fail to understand the beauty and sweetness associated with Torah.

Perhaps there is financial sacrifice, since one who devotes his time to Torah study has little time for anything else. A promising career in

commerce, science or law eludes he who trades a financial portfolio for a Gemorah. The cost of Torah study for those who want to have nachas, spiritual satisfaction, from their children is definitely a sacrifice. On the other hand, my heart goes out to all those who choose secular education over a Torah day school/Yeshivah education. The fruits we reap are often the results of the seeds we sow. After all is said and done, there might be sacrifice to a Torah life, but it is well worth the awesome reward: a reward that cannot be obtained any other way.

This perhaps explains the Altar, but what about the Ramp? Is there a difference if one ascends the heights of Torah via a stairway or a ramp? Regardless of the means, he has still made it to the top. There is a difference, however, in the quality of the ascent. More effort is exerted in climbing stairs. This is especially true if the space between the steps is high. There is less exertion in going up a ramp since, it is a gradual climb. On the other hand, it is more difficult to stop and rest on the incline of the ramp, while one who has reached the next step does not expend great effort in remaining there.

We, thus, have discerned one primary difference, which allows for a benefit in each means of ascension. Steps are more difficult to climb, but easier when one wants to stop and rest. The ramp is easier to ascend, but does not allow for comfortable resting along the way. Additionally, if the steps are slippery, one can still climb up; while a slippery ramp will prove quite difficult to escalate.

The Torah is teaching us an important principle in avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty. The road to Heaven is not comprised of steps. It is more like an upward ramp. One who wants to ascend to the Torah peak must be acutely aware from the very beginning that there is no resting, no stopping, no vacations, no holidays. It is a steady, upward climb, at times slippery, whereby one could easily fall. He must be careful, focused on the "top" and not allow for status quo. On the other hand, it does not require one to jump from step to step, go from level to level, in one catapult. It means placing one foot in front of the other and keeping it up until he makes the "top." One cannot say: "I have gone far enough"; "This is how religious I want to be"; "I am comfortable with my present level of Yiddishkeit." If one stops his progression, he begins to slide backward until he is at the bottom.

This idea applies equally on the community level, as it does on an individual basis. The shul that wants to maintain a status quo, a certain level of religious commitment - no more, no less - will eventually have less. A community that refuses to go forward, to move upward, will eventually slide backward. There are no plateaus in Jewish life. One either grows, or he regresses.

Va'ani Tefillah

V'hayah im shamo'a tishme'u el mitzvotai

The Talmud Berachos 13a makes the following statement, which I feel is central to our concept of mitzvah performance, especially in the area of Jewish outreach. Amar Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha. Why does Parashas Shema (the first parsha of Krias Shema) precede the (second) parsha, V'hayah im shamo'a? It is to encourage one to accept upon himself the yoke of G-d's reign before accepting the yoke of mitzvot. In Parashas Shema, we accept the ol malchus Shomayim, the yoke of the rule of Heaven, over ourselves. This is a prerequisite to the parsha, V'hayah im shamo'a, in which we assume upon ourselves the yoke of mitzvot performance. Carrying out mitzvot can, at times, be difficult. Thus, Chazal have characterized its performance with the terminology of "yoke." We derive one important principle from Chazal: Mitzvah performance is not exclusive of recognizing that Hashem is in control and that He reigns supreme in all areas of human endeavor. Becoming a Torah observant Jew does not occ

ur because one simply performs mitzvot. If he does not acknowledge the Heaven-factor - the mitzvot are wonderful practices, but they remain practices. A mitzvah is an endeavor carried out l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven. In order to do this, one must recognize that there is a Heaven. Otherwise, for whom is he performing the mitzvah?

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear mother and grandmother Leona Genshaft - Leah bas Rephael Hacohen a"h, niftara 17 Shevat 5770

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Rabbi Weinreb's Parsha Column, Parshat Yitro

Sponsored in memory of Nathan and Louise Schwartz a"hn

"Answers and Questions"

The world has one persistent belief about Jewish behavior which may indeed be true. It is the belief that Jews always answer a question by asking another question.

This tendency is mocked good naturedly in the old joke about the non-Jew who approaches his Jewish friend and asks: "Why do you Jews always answer one question with another?" To which the Jew responds, "Why not?"

Truth to tell, this tendency, answering one question with another, goes back to long before the emergence of the Jewish people. In fact, it is one of the earliest events on record and is described in the Bible. It is part of the story of Cain and Abel.

As the reader of this column surely knows, Cain murdered his brother Abel, the first murder in human history. Soon afterwards, God appeared to Cain. "The Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' And he said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?'"

So Cain was asked a question by the Lord, and responded with another question, one of the most famous rhetorical questions of all time, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Not to be outdone, the Lord responded to Cain's question with yet another question, a question of His own. "Then He said, 'What have you done?'" (Genesis 4:9)

What we have here is a biblical precedent not only for answering a question with a question, but for answering the second question with a third, setting in motion what could easily become an endless progression of unanswered questions.

Our sages do not take this matter trivially at all. Rather, they see in the question with which Cain responded to the Almighty's question nothing less than mankind's first challenge to the deity. By responding with a question, Cain brazenly faulted the Almighty Himself for Abel's murder. "Thus, said Cain: 'Am I my brother's keeper? You, Lord, are the keeper of all creatures. You, Lord, did not protect my brother Abel. Why do You hold me responsible?'" (Midrash Tanchuma, Genesis 9)

This week's Torah portion, Yitro (Exodus 18:1-20-23), provides the opportunity to study a most fascinating Talmudic example of answering one question with another. The centerpiece of this week's parsha is of course the Ten Commandments. We all should be familiar with the fourth commandment, which reads: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements." (Exodus 20:8-10)

One would think that this is a fairly straightforward and easily comprehended commandment. Yet it became the subject of a confrontation between two adversaries, one of whom had a question on the passage, which the other answered with another question.

This incident is described in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b). A lengthy dialogue is reported there between the great Sage Rabbi Akiva, who was eventually martyred, and the Roman consul, Turnus Rufus. Some commentaries conjecture that this debate took place during Rabbi Akiva's final imprisonment, just before the Romans tortured him and took his life.

At one point in the debate, we have the following passage:

This question too was asked by Turnus Rufus of Rabbi Akiva:

Turnus Rufus: What makes this day different from other days? Why is this Sabbath day special?

Rabbi Akiva: What makes this man different from other men? Why are you special?

Turnus Rufus: Because my master willed it. Caesar chose me for this post.

Rabbi Akiva: So too with the Sabbath. My Master willed it. God designated the Sabbath as a special day.

The Midrash understands Cain's question, "Am I brother's keeper," not as a merely rhetorical question, but as an audacious retort to the Almighty; so too are we to understand Rabbi Akiva's question.

By his question, "What makes this man different from other men?," Rabbi Akiva forced his adversary to admit that his authority was not attributable to his special qualifications, but rather was subject to the whim of another man, more powerful than he.

Rabbi Akiva then craftily made use of Turnus Rufus' response to teach him a lesson about the Almighty, the ultimate authority.

Recently, I too found myself answering a question with a question. Don't get me wrong. I am not comparing myself to Cain, and certainly not to Rabbi Akiva. But my use of a question to answer a question allowed me to make use of a "teachable moment." What's more, the subject of my little lesson was our very topic, the Sabbath.

One of the songs sung at the Sabbath table begins, "Blessed is the Lord, day by day." I had a young guest who was chanting the melody along with the rest of us, while at the same time perusing an English translation of the text.

When we had concluded the singing, he turned to me and asked, "This song does not refer to the Sabbath in any way. Why do we sing it on the Sabbath?"

Since he held a siddur in his hand, with the excellent English translation of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, I asked him to turn the pages to three other prayer selections which are only recited on the Sabbath (and in the case of the first two, on the Festivals as well). The first was Psalm 92, which begins with the words "A song to the Sabbath," but which then continues for more than a dozen verses without alluding to the Sabbath. The second was the prayer Nishmat (The Soul [of Every Living Thing]) which contains no reference whatsoever to the Sabbath. And finally, the hymn El Adon (God, the Master of All Things.) Here again, there is no hint of Sabbath.

Then I proceeded to answer his question with my question: "None of these prayers mentions the Sabbath. Why then are they designated for recitation on the Sabbath day?"

Unlike Cain, and unlike the saintly Rabbi Akiva, I went on to answer my own question. I explained to the young man that the Sabbath is not just about Sabbath. The Sabbath is the central core of Judaism. Therefore, all of these prayers, and our table song, are appropriate for Sabbath recitation.

I went on to summarize each of these prayers: Psalm 92 contains the theme of the ultimate triumph of good over evil; Nishmat is a prayer of thanksgiving to the Almighty; and the El Adon hymn sings of God's mastery over the sun, moon, and stars. Finally, the table song, "Blessed is the Lord, day by day," reassures an exiled people that the redemption is near.

The Sabbath is more than just a day of rest. It is a day for the Jew to ponder the grand themes of Judaism.

To conclude this essay with a question, I ask: What better way is there to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" than to reflect upon these themes in our minds, express them in our prayers, and sing of them in our songs?

Orthodox Union / www.ou.org

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The Stewardship Paradigm

Few texts have had a deeper influence on Western civilisation than the first chapter of Genesis, with its momentous vision of the universe coming into being as the work of God. Set against the grandeur of the narrative, what stands out is the smallness yet uniqueness of humans, vulnerable but also undeniably set apart from all other beings.

The words of the Psalmist echo the wonder and humility that the primordial couple must have felt as they beheld the splendour of creation:

"When I consider your heavens,
The work of your fingers,

The moon and the stars,
Which you have set in place.
What is humanity that you are mindful of it,
The children of mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them little lower than the angels
And crowned them with glory and honour."
(Psalm 8:3-5)

The honour and glory that crowns the human race is possession of the earth, which is granted as the culmination of God's creative work: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it."

This notion is fortified in Psalm 115: "The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth God has given to humanity." While the creation narrative clearly establishes God as Master of the Universe, it is the human being who is appointed master of the earth.

Grappling with the challenging notion of humans as divinely-ordained owners and subduers of the earth, we come face to face with the fundamental questions of our place in the universe and our responsibility for it. A literal interpretation suggests a world in which people cut down forests, slaughter animals, and dump waste into the seas at their leisure, much like we see in our world today.

On the other hand, as Rav Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Israel, writes, any intelligent person should know that Genesis 1:28, "does not mean the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfil his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart." Could God have really created such a complex and magnificent world solely for the caprice of humans?

Genesis chapter 1 is only one side of the complex biblical equation. It is balanced by the narrative of Genesis chapter 2, which features a second Creation narrative that focuses on humans and their place in the Garden of Eden. The first person is set in the Garden "to work it and take care of it."

The two Hebrew verbs used here are significant. The first - *le'ovdah* - literally means "to serve it." The human being is thus both master and servant of nature. The second - *leshomrah* - means "to guard it." This is the verb used in later biblical legislation to describe the responsibilities of a guardian of property that belongs to someone else. This guardian must exercise vigilance while protecting, and is personally liable for losses that occur through negligence. This is perhaps the best short definition of humanity's responsibility for nature as the Bible conceives it.

We do not own nature - "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." (Psalm 24:1) We are its stewards on behalf of God, who created and owns everything. As guardians of the earth, we are duty-bound to respect its integrity.

The mid-nineteenth century commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch put this rather well in an original interpretation of Genesis 1:26, "Let us make the human in our image after our own likeness." The passage has always been puzzling, since the hallmark of the Torah is the singularity of God. Who would God consult in the process of creating humans?

The "us," says Hirsch, refers to the rest of creation. Before creating the human, a being destined to develop the capacity to alter and possibly endanger the natural world, God sought the approval of nature itself. This interpretation implies that we would use nature only in such a way that is faithful to the purposes of its Creator and acknowledges nature's consenting to humanity's existence.

The mandate in Genesis 1 to exercise dominion is, therefore, not technical, but moral: humanity would control, within our means, the use of nature towards the service of God. Further, this mandate is limited by the requirement to serve and guard as seen in Genesis 2. The famous story of Genesis 2-3 - the eating of the forbidden fruit and Adam and Eve's subsequent exile from Eden - supports this point.

Not everything is permitted. There are limits to how we interact with the earth. The Torah has commandments regarding how to sow crops, how to collect eggs, and how to preserve trees in a time of war, just to name a few. When we do not treat creation according to God's Will, disaster can follow.

We see this today as more and more cities sit under a cloud of smog and as mercury advisories are issued over large sectors of our fishing waters. Deforestation of the rainforests, largely a result of humanity's growing

demand for timber and beef, has brought on irrevocable destruction of plant and animal species.

We can no longer ignore the massive negative impact that our global industrial society is having on the ecosystems of the earth. Our unbounded use of fossil fuels to fuel our energy-intensive lifestyles is causing global climate change. An international consensus of scientists predicts more intense and destructive storms, floods, and droughts resulting from these human-induced changes in the atmosphere. If we do not take action now, we risk the very survival of civilisation as we know it.

The Midrash says that God showed Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are - how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."

Creation has its own dignity as God's masterpiece, and though we have the mandate to use it, we have none to destroy or despoil it. Rabbi Hirsch says that Shabbat was given to humanity "in order that he should not grow overweening in his dominion" of God's creation. On the Day of Rest, "he must, as it were, return the borrowed world to its Divine Owner in order to realize that it is but lent to him."

Ingrained in the process of creation and central to the life of every Jew is a weekly reminder that our dominion of earth must be *l'shem shamayim* - in the name of Heaven.

The choice is ours. If we continue to live as though God had only commanded us to subdue the earth, we must be prepared for our children to inherit a seriously degraded planet, with the future of human civilisation put into question.

If we see our role as masters of the earth as a unique opportunity to truly serve and care for the planet, its creatures, and its resources, then we can reclaim our status as stewards of the world, and raise our new generations in an environment much closer to that of Eden.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is a global religious leader, philosopher, the author of more than 25 books, and moral voice for our time. Until 1st September 2013 he served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, having held the position for 22 years. To read more from Rabbi Sacks or to subscribe to his mailing list, please visit www.rabbisacks.org.

Drasha Parshas Yisro by 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 God 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.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky is the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Toras Chaim at South Shore and the author of the Parsha Parables series.

Questions or comments? Email feedback@torah.org.. Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Yisro

What Prompted Yisro To Come?

The first pasuk of the parsha states: "Yisro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that the Almighty did for Moshe and for Israel his nation, for Hashem took Israel out of Egypt." [Shmos 18:1] Rashi quotes a Talmudic teaching [Zevachim 116a] (cited in Mechilta as well) which asks: Specifically what was it that Yisro heard that prompted him to come? The answer Rashi quotes is that he heard about "the Splitting of the Red Sea and about the war with Amalek".

There are several difficulties with this question and answer. First, the question (what did Yisro hear?) is superfluous. The pasuk already tells us what he heard – "he heard all that the Almighty did for Moshe and for Israel his nation, for Hashem took Israel out of Egypt!" Rashi answer this by adding a key word to his question: "What did Yisro hear THAT PROMPTED HIM TO COME (u'ba)?"

What does Rashi mean to add by this added word "u'ba"? It is also noteworthy that Rashi does not say that Yisro was prompted to come when he heard "the Splitting of the Red Sea and the VICTORY over Amalek." Rather, Yisro came because he heard about "the WAR with Amalek" (milchemes Amalek). Why the WAR with Amalek?

There is also another question: The Medrash Rabbah equates the pasuk "And Yisro heard..." here at the start of the parsha with a pasuk in Mishlei: "Don't abandon your friend and the friend of your father." [Mishlei 27:10]. The Medrash interprets that pasuk: "'Your friend' refers to the Almighty; 'the friend of your father' refers to Avraham as it is written 'the seed of Avraham my beloved' [Yeshaya 41:8]". What is this equation teaching us? What in the world does the pasuk about Yisro hearing have to do with the Almighty and the Almighty's friend and not abandoning them? I saw the following thought in the Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni from the Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim:

Yisro heard about the Exodus from Egypt – as the pasuk states – but that is not what impressed him. What had an impact on him and what prompted him to come was something else, namely "the Splitting of the Red Sea and

the war of Amalek". Yisro could not figure out how it could happen that a nation that witnessed the Splitting of the Red Sea and came to such an exalted spiritual level at that time (As Rashi cites elsewhere [Shmos 15:2], the handmaidens at the time of the splitting of the sea 'saw more' than the greatest prophets.) could in such a short amount of time later have slackened off in their attachment to the Almighty to such an extent that they were attacked by Amalek. (Chazal comment on the symbolism of the name of the place where Amalek attacked them. The attack took place in Refidim, which hints at the idea that Bnai Yisroel's attachment to Torah became "softened" (rafu). Bnai Yisroel asked the question there, "Is G-d in our midst our not?")

Yisro said, "There is something I do not understand here. How could people who were granted such an intense understanding of the Almighty turn around such a short time later – and throw it all away?"

Yisro was a believer and a searcher. Chazal tell us that Yisro had investigated all the "religions" of the world and had independently come to the conclusion that the G-d of Israel was the true G-d. He did not need an Exodus from Egypt to convince him thereof. However, what perplexed him – to the extent that it prompted him to come and investigate for himself – was the combination of 'Krias Yam Suf' (the pinnacle of spiritual experience) on the one hand and 'Milchemes Amalek' (which was the result of spiritual laxity) on the other, in such close proximity.

In short, Yisro was not aroused by the victory over Amalek; his curiosity was aroused by the very fact that such a war took place at all – a war that took place in Refidim, symbolic of the fact that "rafu yedeihem min haTorah" (their hands loosened from its attachment to Torah). This was a war that was precipitated by the question "Is there a G-d in our midst or not?" Yisro could not understand how such a question could be asked by the nation that witnessed the miraculous splitting of the Red Sea just weeks before.

The answer to Yisro's question is that 'ruchniyus' and spirituality is not like climbing a mountain. When one climbs a mountain and reaches the summit – the mission is accomplished! It's done. It's over. Maybe one can climb another mountain, but the first mountain has now been conquered! Judaism is not like that. There are two separate challenges: There is the challenge of "Who will climb the mountain of G-d?" and then there is the secondary challenge – equally important and almost more difficult -- of "Who will stand firm in His holy place?" [Tehillim 24:3].

This is what Yisro did not understand. The lesson of the combination of "Krias Yam Suf" and "Milchemes Amalek" is that if one does not do constant battle and maintain vigilance after having "climbed up the mountain of G-d" then one will inevitably slip. A person can achieve the greatest heights of spirituality – he can see a 'Krias Yam Suf' – but if he does not maintain it and does not work at it, he will slip right back to where he was originally, if not worse.

This explains the Medrash's linkage between Yisro and "not abandoning one's Friend's father" (Avraham). Who is the paradigm of the person who achieved spiritual greatness but did not rest on his laurels and kept taking and meeting spiritual challenge after spiritual challenge throughout his life? Certainly this was Avraham Avinu, who faced 10 major spiritual challenges in his life and met them all. The lesson which must be learned from Avraham's example is "al ta'azov" – do not abandon the struggle to achieve and grow spiritually. One must always keep at it! If one does not keep at it on a daily basis, then it will all fall by the wayside. Maintaining one's spiritual status and safeguarding past accomplishments requires constant vigilance.

This also explains something else. There is a Biblical commandment to read the paragraphs of 'Krias Shma' every morning and evening. 'Krias Shma' is basically our Pledge of Allegiance. Those in the audience of my age or older no doubt remember there was a time when it was part of the daily routine in classrooms throughout the country to begin the school day by placing one's hand on their heart and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, etc."

Today, this is much less common and the law does not even allow saying it to be mandatory. On the day when people become citizens of the United States, they raise their right hand and swear or affirm their loyalty to the

country. But they do that just once. How many people, after they have become citizens, get up every single day and repeat that oath of allegiance? Even the biggest patriot does not say it every day. Because of that, one's allegiance and loyalty and devotion to the constitution and the country can wane from time to time.

But every single morning, we get up and say "Shma Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad". Likewise, the Kohen Gadol, who is chosen because of his wisdom and fear of Heaven (Yiras Shamayim), does not just bring one sacrifice of allegiance when he first becomes a Kohen Gadol (as is the case with a regular priest who only brings a special offering when he is first initiated to Divine Service). Twice a day, the Kohen Gadol offers a Minchas Chavitin (specially prepared flour offering) to remind himself that he attained that position because of his Yiras Shamayim and closeness to Torah. He must keep doing this every single day because if he does not re-emphasize and recommit himself to this dedication to the Almighty on a daily basis, he will lose it. There is no standing still or resting on laurels in Judaism.

We see the same lesson from the end of the parsha: "And when you build an Altar of stone for Me, do not build them of hewn stones, lest you wield your sword upon it and desecrate it." [Shmos 20:22] We may not make this Altar from a single stone. Such a structure is known as a 'Matzevah' and its use in the Divine Service was forbidden. A single stone altar was actually declared detestable for worship. [Devorim 16:22] The altar of stone referred to at the end of the parsha has to consist of a multi-stoned structure, joining layer upon layer of individual stones. This is the case, despite the fact that in the time of the Patriarchs, a Matzevah altar was perfectly acceptable. Yaakov Avinu himself made a Matzevah. It was only after the Torah was given that this form of worship was proscribed.

Why was that the case? What is the difference between the time of the Avos and the time of the Mishkan / Bais HaMikdash after the Torah was given?

Rav Moshe Feinstein writes in Parshas Shoftim that before Matan Torah, a person had to observe the Seven Noachide laws, but beyond that he was "not commanded" (ayno metzaveh). A person could be rewarded for whatever mitzvos he did during that era (as one who is "not commanded but does"), but at any time he could go before the Almighty and announce "I resign. I want to cash in my reward for mitzvos done until this point and I do not intend to do any more mitzvos beyond what I am commanded in the future." This approach, Rav Moshe said, is symbolized by the Matzevah (single-stone altar).

The Matzevah is a memorial of what had been accomplished in the past. Before the Giving of Torah, a person had that option of saying "I did what I did, now I want my payment and am suspending my participation in the club." After the Torah was given, this option is no longer possible. One must now work and grow every single day. This is the message of the multi-stone altar. Divine Service involves building one stone upon another, one day after another – each day building on the level and accomplishments of the previous day. Now, there is only one occasion in life when a person can make a 'Matzevah' and rest on his previous accomplishments. That is the tombstone (which is also called a Matzevah, being a single stone slab) that is erected when a person is already deceased. At that point and only at that point can a person say to the Almighty – as it were – "This is what I did; look at what I have accomplished.

Several things stick in my mind from the funeral of Rav Moshe Feinstein, which is now quite a few years ago. One thing that I remember clearly is the comment of one of the eulogizers that when Rav Moshe was near death and was being taken by ambulance to the hospital where he eventually died, he said while being put into the ambulance "Ich hub mer nisht kein koach" (I have no more strength.) That is saying, in effect, "I have done what I can do in this world; now I am finished." Only at that point in life is one allowed to say such a thing. That is when one can erect a Matzevah, and say to the Almighty "This is what I have done." Until then, Matzevahs are hated by the Almighty. The only acceptable approach in Divine Service is piling stone on top of stone, constant growth without resting upon one's laurels.

This was symbolized by "Avraham my beloved," who never stopped growing and this is the lesson that Yisro learned from "Krias Yam Suf" and "Milchemes Amalek."

Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD

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Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

The Value of Questions

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.

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Rav Kook List

Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

Yitro: A Pure Revelation

"Moses awoke early in the morning and climbed Mount Sinai." (Ex. 34:4) The text emphasizes that Moses ascended the mountain at daybreak to receive the Torah. The Sages taught that Moses' subsequent descent from Sinai to transmit the Torah to the people also took place at first light. "Just as his ascent was at daybreak, so, too, his descent was at daybreak" (Shabbat 86a). Why is the hour of these events so significant?

Crystal Clear

The quality of Moses' prophecy was without equal. The Sages compared the unique clarity of his prophetic vision to an *aspaklariah me'irah*, a clear, transparent lens. This metaphor expresses the unique authenticity of the Divine revelation to Moses, to whom God spoke "face to face, in a vision and not in allegories" (Num. 12:8).

What made Moses' vision so uniquely accurate? His prophesy was true to its original Divine source; it was not influenced by societal needs or political considerations. On the contrary, it is this pristine Divine revelation that dictates the proper path for society, the nation, and the entire world.

For this reason, the Torah stresses the hour of this historic event. Moses began his ascent to Sinai at first light - before the day's social interactions - thus indicating that the revelation at Sinai was independent of all social, political, and practical accommodations. It is precisely due to the Torah's absolute integrity that it has the power to vitiate life and renew creation, to refine humanity and uplift the world to the heights of purity and holiness.

Precise Transmission

The Sages added an important corollary to this insight. It was not just Moses' original revelation that was free of worldly influences. The Torah's transmission to the people also retained its original authenticity. "Just as his ascent was at daybreak, so, too, his descent was at daybreak." The Torah's laws do not reflect the influence of social and political necessities. The Torah is the light of the Creator, the Divine Will giving life to the world, propelling the universe to advance in all aspects, material and spiritual.

The Torah that Moses brought down to the people of Israel was the exact same Torah that he received on Sinai - a complete Torah of absolute truth, transcending the limitations of our flawed world. "His descent was at daybreak," unaffected by the day's social interactions. The Torah remained pure, brought down to the world through the spiritual genius of the master prophet.

(Silver from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV on Shabbat 86a (9:16).)

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Lessons from Jethro

By Shmuel Rabinowitz

January 16, 2014 Thursday 15 Shevat 5774

As a foreword to the central story of Parshat Yitro, Maamad Har Sinai ("The Stand at Mount Sinai") – which was the greatest historical event of all time, we read the story of Jethro.

Jethro was Moshe's father-in-law who came from his land of Midian and joined Am Yisrael who had just left Egypt and was on its way to the Promised Land, Eretz Yisrael.

The day after Jethro arrives he sees a less-than-ideal situation in which Moshe Rabbeinu, the Jewish nation's greatest leader, sits alone from morning to evening and judges the nation. Jethro understands that Moshe, as great a leader as he was, would not be able to withstand working at such a demanding job alone, so he turns to Moshe with the following criticism: Moses's father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out both you and these people who are with you for the matter is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. (Exodus 18, 17-18) Jethro does not only offer criticism, but also suggests a practical organizational suggestion: creating a hierarchical justice system with one judge responsible for every 10 people at the base, and above them, judges for hundreds and for thousands.

Moshe Rabbeinu would be at the top of the entire hierarchy. This system, suggests Jethro to his son-in-law Moshe, would ease the great burden on him and have him dealing with only the most complicated of cases which the other judges did not succeed in solving. And indeed, Moshe Rabbeinu accepts his father-in-law's suggestion and begins to create this wider justice system.

This story is surprising to the wise reader. Was Moshe Rabbeinu unaware of his own limitations? Did he actually think that he would succeed in judging the nation on his own long-term? It seems like we can learn an important message from Jethro's suggestion. Moshe Rabbeinu, who was judging the nation from morning to night, was acting with unlimited dedication and devotion. He dedicated his entire self to the nation. This dedication prevented him from accurately forecasting the future when he would not be able to continue carrying the heavy burden of the nation. Only another person, an outsider, who was not acting out of devotion but was looking at reality objectively, could discern the danger in Moshe's type of leadership. Moshe also recognized that this sort of objective view of reality was correct, and immediately upon hearing Jethro's words, he changed the justice system and authorized many judges to help deal with the tremendous amount of work that had been his alone to deal with up to then.

This story teaches us about the importance of objective advice coming from a person who is not affected by strong feelings, even if those feelings are positive and important ones of devotion to the nation. But still we must understand: Why didn't anyone from Am Yisrael recognize the faulty situation of Moshe Rabbeinu sitting alone and judging the entire nation? How is it that only Jethro, the outsider, managed to notice this? To understand this, we must look again at the words of Jethro who says to Moshe, "You will surely wear yourself out both you and these people who are with you." We see that the danger that Jethro envisioned was not only Moshe wearing himself out due to the heavy burden on his shoulders, but that the entire nation would collapse as well. The existence of a great leader, especially one who is wholeheartedly devoted to the nation, can bring about the result of an irresponsible nation.

The feeling that a great leader like Moshe is supervising every action might take away from the simple people the sense of responsibility for their deeds, and this constituted a great danger.

This is what Jethro envisioned, as only he could, since the reality of Moshe Rabbeinu judging the entire nation on his own led to the nation's complacency, to the security of thinking there is someone "taking care of things." In a situation like that, we can understand why no one tried to see if things were being conducted in the best possible way. Only an outsider who did not feel the protection of Moshe's leadership could discern the dangers inherent in it and advise how to avoid them.

This message is true for everyone, especially anyone privileged to be the parent of children. Alongside the tremendous investment that we must invest in imparting the right values to our children, we must also give them some independence.

A little less control in every aspect of their lives will give them the ability to analyze reality and recognize dangers.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

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R' Netanel Gertner

Parshas Yisro

gTorah / The Dvar Torah Service (ng@gtorah.com)

Emotional investment

One of the mitzvos recited daily is the duty to love God:

וְאַהֲבֵתָּהּ, אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֵדֶךָ – Love Hashem your God, with all your heart, soul, and things... (6:5)

The question commonly asked is how exactly can emotion be commanded? Emotions are responses; they are there or they aren't. How is the feeling of love demanded of us?

The Sfas Emes explains that the existence of the instruction can only mean that the emotion is not borne in a vacuum. The ability to love God is imbued in everyone, and is only dormant. The instruction is to find it.

The same is true of most (all..?) things. The Gemara says to believe someone who claims to discover something after hard work. Curiously, it says “discovers”, not “earns”. The word “discover” means dis-cover, or uncover. Electricity was discovered, not invented.

It is said that an angel teaches a child the entire spectrum of knowledge to a baby in the womb, but at birth, it is tapped on the face and forgets it all. This serves to illustrate that knowledge alone is not the goal. The curse of Adam is to toil and work hard. The Vilna Gaon points out that the knowledge is always there, but birth and life are a gift to enable the ability to earn it. Perhaps the curse of Adam isn't really a curse at all then. The achievement has accrued value due to the effort put into its acquisition.

Perhaps then, the initial question is fundamentally flawed. Something has slipped under the radar. One of the Ten Commandments is *לא תחמד* – Do not covet. Jealousy is an emotion too, yet there are no questions about commanding emotion.

The Ibn Ezra explains that emotions can actually be worked on – that is the subtext of the mitzva. The way to not be jealous of someone's property is to view it as out of your league. Most normal people aren't jealous that a billionaire owns a fleet of yachts or a private island in the Caribbean. The way to not be jealous is to understand that some people have yachts and islands, your friends have a house or car, and you have what you have. Jealousy is completely suppressed in this way – mitzva accomplished.

Working on this is deeply significant beyond the applications of jealousy. Simply put, is jealousy really one of the top ten laws of Judaism this top ten in Judaism? Consider then, that it appears in the Ten Commandments.

Perhaps the instruction is that emotional development is required of us. It starts with not being jealous, and can develop into *וְאַהֲבֵתָּהּ, אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ*

Moshe as a Representative

The Maharal explains that the reason Avraham, Yitzchak and Yakov did not and could not have received the Torah is because they had no “nation”. They were individuals, and individuals pass on. The Torah is eternal and cannot fade into obscurity; it must therefore be given to a nation.

Chazal understand that after the Golden Calf, Moshe argued in defence of the Jews that *אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ* was only said to Moshe, in the second person singular, so technically, the Jews had not violated *אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ* by engaging in idol worship.

But if the Torah is given to a nation, not an individual, how could Moshe, claim he received it alone?

The answer lies in understanding Moshe's role.

After departing Egypt and being saved at the Red Sea, the Torah emphasises what Yisro heard had happened, to “Moshe and his people”. Rashi deduces that the Torah implies that Moshe was equal to the whole nation.

Much later, in the final stages of the journey through the desert, Moshe sent emissaries to Edom, requesting permission for the Jews to pass through on their way to Canaan, which was declined. Throughout the episode, the Torah alternates between Moshe and the Jews as having sent

them, from which Rashi deduces that the Torah illustrates that a national leader acts in the capacity as a proxy for the entire people.

The Maharal points out that these seem mutually exclusive. If Moshe was equal to the Jews, he achieved something greater than any other leader. How then, would his actions shed light on the authority of other leaders, that they act as agents of the people they represent?

R' Yehoshua Hartman explains that Moshe being equal to the Jewish people isn't necessarily literal. If he were to pray, it's not as though that would count as their prayer too.

A leader is an agent or representative of his people. Moshe was more than that; the “equality” meant his actions carried the same weight as the nation itself. Regular activity, such as diplomacy like sending emissaries, is an act of any leader as a representative, and it is from this aspect that we can extrapolate from Moshe to other leaders.

Moshe was a microcosm of Yisrael. There were the 600,000 people at Sinai, plus Moshe. Whatever made them into Yisrael at Sinai, Moshe already was. He could claim that only he heard *אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ* because the qualities of Yisrael at Sinai that he represented were not guilty of the Golden Calf. This is the intent behind labelling him equal to the nation.

Moshe was the pinnacle of Yisrael and humanity. He represented all that was good in the people. The people he represented could not be the people who were guilty of the Golden Calf, and thus, the people arguably ought not to be held guilty at all.

A little arrogant...

Humility is acknowledged to be one of the foremost identifying features of a Jew. The Gemara in Sota cryptically recommends that the appropriate measure of humility is as an eighth of an eighth (or 1/64) of arrogance.

What does this cryptic figure mean, and how does it indicate a suitable degree of humility?

The Koheles Yitzchak explains that the 64th correlates to the Gemara in Megila that tells how all the mountains competed for the right to have the Torah delivered on them, and Mt. Sinai “won” the right by not competing. The mightiest mountain was called Tabor, which was 32,000 cubits tall. Sinai was 1/64th, and was deemed worthy.

But how do we practice this measurement? What does it look like to us?

The Vilna Gaon explains that the 8th pasuk in the 8th parsha (Vayishlach) has Yakov doubting his merit's ability to deliver him from danger:

קָטַנְתִּי מְכַל הַחַסְדִּים וּמִכָּל הַאֲמִת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֵת עַבְדְּךָ – I have become small from all the kindnesses and from all the truth that You have rendered Your servant.

That is to say, our perspective should be that our merits are small, and that we don't deserve that much at all.

The Maharsha notes that the word for arrogance in Hebrew – *גַּס* – has the numerical value of 63. Seeing oneself as part of something greater (1/64th), and not an individual contextualises things, and a person will be humble.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the Gemara specified an eighth of an eighth, and not one sixty-fourth, for a reason.

The number 8 connotes the confluence of natural and supernatural. It is a repetition of a cycle, an octave higher. It is a rededication of the connection from God. This is what the Bris of circumcision and Yovel indicate – an eighth unit. The second eighth is necessary, because a person may recognise that their talents and achievements are from God — but why did God give them to him?

The second eighth offsets that. The path to humility is recognition that everything is from God. The gift is itself a gift, and not because you deserve it.

How Does a Person Convert to Judaism?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

When our ancestors accepted responsibility to observe the Torah, they did so by performing bris milah, immersing themselves in a mikveh, and offering korbanos. A non-Jew who chooses to join the Jewish people is

entering the same covenant and must follow a similar procedure (Kerisus 9a).

The privilege of becoming a ger tzedek requires one to follow very exacting guidelines. On a technical level, the ger is accepting responsibility to perform mitzvos. Through the gerus procedure, he creates an obligation upon himself to observe mitzvos (Birchas Shmuel, Kiddushin #15).

DEFINITION OF A JEW

To the non-Jewish or non-observant world, the definition of a Jew is based on sociological criteria. But to the Torah Jew, the definition of a Jew is someone who is a member of a people that is obligated to fulfill the Torah's commandments. For this reason, it is axiomatic that one cannot become Jewish without accepting the responsibility of observing mitzvos (kabbalas mitzvos). This concept, so obvious to the Torah Jew, is almost never appreciated by the non-observant. Someone who does not (yet) observe mitzvos himself does not usually comprehend why observing mitzvos is imperative to becoming Jewish. This is why a not-yet-observant Jew often finds the requirements for halachically acceptable giyur (conversion) to be "unrealistic" or even "intolerant." However, in reality, attempting to bend the Torah's rules reflects an intolerance, or more precisely, a lack of understanding. The basic requirement for becoming a Jew is accepting Hashem's commandments, since a Jew is, by definition, someone who has a covenant with G-d to observe the Torah.

DISCOURAGE CONVERTS

As we all know, when someone requests to be converted to Judaism, we discourage him. As the Gemara (Yevamos 47a) says: If a potential convert comes, we ask him, "Why do you want to convert? Don't you know that Jews are persecuted and dishonored? Constant suffering is their lot! Why do you want to join such a people?"

Why do we discourage a sincere non-Jew from joining Jewish ranks? Shouldn't we encourage someone to undertake such a noble endeavor?

The reason is that even if the potential convert is very sincerely motivated, we still want to ascertain that he or she can persevere in keeping the mitzvos, even under adversity. Although we can never be certain what the future brings, by making the path to conversion difficult, we are helping the potential convert, who may later regret his conversion when the going gets rough. Because of this rationale, some batei din deliberately make it difficult for a potential convert, as a method of discouraging him or her.

Another method of discouraging someone from conversion is by informing potential converts of the seven mitzvos bnei Noach. In so doing, we point out that a non-Jew can merit olam haba without becoming obligated to keep all the Torah's mitzvos. They can become responsible, moral non-Jews, without their becoming Jewish. As the Gemara explains, we tell him, "Until now, you were not punished if you neglected keeping kosher. There was no penalty for not observing Shabbos. If you become Jewish, you will receive very severe punishments for violating any of the mitzvos!" (Yevamos 47a)

I once met a woman who was enthusiastically interested in becoming Jewish. Although she was living in a town with no Jewish community, she was already keeping a kosher home!

After I explained the mitzvos of bnei Noach to her, she insisted that this was not enough for her. She wanted to be fully Jewish.

Because of her passion, I expected to hear from her again. I was wrong. She never contacted me again. It seems that her tremendous fervor petered out. This is exactly what Chazal were concerned about. Therefore, they told us to discourage someone who wants to become Jewish, to see whether her commitment survives adversity. Better that for her enthusiasm to wane before she becomes Jewish than afterwards when she has no way out.

The following story from my personal experience is unfortunately very common. A gentile woman, eager to marry an observant Jewish man, agreed to fulfill all the mitzvos, as a requirement for her conversion. (As we will point out shortly, this is not a recommended procedure.) Although initial she seemed very excited about observing mitzvos, with time she

began to lose interest. In the end, she gave up observance completely. The unfortunate result is that she is now a Yisrael chotei (a Jew who sins).

MOTIVATION FOR CONVERTING

We must ascertain that the proposed convert wants to become Jewish for the correct reasons. If we discern or suspect that there is an ulterior reason to convert, we do not accept the potential convert, even if he is committed to observing all the mitzvos.

For this reason, converts are not accepted at times when there is political, financial, or social gain in being Jewish. For example, no converts were accepted in the days of Mordechai and Esther or in the times of Dovid and Shlomoh; nor will gerim be accepted in the era of the Moshiach. During these times, some of the motivation to convert is suspected of being due to the financial or political advantages in being Jewish (Yevamos 24b). This applies, even if we are certain that the potential convert will observe all the mitzvos.

Despite this rule, some Jews created "batei din" during the reign of Dovid Hamelech and accepted converts against the wishes of the gedolim (Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Bi'ah 13:15).

The Rambam explains that the "non-Jewish" wives that Shlomoh married were really insincere converts. In his words, "In the days of Shlomoh, converts were not accepted by the official batei din...however, Shlomoh converted women and married them... . It was known that they converted for ulterior reasons and not through the official batei din. For this reason, the pasuk treats them as non-Jews... . Furthermore, the end bears out -- they worshipped idols and built altars to them" (Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Bi'ah 13:15-16).

Because of this rule, we do not accept someone who is converting because he or she wants to marry someone who is Jewish, even if the convert is absolutely willing to observe all the mitzvos (Yevamos 24b). I have seen numerous instances of non-Jews who converted primarily for marriage and who agreed to keep all the mitzvos at the time of the conversion. Even in the instances where mitzvos were, indeed, initially observed, I have seen very few situations where mitzvos were still being observed a few years (or even months) later.

GERUS WITH IMPROPER MOTIVATION

What is the halachic status of someone who went through the gerus process for the wrong reasons, such as when they converted because they wanted to marry a Jew?

If the convert followed all the procedures, including full acceptance of all the mitzvos, the conversion is valid, even though we disapprove of the individuals who facilitated this procedure. Assuming that the convert remains faithful to Jewish observance, we will treat him or her with all the respect and rights due to a Jew. However, before accepting the gerus, the beis din waits to see whether the convert is, indeed, fully committed to living a Jewish life (Rambam, Issurei Bi'ah 13:15-18).

However, someone who is not committed to mitzvah observance and just goes through the procedures has not become Jewish at all.

Jim was interested in "converting to Judaism" because his wife was Jewish, and not because he was interested in observing mitzvos. At first he went to a Rav who explained that he must observe all the mitzvos, and certainly they must live within the frum community. This was not what Jim had in mind, so he went shopping for a "rabbi" who would meet his standards. Is there any validity to this conversion?

CONVERSION PROCESS

How does a non-Jew become Jewish? As mentioned above, Klal Yisrael joined Hashem's covenant with three steps: bris milah (for males), immersion in a mikveh, and offering a korban (Kerisus 9a). Since no korbanos are brought today, the convert becomes a ger without fulfilling this mitzvah. (We derive from a pasuk that gerim are accepted, even in generations that do not have a Beis Hamikdash.) However, when the Beis Hamikdash is, iy"h, rebuilt, every ger will be required to offer a korban olah, which is completely burnt on the mizbayach (Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Bi'ah 13:5). Until the convert offers this korban, he or she will not

be permitted to partake of the meat of korbanos that other Jews may (Mishnah, Kerisus 8b; Rambam, Hilchos Mechusarei Kapparah 1:2).

In addition to these three steps, the convert must accept all the mitzvos, just as the Jews did at Har Sinai.

Preferably, each step in the gerus procedure should be witnessed by a beis din. Some poskim contend that the bris and immersion in a mikveh are valid even if not witnessed by a beis din. But, all poskim agree that if the kabbalas (accepting) mitzvos does not take place in the presence of a beis din, the conversion is invalid (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 268:3). Thus, a minimal requirement for proper giyur is that the ger's commitment to observe all the mitzvos and practices of a Jew be made in the presence of a kosher beis din. Any "conversion" with no commitment to mitzvos, or where the commitment is made without observant Jews present, is by definition invalid and without any halachic foundation.

Unfortunately, some well-intentioned converts have been misled by people purporting to be batei din for gerus. I know of a woman who underwent four different conversion procedures, until she performed a gerus in the presence of a kosher beis din!

KABBALAS MITZVOS

As mentioned above, kabbalas mitzvos is a verbalized acceptance to observe all the Torah's mitzvos. We do not accept a convert who states that he is accepting all the mitzvos of the Torah except for one (Bechoros 30b). Rav Moshe Feinstein discusses a situation where a woman interested in converting was willing to fulfill all the mitzvos with the exception of dressing according to the halachically-required rules of tzeni'us. Rav Moshe rules that it is uncertain if her gerus is valid (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 3:106).

If the potential convert states that he accepts all mitzvos, we usually assume that the gerus is valid. However, what is the halacha if a person declares that he accepts the mitzvos, but his behavior indicates the opposite, such as eating non-kosher food or desecrating Shabbos immediately following the conversion procedure? Is he considered Jewish? Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that if it is clear that the person never intended to observe mitzvos, his conversion is invalid. The person remains a non-Jew, since he never undertook kabbalas mitzvos, which is the most important component of gerus (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:157; 3:106).

BEIS DIN

As mentioned before, conversion is an act that requires a proper beis din, meaning minimally, three fully-observant male Jews.

Since a beis din cannot perform a legal function at night or on Shabbos or Yom Tov, conversions cannot be performed at these times (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 268:4).

CHILD CONVERSION

Until now, we have discussed the conversion of adults. A child can also be converted to Judaism (Kesubos 11a). There are two common reasons why this is done: Either when the child's parents are converting to Judaism, or when a non-Jewish child is adopted by Jewish parents.

The conversion of a child involves an interesting question. As we explained above, accepting the observance of mitzvos is the main factor that transforms the gentile into a Jew. However, since a child is too young to assume legal obligations and responsibilities, how can his conversion be valid when it is performed without his accepting to observe mitzvos?

Yet we have the historical precedent of Sinai, where the Jewish people accepted the Torah and mitzvos, and this included many thousands of children who also joined the covenant and became part of klal Yisrael. When these children became adults, they became responsible for keeping mitzvos (Tosafos, Sanhedrin 68b). Thus, we see that a child can become converted to Judaism, notwithstanding his inability to make a legal decision to observe mitzvos.

There is, however, a qualitative difference between a child who becomes part of the covenant together with his parents, and an adopted child who is becoming Jewish without his biological parents. In the former case, the

parent assumes responsibility for the child's decision (Kesubos 11a; Rashi, Yevamos 48a s.v. eved), whereas an adoptive parent cannot assume this role in the conversion process. Instead, the beis din supervising the procedure acts as surrogate parents for the child's gerus. This same approach is used if a child of his own volition requests to be converted (Mordechai, Yevamos 4:40).

CAN THE CHILD LATER REJECT THIS DECISION?

Yes. If the child convert decides, on reaching halachic maturity, that he does not want to be Jewish, he invalidates his conversion and reverts to being a gentile. The age at which a child can make this decision is when he or she becomes obligated to observe mitzvos, twelve for a girl and thirteen for a boy (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:162).

CAN HE RESCIND HIS CONVERSION LATER IN LIFE?

No. Once a child achieves maturity and chooses not to reject being Jewish, he cannot rescind his status afterwards.

WHAT IF THE CHILD CONVERT WAS UNAWARE THAT HE WAS A GER AND DID NOT KNOW THAT HE HAD THE OPTION?

If the child does not discover that he is a convert until he becomes an adult, he has the option at that time to accept or reject his Judaism. Rav Moshe Feinstein discusses the case of a couple that adopted a non-Jewish child, but did not want to tell him that he was adopted. (Not telling the child he is adopted may be inadvisable for psychological reasons, but this is an article on halacha, not psychology.) Rav Moshe raises the following halachic reason why the parents should tell the child that he is a convert. Assuming that the child knows he is a child convert, he has the option to accept or reject his Judaism when turning bar mitzvah (bas mitzvah for a girl), which is a time that the parents have much influence on their child. Subsequent to this time, he cannot opt out of Judaism. However, if he only finds out that he is a convert after becoming an adult, he would have the option of not accepting his Judaism, and the parents would have limited influence on his decision.

WHAT IF THE CHILD WANTS TO BE A NON-OBSERVANT JEW?

What is the halacha if the child at age thirteen wants to be Jewish, but does not want to be observant?

There is a dispute among poskim whether this constitutes a rejection of one's conversion or not. Some contend that not observing mitzvos is not the same as rejecting conversion; the conversion is only undone if the child does not want to be Jewish. Others contend that not observing mitzvos is considered an abandonment of one's being Jewish.

Many years ago, I asked my rebbe, Rav Yaakov Kulefsky zt"l, about the following situation. A boy underwent a giyur katan and was raised by non-observant "traditional" parents, who kept a kosher home but did not observe Shabbos. The boy wanted to be Jewish without being observant, just like his adoptive parents. The family wanted to celebrate his bar mitzvah in an Orthodox shul and have the boy "lein" the Torah. Was this permitted, or was the boy considered non-Jewish?

Rav Kulefsky paskined that the boy could "lein" and was considered halachically Jewish. Other poskim disagree, contending that accepting being Jewish requires observing the mitzvos.

GERIM ARE SPECIAL

A ger tzedek should be treated with tremendous love and respect. Indeed, the Torah gives us a special mitzvah to "Love the ger," and we daven for them daily in our Shmoneh Esrei!

Throughout the years, I have met many sincere gerim and have been truly impressed by their dedication to Torah and mitzvos. Hearing about the journey to find truth that brought them to Judaism is usually fascinating. What would cause a gentile to join the Jewish people, risk confronting the brunt of anti-Semitism, while at the same time being uncertain that Jews will accept him? Sincere converts are drawn by the truth of Torah and a desire to be part of the Chosen People. They know that they can follow the

will of Hashem by doing seven mitzvos, but they insist on choosing an all-encompassing Torah lifestyle.

One sincere young woman, of Oriental background, stood firmly before the beis din. "Why would you want this?" questioned one of the rabbonim.

"Because it is truth and gives my life meaning."

"There are many rules to follow," he cautioned.

"I know. I have been following them meticulously for two years," was the immediate reply. "I identify with the Jews."

After further questioning, the beis din authorized her gerus, offering her two dates convenient for them. She chose the earlier one, so she could keep one extra Shabbos.

We should learn from the ger to observe our mitzvos every day with tremendous excitement – just as if we have just received them for the first time!

Ohr Somayach :: Talmud Tips :: Yoma Yoma 72 - 78

For the week ending 18 January 2014 / 17 Shevat 5774

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

"If a person learns Torah for l'shma ("for its sake" and not for ulterior motives) and fulfills the Torah — the Torah becomes a crown for that person. But if he not worthy of doing this, the Torah becomes "a stranger" to him." Yoma 72b

This statement is found on our daf in the name of the Sage Rabbi Yochanan. He derives this teaching from the apparent contradiction between the way the word "zer" of the Aron that contained the Torah is written "zar", without a "yud", and the way it is pronounced as "zeir", as if there was a "yud", since the vowelization is with a "tzerei". Rabbi Yochanan states that this variance shows the dual nature of Torah study and observance. If a person studies for positive reasons and fulfills what he learns, the Torah is a crown for him ("zeir" as it is pronounced). But if not, it is a "stranger" ("zar") and he will forget it. (Rashi)

"Any talmid chacham (Torah scholar) whose inside is not like his outside is not a talmid chacham." Yoma 72b

Rava learns this from the verse which refers to the Aron with gold, both on the inside and the outside. The Maharsha elaborates on the source for Rava's teaching. The other vessels in the Mishkan that were gold-plated — such as the Shulchan and the Golden Altar — were golden only where visible — i.e. the outside. The Aron, however, was coated with gold also on the inside (see Ex. 25:11).

Therefore a person learning Torah (which the Aron represents) needs to be "golden" and pure from impropriety not only when in public but also when he is by himself in private — inside and out. Only then is he a true talmid chacham. (Meiri)

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