

A MATTER OF PRIORITIES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

It is quite a merit to have the giving of the Ten Commandments in a parsha to do with you. Yisro was a non-Jew who had tried every kind of idol worship known to man at that time, and yet, it is the account of his arrival to meet up with Moshe, his son-in-law, that heads of this parsha. Why?

There are a few explanations given by the commentators for this, but one that I'd like to suggest is the following: to undermine the myth of "frum from birth" (religious from birth).

What I mean by this is the following. No one is really born "religious," though they may be born to religious parents. This is certainly a tremendous advantage, for it means that they will have Bris Milah at the proper time, not have to go before the Bais Din to convert, and, most important of all, be raised in a holy environment and with a familiarity of many of the most important Jewish concepts.

However, Judaism is a "spirit," a thing of the soul, and that is something every Jew, be he born to a religious family or not, has to choose for himself at the right time and in the right way. To assume otherwise is to make one's children vulnerable to the negative outside influences that are contrary to a Torah lifestyle. After all, from a population of about 12,000,000 (b'li ayin hara), a small fraction is Torah-observant today-something has not gone altogether right!

Perhaps this is why Yisro is juxtaposed with the giving of Torah, to tell us that everyone has to be a Yisro in his or her own way. In a sense, we are all "coverts" to Judaism, when at a point of maturity we make a free-will decision to commit ourselves to G-d and His Torah. And, we have to teach our children to act this way, to be willing to uproot themselves from their previous carefree lifestyles to go in search of the Ultimate Truth-Torah and mitzvos.

We have to teach them to be willing to go out into the "desert," if need be, to meet up with G-d, to listen for the truth even over the "noise" of the world that dictates otherwise. We have to help them appreciate how to arrange their priorities.

That's on one level-as always, there is a deeper one.

It is relatively well known that Moshe was a gilgul (reincarnation) of Hevel (Abel), having received the "good" from Hevel's soul. However, what may not be so well known is that Yisro received the good part from Kayin's (Cain) soul (Seder HaDoros), which would make him more than just Moshe's father-

in-law; it would also make him his "soul-brother" in the real sense of the term!

In fact, the Arizal points out a hint to this in the following verse:

Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe came to Moshe, who was camped at the mountain of G-d, and to the desert, with his [Moshe's] wife and sons. He [Yisro] said to Moshe, "I am your father-in-law Yisro (ani chosen'chah Yisro) ..." (Shemos 18:5)

The first letter of each of the above three Hebrew words (in parentheses) when combined in order spell the word "achi" (aleph, ches, yud), which means, "my brother." Embedded in Yisro's words was a message: If you don't accept me because I am now your father-in-law, accept me because I was once your brother, so that we can make amends for what I once did wrong. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Moshe went to such an extent to honor Yisro, as if to show his forgiveness for what once happened.

Like with everything in Torah, there is the plot, and then there is the sub-plot. The above just helps us to understand that what we live through on the surface often belies what is taking place below the surface, all of which is working towards G-d's ultimate plan for creation.

Shabbos Day:

Since this is the week that we read about the acceptance of Torah at Mt. Sinai, it seems only fitting that we discuss Torah itself.

What is Torah?

There are many ways to describe G-d's greatest gift to mankind, but the simplest way is in terms of the mitzvos and stories found within. It is called Toras Chaim-Instructions for Living-and Aitz Chaim-Tree of Life. In any case, Torah is the manual written by the Creator for the created, to help us understand ourselves and the world we find ourselves within, in order to maximize our potential, and the world's. Ultimately, it is our "passport" to the World-to-Come.

However, that is like saying, "What is man?" and then describing him as a body with tremendous potential to accomplish all kinds of physical and spiritual things, which is true. However, man is a physical being with a soul, the former being finite and the latter being infinite, which raises the question: How do you get an infinite soul into a finite body?

The same question arises regarding Torah: How do you get the infinite light of Torah into the finite black-ink letters found in the Torah scroll? After all, as the Ramban points out, the entire Sefer Torah is comprised of names of G-d (which is amazing considering that they make up logical sentences and paragraphs). And, in the words of one Kabbalist, "the entire Torah is the light of His will literally,

His Holy Light itself." This is why "Torah is the source of life" and why she is called the "inner soul of all the worlds."

Hence, just as there are different levels of souls (Nefesh, Ruach, Neshama, etc.), there are different levels of Torah, and the Kabbalists are quick to point out that the Torah we have in our possession now looks different than it will in the World-to-Come. Our version of Torah is a "veil" for the true light it contains, and that veil will gradually lift as we move closer and closer to the World-to-Come, beginning with the days of Moshiach.

(The truth is, the "veil" has already begun to lift. Between what was revealed by the Arizal in the 1500s, and what has been disseminated with the help of technology over the last 200 years, it is clear that something dramatic is in the works. Witness the explosion of accessibility to Torah over the Internet, which improves exponentially every day!)

Therefore, the actual letters of the Sefer Torah are considered "clothing" for the light they represent, or more accurately, channel to us. However, actual names of G-d are less of a veil for that light, and therefore have an added degree of holiness. When we learn Torah and do mitzvos, we may not be able to sense just what we're accessing and causing to emanate; but we must never forget that, just like the clothing we wear belies the holy soul that is within us, so too does the physical parchment and ink letters conceal the true holiness of the Torah itself.

The actual two tablets on which G-d engraved the Ten Commandments contained 620 letters, to allude to the "620 pillars of light in the Crown" (whatever that means!), which is why there are 613 Torah-based commandments, and seven rabbinical commandments (e.g. Chanukah, Purim, etc.; these are not to be confused with the many rabbinical decrees and enactments to safeguard the Torah mitzvos). "When the time came to emanate down the light of Torah, G-d caused the Upper Root to spark from the Hidden Light of Creation itself."

"What is all this Kabbalistic terminology supposed to mean to us?" you may be asking.

It is supposed to mean that we are expected to contemplate on just what we were given at Mt. Sinai, and what we still have in our possession. Our written Torah and what we possess of the Oral Law today may only be a "shred" of what Torah really has to offer, but it is still phenomenally holy and esoteric. Tampering with Torah and her mitzvos, for us, is like a child trying to perform a triple by-pass-for the first time. It is bound to do more harm than good, if not set creation back light years in the end.

As a side note, this is why Orthodox Jewry has fought tooth-and-nail to preserve Torah, even giving up the lives of its adherents to uphold Torah. It is not a question of "monopolies" or of "religious manipulation." It is an issue of humbly recognizing from whence Torah has come, and for what purpose Torah has been entrusted to us. The truth is often painful and inconvenient, and certainly uncomfortable, but it is falsehood that lays waste to mankind and the world, if not today, then certainly tomorrow. After all, as the Talmud warns, Torah can be either an elixir for life, or for death

(Yoma 72b); it all depends upon who is "consuming" it, and why, and how much Torah is a priority in one's life.

Seudos Shlishi:

The Talmud records a fascinating account from Moshe's sojourn on Har Sinai:

When Moshe ascended to heaven, the Ministering Angels said to The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the Universe! what is one born of a woman doing among us?" He told them, "He has come to receive Torah." "What?!" they exclaimed. "Are You about to give that cherished treasure that was with You for 974 generations before the world was created?!" ... G-d told Moshe to answer them. Moshe told Him, "I am afraid that I will burn up from the breath of their mouths!" "Take hold of My Throne of Glory (for protection) and answer them," G-d told him ... [He took hold of the Throne and] said before Him, "Master of the Universe! What is written in Torah, 'I am the L-rd Your G-d Who took you out of Egypt ...' (Shemos 20:2)." He asked them, "Did you go down to Egypt and serve Paroah? Of what use, then, can Torah be to you? What else is written inside, 'You shall have no other gods besides Me' (Shemos 20:3). Are you living among nations who worship idols [that you need this mitzvah]? Furthermore, what else is written? 'Remember the Shabbos and keep it holy ...' (Shemos 20:8). Do you do work from which you must abstain? ... And, is it not written, 'Honor your father and mother' (Shemos 20:12)-do you have fathers and mothers?" and so on. The angels at once confessed that The Holy One, Blessed is He, was right!

There are, of course, many questions to ask on this midrash. But the questions we will ask now are, why did G-d have Moshe answer on His behalf, and, why didn't the angels figure out Moshe's answer for themselves?

First of all, the problem with a gift is that it is just that, a gift. Just about everyone spends \$100 faster if it is given to them as a gift than if it was earned through effort and fought for. In the words of the Talmud, you have to "die" for Torah before it will stay with you (Brochos 63b). Elsewhere, we are told that one must "blacken his face" for Torah (Eiruvim 22a), which means being willing to suffer some kind of discomfort, when necessary, to learn Torah.

The answer to the second question alludes to a very deep idea. The truth is, the angels could have answered Moshe, "That's all very well and fine, except that Torah on its higher levels doesn't contain such mitzvos, as you will discover in the time of Moshiach and certainly in the World-to-Come!"

So why didn't the angels seize their golden opportunity and rebut Moshe's argument? Because Moshe was really telling them that the whole point of Torah "up there" was to give rise to Torah "down here." Angels may be holier than man, but it was for man that G-d made creation. Angels may

never make mistakes, but it was for free-will beings who could make mistakes that G-d brought into being the entire universe, including the angels. This too was a message that Moshe was to come to understand on Har Sinai, before returning to the mundane life of the world below to bestow Torah on G-d's "treasured nation."

Knowing all of this helps to make Torah the top priority in our lives.

Melave Malkah:

Rav Hamnuna said, "Jerusalem would not have been destroyed except for the sin that they ceased to teach small children." (Shabbos 119b)

It is hard to imagine that a people such as ours would ever forsake the important mitzvah of providing a child with a Torah education. However, a friend of mine told me a story that reminded me that there is educating your child, and then there is educating your child.

What's the difference?

Like many today, the man in the story had assumed that sending his children to cheder was a sufficient fulfillment of the mitzvah to "teach your children." Yes, he always asked his children how cheder was, and on Shabbos night he was careful to review a little of their weekly material. However, when it came to Shabbos afternoon, it was a tug o' war between his own learning goals, and the educational (and emotional needs) of his children.

Yes, Torah was a priority in the house, but it was unclear as to whose learning should be the priority and when. And, as long as the teachers seemed more-or-less happy with his sons' efforts, was it not a sign that the status quo situation was fine in heaven and on earth? However, a major reason why we learn Torah is to figure out how to prioritize our needs and concerns, so that we can correctly fulfill our responsibility to ourselves, our families, our societies, and the world around us.

Of course, the "note" eventually came. The rebi requested that the parents come in for a meeting to discuss a child's negative progress in cheder. The rebi had seen the son do much better, and was concerned about the direction of the child. In the rebi's office, as the rebi spoke with concern, the mother looked at the father, and the father looked at the mother. First there was anger towards the child for not reviewing his studies on Shabbos instead of playing games. But then the father felt a different emotion altogether; a sense of letting his children down.

Later that day, rather than berating his son, the father told him, "That's it! Shabbos afternoon is yours! You and I are going to the Bais Medrash to learn, and if you learn well, and I hear positive feedback from your rebi, then you will get your own seforim (books) to begin building your own Torah library!"

The son's eyes lit up, as a big smile reached from cheek to cheek. Within days there was much improvement. More importantly, the son's attitude turned around 180 degrees, as he bubbled with the thought of having his own Torah library, to the point that he wanted to invent his own money (which previously had been slated as a "nosh-fund") in new seforim as well.

The new found relationship with his father and his learning carried over from the house to the cheder, and from the cheder to the house, and from Shabbos to Shabbos. It was a happy ending to what had started off as a sad story. The son was happy, the rebi was happy, and the father was happy. But most important of all, heaven was happy. And who knows just how far that goes to keep the world afloat!

Have a great Shabbos, filled with the light of Torah.

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