

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The revelation at Mount Sinai -- the central episode not only of the parshah of Yitro, but of Judaism as a whole -- was unique in the religious history of mankind. Other faiths (Christianity and Islam) have claimed to be religions of revelation, but in both cases the revelation of which they spoke was to an individual ("the son of G-d", "the prophet of G-d"). Only in Judaism was G-d's self-disclosure not to an individual (a prophet) or a group (the elders) but to an entire nation, young and old, men, women and children, the righteous and not yet righteous alike.

From the very outset, the people of Israel knew something unprecedented had happened at Sinai. As Moses put it, forty years later: "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day G-d created man on earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of G-d speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?" (Deut. 4:32-33).

For the great Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, the significance was primarily epistemological. It created certainty and removed doubt. The authenticity of a revelation experienced by one person could be questioned. One witnessed by millions could not. G-d disclosed His presence in public to remove any possible suspicion that the presence felt, and the voice heard, were not genuine.

Looking however at the history of mankind since those days, it is clear that there was another significance also -- one that had to do not with religious knowledge but with politics. At Sinai a new kind of nation was being formed and a new kind of society -- one that would be an antithesis of Egypt in which the few had power and the many were enslaved. At Sinai, the children of Israel ceased to be a group of individuals and became, for the first time, a body politic: a nation of citizens under the sovereignty of G-d whose written constitution was the Torah and whose mission was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Even today, standard works on the history of political thought trace it back, through Marx, Rousseau and Hobbes to Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics and the Greek city state (Athens in particular) of the fourth century BCE. This is a serious error. To be sure, words

like "democracy" (rule by the people) are Greek in origin. The Greeks were gifted at abstract nouns and systematic thought. However, if we look at the "birth of the modern" -- at figures like Milton, Hobbes and Locke in England, and the founding fathers of America -- the book with which they were in dialogue was not Plato or Aristotle but the Hebrew Bible. Hobbes quotes it 657 times in *The Leviathan* alone. Long before the Greek philosophers, and far more profoundly, at Mount Sinai the concept of a free society was born.

Three things about that moment were to prove crucial. The first is that long before Israel entered the land and acquired their own system of government (first by judges, later by kings), they had entered into an overarching covenant with G-d. That covenant (brit Sinai) set moral limits to the exercise of power. The code we call Torah established for the first time the primacy of right over might. Any king who behaved contrarily to Torah was acting *ultra vires*, and could be challenged. This is the single most important fact about biblical politics.

Democracy on the Greek model always had one fatal weakness. Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill called it "the tyranny of the majority". J. L. Talmon called it "totalitarian democracy." The rule of the majority contains no guarantee of the rights of minorities. As Lord Acton rightly noted, it was this that led to the downfall of Athens: "There was no law superior to that of the state. The lawgiver was above the law." In Judaism, by contrast, prophets were mandated to challenge the authority of the king if he acted against the terms of the Torah. Individuals were empowered to [The covenant at Sinai deserves to be seen as the single greatest step in the long road to a free society.] disobey illegal or immoral orders. For this alone, the covenant at Sinai deserves to be seen as the single greatest step in the long road to a free society.

The second key element lies in the prologue to the covenant. G-d tells Moses: "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel. 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now, if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, you will be My treasured possession, for the whole earth is Mine. You will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...' " Moses tells this to the people, who reply: "We will do everything the Lord has said."

What is the significance of this exchange? It means that until the people had signified their consent,

the revelation could not proceed. There is no legitimate government without the consent of the governed, even if the governor is Creator of heaven and earth. I know of few more radical ideas anywhere. To be sure, there were sages in the Talmudic period who questioned whether the acceptance of the covenant at Sinai was completely free. However, at the heart of Judaism is the idea -- way ahead of its time, and not always fully realised -- that the free G-d desires the free worship of free human beings. G-d, said the rabbis, does not act tyrannically with His creatures.

The third, equally ahead of its time, was that the partners to the covenant were to be "all the people" -- men, women and children. This fact is emphasised later on in the Torah in the mitzvah of Hakhel, the septennial covenant renewal ceremony. The Torah states specifically that the entire people is to be gathered together for this ceremony, "men, women and children." A thousand years later, when Athens experimented with democracy, only a limited section of society had political rights. Women, children, slaves and foreigners were excluded. In Britain, women did not get the vote until the twentieth century. According to the sages, when G-d was about to give the Torah at Sinai, He told Moses to consult first with the women and only then with the men ("thus shall you say to the house of Jacob" -- this means, the women). The Torah, Israel's "constitution of liberty", includes everyone. It is the first moment, by thousands of years, that citizenship is conceived as being universal.

There is much else to be said about the political theory of the Torah (see my *The Politics of Hope*, *The Dignity of Difference*, and *The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah* as well as the important works by Daniel Elazar and Michael Walzer). But one thing is clear. With the revelation at Sinai something unprecedented entered the human horizon. It would take centuries, millennia, before its full implications were understood. Abraham Lincoln said it best when he spoke of "a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." At Sinai, the politics of freedom was born. © 2013 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and *torah.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Lord said to Moses, behold I come to you in the thickness of the cloud' (Exodus 19:9) The most momentous of all biblical experiences - dwarfing the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Re(e)d Sea and perhaps even the creation of the world itself - was the Revelation at Sinai. This was the time when G-d came to Moses "in the thickness of the cloud" and revealed to him the Ten Commandments and much more: According to Rabbeinu Saadya Gaon, the Revelation included the 613 commandments; according to the Maharitz Hayot, the 13 hermeneutic principles of

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biblical interpretation, and according to the first Mishna in Avot, the corpus of the Oral Law.

What actually occurred? Did G-d speak in words that were heard by the Jews at the foot of the mountain? Does G-d have a voice, in the physical sense of a larynx, which admits of speech emanating from the Divine? Or was it the "active intellect" of Moses that "divined" or "kissed" the active intellect of G-d, enabling Moses to understand and communicate the Divine will to the entire assemblage, as suggested by Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed*? The only thing we can say with certainty is that the Sinai encounter miraculously transformed a bedraggled and beaten group of Hebrew slaves into a G-d-enthused and Torah-intoxicated nation. This nation dedicated itself to a concise and exalted moral code that has not been rivaled by any other nation, philosopher, ethicist or theologian in the past 4,000 years. But can we attempt, nevertheless, to describe this numinous, fateful and glorious experience with any precision? At the risk of complicating our understanding even further, permit me to cite a commentary on our portion of Yitro written by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Lerner (1800-1854), the Izhbitzer Rebbe, in his masterful work *Mei Hashiloah*.

The Izhbitzer explains that while the first of the Ten Commandments begins "I am the Lord your G-d," the word used for "I" is not the normal "Ani." The Hebrew word "Anochi," which is used instead, could also be read as "I am like the Lord your G-d." Had it simply stated "I am the Lord your G-d," the implication might be that G-d revealed the totality of His essence at Mount Sinai, precluding the possibility of any further understanding of His words. The use of the word "Anochi" - "I am like the Lord your G-d" - denotes that our understanding of the Revelation is not complete; it is rather an estimate and mere comparison to the total light that is gradually and continuously revealed to us.

The Izhbitzer goes on to write that the very next verse prohibiting idolatrous graven images comes to denigrate - nay, forbid - any manifestation of the Divine that is shaped according to specific and precise dimensions, perfect and complete. No Divine expression can come to a human being in a fixed, unchanging and whole-in-itself fashion. Any such expression must be taken as idolatrous.

Hence whatever one says about the Revelation must include the fact that it was open-ended, unclear

and unspecific; beyond the clear, moral, ethical and theological directions of the Ten Commandments (and even these are open to interpretation throughout the generations).

Hence the Divine Presence always appears in a nebulous cloud and when Moses descended from his encounter with the Divine on Mount Sinai, his face was covered with a mask since the rays of G-d's splendor made it impossible to look directly at Him. Apart from that which was revealed, much more had to remain hidden.

This is the true meaning of the Name of the G-d of Exodus, the Name that is not read the way it is written, the Name that itself is never completely revealed (Exodus 6:2, 3). This is built into the strange and open-ended, imprecise Name which G-d tells Moses to reveal to the Jewish nation: "I shall be what I shall be" (Ex.3:14).

This is the Platonic G-d of becoming, the shadows of the cave striving to come closer and closer to the ideal forms of true reality which always remains beyond human grasp - the elusive and evolving G-d of redemption - rather than the fixed Aristotelian Unmoved Mover of Creation.

This is the nature of an open-ended Revelation that must leave room for history, for human empowerment and input, for an ongoing dialogue between the "image of G-d" in every human being and the divine words that descended from the eternal, ethereal heavenly spheres. This is the Torah whose letter outlines were given at Sinai, but whose proper reading and interpretation continues to develop in every generation.

"Blessed art Thou, O, Lord our G-d, who [continuously] gives us Torah." This is the meaning behind the Talmudic story (Menahot 29b) of Moses who, having ascended to the supernal realms to receive the Torah, finds the Almighty placing crowns atop the sacred letters. G-d explains to him that in future generations a man named Akiva ben Yosef will arise who will derive mounds of new laws from each of those crowns. But when G-d shows him the future and he sees Rabbi Akiva lecturing in his academy, Moses doesn't understand the lessons and the great prophet of the Revelation becomes weak from frustration and despair. Then, when one of the disciples asks Rabbi Akiva for the source of his conclusions, and Rabbi Akiva responds, "The halacha given to Moses at Sinai," Moses feels comforted and fulfilled. © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There are differing opinions as to when exactly Yitro appeared in the camp of the Israelites in the desert. There are those who follow the rabbinic dictum that one cannot infer chronological order from

the juxtaposition of narratives as they appear in the Torah. Rashi definitely adheres to this view in many instances. However Ramban and others maintain that a general chronology of events can correctly be deduced from the order of the narrative portions of the Torah.

According to this latter view, Yitro appears to join the Jewish people before the revelation at Sinai and before the construction of the Mishkan/Tabernacle. This makes his appearance and newly found commitment to Jewish life and Torah values even more remarkable. Yitro is the epitome of the restless, wandering, curious, seeking soul of humans.

According to Midrash, Yitro experimented with all forms and types of worldly faiths and religions before arriving at Moshe's doorstep in the wilderness of Sinai. And, he exclaims that "only now do I know" what I am searching for and where eternal truth and soulful serenity lie.

All humans embark on the same journey as did Yitro. All of us are looking for the ultimate meaning of our lives and what our purpose on earth truly is. Some of us, like Yitro of old, are forced to take many detours and encounter many dead-end paths before finding our road to fulfillment. Unfortunately, there are many who never find their way clear of the maze of society, mores and the distractions that are the roadblocks to our search for our true selves and purpose. But many of us, again like Yitro, are able to fight our way through our previous errors of direction and reach the sanctuary of a Torah life and a moral existence. Yitro stands as a living and eternal example of this great spiritual accomplishment.

For the Jewish people and, in fact, for all humankind, the Lord simplified the matter with the revelation at Sinai of the Ten Commandments, an event that is described in detail in this week's parsha. These Torah rules address all of the challenges of life -- material gain and acquisitions, paganism, falsehoods, generational interaction and respect, sexual probity and family loyalty, a day of rest and spirit and not 24/7 living, honesty and ego-centered jealousy, to name the main categories. In effect the Torah provides for us a shortcut to reach the high road of accomplishment and satisfying purpose in life.

But there are those of us in life that feel themselves smarter and create their own shortcuts in life, avoiding the lessons of the Ten Commandments. The world's prisons are full of such people. The Torah purposefully placed the Ten Commandments in the parsha of the story of Yitro to illustrate to us that the long road that Yitro was forced to travel in life and G-d's shortcut lead to the same place -- to Moshe's tent and to Mount Sinai.

As always the final choice of belief and behavior is left to each one of us individually. Fortunate are those that adhere to Sinai first and foremost without having to initially traverse the entire world of ideas and beliefs to eventually arrive at Sinai where their soul will be

satisfied and their life purpose delineated clearly. © 2013 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Watching Moshe (Moses) judge the Jews from morning to night, Yitro (Jethro), Moshe's father-in-law, offers sound advice. He tells Moshe that if you continue trying to judge everyone, you surely will wear away-it is too difficult a task. Yitro suggests that Moshe appoint other judges, who will share the burden.

In advising Moshe to share judicial responsibility, Yitro insists that lower courts handle less important matters, and matters of greater magnitude would go to Moshe. "And it shall be," Yitro concludes, "that every major (gadol) matter they shall bring to you, but every minor (katan) matter they shall judge themselves." (Exodus 18:22)

Moshe listens to Yitro's advice with one deflection. Rather than dealing exclusively with major matters, Moshe tells Yitro that he will judge the most difficult (kasheh) cases. (Exodus 18:28).

Hatam Sofer notes that Yitro uses the term gadol because he believes that only the more important people, only the large "tycoon" type companies should be judged by Moshe. The less important people, the small corporations, regardless of the complexity of the judicial issue, would automatically come before the lower courts.

Moshe rejects this division insisting that he would deal with the complex questions, no matter where they come from-the lower courts would handle the easier questions, no matter their origin.

Here the Torah accentuates the importance of every individual problem. No matter how low one is seen by society, his or her problem is of great importance. For this reason, depending upon the complexity of the question, every person can potentially come before Moshe.

It is ironic that Moshe teaches his father-in-law this particular lesson. According to some commentators, Yitro converts to Judaism. (See Ramban, Numbers 10:29) Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for the convert to be treated as a secondary citizen. Moshe informs Yitro that no one's claims would be overlooked, everyone, including Yitro, is given equal attention.

An important message surfaces: The test of a community, is not the way it treats the most powerful. Rather it is the way it treats the little people, those whose problems, on the surface, seem to be insignificant.

As much as Yitro teaches Moshe by proposing the division of judicial responsibilities between higher

and lower courts, Moshe teaches Yitro that even the lowly, even those who seem to be insignificant, are entitled to supreme consideration. © 2013 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "I, Your father-in-law, Yitro, am coming to you; and your wife and her two sons with her (are coming)" (Exodus 18:6).

Rashi, the great commentator, cites the Mechilta, a Midrash, which tells us that Yitro sent the following message to Moshe: "If you do not want to come to greet me, come for the sake of your wife; and if you do not want to come to greet your wife, come for the sake of her two sons." Why would Yitro send what seems to be a rather bizarre message?

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv clarifies for us that Yitro was a great philosopher; a sincere and honest seeker of truth. He had experimented with every available form of idolatry, and attained the awareness that each was void and meaningless. Finally, he embraced Judaism. However, before he studied Torah, he did not know that it was possible to attain a high spiritual level and still be a part of this world involved with one's fellow human beings.

Therefore, Yitro's message to Moshe was a hint that even though "You might have reached the apex of spirituality, you must nevertheless fulfill your social obligations."

The Torah teaches that one cannot be spiritual if he does not fulfill his obligations to the Almighty, himself and his fellow man. Life is an integrated whole; one must strive to grow in all areas for true spirituality. *based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin*
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RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals to us the unlimited potential of the Jewish soul. The prophet Yeshaya shares with us his astounding vision of Hashem's throne of glory. He says, "Fiery angels stand before Hashem in service... They call to one another and say in unison, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is Hashem the master of the legions whose glory fills the entire world'" (6:2,3) Yeshaya saw one of the loftiest visions ever to be seen by man and responded in the following manner, "Woe to me for I remained silent because I am a man of impure lips...and my eyes beheld the Divine Presence itself." (6:5) This verse displays Yeshaya's humble response to his awesome experience feeling unworthy of catching the faintest glimpse of Hashem's magnificent glory. Yet, Yeshaya was troubled by his

personal silence during those lofty moments unable to participate in the angels' glorious praise. (see Radak ad loc) He attributed this to his personal imperfection and inadequacy. Apparently, his speech was impure and sinful and rendered him unworthy of uttering a sound in Hashem's holy presence.

The vision continued and Hashem commanded one of His fiery angels to deliver Yeshaya a burning coal. Yeshaya said, "And with tongs the angel removed the coal from the altar, touched my mouth and said...'Your sin is removed and your error forgiven.'" (6:6,7) Immediately following this, Hashem asked, "Whom shall I send?" and Yeshaya responded and said, "Here I am; send me." (6:8) Yeshaya's awesome vision together with his humble response initiated him into prophecy. After this initial cleansing, he became worthy of transmitting Hashem's penetrating message to His people. In addition, Yeshaya's cleansing process allowed him to join the ranks of the angels and converse with Hashem in His actual presence. (Radak ad loc)

This intriguing incident suggests the unthinkable, that man can rise to the lofty status of Heavenly beings. Although Yeshaya was privy to the inner most levels of spirituality he sensed his mortality and felt unworthy of associating with such elevated levels of holiness. Alas, he was a human being and not a spiritual entity. He identified with impurity and sin and didn't deserve to see such revelations or sing Heavenly praises. Hashem revealed Yeshaya that he had the potential and after minor refinement he would personally attain those lofty levels. Interestingly, when we reflect upon this incident we tend to side with Yeshaya. We also wonder, "What position does an impure mortal occupy amongst Heavenly angels?" How could man even consider participating in Heavenly praise? Although angels reflect Hashem's glory what can be said about man?!

The answer to these is found in the essential discussion of mortality between Hashem and the angels. The Sages relate that the angels complained to Hashem when He chose to share His precious Torah with His people. They argued, "Your glory (Your Torah) should remain among the Heavenly beings. They are holy and Your Torah is holy, they are pure and Your Torah is pure and they are everlasting and Your Torah is also." Hashem responded that the Torah could not remain amongst them because they are perfect spiritual beings with no mortality, impurity or illness. Hashem's true glory would ultimately come from man plagued by impurity and mortality. (Midrash Shochar Tov 8) This response also troubles us because, in truth, we side with the angels. Isn't perfect fulfillment of Hashem's will the greatest tribute to His honor? What could be more glorious than the angels' purest praises? How could mortality and impurity serve as positive factors in Hashem's ultimate glory?

The Sages' words in this week's haftarah provide deep insight into this. Rashi reflects upon the burning coal and notes that the fiery angel held it with tongs. This suggests that the coal's heat was too intense for an angel to hold. Surprisingly however, Yeshaya's lip endured direct contact with the coal without being harmed. Rashi quotes the Sages who explain a human being's potential truly surpasses the status of an angel. They support this with a verse in Yoel that says, "For His camp is massive but mightier are those who do His word." (Yoel 2:11) Chazal interpret Hashem's massive camp to refer to His angels and those who fulfill His word to refer to His prophets. This teaches us that, in truth, a devout prophet is greater than an angel. (Rashi 6:7 from Midrash Tanchuma)

The upshot of this is based on man's equal ability to obey or disobey Hashem. An angel's clear perception of Hashem basically leaves no room for anything but perfect behavior. Man, on the other hand, is plagued by impurity, weakness and temptation. His perfect adherence to Hashem's will is undoubtedly true testimony to Hashem's greatness. Man's absolute negation for Hashem's sake displays the true power of His word. The spiritual ascent of a prophet proves that free thinking man can be so subservient to his master that he transcends all physical barriers. Maimonides explains that the basic qualifications of any prophet demand full control over all passions and emotions never succumbing to any physical desire. After achieving this he continues to detach himself from worldly matters totally focusing his mind on spirituality while training it never to stray into frivolity or vanity. He continues developing until his mind becomes transfixed on Hashem's innermost secrets thus deeming one worthy of Hashem's contact. During prophecy one realizes that he transcended all human barriers and joined the ranks of the angels. (see Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 7:1) This incredible accomplishment by man supersedes indeed the Heavenly angels even during their loftiest praises to Hashem. Man, unlike angel, begins far from perfect but can actually refine himself and attain the spirituality of the Heavenly hosts themselves.

We now understand that the human being sings the "praise of all praises" through his enormous efforts overcoming his human imperfections. Yeshaya originally felt unworthy of participating in the Heavenly display of Hashem's glory due to his human limitations and imperfections. Hashem responded that his conscious decision to totally subject himself to Hashem's will surpassed the Heavenly praise. Once Yeshaya's personal speech was totally cleansed he was worthy of participating in the loftiest of all praises. He could now speak in Hashem's presence and even rise above the angels and display, through his total subservience, Hashem's greatest honor.

This lesson has great bearing on our times. Chafetz Chaim raises the classic concern how the latest generations consider meriting the advent of Mashiach? If previous generations who were undoubtedly more pious than ours did not merit Mashiach how could our shameful generation merit him? Chafetz Chaim answers that, on the contrary, no generation ever qualified for Mashiach as much as ours. He explains that in previous times Mitzva observance was, basically, a foregone conclusion. It did not require endless self sacrifice and had therefore had relatively limited value. In our days, however, foreign influences are so rampant that even basic Mitzva observance requires tremendous devotion and sacrifice. In present times, we may add, morality has fallen so low that attaining any level of purity and self negation is a tremendous accomplishment. In this light every mitzva has such great value that we, above all, display Hashem's greatest glory. Hashem undoubtedly tells His angels, "Look at My people who manage to remain moral and pure even in their corrupt and free thinking environment." "Can anyone bring Me greater glory than them?!" © 2013 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd Yisro the father-in-law of Moshe came, along with [Moshe's] sons and his wife, to Moshe, to the desert" (Sh'mos 18:5). "We [already] know that they were in the desert (so there is no need for the Torah to tell us this); rather, the Torah is coming to praise Yisro, who was residing in a position of honor and [yet] his heart moved him to go out to the desert, a barren place, in order to hear words of Torah" (Rashi). The "position of honor" that Yisro enjoyed would seem to be his being a leader of his country, Midyan, a position ("priest of Midyan") referred to earlier (2:16, 3:1). However, Rashi (2:16), based on Sh'mos Rabbah (1:32), tells us that although Yisro had been the religious leader in Midyan, he gave it up because he no longer shared their beliefs, at which point he was excommunicated. This was the reason his daughters tended his flocks, as no one else was willing to do it. How could Yisro be praised for coming to the desert even though he was "residing in a position of honor" if he was no longer in that position?

I discussed this issue a few years ago (<http://rabbidmk.posterous.com/parashas-yisro-5771>), including mentioning the possibility that "despite being excommunicated by the establishment in Midyan, Yisro had his own support group, his own power base" because "his ideas (i.e. the futility of idol worship and the truth about the One True G-d) were attractive enough to start a counter-culture in Midyan." If so, the "position of honor" he abandoned would have been being the leader of this movement. I rejected this possibility because if Yisro still had any supporters, he

wouldn't have had to send his daughters to water his flocks. I have also discussed (<http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5766/shmot.pdf>) why the Torah still referred to Yisro as "the priest of Midyan" (when Moshe was tending his flocks) if he was no longer their religious leader. I would like to revisit both of these issues, and as well as a third issue regarding Midyan.

In "Recalling the Covenant," Rabbi Moshe Shamah writes the following (pg. 352): "Some modern scholars claim to have uncovered evidence that at a time roughly contemporaneous with *Mattan Torah*, in the region of Midian, which was a loose confederation of diverse tribes, a nomadic tribe was developing a religious system without paganism. If so, we may assume that Jethro, as their priest, was one of their leaders and perhaps the preserver of the Abrahamic tradition." (Rabbi Shamah had pointed out that Midyan was one of the sons Avraham had with Keturah, see B'raishis 25:2-6, adding that "some of the patriarch's 'gifts' that he presented to his sons were likely of a spiritual and educational nature.") Although Chazal saying that Yisro had worshipped idols until he realized the folly of his ways precludes his being "the preserver of the Abrahamic tradition," he would have likely played a major role in one of the tribes developing a monotheistic religious system. When Moshe joined the family, he would have helped his father-in-law further develop this monotheistic religious community in Midyan, so that by the time he encountered G-d at the burning bush, Yisro could have regained his status as a "priest of Midyan." Although when Moshe first met Yisro no one would even tend his flocks, over time Yisro's religious community had grown, and Yisro's position was once again a "position of honor." It was leaving the comforts of home, including his regained position of honor, that the Torah praised by pointing out that Yisro came out to the desert to hear words of Torah. (It is also quite praiseworthy that he did not let his position of leadership prevent him from admitting, by implication, that he too could learn much more, and was open to further growth.)

There is another issue that can be explained if Midyan was comprised of "a loose confederation of diverse tribes." Midyan played a major role in tempting the Children of Israel to sin (Bamidbar 25:16-18). When G-d commanded Moshe to take vengeance against them (Bamidbar 31:1-12), the implication is that Midyan was completely wiped out (see 31:7 and 31:17). Yet, they are still very much alive and kicking and causing trouble over 200 years later (see Shoftim 6:1-6). Although two centuries is certainly enough time for a few escapees to rebuild themselves and become a formidable foe once again (see Daas Sofrim), if there were separate tribes of Midyanites, it could have been one of the tribes that tempted the Children of Israel -- and were subsequently wiped out -- while other tribes (those not involved at Baal P'or) survived. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

“Yisro, the priest of Midian, Moshe's father-in-law, heard of all that G-d had done for Moshe and Israel His people...” (Shemos 14:1-2)

Life takes place on many levels. We know that even from our own personal lives when the things we say or do can have different levels of meaning, one for the people we are addressing, and one for ourselves. Sometimes it is just plain deception, sometimes it is necessary deception, and sometimes it is just due to the limitations of the perceivers.

G-d has no problem sharing many of His secrets with mankind, which is why He gave the Torah 70 facets, and made it so that it can be understood on all four levels of Pardes: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod, or simply, through hints, as a result of exegesis, or Kabbalistically.

You have to pity the person who doesn't know this, or doesn't believe it, especially when, as a result, they reject Torah. But then again, sometimes this is the choice they make, especially when their desire to integrate into the gentile world is much greater than their desire to integrate into the World-to-Come.

As I have mentioned before, I have taken to reading about Jewish history once again. I love history in general, and Jewish history in particular, and I know that it is extremely important for us to know how we got to where we are today. A ship without knowledge of its past, even if it has knowledge of its future, is a ship lost at sea.

In my reading, I am up to the period of emancipation which occurred in the 1800s. With new found acceptance into their gentile host societies, and in spite of prevailing anti-Semitism, many Jews used the opportunity to jump ship and either leave Judaism altogether, or rewrite it to suit their whims. Thus was born Reform Judaism, and all of its innovations to make it, in their own words, match the Christian approach to religion.

Now Orthodox Judaism not only had to fight the enemy from without, but it also had to fight an enemy from within. For, not only did Reform leaders turn their backs on their three-millennia-old heritage and their portions in the World-to-Come, they went on the offensive and insisted that the rest of the Jewish people do the same. Those who did not they condemned and often in the ugliest of ways, suggesting to many objective onlookers that what they felt was more self-hate than self-righteousness.

The story of Yisro is about the opposite approach. It is about how a man had the courage to reject the prevalent and accepted religions of his day to join one that was not. It is the account of a person whose desire for truth was greater than his desire for comfort and acceptance, because there was a good

chance that he would achieve neither on both sides of the line. Just ask many ba'alei teshuvah, who often have difficulty fitting in well to communities in which its members grew up religious. Not only this, but basic skills which FFBs (Frum From Birth) developed long ago must be leaned anew by people becoming religious at the age of 20 and upward. Some people don't even take on Torah until their 60s or later!

All of a sudden, people who had grown together with peers their own age for decades, advancing in skills as their peers did, which allowed for the development of their self-confidence, have to start from scratch with people who already have decades of experience on them. This often leads to moments of embarrassment and has to damage self-confidence.

Yet ba'alei teshuvah persevere. What's a little embarrassment from time-to-time in light of the Ultimate Truth? Losing self-confidence can simply count as just one of those sacrifices you make to throw your lot in with the Creator of everything. It has to result in increased reward in the World-to-Come.

There is also compensation. It is ironic that many of the improvements made to the Torah world over the last couple of decades have been the result of the expertise of many ba'alei teshuvah. While secular, they picked up skill sets that they would not have gained had they grown up religious, which often come in handy on behalf of Torah.

Picking up such skills, no matter how valuable, is never justification for turning one's back on Torah. But returning to Torah is justification enough to make use of skills gained and developed while secular, provided making use of such skills does not continue to compromise one's commitment to Torah. And, where it has made a positive difference, the religious world has looked on with admiration and appreciation.

Nevertheless, leaving the world in which one grew up for a new one that is filled with uncertainty is never easy, especially if more than likely one will have to fight for some level of acceptance. You have to be a real truth-seeker to do that, and apparently, that is what Yisro was.

On the other hand, he had a little help from his friends. According to the Arizal, the day Moshe Rabbeinu killed the Egyptian back in Egypt, Yisro got a burst of spiritual inspiration that made him jump ship from his home society in preparation for joining that of the future Torah nation.

What was the connection between the two events? The Arizal revealed that both the Egyptian and Yisro received a part of Kayin's soul, the Egyptian, a bad part, and Yisro, a good part. However, when Moshe Rabbeinu killed the Egyptian for beating a Jew, using a Name of G-d to do so, the bad part of Kayin's soul became rectified and jumped to Yisro, spiritually enhancing him.

All of a sudden, Yisro became inspired to go beyond the spiritual limitations of his society and was

primed to join Moshe Rabbeinu, and the rest of the nation. Considering that Moshe Rabbeinu was the reincarnation of Hevel, Kayin's brother, Yisro and his son-in-law had much more in common than Moshe's wife and children.

All of a sudden, Yisro does not seem as heroic as the Torah makes him out to be. Rather, it seems that his spiritual past and present kind of compelled him to take the steps he did in the name of the real G-d's truth. If so, then what is to be learned by anyone else who might consider becoming a ba'al teshuvah himself?

As the Talmud points, blessing has a habit of attaching itself to the blessed. Money goes to money, wisdom goes to the wise, and good souls go to good souls. And, not every good soul starts off good; some become good as a result of personal tikun, by working on ones-self to become a better person. Ultimately, all G-d wants to see from us, to help us excel in ways we might otherwise not be able to, is a desire on our part to make the positive change. Eisav was evil, but by hunting for food for his father, he would have created a spiritual base to which the blessing his father had planned to give him, could have taken hold.

Yisro, on his own, created such a base, to which G-d sent all the blessing that allowed him to succeed in ways he could never have on his own. The same thing is true of every potential ba'al teshuvah, even the ones born religious from birth; it's about creating a spiritual base to which G-d can attach all kinds of Heavenly assistance to allow us to achieve goals we might have thought we could only dream of achieving. © 2013 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we read the parsha of Yisro. "And Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that Elokim had done for Moshe and Yisroel his nation. [18:1]"

What did Yisro hear that prompted him to come? He heard about the splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek. [Rashi]

The Ramban brings the two opinions of when this episode with Yisro took place either before or after matan Torah {the giving of the Torah}. He then asks, according to the opinion that Yisro arrived after matan Torah, why wasn't that earthshattering event a cause of his coming? If we were to look for an event that prompted Yisro to come and join the Jewish Nation, it would seem that matan Torah would figure far more prominently than either the splitting of the sea or the war against Amalek!

Furthermore, what was so inspiring about the war against Amalek? Wasn't it the victory in the war that would have inspired Yisro to come?

Yisro was aware of the great things that Hashem was doing for the Jewish Nation. However, that alone wasn't enough to motivate him to convert.

However, the Darchei Mussar writes, when Yisro heard that Amalek had attacked Bnei Yisroel {the Children of Israel}, he then had a change of heart.

Amalek heard of all the miracles including the splitting of the sea and had chosen to blind themselves to those facts and to attack Bnei Yisroel. Those incredible events did not move them. This tendency of Amalek to avoid and deny the obvious when it went against their agenda really shook up Yisro. He recognized the bankruptcy of such a nation and decided that he had to remove himself from such a group. He moved to join the nation that was diametrically opposed to Amalek. It was the war, not the victory, that made him come.

The contradiction between what is known and what is done can be so glaring by others and so elusive by oneself.

Rav Sholom Schwadron, zt"l, the Maggid of Yerushalayim, would tell a story of a father who complained bitterly that his son had joined a yeshiva {institution of advanced Jewish study}. "How could he do this to me?" he lamented. "My parents were religious and I was smart enough to move away from all of that. I brought my son up in a totally irreligious manner and now, of all places, he decides to go to a yeshiva?! Why can't he be like me?" he thundered to the Rosh {Dean of the} Yeshiva.

The Rosh Yeshiva turned to the father and said, "But he has! He's grown up just like you. You disregarded what your parents taught you and he disregarded what you taught him. Your boy is just like you..."

The method of a Maggid was to tell stories that would make a person laugh at the follies of others and then, with their guard down, make them confront their own very similar follies.

When we contemplate all of the miracles that Hashem has done and is still doing for Bnei Yisroel, it behooves each person to hear and to come with a renewed dedication and enthusiasm. © 2013 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

