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from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org>

to: ravfrand@torah.org

date: Feb 12, 2025, 9:39 PM

subject: Rav Frand - **If They Were Just Rich Men, They Still Would Not Necessarily Be 'Anshei Chayil'**

Parshas Yisro

If They Were Just Rich Men, They Still Would Not Necessarily Be 'Anshei Chayil' These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1324 Saying Kaddish: All Aveilim Together or Each One Individually on a Rotating Basis? Good Shabbos!

Parshas Yisro begins with Yisro's arrival and his taking notice that people were standing from morning until evening waiting for adjudication from Moshe Rabbeinu. Yisro came up with the idea that there should be a judicial system of lower courts and higher courts to improve the efficiency of the adjudication process. Yisro advised his son-in-law, "And you shall see from among the entire people, men of means, G-d fearing people, men of truth, people who despise money, and you shall appoint them leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens." (Shemos 18:21)

Moshe Rabbeinu accepted Yisro's plan: "Moshe chose anshei chayil (men of accomplishment) from among all Israel and appointed them heads of the people, leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens." (Shemos 18:25). Rashi explains the expression "anshei chayil" as "ashirim" (rich people, who have no need to worry about flattering other people or showing favoritism)." (Shemos 18:21) In other words, an independently wealthy individual is a good person to have as a judge.

Not everyone explains "anshei chayil" in this fashion. For example, the Ibn Ezra interprets the term as "patient people." There is something called "judicial temperament." People can get very testy about dinei Torah. A judge needs to have a certain calmness and emotional discipline to maintain the appropriate decorum between litigants. The Ramban has a third interpretation: "hachacham, hazariz v'ha'yashar" (someone who is wise, diligent, and has integrity).

At any rate, Rashi says that anshei chayil means rich people. The pasuk also lists several other qualities, in addition to anshei chayil: G-d fearing, men of truth, and those who hate corruption. What would we consider as the number one quality of a judge? I would think that the top two qualities would be "G-d fearing" and "men of truth". It is certainly nice for a person to be wealthy

and not beholden to others, but why should that be priority number one on the list of qualifications for the job?

A second question may be asked: The Gemara says (Bechoros 5b) that every Jew who left Mitzrayim had ninety donkeys laden with silver and gold. Everyone was rich! If that is the case, there should have been no need at all to specify that the judges chosen should be rich. Pick a number out of a hat! Look in the phone book! Everyone met this criterion!

I saw a very interesting approach from the Tolner Rebbe. The Tolner Rebbe states that there is a difference between "the essence of a person" and "a person who possesses a certain quality." To what can this be compared? The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 53) paskens that a shliach tzibbur (chazan) who leads the congregation in prayer should be "free from sin and not have a bad reputation, even in his youth, and be modest and acceptable to the congregation." We might suggest that the Shulchan Aruch forgot to mention the main quality to look for in picking a chazan: The shliach tzibbur should know how to clearly articulate the words of the prayers. We are not going to even mention that the Shulchan Aruch contains no mention of a requirement that a chazan should have a "nice voice." Why was there no mention of the requirement to enunciate properly?

The Tolner Rebbe explains that the reason is that proper enunciation is not a quality. It is the definition of a chazan. If a chazan can't speak the words or if he doesn't know 'Ivra' (Hebrew), then he is not a chazan. Similarly, Rashi's comment about the judges needs to be understood in the same fashion. When Rashi says that he must be a wealthy individual who does not flatter people, Rashi is not talking about the candidate's bank account or stock portfolio. Rashi is saying that the judge must have the essence of an ashir (rich man)." A person who is by essence an "ashir" is a person who is not going to lower himself by trying to curry favor with flattery of individuals. That is beneath his dignity. That is not who he is.

Possessing money is not good enough to qualify someone as a judge. The person needs to have the essence and the mentality of an ashir. On occasion, people win lotteries worth mega millions. Overnight, these people are worth a couple hundred million dollars. Are they ashirim? They may have money but they are not ashirim. An ashir is a person who has a certain standard, a certain approach and dignity. That is what Rashi means when he comments that anshei chayil = ashirim, as the number one criterion for a judge.

The colloquial term for a rich man is a "gvir." Rav Leib Steimann once commented that a "gvir" must be a gibor (possessing strength of character)! A person can have a lot of money but that alone does not make him into a gvir. A gvir means a person who is in charge of himself. Who is the gibor – one who conquers his evil inclination (Avos 4:1).

Many of us remember Rav Moshe Reichmann of Toronto. By all standards he was an ashir. But not only was he a person who had a lot of money, he was an ashir because of the way he conducted himself and the way he treated others. He was not just an ashir. He was a gvir.

Of all the stories I read about Rav Moshe Reichmann, the following made the most lasting impression on me: He was suffering from cancer at the end of his life. He had an aide who used to take him for treatments. After his treatments, he was very thirsty. After one of his treatments, he asked his aide to get him a glass of water. The aide came back with a bottle of water and no cup. Rav Moshe Reichmann refused the water. He said that since the time he was a baby, he never drank out of a bottle and he did not intend to start now. That is a certain dignity and presence of how a person holds himself. That is an ashir! That is a gvir!

So sure, all the people in Klal Yisrael had ninety donkeys laden with silver and gold. But that only makes them into people with a lot of money. It does not make them into ashirim. It does not make them into anshei chayil (according to Rashi's interpretation of the term.)

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Do you have a question or comment? Feel free to contact us on our website. Join the Jewish Learning Revolution! Torah.org: The Judaism Site brings this and a host of other

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from: Rabbi YY Jacobson <rabiyy@theyeshiva.net>

date: Feb 13, 2025, 10:24 PM

subject: The War Of Hamas and the Radical Left on the Jews - Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

The War Of Hamas and the Radical Left on the Jews

The Two Great Evils of History: The Islamists and Hitler

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

This Nazi swastika flag was planted in 2018 near the Gaza-Israel border

Give Us Two

One of the intriguing things about the Ten Commandments[1], given to the Jewish people is that they were engraved on two separate tablets. Was G-d short of granite that He needed to use two tablets? Why could He not carve the commandments onto a single stone?

Two Versions

The rabbis in the midrash proposed a novel answer. The Ten Commandments, they suggested, were engraved on two tablets, five on each stone, so that they would be read in two directions -- from top to bottom, and from side to side[2].

The simplest way of reading the Ten Commandments is, of course, from top to bottom:

On the first stone:

1) I am the Lord your G-d who has taken you out of Egypt...

2) You shall have no other gods...

3) You shall not swear in G-d's name in vain...

4) Remember the Sabbath...

5) Honor your father and your mother...

And the five commandments engraved on the second tablet:

6) You shall not murder.

7) You shall not commit adultery.

8) You shall not steal.

9) You shall not bear false witness against your fellow.

10) You shall not covet your fellow's house; you shall not covet your fellow's wife ... nor anything that belongs to your fellow.

This was the way of reading the Ten Commandments vertically. Yet due to the fact that the first five commandments were engraved on one stone and the second five on a separate stone, there was another way of reading the commandments -- horizontally instead of vertically, from commandment No. 1 directly to No. 6; from No. 2 to No. 7; 3 -- 8; 4 -- 9; 5 -- 10.

This version of the Ten Commandments would then read like this:

1) I am the Lord your G-d/You shall not murder. 2) You shall have no other gods/You shall not commit adultery; and so forth with the rest of the commandments.

But why is it necessary to read the Ten Commandments horizontally? What insight can we gain from this alternative reading of the commandments?

In this essay we will discuss the juxtaposition of the first and sixth commandments: "I am the Lord your G-d/You shall not murder." The significance of this "horizontal" reading from a historical, political and religious standpoint cannot be overstated. It embodies one of the most stunning aspects of Judaism. What is at stake in this juxtaposition is nothing less than the future of human civilization.

Two Historical Attempts

Two groups have made an attempt to divorce commandment no. 1 from commandment no. 6 -- to sever the idea of a Creator, who conceived the world for a moral purpose, from the imperative to honor the life of another human being. The first group was comprised of the philosophers of the Enlightenment during the 18th and 19th centuries, the second of religious leaders in many and diverse ages. The result for both was moral defeat.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment ushered in the Age of Reason and the

modern secular era, founded on the belief that the great ideal of "You shall not murder" did not require the prerequisite of "I am the Lord Your G-d" in order to be sustained. Religion was not necessary to ensure moral behavior; reason alone, without G-d, would guide humanity into an age of liberty and to the achievement of moral greatness. The sixth commandment could operate successfully independent of the first.

While religion embodied the vision of man standing in a continuous relationship with G-d, the essence of the Enlightenment represented the vision of man without G-d. It was a vision already introduced during the first days of creation near the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, by the most sophisticated animal of the time, the serpent. "You shall be like G-d," it promised Eve[3]. Man could, and ought to, replace G-d. Left to his own (de)vice, the thinking went, the human being will achieve greatness. But the Holocaust spelled the end of this grand faith in the promise of human progress based on human reason. In Auschwitz, the belief that modern man felt a natural empathy for others was ruined forever.

The gas chambers were not invented by a primitive, barbaric and illiterate people. To the contrary, this people excelled in sciences and the arts, but nevertheless sent 1.5 million children, and 4.5 million adults, to their deaths solely because they had Jewish blood flowing in their veins. SS guards would spend a day in Auschwitz, gassing as many as 12,000 human beings, and then return home in the evening to pet their dogs and laugh with their wives. As the smoke of children ascended from the crematoriums, these charming romantics would enjoy good wine, beautiful women and the moving music of Bach, Mozart and Wagner. They murdered millions of innocents in the name of a developed ethic, and they justified genocide on purely rational grounds.

In "Schindler's List," there is a scene during the liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto where a little girl hiding in a piano is shot dead by an SS guard. As her little angelic body lay in a river of blood, another guard sits down to play the piano.

First SS guard: Was ist das? Ist das Bach?

Second SS guard: Nein. Mozart.

First SS guard: Mozart?

Second SS guard: Ja. And they both marvel at the exquisite music.

This was Nazi Germany at its best.

Elie Wiesel, who gripped the world's imagination with his book "Night," a personal testimony of life and death in Auschwitz, once asked the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who himself lost many members of his family in the Holocaust, how he could believe in G-d after Auschwitz. If G-d existed, Wiesel asked, posing the single greatest challenge to faith, how could He ignore 6 million of His children de-humanized and murdered in the cruelest of fashions?

The Rebbe shed a tear and then replied, "In whom do you expect me to believe after Auschwitz? In man?"

This must remain one of the lasting legacies of Auschwitz. If there is any faith at all left after the extermination of 6 million people, it must glean its vitality from something transcending the human rationale and its properties. If morality is left to be determined exclusively by the human mind, it can become a morality that justifies the guillotine, the gulag and the gas chamber. As Dostoevsky famously put it in "The Brothers Karamazov," "Where there is no G-d, all is permitted."

The atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote: "I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values [resulting from atheism], but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it." Russell's point is critical. Without G-d, we cannot objectively define any behavior as good or evil. As difficult as it is to entertain, no one can objectively claim that gassing a mother and her children is any more evil than killing a mouse. It is all a matter of taste and opinion. The validity and effectiveness of "You shall not murder" can be sustained only if it is predicated on the foundation of faith in a universal moral creator who gave humanity an absolute and unwavering definition of what constitutes good vs. evil.

It is why so many on the radical left are so confused about morality, as to even defend Hitler and Hamas. Who would have believed the vile hatred

that emerged from Harvard and Colombia, the elite universities of our country? who would believe how sick and deranged some professors and students can be?

Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel, who escaped Warsaw a few weeks before it was invaded and lost most of his family in the Nazi Holocaust, captured this sentiment succinctly: "If man is not more than human, then he is less than human." Either we climb to a place beyond ourselves, or we are likely to fall to a place below ourselves. When the vision of the sacred dies in the soul of a person, he or she is capable of becoming a servant of the devil.

Religious Evil

But this is far from the whole picture.

While the Enlightenment abandoned commandment no. 1 in favor of no. 6, various religions over the ages abandoned no. 6 in favor of no. 1. Theirs has been the atrocious belief that as long as you believe in the Lord, or in Allah, you can kill and maim whomever you brand an "infidel." Whether it is a business executive in New York, or a teenager eating a slice of pizza in Jerusalem, or a child on the first day of school in Beslan, or a commuter in Madrid, or a tourist in Bali, or a Chabad couple in Mumbai, if the person is not a member of your faith, G-d wants him or her to die. For the religious fundamentalist, "I am the Lord your G-d" has nothing to do with "You shall not murder."

This is the greatest perversion of faith. When thousands can rejoice gleefully in the torture of Jewish babies, in the rape and beheading of Jewish women, as the Hamas monsters did on October 7th, 2023, while millions of others celebrated, it is the most vile desecration of Allah. Faith that does not inculcate its followers with the sanctity of every single human life desecrates and erodes the very purpose of faith, which is to elevate the human person to a state beyond personal instinct and prejudice. If you delete "You shall not murder" from religion, you have detached yourself from "I am the Lord your G-d." To believe in G-d means to honor the life of every person created in the image of G-d. What the juxtaposition of the two commandments is telling us is that you can't believe in G-d and murder[4].

Conversely, if you truly believe that taking the life of another human is wrong -- not just because you lack the means or motive to do so or are afraid of ending up in jail, but because you recognize the transcendent, inviolable value of life -- that's just another way of saying you believe in G-d. For what confers upon human life its radical grace, its transcendent sanctity and its absolute value if not the living presence of G-d imprinted on the face of the human person?

3,336 years ago, Judaism, in the most ennobling attempt to create a society based on justice and peace, established its principle code in the sequence of the two commandments -- "I am the Lord your G-d/You shall not murder." A society without G-d can become monstrous; a society that abandons the eternal and absolute commandment "You shall not murder" is equally evil. Both are capable of burning children alive during the day and then retiring to sleep with a clear conscience.

The Mountain

The Talmud captures this notion in an intriguing fashion[5].

The Talmud cites a tradition that when Israel approached Sinai, G-d lifted up the mountain, held it over the people's heads and declared: "Either you accept the Torah, or be crushed beneath the mountain." (The Talmud bases this tradition on the verse in Exodus, "And they stood beneath the mountain[6].")

This seems ludicrous. What worth is there to a relationship and a covenant accepted through coercion[7]?

The answer is profoundly simple. What G-d was telling the Jewish people is that the creation of societies that honor life and shun cruelty is dependent on education and on the value system inculcated within children of the society. The system of Torah, G-d was suggesting, was the guarantor for life and liberty. If you reject the morality of Torah, if you will lack the courage and conviction to teach the world that "I am the Lord your G-d" and that I have stated unequivocally "You shall not murder," the result will be humanity crushed under a mountain of tyrants.

Seventy-five years since Auschwitz and after two decades of incessant

Islamic terrorism, the mountain is hanging over our heads once again. Shall we embrace the path of divine-based morality? Shall we never forget that religion must always be defined by "You shall not murder[8]?"

[1] Exodus chapter 20. [2] Mechilta to Exodus ibid. [3] Genesis 3:5.

[4] The Midrash (Mechiultah ibid.) in discussing the connection between the first and sixth commandments presents the following parable to explain the evil behind murder: "There was a king who entered a country and put up portraits of himself, and made statues of himself, and minted coins with his image. After a while, the people of the country overturned his portraits, broke his statues and invalidated his coins, thereby reducing the image of the king. "So, too, one who sheds blood reduces the image of the King, as it is written (Genesis 9:6): "One who spills a man's blood... for in the image of G-d He made man."

[5] Talmud, Shabbas 88a. [6] Exodus 19:17.

[7] This question is raised among many of the Talmudic commentators. Many answers have been offered. See Tosfos, Eitz Yosef, Pnei Yehoshua, Shabbos Shel Mi and Ben Yehoyada to Talmud Shabbos ibid. Midrash Tanchumah Noach section 3. Daas Zekeinim Mibbalei Hatsofot on Exodus 19:17. Maharal Tiferes Yisroel ch. 32, Gur Aryeh on Exodus ibid. and Or Chodosh p. 45. Sources noted in Pardas Yosef to Exodus ibid. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Pulnah in Ben Poras Yosef Parshas Vayeishev. Torah Or Megilas Esther p. 96c; 118c. 7) This essay is based on a Yiddish letter by the Lubavitcher Rebbe written to Dr. Elie Wiesel in 1965 (published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 33 pp.255-260) and on a 1962 public address by the Rebbe (published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 3 pp. 887-895), and on other sources.

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from: **Alan Fisher** <afisherads@yahoo.com>

SubjectPotomac Torah Study Center Devrei Torah for Parshat Yitro 5785 BS"D February 14, 2025 Potomac Torah Study Center 23-24 Shevat 5784; Yitro; Mevarchim HaHodesh

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May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May Israel, with the support of the U.S. government, find a way to force Hamas to release the remaining hostages and bodies of victims of their brutality as soon as possible. May 5785 initiate a period of peace and security for Israel and Jews throughout the world.

Parshat Yitro opens (chapter 18) as Moshe's father-in-law hears of God's great interventions for B'Nai Yisrael and takes Moshe's wife and sons with him to reunite at the base of Har Sinai. However, chapter 17 ends with B'Nai Yisrael at Refidim, and they do not depart for Har Sinai until later and do not reach the base of Har Sinai until Sivan (19:2). Moshe's reunion with his family, including Yitro, therefore must take place after the Revelation -- and thus chapter 18 is out of chronological order. (I discussed the likely reason for moving chapter 18 in my introduction two years ago.)

What is so important about Yitro's reunion with Moshe that the Torah moves it out of chronological order? The most common answer I have seen (and discussed in the past) is that chapter 17 ends with Amalek's attack -- the reaction of one group of non-Jews to B'Nai Yisrael leaving Egypt. Yitro demonstrates a very different response, a non-Jewish (Midianite) priest thrilled for the Jews leaving Egypt and about to receive a direct message from God. By moving Yitro's reunion to come directly after Amalek's attack, chapter 18 fits thematically to contrast B'Nai Yisrael's interactions with members of two nearby non-Jewish nations living near them. Chapters 17 and 18 are models for B'Nai Yisrael on how to relate to evil and good from neighboring nations.

This year, I would like to discuss Who Are You Moshe Rabbeinu?, a compelling article by Rabbi Itiel Gold, a psychologist and alumnus of Yeshivat Har Etzion. I obtained the article from the Har Etzion archives, but it is also easily available on the Internet by searching the author and name of the article. Rabbi Gold observes that B'Nai Yisrael seem not to have accepted Zipporah, Moshe's foreign (Midianite) wife, and they also consider Moshe to be a foreigner, because Paro's daughter adopted him and raised him in the palace. Moshe is in a difficult situation, because at best B'Nai

Yisrael consider him to be Hashem's representative while Moshe wishes to become a representative of the people to Hashem. The Jews do not completely trust Moshe as their representative. (The people seem not to realize that a recently freed slave would not be effective negotiating with Paro.)

Yitro arrives and almost immediately realizes that Moshe and Zipporah both need to interact socially with B'Nai Yisrael so the people and Moshe's family can all relate comfortably with each other. Yitro therefore arranges a large dinner to celebrate God's gifts for the people and invites the heads of the various tribes and other VIPs to interact with Moshe and his family. Everyone comes and enjoys the meal – except Moshe. Yitro discovers that Moshe spends all day and night every day meeting with people who have questions for God, and Moshe judges disagreements for many hours each day. Given that schedule, Moshe does not finish his work early enough for a social meal.

Yitro's next intervention is to recommend a judicial system to make Moshe's workload manageable. If God approves, Moshe should train judges for minor matters; higher level judges for initial appeals; and reserve only the most important not yet determined cases to go on to Moshe for final decisions. This model, the prototype for judicial systems for most countries even today, has the advantage of showing the people that Moshe is on their side and is their representative taking issues up from the people to God to resolve.

Rabbi Gold's analysis demonstrates how Yitro's suggestions meet the psychological needs of Moshe, Zipporah, and B'Nai Yisrael. The people come to meet Moshe and his family, see them as their representatives, and understand that Moshe is working very long hours to help the people understand and obtain help from God. With this system newly in place, the people have a method to help them understand and learn how to meet Hashem's demands. B'Nai Yisrael do not all learn and trust either Moshe or God completely for some time, but at least they have an intelligent method to learn better how to follow the mitzvot.

So far my discussion focuses on how we are to live and relate to each other, God, and non-Jews in a civilized world. Israel, however, has been dealing with a world of evil – murderers capturing and torturing our people, sending weapons aimed at destroying lives and property, and encouraging hatred among non-Jews all over the world. Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander asks how “we balance the imminent threat to the lives of our brothers and sisters in captivity with the prospect of harm to any or many of us when convicted murderers go free?” Rabbi Brander's answer is that the Torah gives us a road map directing us toward values by which we wish to live. Meanwhile, the Israeli and American governments support our people in fighting evil as necessary to bring the fighting to an end.

Our prayers help. On Tu B'Shevat, I received an email from Kiryat Arba informing us that The Mor family of Kiryat Arba have received a sign of life from their son, hostage Eitan Mor. As we continue to pray for Eitan Avraham ben Efrat and all the hostages, may the news about Eitan Mor be a sign that Hashem is listening and working to bring better news to our people.

As we continue to perform more mitzvot, pray to Hashem, and oppose evil in the world, may conditions for our people improve. May we also teach our children and grandchildren more lessons from the Torah.

Note: in writing these words, I recall anti-Semitic attacks on my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z”l, such as his getting arrested and spending time in jail for petitioning for Soviet Jews in front of the Soviet Embassy and spending all day in shul on Yom Kippur after high school thugs pelted him with raw eggs while he walked to services. In contrast, one of Rabbi Cahan's closest friends was a minister with whom he co-taught a Bible course for many years (with some services at Har Shalom and others at the Lutheran Church). Hopefully all of us can remember many episodes of positive interactions with non-Jews as well as any anti-Semitic incidents.

Shabbat Shalom, Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the

pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

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subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Home Weekly Parsha YITRO

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

At the revelation at Sinai the Lord set the goal for the Jewish people – “to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These noble goals, like all great ideas and lofty ideals, require definition. What is meant by a kingdom of priests? In Jewish life the priests, the descendants of Aharon, were people who were freed from the daily mundane chores of life and were supported by the masses of Israel who sustained them physically and financially.

Now if the entire nation was to be a kingdom of priests, in those terms of support and life, it obviously was an impossibility to maintain such a kingdom. Therefore the idea of the kingdom of priests must mean a broader reality. It is the challenge of being a kingdom of teachers of others – “for the lips of the priest shall guard knowledge and Torah will be asked to be taught from his mouth.”

We are all teachers by example if not by profession. How we act influences our children, our neighbors, our customers and our coworkers. And a priest in the service of the Jewish people was someone who served the public and private needs of Jews. He was someone who was on call to answer the needs of the community, whether in the required Temple service or in the private endeavors meant to enhance the status of the community or of help to other individuals. The priest was the social worker, the peace maker, the cement that binds a community together and gives it its necessary sense of unity and cohesion. Every Jew is obligated to attempt to be such a priest.

A holy nation is also a phrase that requires definition and detail. Holiness in its Hebrew root means dedication, loyalty and an ability to break down the barriers of society that oftentimes prevent us from achieving spiritual satisfaction and nobility of purpose. A holy nation must therefore mean a nation that is able to retain its unique identity. It cannot be swallowed up by the prevailing and ever changing majority cultures that will always surround it.

Holiness requires the ability to care for everyone while remaining apart from everyone at one and the same time. Holiness refers to the body and not just to the soul and the spirit. It speaks to discipline and order, self-control and resisting impulse. The great challenge here is to instill these virtues and traits of character and behavior in an entire nation and not only in a few special chosen, extraordinary individuals.

These goals of probity and correct behavior are to be the national goals of the Jewish people and the hallmark of its society. Other societies look for greatness and morality from the few. Not so the society of the Jewish people, where these demands and goals are laid upon all who are part of the household of Israel.

A holy nation is not restricted to being so only in the house of worship and study. It is to be a holy nation in every walk of life, at home and in the marketplace, in the halls of government - and certainly in its treatment of others. That is the blueprint of Sinai that was set before us millennia ago and still binds us to this very day.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

from: The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust <info@rabbisacks.org>

subject: Covenant and Conversation

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l

The Custom that Refused to Die

Yitro

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

There's an enthralling story about the Ten Commandments and the role they played in Jewish worship and the synagogue.

It begins with a little-known fact. There was a time when there were not three paragraphs in the prayer we call the Shema, but four. The Mishnah in Tamid (5:1) tells us that in Temple times the officiating priests would first recite the Ten Commandments and then the three paragraphs of the Shema. We have several pieces of independent evidence for this. The first consists of four papyrus fragments acquired in Egypt in 1898 by the then secretary of the Society of Biblical Archaeology, W.L. Nash. Pieced together and located today in the Cambridge University Library, they are known as the Nash Papyrus. Dating from the second century BCE, they contain a version of the Ten Commandments, immediately followed by the Shema. Almost certainly the papyrus was used for prayer in a synagogue in Egypt before the birth of Christianity, at a time when the custom was to include all four paragraphs. Tefillin from the Second Temple period, discovered in the Qumran caves along with the Dead Sea Scrolls, contained the Ten Commandments. Indeed a lengthy section of the halachic Midrash on Deuteronomy, the Sifri, is dedicated to proving that we should not include the Ten Commandments in the tefillin, which suggests that there were some Jews who did so, and the rabbis needed to be able to show that they were wrong.

We also have evidence from both the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli, Brachot 12a) and the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi Brachot 1:8) that there were communities in Israel and Babylon who sought to introduce the Ten Commandments into the prayers, and that the rabbis had to issue a ruling against doing so. There is even documentary evidence that the Jewish community in Fostat, near Cairo, kept a special scroll in the Ark called the Sefer al-Shir, which they took out after the conclusion of daily prayers and read from it the Ten Commandments.[1]

So the custom of including the Ten Commandments as part of the Shema was once widespread, but from a certain point in time it was systematically opposed by the Sages. Why did they object to it? Both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud say it was because of the “claim of the sectarians.” Jewish sectarians – some identify them as a group of early Christians but there is no compelling evidence for this – argued that only the Ten Commandments were binding, because only they were received by the Israelites directly from God at Mount Sinai. The others were received through Moses, and this sect, or perhaps several of them, held that they did not come from God. They were Moses’ own invention, and therefore not binding.

There is a Midrash that gives us an idea of what the sectarians were saying. It places in the mouth of Korach and his followers, who rebelled against Moses, these words:

“The whole congregation are holy. Are you [Moses and Aaron] the only ones who are holy? All of us were sanctified at Sinai . . . and when the Ten Commandments were given, there was no mention of challah or terumah or tithes or tzitzit. You made this all up yourself.”

Yalkut Shimoni Korach 752

So the rabbis were opposed to any custom that would give special prominence to the Ten Commandments since the sectarians were pointing to such customs as proof that even orthodox Jews treated them differently from the other commands. By removing them from the prayer book, the rabbis hoped to silence such claims.

But the story does not end there. So special were the Ten Commandments to Jews that they found their way back. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, author of the Tur (14th century) suggested that one should say them privately. Rabbi Joseph Karo argues that the ban only applies to reciting the Ten Commandments publicly during the service, so they could be said privately after the service. That is where you find them today in most siddurim – immediately after the morning service. Rabbi Shlomo Luria had the custom of reading the Ten Commandments at the beginning of prayer, before the start of Pesukei de-Zimra, the Verses of Praise.

That was not the end of the argument. Given that we do not say the Ten Commandments during public prayer, should we none the less give them special honour when we read them from the Torah, whether on Shavuot or in the weeks of Parshat Yitro and Vaetchanan? Should we stand when they are being read?

Maimonides found himself involved in a controversy over this question.

Someone wrote him a letter telling the following story. He was a member of a synagogue where originally the custom was to stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments. Then a rabbi came and ruled otherwise, saying that it was wrong to stand for the same reason as it was forbidden to say the Ten Commandments during public prayer. It could be used by sectarians, heretics and others to claim that even the Jews themselves held that the Ten Commandments were more important than the other 603. So the community stopped standing. Years later another rabbi came, this time from a community where the custom was to stand for the Ten Commandments. The new rabbi stood and told the congregation to do likewise. Some did. Some did not, since their previous rabbi had ruled against. Who was right? Maimonides had no doubt. It was the previous rabbi, the one who had told them not to stand, who was in the right. His reasoning was correct also. Exactly the logic that barred it from the daily prayers should be applied to the reading of the Torah. It should be given no special prominence. The community should stay sitting. Thus ruled Maimonides, the greatest rabbi of the Middle Ages. However, sometimes even great rabbis have difficulty persuading communities to change. Then, as now, most communities – even those in Maimonides’ Egypt – stood while the Ten Commandments were being read.

So despite strong attempts by the Sages, in the time of the Mishnah, Gemara, and later in the age of Maimonides, to ban any custom that gave special dignity to the Ten Commandments, whether as prayer or as biblical reading, Jews kept finding ways of doing so. They brought it back into daily prayer by saying it privately and outside the mandatory service, and they continued to stand while it was being read from the Torah despite Maimonides’ ruling that they should not.

“Leave Israel alone,” said Hillel, “for even if they are not prophets, they are still the children of prophets.” Ordinary Jews had a passion for the Ten Commandments. They were the distilled essence of Judaism. They were heard directly by the people from the mouth of God himself. They were the basis of the covenant they made with God at Mount Sinai, calling on them to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Twice in the Torah they are described as the covenant itself:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

Ex 34:27-28

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you His covenant, the Ten Commandments, which He commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.

Deut. 4:12-13

That is why they were originally said immediately prior to the Shema, and why despite their removal from the prayers Jews continued to say them – because their recital constituted a daily renewal of the covenant with God. That too is why Jews insisted on standing when they were being read from the Torah, because when they were being given, the Israelites “stood at the foot of the mountain” (Ex. 19:17). The Midrash says about the reading of the Ten Commandments on Shavuot:

“The Holy One blessed be He said to the Israelites: My children, read this passage every year and I will account it to you as if you were standing before Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah.”

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 12, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 204

Jews kept searching for ways of recreating that scene, by standing when they listened to it from the Torah and by saying it privately after the end of the morning prayers. Despite the fact that they knew their acts could be misconstrued by heretics, they were too attached to that great epiphany – the only time in history God spoke to an entire people – to treat it like any other passage in the Torah. The honour given to the Ten Commandments was the custom that refused to die.

[1] Jacob Mann, The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fātimid caliphs, 1920, volume I, p. 221.

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Revivim by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed (R"Y Har Bracha)

Release of Hostages on Shabbat, And Israel's Dignity

Revivim

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

It is unfortunate that the representatives of the State of Israel did not take heed of the fact that the release of the hostages was done on Shabbat, violating the national sanctity of Shabbat * As part of the religious war Hamas is waging against us, they worked towards this outcome, continuing from the terrible desecration on Shabbat and Simchat Torah * Even wicked kings achieved victory when they honored Israel's sanctities * Honor for Israel's sanctities is an essential component in defeating the enemy, and in establishing the Israeli national identity * In our time, it is forbidden to enter a mosque, because in recent generations, many Muslims have become leaders of anti-Israel sentiment in the world
Sanctification of God's Name through Observance of Commandments in Captivity

The story of Agam Berger, the surveillance soldier who was kidnapped and released, is inspiring. The terrorists used her as a servant, and demanded that she cook for them even on Shabbat, but she courageously insisted on not violating Shabbat. Her friends testified that she made sure to eat kosher food, even though it limited her diet. Her friends also shared that they did not eat chametz during Passover, and fasted on Yom Kippur. Meanwhile, Agam's mother, Merav Berger, asked the public not to desecrate Shabbat during her release. Divine help guided them, and Agam was released on Thursday. When she was freed and in the helicopter, she wrote: "I chose the way of faith, and I returned through the way of faith. Thank you to all the people of Israel, and the brave soldiers of the IDF." These beautiful words should serve as a model for all of us. May it be God's will that dear Agam, along with all the kidnapped women and the brave soldiers of the IDF, merit good health, joy, and the ability to build wonderful families, with happiness and love.

Negligence

It is unfortunate that the representatives of the State of Israel did not pay attention to the fact that the release of the hostages took place on Shabbat, violating the national sanctity of Shabbat. It turns out that the representatives of Hamas, as part of the religious war they are waging against us, worked towards this, continuing from the terrible desecration on Shabbat and Simchat Torah. However, the representatives of the Shin Bet and the Israeli government continue to fail to understand the enemy, and the price is heavy. I asked Member of Knesset Amit Halevi, a member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, about this. He responded: "This is a religious war, and therefore, I believe that this is a deliberate humiliation by Hamas to ensure that the release takes place specifically on Shabbat, causing the State to desecrate Shabbat publicly. After Agam Berger insisted not to be released on Shabbat and proved that it was possible, even though she personally was not obligated to do so, the state representatives should have insisted on this, not because of the desecration of Shabbat itself, but because of the desecration of God's name that stems from it, which is the focus of the entire war."

National Honor in Observance of Israel's Sanctities

Even Jewish wicked kings, when they kept Israel's sanctities, achieved victory, as is told about Ahab, the king of Israel (1 Kings 20). Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, gathered a very large army, and went to war against the kingdom of Israel. The Israeli army could not stop his forces, and they conquered the entire land, laying siege to Samaria, Ahab's royal city. The situation seemed hopeless. Ben-Hadad was willing to end the siege if Ahab would surrender and give him his money, gold, wives, and children. Ahab, who thought his chances of winning were lost, agreed to give the king of Aram everything that belonged to him personally. However, Ben-Hadad then demanded "the delights of his eyes." Our Sages explained (Sanhedrin 102b) that he meant the Sefer Torah – the Torah scroll. But Ahab did not agree to give the Torah scroll. Although he did not keep the commandments properly,

the national honor represented by the Torah scroll was so precious to him, that he preferred to go into a hopeless battle, rather than degrade the honor of Israel by handing over the Torah scroll to the enemy.

Because this was a fateful decision, one that could cause many to die, Ahab did not want to decide alone and consulted with the elders, and they too, supported his position. Ahab then said to Ben-Hadad's messengers: "Say to your master, the king, all that you sent to your servant in the first matter I will do, but this thing I cannot do" (1 Kings 20:9). Ben-Hadad got angry, and threatened to destroy Samaria. Then a prophet sent by God came to assure Ahab that he would defeat Aram. The Israelites went out and struck the Arameans with a great blow, and Ben-Hadad fled for his life. The prophet came again to warn Ahab, in the name of God, that Ben-Hadad would return to fight him the next year. Ahab properly prepared his army, and Israel once again defeated Aram.

Settlement of the Land

National honor is connected to the commandment of Yishuv Ha'Aretz (settling the Land) and defending it, which Omri and his son Ahab, excelled in. Therefore, even though they practiced avodah zara (idolatry), they enjoyed successes, as the Tanna of the School of Elijah said:

"Once I was sitting in the great study hall in Jerusalem before the sages, and I asked them: Why did King Omri merit that all the kings before him did not have their sons sit on their throne, but Omri succeeded in having three kings from his seed sit on his throne (Ahab his son, Ahaziah son of Ahab, and Jehoram son of Ahab)? They replied: 'We don't know'. I said to them: My friends, Omri merited to have three kings from his seed sit on his throne because he built a great city in the Land of Israel" (Tanna d'Vei Eliyahu Rabba 9).

In other words, even though King Omri did evil in the eyes of God more than all those before him (1 Kings 16:25), the merit of Yishuv Ha'Aretz, settling the Land, stood for him and his descendants. And this was despite the fact that he did not build the city of Samaria with pure intentions of settling the Land, but for personal reasons – to strengthen his monarchy, as Omri said, "Just as Jerusalem is for the kings of Judah, so Samaria will be for the kings of Israel." From here, we learn how great is the merit of the commandment of Yishuv Ha'Aretz – that even though Omri's motivation for building Samaria was flawed, because he effectively settled the Land, he merited to have three kings from his descendants sit on his throne.

Settlement of the Land and Unity of Israel

The commandment of Yishuv Ha'Aretz is connected to achdut ha'am, the unity of the nation, and in the days of Ahab, there was peace between the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel, and Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, married Ahab's daughter, and the king of Judah and the king of Israel went out together to war against their enemies, and were victorious (1 Kings 22). Our Sages also said that in Ahab's generation, they were idolaters, yet they went to war and won, because they did not speak loshon ha'ra – evil of one another. Whereas in the generation of Saul, despite being scholars of the Torah, they went to war and lost, because they had among them those who spoke loshon ha'ra (Devarim Rabbah 5:10; Yerushalmi Peah 1:1). And it is written in the Sifrei:

"Great is peace, for even if Israel are idolaters and there is peace between them, it is as though God says that the Satan does not touch them, as it is written: 'Ephraim is addicted to images – let him be', but when they are divided, what is said about them? 'Their hearts are divided, now they shall be guilty'" (Sifrei Bamidbar 42).

Without Faith, the Love for the People and the Land Weakens

However, it must be known that the merit of the commandment of Yishuv Ha'Aretz and the unity derived from national sentiment, cannot last forever. Because Omri and his son Ahab sinned with idolatry, their relationship with the nation and the Land weakened. Therefore, after Ahab succeeded, with God's help, in defeating Aram in the second battle, instead of killing Ben-Hadad as he had planned to do to Israel, he showed mercy on him, brought him up into his chariot, made a covenant with him, and sent him on his way. Then the prophet came and said:

"Because you have let go of a man whom I had devoted to destruction, your life shall go for his life and your people for his people" (1 Kings 20:42).

And so it was, after a few years, Ahab was killed in battle against Aram (1 Kings 22:34-38).

Moral Decline

Turning away from God also caused a moral decline, which was sharply evident in Ahab's treatment of Naboth the Jezreelite. Ahab coveted his vineyard, and when Naboth refused to sell it to him, at the advice of his wicked wife Jezebel, false witnesses were brought to testify that Naboth had rebelled against the king. Based on their testimony, Naboth was executed, and Ahab inherited his vineyard. God then commanded Elijah the prophet: "Go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who is in Samaria, and is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. Say to him: 'This is what the Lord says: Have you murdered and also taken possession?'" (1 Kings 21:17-19).

Summary

From all this, we learn that there is value in observing Israel's sanctities, even for national honor alone. Moreover, honor for Israel's sanctities is an essential component in defeating the enemy, and in establishing Israeli statehood. For the unity needed to strengthen the nation, especially in the face of difficult challenges such as war and mourning, must be created around a general and sacred, national value.

Entering a Mosque

Q: According to halakha, is it permitted to enter a Muslim mosque?

A: According to the overwhelming majority of poskim (religious authorities), Islam is not idolatry, so there is no prohibition against entering a mosque, and in times of need, it is even permitted to pray inside.

However, it seems that in practice, entering a mosque today is forbidden.

This is because in recent generations, many Muslims have become leaders of anti-Israel sentiment in the world, despising and humiliating the people of Israel, and its Torah. In many mosques, they incite hatred against Israel, and in some, they even call for war against Israel, and the Jews. Our Sages said: "Anyone who is an enemy and hates Israel, is as if he is an enemy and hates God" (Sifrei Zuta, Numbers 10:35). This is what is meant when it is written: "When the ark set out, Moses said: 'Arise, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee'" (Numbers 10:35).

The enemies and haters mentioned here, are the enemies and haters of Israel.

Our Sages continue and explain, regarding them it is said in the verse:

"Do I not hate those who hate You, Lord, and abhor those who rise up against You? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies" (Psalms 139:21-22).

And our Sages also said regarding the verse:

"In the greatness of Your majesty, You will overthrow those who rise up against You" (Exodus 15:7), who are those who rise up against God? They answered: "Anyone who rises against Israel, is as if they are rising against the Holy One, blessed be He" (Mehilta of Rabbi Ishmael).

Therefore, it is forbidden to enter a mosque in general, except for those mosques with good leaders who openly declare that they respect Israel and Judaism – and may all follow their example.

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from: Ohr Torah Stone <ohrtorahstone@otsny.org>

subject: Rabbi Riskin on the Weekly Torah Portion

Parshat Yitro: Who is a Jew

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"You have seen what I have done to Egypt... And now, if you will surely hearken to My voice and observe My covenant... then you will be for Me a kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation..." (Exodus 19:4-6)

In effect, the drama of the Exodus and its aftermath have transformed Israel from a family to a nation-religion, from Bet Yisrael to Am Yisrael. But how do we define the 'Am'[1]? Are we a nation, are we a religion, or are we an amalgamation of both?

In truth, one of the most agonizing problems facing the Jewish people of Israel as well as the Diaspora, an issue which can potentially tear us asunder and make a mockery of the Jewish Federation slogan "We are one," is "Who is a Jew." From a technical, legal perspective, this question expresses itself

in the requirements for conversion, the ramifications of which impinge on who qualifies for automatic Israeli citizenship under the "Right of Return," an Israeli law that provides automatic citizenship for any "Jew" who desires to live there. This law was enacted as an obvious and proud reaction to the tragic situation in the 1930s and 1940s, when Jews were sent to the gas chambers because virtually no existing country would relax their immigration rules and allow the would-be refugees a haven from Nazi persecution. In a far broader way, however, the "Who is a Jew" controversy speaks volumes about "what is Judaism"; after all, the necessary criteria for entering our fellowship will pretty much define the cardinal principles of that fellowship.

The sages of the Talmud, as interpreted by Rabbi Yosef Karo's sixteenth-century code of Jewish Law, set down three criteria for male conversion, with the latter two forming the criteria for female conversion: circumcision, immersion in a mikva, and acceptance of the commandments (Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, 268:3).

The casting off of the foreskin connotes the removal of gentile-dom, the separation of the Jew from the licentious practices (especially in the sexual realm) which characterized the pagan world (interestingly enough, the sages saw women as "naturally circumcised.")

Ritual mikva immersion symbolizes rebirth – after all, the fetus is encompassed in fluid and birth is presaged by the "breaking" of the mother's "waters" – into a new family-nation. (A similar ritual was adopted by Christianity in the form of baptism.)

The acceptance of the commandments signals the entry into a religion, a faith community bound together by common adherence to a system of ritual, moral and ethical laws. With this understanding it becomes clear that we are a nation as well as a religion, a nation with a separate language, culture and homeland and a religion with a unique code of law defining our prayer rituals, feasts and fasts, lifecycle celebrations, and ethical behavior.

Fascinatingly enough, the Bible records just such a process of development, a "national conversion," as it were, in the Torah portions in the middle of the book of Exodus. In the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites separated themselves from the Egyptians, the Egyptian enslavement, the Egyptian concept of slavery as a societal norm, and the immoral Egyptian lifestyle.

The Bible suggests that the Jews expressed this removal from "Egyptiandom" with circumcision, since the Paschal lamb sacrifice could only be eaten by males who were circumcised (Ex. 12:48). The Midrash explains precisely when the circumcision took place. The Bible provides for the Israelite preparation for the Exodus, commanding each household to take a lamb on the tenth of Nisan, to guard the lamb until the fourteenth of Nisan, and then to sacrifice the lamb to God (their disavowal of Egyptian idolatry, since the lamb was one of the Egyptian gods) and place its blood on their doorposts. On the night of the fifteenth they were to eat the lamb – their first Seder – and then exit from Egypt.

Asks the Midrash: why take the lamb on the tenth and wait until the fourteenth to sacrifice it? The Midrash answers that the male Israelites were to have themselves circumcised, and by merit of the twofold blood of the sacrifice and the circumcision they would be found worthy by God to be freed from Egypt (Ex. 12:6, Mechilta and Rashi ad loc.). Indeed, in Temple times, a convert was expected not only to have himself circumcised, but to bring a sacrificial offering as well (Maimonides, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 13:1).

The ritual immersion of the Israelites took place right before the revelation at Sinai, either when God commanded Moses to see that the people "be sanctified and their clothing be washed" (Ex. 19:10, see Maimonides, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 13, 2-3), or when the Israelites jumped into the Reed Sea before it split ("and the children of Israel entered into the midst of the waters on the dry land..." [Ex. 14:22]).

And of course, the acceptance of the commandments came following the Decalogue and the subsequent legal code, but as a prerequisite to the confirmation of the eternal covenant between God and Israel: "... And the entire nation responded with one voice and declared, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we shall do and we shall internalize'" (Ex. 24:3, 7). Indeed, prior to the formula of acceptance, the Bible not only recorded the Ten

Commandments as well as the major civil and ritual laws, but also outlined the eventual borders of the Land of Israel which the Jews would occupy (Ex. 23:20–25).

In effect, therefore, the Israelites were accepting both Jewish nationality and Jewish religion. We came to be bound together ('am' contains the same letters as the word 'im', which means "together") by common genes, land and destiny as well as by a unifying system of laws, values and lifestyle.

Now, does this mean that a person can only convert to Judaism if he/she lives in our Jewish homeland and is observant of all of the commandments? Perhaps the book of Ruth suggests that this be the case, having Ruth say to Naomi, "Where you shall go [to your homeland Israel], there shall I go; your nation shall be my nation, your God [religion] shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16). However, since the Babylonian expulsion of the Jews from Israel (586 BCE), a majority of Jews have lived in the Diaspora – even during the Second Commonwealth. Hence, the rabbis accepted even converts living in the Diaspora. And many religio-legal decisors have also ruled that although acceptance of commandments is a necessary prerequisite for conversion, there is no requirement to teach all of the 613 commandments with their respective rabbinic injunctions and enactments; indeed, the Talmud merely requires "several of the more stringent laws and several of the more lenient laws," specifically mentioning the laws of the Sabbath, kashrut and tithing (charity to the poor).[2]

There is nevertheless a general consensus amongst the rabbinic authorities that circumcision for males, and ritual immersion and a general acceptance of commandments for both males and females, are clear and absolute requirements for conversion. After all, becoming Jewish is not merely an acquisition of a new garment; it is a commitment which connotes sacrifice, a willingness to share a national destiny of yearning for Zion and perfecting the world (tikkun olam) and participating in a tradition of faith and habitual norms which have united Jews from Ethiopia, Yemen, Jerusalem, New York and Melbourne for 4,000 years. And it was these very requirements which the Israelites fulfilled at the very dawn of their history.

[1] The Hebrew letters ayin and mem may form a word translated as "with," "together," or "collective."

[2] See Yevamot 45b–47a

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subject: [Rav Kook Torah]

Rav Kook Torah

Yitro: Breaking Bread with Scholars

A Meal Before God

When Moses' father-in-law Jethro met the Israelites in the desert, he rejoiced when he heard about the rescue of the Jewish people from Pharaoh's hand, and he brought offerings to God. "And Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to share the meal with Moses' father-in-law before God." (Exodus 18:12)

The expression "before God" appears out of place here. In what way was this particular feast in God's presence?

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Avin explained:

"To partake of a meal where a Torah scholar is present is like enjoying the splendor of God's Divine Presence. After all, did Jethro, Aaron, and the elders of Israel eat before God? They ate before Moses! Rather, this verse teaches us that sharing a meal with a scholar [such as Moses] is like enjoying the splendor of God's Presence." (Berachot 64a)

Rabbi Avin's statement needs to be clarified. What is so wonderful about eating with a Torah scholar? Wouldn't studying Torah with him be a much greater spiritual experience? And in what way is such a meal similar to "enjoying the splendor of God's Presence"?

Common Denominator

The human soul, for all its greatness, is limited in its ability to grasp and enjoy God's infinite wisdom. Whatever degree of pleasure we are able to derive from God's Presence is a function of our spiritual attainments. The greater our spiritual awareness, the greater the pleasure we feel in God's

Presence. But while we will never gain complete mastery of Divine wisdom, even the small measure of comprehension that is possible is sufficient to fill the soul with tremendous light and joy.

A Torah scholar whose holiness is great, whose wisdom is profound, and whose conduct is lofty cannot be properly appreciated by the masses.

Common folk will not understand his wisdom and may not be able to relate to his holiness. In what way can they connect with such a lofty scholar?

A scholar's greatest influence takes place in those spheres where others can best relate to him. Most people will be unable to follow his erudite lectures, but a meal forms a common bond between the most illustrious and the most ordinary. This connection allows everyone to experience some aspect of a great scholar's path in Torah and service of God.

When a Torah scholar reveals his great wisdom and holiness, the average person will be overcome by a sense of unbridgeable distance from such sublime attainments. He may despair of ever reaching a level so far beyond his own limited capabilities. But when sharing a meal with a scholar, the common physical connection enables people to be more receptive to the scholar's noble traits and holy conduct.

Of course, those who are able to understand the scholar's wisdom can more fully appreciate his greatness. Those individuals will derive greater benefit and pleasure from him. This is precisely Rabbi Avin's point: just as the degree of pleasure gained from God's Presence depends on the soul's spiritual state, so too, the benefit we derive from a great scholar depends on our spiritual level and erudition.

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Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Yisro

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 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

Dedicated in memory of Rose Horn (Rachel bas Shraga Faivel) Felig by Dr. & Mrs. Philip Felig – 17 Shevat

Dedicated by Michael & Rikki Charnowitz in memory of Ephraim (Epraim Yitzchak ben R'Avraham) Spinner – 17 Shevat

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Chief Rabbi Mirvis

Yitro

Every child is the one and only Parshat Yitro famously gives us a commandment relating to how we should be good children to our parents. However, it also offers a hint as to how we can be good parents to our children.

It is well known that in the Ten Commandments, presented to us in this Parsha, the fifth of the mitzvot is "Kabbed et-avicha ve-et-immecha"—honour your father and your mother. But in addition, there is a wonderful lesson relating to parenting in the Parsha. Close to the beginning, we are given details of the names of the two sons born to Moshe and Tziporah. The Torah presents it as follows: "Shem ha'echad Gershom" – "the name of the one is Gershom". "Veshem ha'echad Eli'ezer" – "and the name of the one is Eliezer." This is extraordinary. Everywhere else in the Torah, when there is a list, you find "Shem ha'echad" — the name of the first one — and "Shem hasheni" — the name of the second. Similarly, for example, with regard to the days of creation, and so on.

How can you have "the one" and "the one"? I believe that Moshe and Tziporah recognised that, in order to create a healthy home environment, they needed to avoid all the pressures, tensions, enmity, bitterness, and even hatred that existed in nearly every family we are introduced to in the Book of Bereshit that preceded them — including the very first family on earth, within which, one brother killed another.

Moshe and Tziporah recognised that there should be no room for jealousy or for the question of who the senior is, who will command respect and attention, or the subordination of others.

That's why, they let their children know that in their eyes: "Gershom — you're echad, you're the one and only Gershom," and "Eliezer, you too are echad, you're the one and only Eliezer." And so too, for all parents: in order that, please God, we should succeed in building and maintaining a healthy home environment, we should let each and every one of our children know that, in our eyes, they are the one and only.

Shabbat Shalom.

Living Synesthesia

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

The Torah's description of Matan Torah, the most seminal moment in human history, a moment that defined not only a nation but gave meaning and purpose to the very creation of the world, is extremely powerful and dynamic, but also perplexing.

וכל העם ראים את הקולות

and the entire people saw the sounds.

What does it mean to "see" sounds? The Zohar writes, "These sounds were etched into the darkness, cloud and mist and were visible." The Zohar understands the pasuk literally: the sounds could be seen.

Though our rational minds dismiss this suggestion as mere mysticism and unrealistic, there is in fact a rare neurological condition called synesthesia which causes the senses to be mixed up and to see sounds as colors. Jan MacKay, a woman with the condition, describes that she sees sneezes as turquoise. "One of my earliest memories is that I could tell the difference between Canadian and American accents because the Canadian accent is more yellow." Neurologist Richard Cytowic explained, "You know the word anesthesia, which means no sensation, synesthesia means joined sensation, and some people are born with two or more of their senses hooked together so that my voice, for example, is not just something that they hear, but it's also something that they might see."

Though this condition only occurs in one in twenty thousand, it is possible that for the seminal moment of Matan Torah, Hashem wanted to leave an indelible and unforgettable impression and so He caused us all to experience synesthesia so that we literally saw the sounds as the Zohar suggests.

The Kli Yakar comments that they didn't see the sounds as colors, but they actually visualized God's commandments, each letter, word and sentence they were hearing was projected before them. The vocalized words were expressed not only in sound waves, but materialized as physical letters and words as if projected on a screen.

The Ibn Ezra interprets the expression "see the sounds" much more metaphorically. We know that in many places in Tanach the expression "to see" is used for something that is intangible or conceptual. Re'eh anochi nosein lifneichem hayom beracha ukelala, see I place before you today blessings and curses. Seeing is the sense we reference when we seek to convey the powerful impression something makes. In our own vernacular, when we want the person speaking to us to feel heard and validated we say, "I see what you are saying, I see your perspective on this issue."

The Zohar, Kli Yakar and Ibn Ezra all offer fascinating interpretations, but I would like to suggest something a little different. Some speakers are talented at communicating ideas. They are well organized, articulate and effectively transmit the information, idea or concept. Yet as successful as these speakers are, their content remains intellectual, cognitive, and abstract. Much more rare and unusual are those speakers that are able to paint a picture with their words. Their message is so compelling and persuasive, the listener not only hears what they are saying, but sees their vision and pictures themselves living the life being described. This information doesn't remain abstract and theoretical, but is absorbed by the listener such that they can envision themselves transformed and behaving differently.

The giving of the Torah was undoubtedly an educational, pedagogic experience. Laws and rules were communicated and transmitted to a nation that was now bound to observe them. For most people law is dry, sterile, and uninspiring. Law books and statutory codes are for reference only and are grossly unexciting and monotonous. One could easily have mistaken Matan Torah as an information session, an intellectual transmission of the new laws incumbent on the people.

Perhaps the Torah is telling us that this description couldn't be further from the truth. At that fateful and faithful moment at Sinai, Hashem painted a picture for his people of a purpose-driven life, of an existence that is sacred and sanctified, of a lifestyle that is extraordinarily rewarding and spiritually satisfying. Perhaps V'chol ha'am ro'im es ha'kolos means they didn't hear about 39 categories of forbidden creative labor on Shabbos, they saw what a Shabbos is like, they felt the serenity, tranquility and rest that Shabbos provides. They heard the laws of Shabbos but they pictured the Shabbos table filled with family and friends, they smelled the cholent and tasted the

chicken soup. At Har Sinai, they didn't just hear about the detailed laws of the prohibition against stealing, they envisioned an ethical society and pictured themselves submitting honest tax returns.

Indeed, Har Sinai is the defining moment of our history not for the laws that we heard but the pictures and the images that we saw and became the vision of a lifestyle that is divinely enriching and elevating. According to the Ramban, there is a biblical commandment to remember Har Sinai each and every day of our lives. Sinai cannot be something in the past, a piece of history, a part of an ancient record. Har Sinai remains relevant, compelling and real each day when we are ro'im es hakolos, when the voice of God spoken that day animates our lives such that it can be seen through us and our homes.

Har Sinai is alive when Judaism for us is not a burden but a beracha, not limiting but limitless in its meaning, not a prescription for hardship but for holiness. V'chol ha'am ro'im es hakolos. The entire nation seeing the voice, envisioning the message, and absorbing the sounds, is in many ways the mission of Jewish parenting.

What do our children see? What are we celebrating for our children, for our family, for ourselves? Are we celebrating the things and accomplishments that we truly value? Here is why that question is critical: Because whatever you celebrate, that's what you'll value and that is what you children will value and sacrifice for.

Our Judaism must not be commemorative, our commitment to Torah must not be a casual connection because of a past. It must be vibrant, dynamic, alive, passionate in the present.

The Midrash tells us that when Hashem gave the Torah, כפה עליהם הר כנגית, He held it over our heads and said accept it or שם תהא קבורתכם, there you will be buried. Many ask, shouldn't it say פה, here, not שם, there? If Hashem is going to threaten us, shouldn't He get it right?

I believe, and we are sadly seeing empirically all around us, that if you don't feel the weight of Torah over your head, the responsibility of a deep, profound and passionate commitment to it personally, you may not spiritually die in that moment. Perhaps you can go a generation or two. But שם, down the line, a few generations in, it will catch up. If we negotiate with our Yiddishkeit, if we pick and choose, if we are casual about it, down the road it will come crashing down on our head.

Israel's war against her enemies and the rise of antisemitism have posed formidable challenges but they also bring an opportunity. How we react, what we are doing about it, how focused we are on the fate of our people, can and will leave an indelible and enduring impression on our children and grandchildren.

If we want our families to be passionate, practicing, and proud Jews, living and learning Torah and loving Israel when they are שם, down the road, they need to רואים את הקולות, not only hear, but see our voices in action now.