

HOW MANY TORAHS ARE THERE ANYWAY?

by Shlomo Katz

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Edited by Shlomo Katz**

Contributing Editor: Daniel Dadusc

Yisro

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Today's Learning:
Shabbat 19:3-4
Orach Chaim 233:2-234:2
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Yevamot 60
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Sotah 22

This week's parashah contains the Aseret Hadibrot/the so-called "Ten Commandments." (There are actually more than ten commandments in the Aseret Hadibrot, though the exact number is the subject of a dispute among the Rishonim/early medieval authorities.) Many commentaries offer explanations for the organization of the Aseret Hadibrot, one of which is as follows:

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l writes: The first five dibrot are laws between man and G-d. They begin with a purely intellectual and spiritual demand (i.e., believe in one G-d), but they gradually progress into mitzvot that involve physical demands (i.e., keeping Shabbat and honoring parents). In contrast, the second set of five dibrot are obligations that man owes his fellow man. They begin with a physical demand (i.e., do not murder) and end with an intellectual demand (i.e., do not covet).

From the progression in the first five dibrot, writes R' Hirsch, we learn that honoring G-d in spirit is worthless unless one exercises control over his actions. One's deeds must prove that the honor he gives G-d is genuine. The progression of the second five dibrot teaches, on the other hand, that social order demands more than adherence to the letter of the law; it demands spirit and feelings. (The Hirsch Chumash p. 281)

"And you shall discern from among the entire people . . ." (18:21)

In this parashah, Yitro sees Moshe judging the entire nation on his own, and, in the above verse, Yitro recommends that Moshe appoint other judges to help him. Rashi (to Rashi 18:1) refers to the entire section which contains Yitro's discussion with Moshe as the chapter of "And you shall discern." Why? After all, this is not the first verse in the section?

R' Meir Shapiro z"l explained as follows: "And you shall discern" is the beginning of Yitro's advice to Moshe. Yitro criticized Moshe's methods of judging the nation, but he did not stop there. Rather, he continued with positive advice: "Appoint judges." Perhaps Rashi's intention is to teach us that criticism is worth very little unless it is accompanied by a proposed solution to the problem.

"So shall you say to the House of Yaakov and relate to the Children of Israel." (19:3)

Rashi writes: The House of Yaakov refers to the women; the Children of Israel refers to the men.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l elaborated on this as follows: People are mistaken in thinking that we have only one tradition, the tradition of our fathers. The verse says (Mishlei 1:8), "Hear, my son, the instruction of your father, and forsake not the Torah of your mother." What is the difference between the tradition or instruction of a father and the tradition or Torah of a mother?

From one's father, one should learn the texts - the Bible or the Talmud, how to analyze, how to classify, how to infer, etc. One should also learn the detailed halachot from his father.

From his mother, one learns that Judaism is more than strict compliance with the laws. R' Soloveitchik said about his own mother: "She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and a warmth to mitzvot. I learned from her the most important thing in life - to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting on my frail shoulder."

For example, R' Soloveitchik continued: "The laws of Shabbat were passed on to me by my father. The Shabbat as a living entity, a queen, was revealed to me by my mother; it is part of 'the Torah of your mother'." (Quoted in The Rav, section 19.13)

"The entire people saw the thunder." (20:15)

Rashi comments that the people saw something which is usually audible, i.e., the thunder.

What was the purpose of such a miracle? R' Moshe Feinstein z"l answers that it teaches us the extent of our obligation to study Torah. One must apply all of his energies and intellectual capabilities to Torah study until he understands the Torah's lessons as clearly as if they were spelled out before his eyes. It goes without saying that one who issues halachic rulings, leads others, or educates children must spell out the Torah's lessons for his audience with that same degree of clarity. (Darash Moshe Vol. II)

"Hashem said to Moshe, 'So shall you say to Bnei Yisrael: "You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven . . . gods of silver and gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves." (20:19-20)

Why was it necessary for Hashem to repeat the commandment to not make other gods after Bnei Yisrael just heard this in the Aseret Hadibrot? Throughout history, there have been religions and philosophies that taught that although there is a Creator, he is too great to deal directly with human beings. Those who held that belief prayed to intermediaries (e.g., the heavenly bodies or idols) in order to reach Hashem, in much the same way that one deals with an officer of the king because one cannot gain access to the king himself.

In our verses, Hashem explains why we should not make gods of gold or silver. Hashem emphasizes that He Himself spoke directly to us at Har Sinai, and it therefore should be obvious that we do not need intermediaries. (Yalkut Me'am Loez)

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

R' Aharon Kahn shlita observed: The Torah declares that a kohen must not use steps when approaching the altar, but rather a ramp. A ramp is an incline; on a ramp, one must either continue to move forward or he will inevitably fall backward. On steps, in contrast, one can rest.

The Torah is teaching that if one does not continually move closer to the altar, closer to Hashem, he will inevitably move farther away.

[Ed. note: In the same way, some compare spiritual growth to walking up a "down-escalator." The yetzer hara and man's physical nature both are opposed to spiritual growth, and they constantly exert a downward pull. If one does not keep moving forward, he will move backward. Moreover, if one proceeds only slowly, the best he will do is stay in place. Only with real effort can one move upward on a down escalator.]

The story is told of a farmer who came to shul one Erev Shabbat to speak with R' Meir of Lublin. The farmer spoke to R' Meir with a sense of urgency: "Please rebbe/my master," he said. "Help me! My cow is ill and refuses to eat. What shall I do?"

R' Meir instructed the farmer to mix water into the cow's feed. This would help the cow digest its food, and the cow would be cured.

The farmer thanked R' Meir and left. R' Meir's students, however, were taken aback by this entire episode. Surely the farmer could have sought help from a veterinarian. Why did he have to disturb R' Meir?

R' Meir explained: "The farmer is not a learned man. He sees many people asking me deep and difficult questions, and he feels left out. He wants to have a mentor, but of course he cannot ask me the types of questions that learned people ask. Instead, by asking me questions that are relevant to himself, he develops a relationship with me.

"This," said R' Meir, "is the meaning of the verse (18:15), 'Because the people come to me to seek G-d.' Yitro asked Moshe why people stood in line all day long to see him, and Moshe responded that they came to him to inquire about G-d. At first glance, this does not seem to be true. Were not Bnei Yisrael standing in line to have their arguments settled or to sue for money owed to them?

"The answer is that people came to Moshe to resolve problems, but those problems either were not real or were simple enough to have been resolved without Moshe's intervention. People brought these problems to Moshe because it provided them with an opportunity to see Moshe, the gadol hador/preeminent scholar and tzaddik of the time, to form a relationship with Moshe and, through him, with G-d.

Sponsored by Menashe and Rachel Katz and family on the shloshim of grandmother, Sarah Deutsch a"h Daniel and Rachel Dadusc and family on the yahrzeits of father Sion ben Jamilah a"h and grandmother Jamilah bat Sion a"h

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