

WHEN THE SOUL SUPPLY ENDS...

by Shlomo Katz

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Yisro

The highlight of this week's parashah is Matan Torah/The Giving of the Torah. The Torah introduces this event with the verse (19:2), "They traveled from Refidim, and they arrived in the Sinai Desert, and they camped in the desert, and Yisrael camped there, opposite the mountain."

Chazal note that the phrases, "[T]hey arrived" and "[T]hey camped," both use a plural verb form, while the phrase, "Yisrael camped there," uses a singular form. They explain that the singular form is intended to convey the unity of the Jewish people at that moment - in the words of Chazal, "Like one

man with one heart."

Why was this unity a necessary prelude to Matan Torah? R' Elazar Kallir z"l (died 1801; not to be confused with the liturgical poet with a similar name) explains that no person can perform all of the mitzvot. Some mitzvot are only for men and others are only for women. Some can be performed only by kohanim, some only by levi'im, and some by neither, etc. However, when the Jewish people are united as one body, with one heart, then that body can observe the entire Torah.

We read in Tehilim (29:11), "Hashem will give might to His nation; Hashem will bless His nation with peace," and Chazal interpret this "might" as a reference to the Torah. In light of the above, writes R' Kallir, the connection between the first and second parts of the verse is understandable. Without peace, we cannot observe the Torah in its entirety.

If there is not peace among the Jewish people, R' Kallir continues, then the only way an individual soul can be credited with keeping the entire Torah is to return in several different incarnations (as a kohen, a levi, a yisrael, a woman, etc.). This is the meaning of the gemara's teaching that mashiach cannot come until Hashem's storehouse is emptied of souls. For mashiach to come, we must keep the Torah. The sign that we are keeping the Torah properly is that Hashem's "supply" of souls will be exhausted, for that means that "old" souls are not returning in new incarnations. (Chavot Yair: Drush Ohr Yakar p.16a)

"An Astonishing Midrash"

When Bnei Yisrael said, "Na'aseh ve'nishmah" / "We will observe and we will hear," Hashem revealed to them what was created on each of the days of creation.

Chazal say: "Why was man created last, so that if he becomes haughty, he can remind himself that even the smallest gnat was created before him." But are there not other ways for man to remind himself not to be haughty? In Pirkei Avot, for example, we are taught that man should remind himself of his eventual death and then he will not sin!

The answer is that when the Bnei Yisrael said "Na'aseh ve'nishmah," Hashem decreed that they would live forever. (This decree was reversed when they made the golden calf.) They could not remind themselves to be humble by thinking of the day of death - they were destined to live forever! Accordingly, Hashem taught them what was created on each day as a tool to remain humble.

(Binat Nevoim)

"Yitro, the kohen of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard . . ." (18:1)

Rashi writes: What did he hear? He heard that Hashem split the sea.

Why did the splitting of the sea inspire Yitro to join the Jewish people? Chazal say that when Hashem prepared to split the sea, the angels complained that Bnei Yisrael were idol worshipers just like the Egyptians and did not deserve to be saved. However, Hashem, who knows man's innermost thoughts, understood that the Jews did not sin willingly.

In his younger years, Yitro had been an advisor in Pharaoh's court and was required to worship Pharaoh's idols. He knew it was wrong, but he felt that he had no choice. When Yitro heard that Hashem split the sea, he understood that the way Hashem judges man, he (Yitro) could be excused just as Bnei Yisrael had been excused. [Ed. Note: Halachically, one is required to forfeit his life rather than worship idols. Nevertheless, G-d looks at man's motives in determining how to respond to sin.]

This is why the Torah reminds us here that the same Yitro who was the kohen/priest of Midian was the father-in-law of Moshe. Although an idolater, Yitro was a tzaddik, for obviously, an ordinary idolater would not have merited to be Moshe's father-in-law.

(Sha'ar Bat Rabim)

shem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery." (20:2)

Ramban (Nachmanides) writes: "This is one of the positive commandments, i.e., He commanded that they [Bnei Yisrael] should know and believe in Hashem - that there is a Hashem, that He is G-d, i.e., He exists now and always existed, that everything came from Him because He desired that it be so and He has the ability to make it so, and that they must serve Him."

(Ramban Al Ha'Torah)

R' Yaakov Emden z"l (18th century) writes: Knowing that G-d exists cannot be a mitzvah, for no intelligent person can deny this. The fact that G-d exists and that He is One is plainly obvious. Moreover, there cannot be a mitzvah to believe in G-d, because unless one believes in G-d he cannot be commanded to observe mitzvot.

What then is the mitzvah of the above verse? The mitzvah is that we, who left Egypt, recognize G-d through His Unique Name which He never revealed to the nations in general, and not even to the Patriarchs. [Knowing His Name means recognizing that:] Our King came and revealed Himself to us after He acquired us as slaves by redeeming us from slavery in Egypt; He showed us His honor and greatness; and He informed us of His actual Name [i.e., the four-letter ineffable Name] with which He took us out of Egypt and overrode the laws of nature to show us that He alone rules over the whole

world. Through this knowledge we can understand that He created the world.

Other nations also recognize that the world has a G-d. What is unique about our mitzvah is the commandment to know G-d by His Name [as that knowledge incorporates all of the above information].

(Migdal Oz, Ch. 1)

R' Aharon Soloveitchik shlita writes: Rambam (Maimonides) appears to contradict himself. In Sefer Hamitzvot, his listing of the 613 commandments, he writes that one must believe in G-d on faith alone. However, in his Code (in Hil. Yesodei Ha'Torah ch.1), he writes that one should seek logical proofs that G-d exists.

R' Soloveitchik explains that the fundamental mitzvah is to accept G-d's existence on faith. In addition, those who are intellectually capable should use their intellect to prove G-d's existence. However, for those who are not intellectually capable, such an investigation would be a sin.

(Perach Mateh Aharon p.1)

R' Binyamin of Tudela z"l
died approx. 1175

Although there is evidence that R' Binyamin was a Talmudic scholar, he earned his place in Jewish history as a traveler. Setting out from Spain about 1160, he journeyed through southern France, Italy, Greece, Syria, Eretz Yisrael and Baghdad. His return trip took him through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, to Egypt, finally arriving home, by way of Sicily, in 1173.

R' Binyamin's diary was published under the title Masaot Shel R' Binyamin/The Travels of R' Binyamin. This important chronicle depicts the Jewish community of each city and describes the writings of scholars and leaders, some of whom are still famous and others who are known only thanks to R' Binyamin. Schools of learning are listed, along with the occupations engaged in by the Jewish populace, its civil status, population and its unique customs.

R' Binyamin also provided information concerning Jewish communities which he did not visit, including Germany, the Slavic lands east of Prague, and northern France. His writings are reported to be among the earliest European works to mention China.

R' Binyamin's diary is quoted in many later works, both halachic and aggadic. In recent years, for example, R' Moshe Feinstein z"l cited R' Binyamin regarding the design of the tomb which Yaakov built for Rachel. (He wrote that it had twelve columns and a dome.) R' Eliezer Waldenberg shlita cites R' Binyamin in a discussion of the halachic status of an Indian tribe that calls itself "Bnei Yisrael." (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim, p. 78; Igrot Moshe, Y.D. Vol. IV, No. 57; Tzitz Eliezer, Vol. X, No. 25)

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