

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE?

by Shlomo Katz

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Yitro: What Does It Take to Change?

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Today's Learning:

Sanhedrin 9:4-5

Orach Chaim 577:1-579:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Metzia 72

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Terumot 9

Our parashah opens: "Yitro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that Hashem had done for Yisrael." The gemara (Zevachim 116a) asks: What specifically did Yitro hear that made him come to join Bnei Yisrael? The gemara offers three answers: Rabbi Yehoshua says, "The war with Amalek." Rabbi Elazar Ha'modai says, "The giving of the Torah." Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov says, "The splitting of the sea."

R' Moshe D. Tendler shlita explains that these three Sages are answering the question: What motivates a person to make a complete break with his past and begin life anew? Amalek, according to Rabbi Yehoshua, demonstrates the potential for evil which is within all men. When the world did not protest Amalek's unprovoked attack on a defenseless Bnei Yisrael, Yitro severed his ties to that world.

No, says Rabbi Elazar. The realization that man can be evil is more likely to depress and paralyze a

person than to uplift him. For man to improve requires the realization that there is a higher purpose that is within man's reach. It was the giving of the Torah which moved Yitro.

Rabbi Eliezer does not accept the view of either of his colleagues. A "Torah," i.e. a code of conduct, alone is not enough to uplift a person. Every group has its "Torah"; in a debased society, however, that code of conduct can itself become the tool of evil. What inspired Yitro was the splitting of the sea, for here finally was a Law-Giver - Hashem - who uses His laws towards the ends of justice. (Pardes Rimonim p.5)

"And they stood at the bottom of the mountain." (19:17)

The gemara interprets this verse to mean that Hashem lifted the mountain above Bnei Yisrael and told them, "If you accept the Torah - fine. If not - this will be your burial place." This implies that Bnei Yisrael did not accept the Torah willingly.

Numerous commentaries note that this appears to contradict the verse (Shmot 24:7), "[Moshe] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in earshot of the people, and they said, 'Everything that Hashem has said, na'aseh ve'nishmah / we will do and we will obey!'" This verse suggests that Bnei Yisrael did accept the Torah willingly.

R' Baruch Rabinowitz z"l (Munkatcher Rebbe; later, Chief Rabbi of Sao Paulo, Brazil and Holon, Israel; died 1999) offers the following explanation: If Hashem wanted to force Bnei Yisrael to accept the Torah, why did He have to do it by holding the mountain menacingly over their heads? The gemara says that Hashem created the world conditionally and that He would have destroyed it if Bnei Yisrael had not accepted the Torah. Wasn't this knowledge sufficient to force Bnei Yisrael to take the Torah?

The answer is that Bnei Yisrael's knowledge that the world's existence depended on their accepting the Torah did not force them to accept the Torah. We have to breathe to live, but we do not say that we are "forced" to breathe! We enjoy breathing. We have to eat, but we do not say that we are "forced" to eat! We enjoy eating. Similarly, we had to accept the Torah or the world would be destroyed, but because we enjoy studying and observing the Torah, we do not think of ourselves as forced to do so.

Why then did Hashem have to use any kind of force to give the Torah? Because what we have said above is only true of the nation as a whole. There are individuals who think that they can get by without Torah (just as some people do not eat properly). This explains our Sages' teaching that the Jewish People accepted the Torah anew after Haman's downfall, this time willingly. Haman had planned to kill all Jews without differentiating the individual from the group. Thus the Jewish People realized that all Jews share the same fate, and every Jew needs the Torah. (Divrei Nevonim)

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935) offers the following explanation for why Hashem forced Bnei Yisrael to accept the Torah after they said na'aseh ve'nishmah: The Midrash Tanchuma

states that Bnei Yisrael willingly accepted the Written Torah, but they had to be forced to accept the Oral Law. Why? R' Kook explains that, in this context, the "Written Torah" refers to the fundamental beliefs of Judaism that were passed down to us from our Patriarchs, while the "Oral Law" refers to the mitzvot, whose details are primarily found in the Oral Law. Bnei Yisrael willingly accepted the former, which were their heritage from Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. However, Bnei Yisrael were reluctant, so soon after Amalek's unprovoked attack on them, to accept the mitzvot. Bnei Yisrael feared that agreeing to act so differently from other nations would only fan the flames of Amalek's and other nations' hatred.

This, too, explains why Bnei Yisrael reaccepted the Torah after Haman's downfall. Haman's very ascent to power began with the Jews' sharing in the feasting and revelry of the other nations. Thus, the Jewish people realized that their attempts to fit in were useless and even counterproductive, and they therefore willingly accepted the Oral Torah, the mitzvot. (Me'orot Ha'reiyah: Parashat Zachor)

R' Aryeh Laib Hakohen Heller z"l (died 1813) adds another answer: G-d's forcing us to accept the Torah was not intended to coerce us, but, so-to-speak, to coerce Him. Because G-d forced us to "marry" Him, He can never divorce us. [See Devarim 22:29] (Shev Shemaitita, Introduction)

"You shall not covet your fellow's house. You shall not covet your fellow's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, nor anything that belongs to your fellow." (20:14)

R' Avraham Ibn Ezra z"l (Spain; 1089 - approx. 1164) writes: "Many people wonder - how can a person be commanded not to covet something which he finds attractive?" He answers: A villager, assuming he is intelligent, does not covet the daughter of the king, for he knows that she is out of his reach. Similarly, an intelligent person understands that whatever G-d has given to someone else belongs to that other person and is out of reach. Therefore, it never occurs to him to covet that which belongs to another person.

R' Aryeh Zvi Fromer z"l (see page 4) offers two other answers to Ibn Ezra's question: The midrash states that the prohibition, "You shall not covet," parallels the law (Vayikra 19:18), "You shall love your fellow as yourself." How so? Says R' Fromer: Our Sages say, "A person is jealous of everyone, except of his own son." Thus, if a person loved all of his fellows as himself, he would never be jealous of them and he would never covet their belongings.

Alternatively, we learn in Avot D'Rabbi Natan (Ch. 37), "Even when two people eat from one bowl, what this one tastes depends on his deeds and what this one tastes depends on his deeds." In other words, the level of pleasure that a person succeeds in deriving from this world is determined by Divine Providence. If so, what good does it do to covet another's belongings?

(Quoted in Marbitzei Torah Me'Olam Ha'chassidut Vol. VI, p. 52)

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

R' Yehuda Modern z"l (Hungary; 1819-1893) observes that the words "with Me" do not appear to fit into the verse. He explains them as follows:

Chazal say that the Torah was given on Har Sinai, a low mountain, to teach the importance of humility. Also, several verses liken Torah to water because Torah, like water, seeks out low places. On the opposite extreme, our Sages say that haughtiness is akin to idolatry.

Accordingly, our verses may mean the following: "You have seen that I have spoken to you from the shamayim - derived from the word mayim / water. This should remind you of the importance of humility. Therefore, you shall not make with Me - i.e., when you serve Me - gods of silver and gods of gold - i.e., you shall not have a haughty attitude."

Nevertheless, writes R' Modern, there is a proper time and place for both pride and humility, as is hinted to by the fact that the word "shamayim" in our verse also alludes to eish / fire. (Chazal say that the word shamayim is made up of the two words eish and mayim.) The Midrash says: "Why was the Torah given amidst fire? Because the Torah is like fire - get too close to it and you will be scorched, but stay too far from it and you will freeze." R' Modern interprets this to refer to one's attitude towards observance of mitzvot: One who feels haughty because he performed a mitzvah will be scorched by the fire of Torah. However, one who has too low an opinion of himself will be incapacitated from serving G-d.

When is each trait appropriate? R' Modern explains: When a person begins to perform a mitzvah, he should feel proud that he is a servant of G-d, as it is written (Divrei Hayamim II 17:6), "His heart was elevated in the ways of Hashem." However, after he performs the mitzvah, he should recognize that nothing he has done, or could do, satisfies his obligation to G-d. (Pri Ha'etz)

R' Aryeh Zvi Fromer z"l

R' Aryeh Zvi ("Laib Hirsch") Fromer, one of the leading roshei yeshiva and poskim / halachic authorities in pre-war Poland, was born in a small village near Bendin, Poland in 1884. At the age of 12, he was sent to learn in the yeshiva of Amstov, but after a year he moved on to the yeshiva of R' Avraham Bornstein in Sochaczew. R' Bornstein was the Sochatchover Rebbe and the author of several important halachic works. R' Fromer remained a devoted Sochatchover chassid throughout his life, and, despite his own prominence, he sat humbly before three generations of Sochatchover rebbes like a student before his master.

When R' Bornstein passed away in 1910, his son R' Shmuel (author of Shem Mi'shmuel) decided to

separate the roles of Rebbe and rosh yeshiva, and he offered the latter position to R' Fromer. R' Fromer remained as rosh yeshiva in Sochaczew until World War I forced the closing of the yeshiva. Some of the Talmudic lectures that R' Fromer delivered while in Sochaczew were published in 1913 under the title Siach Ha'sadeh.

Shortly after the war ended, R' Fromer was elected to succeed his uncle as rabbi of the village of Kozhiglov. Immediately upon his arrival, R' Fromer opened a yeshiva in his home which soon had 50 students. Although R' Fromer's stay in Kozhiglov lasted only two years, he was known for the rest of his life as the "Kozhiglovi Rabbi."

The years which followed saw R' Fromer in a number of different towns, always living in great poverty and surrounded by many students. It was during this period that he wrote many of the halachic responsa in his work, She'eilot U'teshuvot Eretz Zvi. Among those whose halachic queries R' Fromer addressed in this work were the Sochatchover Rebbe, R' Shmuel Bornstein and the Gerrer Rebbe, R' Avraham Mordechai Alter.

One of the unique aspects of R' Fromer's responsa in Eretz Zvi is the length to which he goes to defend customs that appear to be contrary to halachah. Another unusual aspect of the work is the author's willingness to use non-halachic sources, including kabbalah, to solve halachic problems.

In 1935, following the death of R' Meir Shapiro (founder of the Daf Yomi movement), R' Fromer accepted the call to serve as rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Chachmei Lublin, the preeminent yeshiva in Poland. In that same year, he made his only trip to Eretz Yisrael. (Among the people he visited on his trip was R' Avraham Yishayahu Karelitz, the Chazon Ish, who reportedly said afterwards: "It has been many decades since I've met a halachic authority of such genius.")

In 1938, on the occasion of the completion of the second cycle of Daf Yomi, R' Fromer proposed a program of Mishnah Yomit / the worldwide study of the same to paragraphs of Mishnah every day.

When World War II broke out, R' Fromer was imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto with his family and his beloved chassidic rebbe, R' David Bornstein. Following the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, R' Fromer was transferred to the extermination camp of Maidenek, where he was killed on 27 Nissan 5703 / May 2, 1943.

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