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The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

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Parshat Yitro

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RETURN TO SENDER

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Yisro is the portion in which the Children of Israel arrive at their spiritual, intellectual, and moral destination. It is the portion in which the former Hebrew slaves choose to become the Chosen People, choosing the responsibilities of 613 mitzvos and all their accountability. This week the Jews accept the Torah at Mount Sinai.

It does not come easy. Hashem prefaces the offering with an overpowering charge. He sends Moshe to speak to both the men and women. “You shall be to Me a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Accepting the Torah included the responsibilities of a holy nation — a new moral divining rod for a world fraught with immorality. But they were up to the challenge and they responded as such.

They did not murmur their response nor did they mumble their acceptance. The Jews affirmed their agreement in unison with words that resound throughout history as the battle cry of Jewish faith. They shouted in unison, “All that Hashem has commanded, we shall do!” (Exodus 19:8). The response, declaring total submission to Torah dictates, was proudly noted by the Almighty, handing the Jews a most chosen nation status through all their ordeals.

But Moshe did not look up to heaven with a content smile, as if he was a proud brother sharing nachas with a father who was watching from the bleachers. The Torah tells us, “and Moshe related the words of the people to Hashem” (Exodus 19:9). He returned to the Master of the Universe and reported the good news. He repeated the response, verbatim, to Hashem. The question is obvious. Moshe knew, perhaps better than any mortal being, that every action, gesture, and thought of any inhabitant of this planet is duly recorded by the Almighty. Why, then, did he report back the response? Hashem was well aware of the enthusiasm and willing acceptance of the people. Furthermore, by telling us that Moshe went back to Hashem, isn't the Torah opening a Pandora's box? Could one possibly infer that Hashem, needed Moshe to find out the response? Obviously there is a deeper lesson to be learned!

In New York State when a baby is born, tests are administered to determine if the baby has any genetic diseases. Among them are tests for histidinemia. This condition causes excessive levels of the protein histadine to build up in the blood, which can damage the nervous system and cause retardation. The disease must be attended to immediately. A histadine level of 1 or 2 points is considered normal. Ten days after a baby was born to a young couple, the hospital frantically tracked down the parents to tell them that their child had a histadine level — of 12! The hospital told the young couple to rush back with the baby. The father instantaneously called his Rebbe, Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky who was the sandek at the baby's bris just a few days ago. Reb Yaakov said he would pray for the child who appeared fine at the bris. Then he told them to insist that the histadine test be repeated before any treatment is administered. The parents rushed back to Bellevue Hospital where they were greeted by an assortment of doctors, nurses, nutritionists, and therapists. The staff wanted to admit the newborn into the hospital immediately. They warned that if the baby was not admitted, permanent brain damage could result. The parents insisted that the test be re-administered to which the doctors grudgingly replied, “we will re-do the test, but understand,” they grumbled, “that these tests are extremely accurate. We never get a false reading.” They re-administered the procedure and came out with a totally different figure than the first time. The histadine level was a bit over one! After further review, they realized that the first test was not off — the technician was! He put the decimal in the wrong place. The original reading should not have been 12, but rather 1.2! The couple, quite upset about the unnecessary scare and trauma, drove with the baby straight to the home of Rabbi Kamenetzky to inform him that the whole ordeal was a mistake. Reb Yaakov, who was elated at the news, held the young father and kissed him. “Thank you for coming and telling me the news,” said the Torah sage. “So many people just tell me their tzorus (problems), they ask me for advice, even prayers, but when things get better, I never find out. I am left bearing the burden of their worries.”

Moshe knew that Hashem heard the answer of the Jewish nation as loud, if not louder, than he did. But he was sent on a mission and he had a responsibility to convey the good news. But he wanted to send the Jewish people a message as well.

He taught his people that before one can receive the Torah he must be a good messenger. Everything that we study – everything we do on this earth is but a message that must be accounted to for Hashem. Even if Hashem knows what we are doing, we must return with a report of accomplishment. And Moshe taught us that Derech Eretz must not only precede the learning of the Torah, it must precede the giving of it as well.

The Secret of Harmonious Relations with the In-Laws

By Rabbi Levi Brackman

The opening story of this week's Torah portion gives some important wisdom in dealing with awkward in-law relationships.

Yitro was a very powerful personality. He was a leader, a scholar and a mystic. When Moses became Yitro's son-in-law, he was a fugitive on the run from Pharaoh's wrath and had not yet had a G-dly revelation. Yitro was an idolater and Moses a believer in Monotheism. All of these factors could not have been conducive to a wholesome father/son-in-law relationship.

When in-laws disagree, each side can become entrenched in their own views, unwilling to see the other's perspective, regardless of the rights and wrongs of the case. Moses and his father-in-law did not see eye to eye on most things; yet it seems that they did not get ensnared in this trap. As soon as Yitro heard about the miraculous splitting of the Red Sea and the wonders that G-d performed for the children of Israel upon leaving Egypt, he realized that his son in law's theology was correct and his was faulty. He immediately set out in to the desert to learn from Moses and to find the truth. When he arrived, an extremely warm and respectful encounter ensued: "Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed to him and kissed him, and they asked each other about their welfare and they came into the tent."

After hearing — first hand — all the miracles that G-d had performed for the Children of Israel, he did not resent the fact that he had been mistaken and his son-in-law's theology had been proved right. On the contrary, "Yitro rejoiced because of all the goodness which the L-rd had done to Israel." He made a dramatic U-turn — denouncing idol worship with the words, "Now I know that the L-rd is greater than all gods."

The very next day, in true father-in-law style, Yitro criticized Moses' leadership and give him unsolicited advice. Many family feuds have started because an in-law gave unasked-for advice and criticism. Moses was unperturbed. In fact, he was grateful for the sensible advice and implemented it right away.

How was it that these two strong personalities were able to have such a wonderful relationship and show each other such respect and admiration? The answer lies in the fact that they were humble. This does not mean that they did not realize their greatness — they did. It means that they knew that there were things beyond themselves — a greater truth that needed to be grasped and understood. Moses and Yitro were both searchers of truth. Yitro felt that he had found truth with idolatry, but being a quintessential truth seeker, once he saw the errors of his ways he was more than willing to change.

Moses was no different. When Yitro pointed out to him that as the solitary judge of his people he was not serving the people efficiently, he was grateful for the advice and immediately made the necessary improvements. Neither cared from where or from whom the truth came — the fact that it was the truth was all that mattered.

Ego and personal animosity will never sour the relationship of people who *sincerely* seek the truth, because theirs is a relationship that is based on values that transcend the self.

Crazy Is As Crazy Does

By Sheldon Stern

Jay Diamond hosted a radio talk show in NY in the 90s. The onetime Bob Grant protégé mentioned that before finding his muse on WABC he was in sales and was taught that a salesman isn't allowed to lie. However, he has to be skilled in how he tells the truth. To that point, someone working in Aliyah isn't likely to bring up the constant specter of Arab terrorism. As Bing Crosby sang, "You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative." This said there is a difficulty in our Parsha. The opening verse states that Moshe told his father-in-law everything that Hashem did for the Bnei Yisrael in freeing them from Egypt. Rashi then commented that Yisro was particularly moved by the splitting of the Yam Suf and the war with Amalek. Now, Moshe was trying to "sell" Yisro on the idea of remaining in the Wilderness so why would he broach the subject of Amalek? Moreover, why would this impress someone who the Midrash says experimented with every form of idolatry, before converting to Judaism.?

To answer these questions consider these words from the American Bard, "We all see the same things, we just start out from a different point of view." Dylan is saying that one's biases color his ability to assimilate the truth. Several weeks ago I was involved in an online debate about the age of the Universe. Despite offering cogent support for the non-fundamental approach, all the evidence was brushed aside by the hardcore right-wingers. You know the deal, "Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind's made up." In truth, that expression is somewhat of a misnomer. Such people don't use their minds. Rather they latch onto some charismatic Rabbi and regurgitate whatever he said. But Yisro was cut from a different cloth. When Pinchas killed Zimri, the prince of Shevet Shimon, his landsmen maligned the man who abated G-d's anger as the scion of one who fattened calves for idolatry. What they didn't understand is that Yisro's forays with Avodah Zarah were a testament to his greatness. A purveyor of truth must be prepared to set aside pre-existing beliefs when they have been proven false. This was Yisro to a tee. Imagine the pope "admitting" that Christianity is false. Highly unlikely, but that's what Yisro did. He was the leading priest and he renounced idolatry. For this, he was ostracized by all his countrymen, But he wasn't deterred. And with this, we can understand Moshe's approach. Yisro was not only an Ish Emes but he was also a clear-minded thinker. That's why he could arrive at the camp and see that Moshe's judicial system was toxic and offer a plan that met with G-d's imprimatur. Why do people pay exorbitant amounts for entertainment? It's because they're amazed by the skills of the performer(s). So we have Yisro, who recognizes Hashem. He understands that Hashem created a world that functions, in perfect synchronicity, according to natural law, but He demonstrated that He could and would violate those laws when He sees fit. Let's offer a Moshol. A fellow approached the Vilna Gaon and proudly told him that he finally mastered Shas by heart. The Gaon responded, "But do you know it backward?" It was mind-blowing. So yes, Yisro, who was uber-rational, was duly impressed by Hashem ignoring natural law to display the extent of His love for Klal Yisroel.

But we're still left with our original question, "Why was Yisro moved by Amalek's attack? There's an expression that's gaining some traction, "the October 8th Jew." He was touched by the horrific events of October 7th and has tapped into his Pintel Yid. I would argue that we also have the "October 8th goy." Not only did he show no compassion for a grieving nation, but he justified what the terrorists did. And as we move farther away from the date of those horrific events, the October 8th goy has ratcheted up his rhetoric accusing Israel of genocide. This, to a great extent, is what Yisro saw. Aside from the barbarity, Amalek's actions were insanity. Hashem had made mincemeat out of Mitzrayim, the world's superpower. All the nations shuddered as they realized that Hashem was taking up the cause of the Israelites. So how could they even think of mixing it up with the Jews? But they did, and this attracted Yisro's eyes and mind. When Moshe saw the Sneh he didn't just shrug his shoulders and say, "Wow that's strange!" No, he had to make sense of it and so he concluded that Hashem was manifested in the Burning Bush. Similarly, Yisro didn't just write off the Amalekites as rabid, rapacious marauders. No, he had to come to grips with their actions and he concluded that they were motivated by irrational hatred. A hatred so intense that they were willing to die to slake their appetite for destruction.

So we see that as far as Yisro was concerned Kriyas Yam Suf and Amalek's attack were two sides of the same coin. They each represented paradigms that transcended rationality. Hashem threw natural law to the wind to demonstrate that His only concern is the welfare of His chosen people. And Amalek taking on the Jewish nation proved the adage, "cutting off one's nose to spite his face." And the same message applies today. When we see the accusations leveled against Israel, we must understand that it's pure irrational hatred. But there's a critical lesson to learn from it. Such hatred reminds us of our importance. We have an immutable bond with Hashem forged by our ancestors' acceptance of the Torah. And the nations of the world are insanely jealous of our relationship. And as Quick Draw McGraw would say, "And don't you forget it."

“Yisro, the minister of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard everything that Hashem did to Moshe and to Israel, his people – that Hashem had taken Israel out of Egypt” (18:1)

Why does the Torah define Yisro by his previous identity as a idolatrous priest of Midian? Aren't we forbidden to remind people of their mistakes from the past? R' Dovid Feinstein explained that Yisro spent his life on a spiritual search, which led him to try and subsequently to reject many forms of idolatry before eventually finding Hashem and the real truth. The only reason why Yisro eventually discovered true spiritual values is because of his openness and his desire to find the truth. His past identity as “priest of Midian” is meant here as the highest compliment. Yisro was an influential person in Midian, but he continued to seek out the truth when he could not find it there. When a person opens his mind, he will find the truth, but if he is not looking for it, he will never see it. If a person wants to learn more about Hashem and Torah, then he will find the abilities within himself to do so. Rashi's opening comment on the parsha hints at this idea. The Torah says that Yisro heard what Hashem had done for the Jewish people, which Rashi understands as a reference to the splitting of the Yam Suf and the victory over Amalek. He heard inspiring stories which excited him, but then he acted on those feelings and went to join the Jewish people. He didn't just let the feelings of inspiration wash over him and pass him by. Too many people are too lazy to do something to build on moments when they feel inspired and they remain unchanged. Yisro saw inspiration as a growth opportunity and grabbed the chance to grow closer to Hashem. That is what made him great.

“When they have a matter, one comes to me, and I judge between a man and his fellow, and I make known the statutes of Hashem and His laws” (18:16)

According to Rabbi Shmuel Spiegel of the Lower East Side, when there is an argument between two people and they come to be judged, they should come before the judge as one unit. The disagreement should not become personal. Rather, they should come united with the intent to learn what the applicable Torah law is in their case. Their trial should be a quest for the truth, not an attempt to get the better of their opponent. This is true for all disagreements, not just court cases. Any interpersonal disputes that we have should be like that of Hillel and Shamai, whose disagreements were solely for the sake of Heaven, in order to seek the true Torah law. When arguments become personal, the truth is not important anymore. We should never allow our anger to blind us and cause us to lose sight of our true quest for the truth that should be the underlying cause of any disagreement.

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

The Torah does not introduce the concept of Shabbos by outlining the dos and don'ts that are part of Shabbos observance, but with a general instruction to remember the Shabbos day. This is because the goal of Shabbos observance is that its lessons about Hashem's creation and guidance of the world should always remain on our minds. The first thing that the Torah tells us about Shabbos is that it should always be in our thoughts. Once we have that approach, we are able proceed to the Torah's next instructions, that we should work for six days with thoughts of Shabbos in our minds and then observe Shabbos on the seventh.

“Because in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, Hashem blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (20:10)

Hashem does not get tired and does not need to rest. Nevertheless, the Torah says that we should rest on Shabbos because Hashem also rested on the seventh day. Hashem has no problem writing something about Himself which is not befitting His honor if it will serve as an encouragement for us. We all find this idea in the laws of the Sotah, the unfaithful wife. As part of what is done to her, the name of Hashem is erased into the water that she is given to drink. Chazal teach us that Hashem is willing to allow His name to be erased if it can help preserve peace between a husband and wife. We can learn from Hashem and not be afraid to roll up our sleeves and get dirty in order to help people. When mitzvos and chesed need to be done, a person cannot claim that anything is beneath his dignity. If Hashem can ignore honor, then so can we.

By Rabbi Meyer Friedman

Unity, Not Uniformity

by Rabbi Ari Kahn

When the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai they were, in a very real sense, a brand new People. They had come down to Egypt as a family, perhaps even a tribe; now they were an emancipated nation. In a very short period of time they experienced a staggering series of national crises: The threat of war against a superpower, miraculous salvation and the celebration at the sea, as well as a surprise military attack at the hands of Amalek. They had seen miracles and experienced panic, but now, at the foot of Mount Sinai, they experienced something new: Unity.

The Torah's description of the Israelite encampment at Sinai includes a nuanced turn of phrase which is lost in the English translation. Whereas all of their travels and encampments up to this point are described in the plural, this stop alone is described in the singular:

In the third month after the Israelites left (plural) Egypt, on the first of the month, they (plural) came to the desert of Sinai. They (plural) had departed from Rephidim and had arrived (plural) in the Sinai Desert, camping (plural) in the wilderness. Israel camped (singular) opposite the mountain. (Ex. 19:1-2)

This unusual shift leads Rashi to describe the atmosphere of this particular encampment "as one person, with one heart." The rapturous description of a people in sync, connected, with one heartbeat, is one of the most uplifting messages in the entire Torah.

There is, however, a downside to unity: Too often, it is achieved through uniformity - particularly uniformity achieved by force. Individuals who don't "fit in" may feel threatened and lost. Moreover, uniformity can seep into the realm of ideas, stifling creativity and vanquishing individuality.

With these pitfalls in mind, a number of commentaries point out that the unity at the foot of Mount Sinai was the backdrop for the great Revelation, which itself was characterized by individuality: The theophany at Sinai was perceived, understood and appreciated by each and every member of the nation in a unique way. Each person experienced the Revelation in accordance with their unique personality, aptitude and capabilities. Rambam (Maimonides) succinctly expressed this school of thought by explaining that what was revealed at Sinai was truth - absolute, pristine truth. Each person was able to perceive this truth according to their individual level of spiritual sensitivity.

The mystical tradition takes a different approach to the Revelation. In mystical sources, the Revelation at Sinai is seen as a multifaceted truth which was experienced, grasped and internalized differently by each person precisely because of their individuality. Because each of their souls was unique, each member of the assembled nation perceived the Revelation in their own unique way, and the truth of the Revelation spoke to them and touched their souls in a unique way.

According to this mystical approach, the multifaceted nature of the Revelation - of truth itself - explains how and why the ongoing halakhic and exegetical processes that expound upon the Torah contain so many different opinions: They reflect diverse perceptions of the Word of God. All are legitimate, and all are part of a whole, just as each individual that stood at Sinai was part of one unified nation.

Our challenge is to perceive opinions that differ from our own as containing a glimpse of Divinity, a different aspect of truth that had eluded our grasp. We must find within ourselves the love and strength to value and cherish those divergent opinions, as well as the individuals who express them. This is the lesson of the strange wording of the verses leading up to the Revelation: Unity, not uniformity, made the Revelation at Sinai possible. At that moment in our history, we were able to unite in our diversity. Against that backdrop, the Revelation, which was uniquely perceived by each member of the community, became a possibility. In appreciating and respecting one another's individuality, the Revelation allowed the new nation to achieve unity. Each individual understood that the Revelation experienced by every other person was unique, different than his or her own experience - and equally true, equally valuable.

Unfortunately, human nature seems prone to attack what is different, whether it be a difference in the color of skin, the type of clothing, or the ideas espoused by others. If we are to learn to value others, we must constantly be aware that their "differentness" may be revealing to us a facet of truth that our own souls somehow missed. We must strive to maintain the sense of family that we brought with us to Egypt: A healthy family learns to accept each member as an individual. Not all the children need have the same interests for a family to be loving and respectful. When we accept different ideas and attitudes, we find that the things which unite us are stronger than any of the things that challenge our unity. Just as the heartbeat sustains all the parts of the body, each with its unique role and function, so, too, the heart of the Jewish People must beat with unity - but not necessarily uniformity.

“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 Shimmon 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 cannot 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.