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Parshat HaShavua sheet**

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Parshat Yitro
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MAN OVER MOSES

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Yisro begins by relating how impressed its namesake, Yisro, (Jethro) is upon hearing the amazing events that transpired to the nation led by his son-in-law, Moshe. He decides to convert to Judaism. Yisro sends word to Moshe that he will soon be arriving at the Israelite camp. Yisro wants Moshe to leave his post and greet him in the desert before he arrives at the Israelite camp. The Torah tells us that Moshe did go out to greet Yisro: “the man bowed and kissed him and asked the peace of his dear one.” ([Exodus 18:8](#))

Rashi is bothered by the ambiguity. “Who bowed to whom? Who kissed whom? Who was the one to make the gesture? Was it Yisro, the father-in-law, who kissed Moshe, or did Moshe, the son-in-law, leader of millions of people, run to greet his father-in-law a Midianite priest, and bow and kiss him?”

Rashi quotes the Mechilta which refers us to Bamidbar ([Numbers 12:3](#)) where Moshe is called “the man Moshe” obviously the words, “the man bowed and kissed him” in our portion must mean that same man – Moshe.

Why, however, did the Torah choose a seemingly convoluted way to tell us that Moshe prostrated himself before his father-in-law? Would it not have been easier to tell us that “Moshe man bowed and kissed him and asked the peace of his dear one”? Why did the Torah use the words “the man” and send us to the Book of Numbers to learn who “the man” was?

One, when my brother, Rabbi Zvi Kamenetzky of Chicago, tried to contact a friend who was vacationing at Schechter's Caribbean Hotel in Miami Beach, Florida. After about 15 rings, the hotel operator, an elderly, southern black woman, who worked at the hotel for three decades politely informed my brother that the man was not in the room. “Would you like to leave a message?” she inquired. “Sure,” responded Reb Zvi, “tell him that Rabbi Kamenetzky, called.” The woman at the other end gasped. “Raabbi Kaamenetzky?” she drawled. “Did you say you were Raabbi Kaamenetzky?” She knew the name! It sounded as if she was about to follow up with a weighty question, and my brother responded in kind. “Yes.” He did not know what would follow. “Why do you ask?” “Are you,” asked the operator, “by any chance, related to the famous Rabbi Kamenetzky?” There was silence in Chicago. My brother could not imagine that this woman had an inkling of who his grandfather, the great sage, Dean of Mesivta Torah Voda'ath to whom thousands had flocked for advice and counsel, was. She continued. “You know, he passed away about ten years ago at the end the wintah?” She definitely had her man, thought Reb Zvi. Still in shock, he offered a subdued, “Yes, I'm a grandson.” “YOOOU ARE?” she exclaimed, “well I'm sure glad to talk to ya! Cause your grandpa — he was a real good friend of mine!” My brother pulled the receiver from his ear and stared at the mouthpiece. He composed himself and slowly began to repeat her words, quizzically. “You say that Rabbi Kamenetzky was a good friend of yours?” “Sure! Every mornin' Raabbi Kaaamenetzky would come to this here hotel to teach some sorta Bible class (It was the Daf-Yomi.) Now my desk is about ten yards from the main entrance of the hotel. But every mornin' he made sure to come my way, nod his head, and say good mornin' to me. On his way out, he would always stop by my desk and say good-bye. Oh! Yes! He was a great Rabbi but he was even a greater man. He was a wonderful man. He was a real good friend of mine!”

The Torah could have told us the narrative an easier way. It could have told us that Moshe bowed before, and kissed Yisro. It does more. It tells us that it was a man who kissed Yisro. True, it was Moshe that performed those actions. But they were not the actions of a Moses, they were the actions of a mentch!

Often we attribute acts of kindness, compassion, and extra care to super-human attributes of our sages and leaders. The Torah tells us that it is the simple mentch that performs them. Inside every great leader lies “the man.” Little wonder that the words “and the man Moses” that Rashi quotes from the Book of Numbers begin a verse that fits our explanation quite well. The verse reads “and the man Moses was the exceedingly humble, more than any one on the face of the earth.” ([Numbers 12:3](#)) It was the **man** Moses, who was exceedingly humble, more than any one on the face of the earth.

A Welcome Introduction

By Rabbi Berel Wein

It is well known that there is a difference of opinion as to whether Yitro's arrival in the camp of Israel in the desert occurred before or after the revelation and granting of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Even if we say that Yitro arrived before the momentous event of Mount Sinai and that the Torah is recording events in a chronological manner, it still is difficult for us to understand.

Why is this most important event in Jewish history as outlined for us in the Torah, be preceded by a rather mundane description of Yitro's arrival and reception in the camp of Israel? Would it not be more effective to highlight the revelation at Sinai immediately at the beginning of the parsha? And this appears to be especially true since the parsha goes into great detail and some length in describing the circumstances and experience of the revelation at Sinai.

Why is there such an apparent emphasis on Yitro and his arrival? And this question certainly is even more difficult if we adopt the opinion that the revelation at Sinai occurred before the arrival of Yitro. It almost seems that by recording for us the entire story of the arrival of Yitro the Torah somehow diminishes, in emphasis and focus, the narrative regarding the revelation at Sinai itself.

If there ever was a stand-alone event in Jewish and in world history it certainly would be the moment of the revelation and granting of the Torah at Mount Sinai. So what is the story of Yitro doing being involved in the immortal narrative of the most seminal event in human history?

We are all aware of the great dictum of the Talmud that proper worldly behavior precedes the Torah itself. The order of the subjects in this week's parsha reinforces this idea clearly and cogently. The Torah records for us the politeness, courtesy, respect and sensitivity extended to Yitro by Moshe and Aaron and the Elders of Israel and all of the Jewish people when he arrived in their midst.

The Torah indulges in great detail in describing the reception that Yitro received. Simple courtesy extended to a stranger is the basis of the Jewish value system. It is what separated Abraham from Sodom. The Ten Commandments and in fact the entire Torah itself cannot be understood or appreciated without a grounding in this basic idea of the worth of the human being and of the necessity to honor, welcome and help of one another.

That is why we are not to be murderers, robbers, adulterers, lying witnesses or people of greed and avarice. The Talmud places great emphasis on the small things in life that make for a wholesome society. It records for us in great solemnity that one of the great virtues of the leading scholars of Torah of its day was that they greeted everyone, no matter who that person was, in pleasantness.

This value is emphasized over and over again in the writings of the great men of Israel, throughout the generations. Therefore the welcome to Yitro must perforce precede the law of the Torah itself for it is the value upon which the Torah itself is based.

“Lo Sachmod”: Two Approaches

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The tenth of the Asserres HaDibros [“Ten Commandments”] is Lo Sachmod: “Do not covet your neighbor’s house; do not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his slave, his donkey, his ox, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” [Shemos 20:13]. A person is not allowed to be jealous of his friend’s possessions.

The Ibn Ezra wonders how the Torah can legislate against a person’s desires. It is very natural for a person driving a jalopy to be jealous of a person who has a new car and does not have to worry about leaking oil and whether the car will start each time he turns the key in the ignition. If this is readily understandable in terms of our neighbor’s car, it is certainly understandable in terms of more meaningful things in life. We see their families, we see their position, etc., etc. How does the Torah command a person not to be jealous?

The Ibn Ezra cites a parable which allows us to understand the proper approach to the prohibition of not coveting: No commoner ever thinks he will marry the princess. He knows that the princess is out of his league. It is human nature that one only has desires for things he can relate to. A person does not covet things which are so far removed from him that he considers them to be “out of his league”. When the villager goes into the big city and sees the King’s palace and sees the King’s beautiful daughter, he does not even think “Oh, I wish I could marry her.” He knows that such an occurrence is strictly beyond the realm of possibility in terms of his lineage and background. It is just not going to happen.

The Ibn Ezra says that an intelligent person must realize that people do not acquire spouses or possessions based on their wisdom or cleverness, but only based on the Will of G-d to grant him such. If a person has a beautiful house or car or wife, it is because the Almighty wanted him to have that. For whatever reason, it is G-d’s Will that Reuven have these things and Shimon not have them. The antidote a person must employ to avoid coveting, says Ibn Ezra, is Emunah [faith]. Namely, the faith that all his possessions are what G-d wants him to have and all of his neighbor’s possessions are what G-d wants his neighbor to have.

Rav Simcha Zissel Brodie, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva, suggests that the Ramba”n (in Parshas Kedoshim) has a different understanding of the “Lo Sachmod” command and a totally different approach to the age old dilemma “How do I avoid being jealous?” The Ramban quotes a Medrash that refers to the repetition of the Asserres HaDibros in Parshas Kedoshim. For example, Parshas Kedoshim contains “I am the L-rd your G-d” [Vayikra 19:3] corresponding to the first of the ten. “Graven images you shall not make for yourselves” [19:4] corresponds to the second of the ten, and so on and so forth. The parallel in Parshas Kedoshim to the tenth commandment (Lo Sachmod) is the pasuk “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” [19:18]

Rav Simcha Zissel explains this Ramba”n as follows: When I see that someone has a better car than I do or a better house than I do and I want that car or house, the human emotion behind this desire is not driven strictly by desire for the car or house or wife but by the fact that I am better than him and why should he have something that I do not have. Really, I know that I can easily live with my old jalopy, but I can not live with the fact that my neighbor has a better car than I do! It is not lusting for money or women; it is the ability to come to terms with the fact that someone else has something that I do not have.

If I would love that person as I do myself, I would be quite okay with the fact that he had a beautiful car and house and wife. Let him have it! The proof of this fact is the Talmudic adage that one is jealous of everyone else except for his children and his students. We rarely see parents who are jealous of their children. Why is that? It is because one loves his children dearly and wants them to be even more successful in life than he himself was. If one really loves his fellow man, he will not be jealous of him. Thus, the Ramba”n advises, the way to overcome jealousy is to love one’s neighbor as much as he loves himself.

“Moshe recounted to his father-in-law all that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt on account of Israel, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how Hashem had saved them” (18:8)

The parsha opens by saying that Yisro came to find the Bnei Yisrael because he had heard about all the things that Hashem had done for them in Egypt. If Yisro already knew about the miracles and was eager to go to Moshe upon hearing about them, why did Moshe need to tell the story to Yisro all over again? Rashi writes that Moshe was trying “to draw his heart closer and bring him to Torah.” Even though Yisro had heard about Hashem’s miracles and acknowledged them, Moshe wanted to inspire him to reach the next level. He told Yisro more details of what had transpired, leading Yisro to exclaim that now he truly knew that Hashem was great. Moshe used the power of speech to help Yisro build on his earlier growth and come even closer to Hashem. When we help people find their way closer to Hashem, we should not be satisfied just because they have achieved some growth because life is a ladder of constant growth. We should try to use the power of speech to continue to bring people closer to Hashem and help them build on their past growth to continue climbing higher.

“Yisro, Moshe’s father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for Hashem. Aharon and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with Moshe’s father-in-law before Hashem” (18:12)

What was the purpose of the feast that was held upon Yisro’s arrival? Seforno writes that it was intended “to rejoice with him upon his entrance beneath the wings of the Divine Presence.” Taking mitzvos upon ourselves and committing ourselves to Hashem and His Torah are great achievements that are worthy of celebration. This is also why we have a festive meal to mark the occasion of a bris milah and a bar mitzvah.

“And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Children of Israel” (19:6)

R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that there were two distinct commands given here. Every person should be a kohen, a leader among people. He can do this by teaching Torah or by being an example for others through his own behavior. There is also the collective responsibility to be a holy nation. The Jewish people are not meant to be a nation like all the others in the sense that our strength does not come from territory or military might. That is not the goal. Our task is to be a leader among the nations in moral character and in our devotion to Hashem. By acting in this way, we truly become a holy nation and a light unto the nations around us. Hashem separated us in order to attain holiness, which is achieved by following the dictates of the Torah. This is the communal responsibility that was given to us at Har Sinai, which is our role as Hashem’s chosen nation.

“Remember the Shabbos day to sanctify it” (20:7)

Seforno comments that the command to remember Shabbos means that one should organize his schedule during the week in such a way that all his outstanding tasks will be completed by the week’s end so that none of them will be weighing on his mind when Shabbos comes. If a person leaves work to be completed on Monday morning, there is a concern that his mind will be occupied by it during Shabbos. On Shabbos, a person’s mind should be totally focused on the spiritual aspects of the holy day.

“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)

The Ibn Ezra asks: How is it possible for a person not to desire something belonging to someone else that he likes? How can one control his feelings? He answers that just as a commoner does not desire to marry a princess because he knows that she is beyond his reach, a person should have the same feelings regarding something that belongs to someone else. One must know, understand and actually feel that he will get everything that Hashem decides that he deserves and that if he is supposed to have something, he will get it. When one realizes that he is not meant to have whatever belongs to someone else, no matter how much he desires it, he will be happy with his portion in life and will trust in Hashem to provide for him and give him what is good for him. Therefore, this prohibition also includes pressuring someone to sell something that he does not want to sell. Even though it is a legal transaction, since the person did not want to sell it, one has violated the prohibition against desiring the property of others.

By Rabbi Meyer Friedman

Only United Can We Fulfill the Torah

by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski

And they encamped in the Wilderness and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain [Sinai] (19:2)

As we have seen, the narration that precedes the giving of the Torah is more than just historical. It indicates the prerequisites of Torah.

Rashi points out that the Hebrew word for encamped is *vayichan*, he camped, rather than *vayachanu*, they camped. Furthermore, the Ten Commandments were also spoken in the singular, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, your God in the singular, rather than the plural *elokeichem*. The singular form of the verb is utilized because there was such complete unity among the Israelites that they were like one person, hence the entire nation could be addressed in the singular.

The Torah was given to each individual, and every person is required to fulfill the 613 mitzvot. It is obvious that technically this is impossible. There are some mitzvot whose performance is restricted to Kohanim (priests), which Yisrael cannot perform. A person whose firstborn child is a girl cannot fulfill the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* (redemption of the firstborn son). Mitzvot that apply to judges do not apply to lay people. How can any single person fulfill all 613 mitzvot? Torah scholars have provided the answer. When a person puts on the tefillin (phylacteries) on his arm and head, it is not just the arm and head that have the mitzvah, but the whole person. Similarly, when people are united, they are as one, and a mitzvah performed by one person is shared by those with whom one is united.

How tragic that we have allowed ourselves to be divisive. Fragmentation not only weakens our nation, but deprives a person of acquiring the merit of those mitzvot which he is unable to perform.

Every human trait may have positive applications, even something as repulsive as selfishness. We should realize that eliminating the divisiveness that reigns among us is not merely altruistic. It is of inestimable personal benefit.

Don't Trust Leaders

By Sheldon Stern

Red Buttons was a popular Borscht Belt comedian. Had he been Orthodox, this might have been a sampling of his humor, "General George Armstrong Custer, who said at the Little Bighorn, "They look like friendly Indians," never had a Parsha of the Torah named after him." Yes, but Yisro did make the grade and it behooves us to understand on what merit he was selected? It's tempting to propose that he was rewarded for being Moshe Rabbeinu's father-in-law. Now that was certainly a feather in his cap, but Judaism is a religion of accomplishment and so one doesn't enter the pantheon riding someone else's coattails.

As is so often the case, Rashi provides the answer. In verse 18:11 Yisro states, "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the other gods." On this, our foremost commentator seemingly plunged, as Jimi Hendrix wrote, his "Dolly Dagger" into our protagonist, "There wasn't an idol in the world that he didn't serve." Seemingly this remark flies in the face of the axiom that we don't remind a Baal Tshuvah, or convert, for that matter, of his ignominious past. Why then would Rashi go out of his way to denigrate someone who was held in such esteem by the greatest man who ever lived? In fact, Rashi's comment was a fitting testament to our eponymous character's greatness. The Midrash tells us that Yisro was one of Paroah's three advisers, along with Job and Bilaam. This was heady company and gives us an indication of his brilliance. It therefore follows that if Yisro delved into a religion, he likely became its high priest. Despite the perks of such a lofty position, not to mention the dangers he'd face by abandoning it, Yisro wasn't deterred, because, as U2 lamented, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Many years ago Rabbi Plutchok told me that he doesn't know what's right, but he knows what's wrong. Yisro found fatal flaws in each of the idolatrous religions until he discovered Hashem and the Torah. The Gemara teaches that Hillel will be Mechayev all the poor people. When the Aniyim come for their judgment at 120 they'll be asked why they didn't study Torah, and they'll try to defend themselves by arguing that they had to spend their time supporting their families. Hashem will then turn on the video and show them how Hillel ignored his abject poverty to achieve immortality and their excuses will fall by the wayside. So too Yisro's example will belie those who try to justify their idolatrous and/or atheistic bents.

While this dogged pursuit of truth attests to Yisro's greatness, we can also find a positive element in the life of a man, who, to borrow from Johnny Lee, "Was Looking For G-d in All the Wrong Places."

Dr. Gerald Schroeder is an observant physicist and author. In his "The Science of G-d: The Convergence of Scientific and Biblical Wisdom" Dr. Schroeder posited that before Adam Harishon entered the world's stage, there were creatures who resembled humans in all aspects, but they lacked a soul. He labeled them hominids.

I decided to bring this up in the Yeshiva, but I added my trademark twist, "Dr Schroeder (he was Rabbi Friedman's classmate at MIT and the Rov spoke highly of him) believes in the hominids or as some might call them, "the homina, homina, hominids." One fellow immediately went ballistic on me. He's a Baal Tshuvah and he knew that I was referencing the classic sitcom "The Honeymooners" so he declared, "There's no Ralph Kramden (the main character of the show) in this Yeshivah." Why did he become so bent out of shape? On numerous occasions Rabbi Friedman reminded us of an incident involving Rav Moshe. One of his Tshuvahs was challenged, and his adversary insinuated that the MTJ Rosh Yeshiva was overly lenient because he had been influenced by the liberal American culture. The Gadol Hador responded, "You can question my decision, but don't ever suggest that I've taken in any secular sources, because in my entire life I've never looked at anything but Torah." When that Talmud attacked me he felt that I had violated the Yeshiva's ideology, by mentioning a television program. IMHO, Rashi took a different tack. In fact, what made Yisro great was the information he derived from those questionable sources. Because he was a connoisseur of truth he was able to, as CSNY sang, "Separate the wheat from the chaff." Pirkei Avos teaches that a wise man learns from everyone, and this was Yisro to a tee. Moreover, it's the greatest tribute to the Torah, when someone of a humble upbringing embraces it. George Harrison wrote, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." What the spiritual Beatle meant is that if one doesn't have a fixed, preconceived notion of where he's going, Hashem will lead him where he was meant to end up. This perhaps is the intent of the famous Talmudic dictum (Berakoth 34b) "In the place where Baalei Tshuvah stand, even complete Tzaddikim (FFB's) can't stand." That Jews from divergent backgrounds arrive at the same place is the greatest affirmation of the Torah's veracity.

But there's another issue that I'd like to explore. Let's consider the title of Dr. Schroeder's book. Rather than prove that either element held sway, he looked for the nexus between the domains of Torah and science. Since we understand that everything comes from Hashem it follows logically that every discipline must, at least, contain truth. For myself, music was essential growing up and so I've found a way to incorporate it into my writing. Shakespeare wrote, "To Thine Own Self Be True." Baruch Hashem I love learning, but I don't believe that one must exorcise all secular influences. Now I'd like to delve into the approach of that fellow who fully imbibed the Yeshiva KoolAid. I was in 10th grade and one day we were studying Biology when the Hebrew studies principal barged in and announced, "There will be no lectures on the subject of Evolution. When you get those questions on the regents you can either skip them or just guess(they were multiple choice.)" I was struck by the Chutzpah of this Rabbi who usurped our teacher's authority. But there was a second problem, "What was he afraid of?" Evolution is a theory, but in a very real sense so are Midrashim. You can't take either at face value, but when my Yeshiva classmate laced into me it took me back to that episode. Now I'm not blaming him, but as simply following the party line. Rabbi Friedman often said that Rabbi Miller translated Emes, not as truth, but as Chesed. That comes from the Gemara in Kesubos 16b-17a which asks, "How do we dance before the Kallah?" The Gemara's question is actually, "How does one dance around the subject of the Kallah?" This led to a discussion between Bes Shammai and Bes Hillel. The former held that one must be truthful and so if asked what he thinks of the bride, he must offer his actual opinion even if it's unflattering. Bes Hillel, however, argued that one should say she's lovely and graceful. They explained, "If someone made a purchase in the market and it can't be returned would you tell the buyer that the goods are of an inferior quality? So too here, you tell the groom what he wants to hear. But there's an important caveat, one must never lose his allegiance to truth. All too often, the powers that be in the Yeshiva world present their points of view, to the exclusion of any conflicting side and it's this attitude that led to that outburst. The principle of Eilu Veilu Divrei Elokim is supposed to engender mutual respect, but that requires a willingness to bend to another opinion. Dovid Hamelech wrote (Psalms 146:3), "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man." Was he telling us not to believe in politicians? Not likely. Rather, he was saying that one shouldn't pledge his troth even to great men, even to Rosh Yeshivas, because they may be speaking their biased truths. Dylan put it bluntly, "Don't trust leaders, watch out for parking meters."

Siyata Dishmaya is a very nebulous term, but I'll cite an example. When I was writing this essay my son told me the following, "Last night I attended a lecture at the Altneu Synagogue. At one point the speaker mentioned that story you like to tell about Rav Moshe never looking at anything but Torah. The Rabbi said that he also heard it when he went to yeshiva but it's not true. He said that he recently met Rav Reuvein (Feinstein) and out of curiosity he brought it up. The Gadol responded, "You think my father wasn't normal? On his hospital death bed he asked me for a newspaper to know what's going on." The Potoker's grandson told me a similar story. Once, when he was a child he visited the Gaon and saw, what was for him, an unusual sight. His Zeide was listening to the radio. His einikel's expression gave him away and the Potoker laced into him, "You think I don't listen to the radio? I need to know what's going on so I can Daven properly." But how could they lie and invent something Rav Moshe never said? He certainly wouldn't have endorsed this. So you'll answer, that Emes is Chesed, as Rabbi Miller said. What's wrong with telling a "white lie" which would enhance Rav Moshe's reputation. The Gemara says that Hashem's seal is Emes. Truth is inviolate. What the story in Kesubos is teaching is that fealty to truth is waived if the truth will be harmful. It's just like observing Shabbos. In the face of Pikuach Nefesh concerns the holy day's laws are overridden. Shlomo Hamelech said, "Don't be overly righteous." Bullies like that fellow in the Yeshiva try to impose their will and justify it because they're convinced that they're defending the honor of the Torah. Rabbi Plutchok told me that a Rabbi has no right to tell others what to do, he must simply serve as a role model and answer the questions which arise. Sounds like my kind of Rabbi, don't you think? Oh, and yes. Thank you Hashem for relaying that story to me. It puts a nice capper on this piece.