

Parashat Yitro (Exodus 18:1-2:23)

Parashat Yitro is the Torah's peak moment. The Israelites are gathered around Mt. Sinai and Moses instructs them to prepare for God's revelation of the Torah, which happens three days later (Exodus 19:16). Since every aspect of the revelation is significant, it's fair to ask why the Israelites need three and only three days to prepare.

A closer look discerns a pattern: a three-fold revelation (Torah, Prophets, and Scriptures) to a three-fold people (Priests, Levites, and Israelites) mediated by a third child (Moses) on the third day of the third month (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88a). This is a happy coincidence, but so what?

According to Chassidic thought, the number one stands for individuality while the number two represents diversity. The number three identifies a new state, in which the differences between disparate elements (or individuals) no longer divide, but rather serve as the medium for creating a unified whole. Since "All that is written in the Torah was written for the sake of peace" (Midrash Tanchuma Shoftim 18), three days of preparation makes perfect sense. The Israelites need that time to come together as a people.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the Torah's many and varied "dos and don'ts" and overlook the Torah's purpose: to forge a unity of purpose between the objects, forces, and peoples of creation, thereby creating a cosmic harmony of service (of God). The three days of preparation for the revelation is a reminder: Unity does not require uniformity, and diversity is a prerequisite for peace.

Gut Shabbos/Shabbat Shalom