

PARSHAS YISRO

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Yisro

"What inspires you?"

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Today's Learning:
Nach: Yirmiyah 25-26
Mikvaot 2:9-10
O.C. 409:10-12
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Batra 169
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Berachot 25

The Gemara (Zevachim 116a) comments on the opening verse of our parashah, "Yitro . . . heard all that Hashem had done for Yisrael," asking: What did Yitro hear? The Gemara offers three answers: R' Yehoshua says, "Of the war with Amalek." R' Elazar Ha'modai says, "Of the giving of the Torah." Finally, R' Eliezer ben Yaakov says, "Of the splitting of the sea." What are these three sages arguing about?

R' Moshe D. Tendler shlita explains that they are arguing about what motivates a person to make a complete break with his past and begin life anew, as Yitro did. Amalek, according to R' 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 R' Elazar. The realization that man can be evil is more likely to depress and paralyze a person than to uplift him. To improve requires the realization that there is a higher purpose which is within man's reach. It was the giving of the Torah which moved Yitro.

R' Eliezer ben Yaakov 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 is often the tool of evil. What inspired Yitro was the splitting of the sea, for here finally was a Law-Giver (i.e. Hashem) who uses His laws towards the ends of justice. (Pardes Rimonim p.5)

"In the third month from the Exodus of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai." (19:1)

The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) relates that a scholar taught the following in the yeshiva of Rav Chisda: "Blessed is the Merciful One who gave the three part Torah on the third day through the third one to the three part nation in the third month."

R' Eliyahu Capsali z"l (Crete; 1490-1555) explains: Rashi z"l writes that "The three part Torah" refers to (1) Torah, (2) Nevi'im and (3) Ketuvim. Although Nevi'im and Ketuvim were not given then, they are alluded to in the Torah, R' Capsali writes. Alternatively, this alludes to the three types of mitzvot found in the Torah: (1) mitzvot that we would never have thought of without a commandment, though they make sense to us (e.g., Shabbat; tefilin), (2) mitzvot that we could have discovered on our own (e.g., honoring parents; not murdering), and (3) chukim / decrees (e.g., kashrut; sha'atnez). Or, it refers to the three types of material found in the Torah: (1) stories, (2) laws, and (3) kabbalistic secrets.

"On the third day" refers to the three days of separation (see Shmot 19:11).

"Through the third one" refers, according to Rashi, to Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the third child of his mother. Alternatively, R' Capsali writes, Moshe's prophecy was the third type of prophecy that existed in the world. To Moshe, Hashem spoke "face-to-face" (see Bemidbar 12:8) using the Ineffable Name (see Shmot 6:2). To the Patriarchs, Hashem revealed Himself only with other names (see Shmot 6:3). And, to Adam and Noach, Hashem spoke, but He did not reveal Himself.

"To the three part nation" refers to Kohanim, Levi'im, and Yisraelim.

"In the third month," as stated in our verse. (Me'ah She'arim ch.3)

"Moshe would speak and Hashem would respond to him with a voice." (19:19)

What does it mean, "Hashem would respond to him with a voice"? R' Yosef Irgas (Italy; 1685-1730) explains that Hashem answered appropriately for Moshe. This teaches that when Hashem appears to act differently to different people, it is not because He is changing but only because people

receive differently based on their level of preparation to receive. (Shomer Emunim [Hakadmon])

"I am Hashem, your G-d . . ." (20:2)

"You shall not recognize the gods of others in My presence." (20:3)

R' Shmuel Meltzen z"l (Slutsk, Poland; 19th century) cites earlier authorities who state that "Anochi" encompasses within it all mitzvot aseh / affirmative commandments, while "Lo yihyeh" encompasses within it all mitzvot lo ta'aseh / negative commandments. R' Meltzen illustrates how "Lo yihyeh" encompasses within it additional mitzvot lo ta'aseh, for example, the prohibitions against stealing and dishonesty in business. In reality, a person's income is determined by Hashem. One who steals or earns "unclean" money apparently believes that he can supplement what Hashem has allotted to him. This would be possible only if there were a source of wealth other than Hashem, and one who believes there is such a power is, literally, recognizing other gods. (Ha'emunah Ve'ha'hashgachah p.4b)

"Do not be afraid, for G-d has come only to test you, and in order that the fear of Him will be with you, so that you do not go astray." (20:17)

This pasuk seems to contradict itself--"Do not be afraid, for G-d has come . . . in order that the fear of Him will be with you." R' Leo Adler z"l (1915-1978; rabbi of Basel, Switzerland) explains: The term "yirah"-- usually translated "fear"--refers to both "dread" and "awe." While dread of G-d merely suppresses man's will to sin, awe or reverence for G-d causes man's free will to turn against the idea of sin itself. Reverence for G-d converts obligation into desire, so that a person no longer has to conquer his yetzer hara; he simply has no desire to sin. (The Biblical View of Man p.61)

"You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven. You shall not make [images of] what is with Me; gods of silver and gods of gold shall you not make for yourselves." (20:19-20)

How does the second verse quoted here follow from the first? R' Shmuel Tayib z"l (early 20th century; Djerba) explains:

Idolatry developed originally because men believed that G-d is too lofty to interact with mankind. Instead, they believed that man could relate only to G-d's intermediaries, such as angels, stars, and planets.

Hashem teaches in our verse that those who held that belief were wrong. "You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven." Therefore, you know that you can interact directly with Me, and you have no need to make "images of what is with Me," i.e., that which is in the upper realms. (Afapei Shachar)

Zachor V'shamor

"Zachor / Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it." (Shmot 20:8)

"Shamor / Safeguard the Sabbath day to sanctify it." (Devarim 5:12)

Although the two versions of the Luchot--one in our parashah and the other in Parashat Va'etchanan--introduce the mitzvah of Shabbat with different words, our Sages teach that G-d used both words when He gave the Torah to Bnei Yisrael. Specifically, says the Gemara (Shevuot 20b): "Zachor" and "Shamor" were uttered simultaneously, something that no human mouth can utter and no human ear can comprehend [absent a miracle].

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (the Maharal of Prague; died 1609) asks: What was the purpose of G-d's uttering "Zachor" and "Shamor" simultaneously? Some say, Maharal writes, that the purpose was so that our Sages would equate the two phrases and derive the principle: "Whoever is obligated in safeguarding Shabbat, i.e., whoever is prohibited from doing melachah / work on Shabbat, is obligated to remember Shabbat." This teaches us that women are obligated in kiddush, which they otherwise would not be because kiddush is a mitzvat aseh she'hazman gerama / an affirmative commandment which is time-dependent. However, Maharal argues, we would have derived the same law if Hashem had said, "Zachor ve'shamor / Remember and safeguard the Sabbath day to sanctify it."

Rather, Maharal writes, the two phrases were uttered simultaneously to teach us that they are equally essential to proper Shabbat observance. Had the Torah said only, "Shamor / Safeguard the Sabbath day to sanctify it," we would have thought that the Shabbat is sanctified if we merely refrain from working; we do not need to do anything to affirmatively imbue the day with sanctity. On the other hand, had the Torah said only, "Zachor / Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it," we would have thought that the Shabbat is sanctified if we merely recite kiddush, no matter what else we do on the Sabbath. Now we know, however, that only with both aspects--refraining from melachah and actively sanctifying the day--do we properly observe Shabbat. (Gur Aryeh)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with

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