

PARASHAH: Yitro (Jethro)
ADDRESS: Sh'mot (Exodus) 18:1-20:23 (26)
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the **Complete Jewish Bible**, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

Yitro is the name of Moshe's father-in-law. As such, he is the first character named in this week's portion, giving the parashah its title. The commentary this week proves to be lengthy; printing is suggested if you have that luxury. As I stated before, one of the primary reasons that HaShem delighted in miraculously delivering the people from Egypt was so that he could demonstrate his mighty power in all of the earth. In the opening few verses of **Parashat Yitro**, we see that this powerful deliverance has already reached the ears of the priest of Midyan.

Moshe is a proven leader of the people. As an eighty year-old man, he and his brother became the instruments in leading the greatest "freedom march" in Isra'el's history. But now, as the "dust is beginning to settle" the people find the need to express their individual concerns to this humble man of God. Moshe finds himself hearing matter after matter, day in and day out. This displeases Yitro who wisely suggests that he delegate his God-given authority to others able and willing to provide counsel for the people. Here we catch a glimpse of the utter "teachable-ness" of the man Moshe. Rather than resist Yitro's request, Moshe humbly accepts his advice.

Matan Torah and Symbolic Traditions

The bulk of this week's portion is given over to the listing of what is known in Judaism as "Asarat HaD'varim," or the "Ten Words." In Sh'mot chapter 20, an enumeration of "ten commandments" has been given. Interestingly enough, before HaShem gives out these commands, he instructs Moshe to have the

people prepare themselves for two days, washing their clothing and abstaining from sexual relations, all for the purpose of displaying his manifest power in the sight of his newly chosen people.

The first Chief Rabbi of the State of Isra'el (he was appointed before it reached statehood), Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) has some food for thought on this spectacular event of the giving of God's Word (Matan Torah) to the people:

On what day was the Torah given to the Jewish people? The majority opinion is that the Jews received the Torah on the sixth of Sivan. R. Yossi, however, disagreed; he said the Torah was given on the seventh of Sivan. [Shabbat 86]

What is the essence of this disagreement? What does it matter if "Matan Torah" occurred on the sixth or the seventh of Sivan?

Rav Kook writes that this difference of opinion revolves around which aspect of the fundamental purpose of the Torah should be stressed. The sixth and seventh of Sivan relate to the very first sixth and seventh days in history - the sixth and seventh day of Creation.

Most of the Sages preferred to associate the Sinaitic Revelation to the sixth day of Creation. That was the day that God created man. The primary value of the Torah, the Sages emphasized, is as a completion of that act of Creation, the birth of man. The purpose of Torah is to perfect man, to recreate him in a new, pure form.

R. Yossi, on the other hand, chose to stress the final goal of the Torah. For after the Torah makes its mark on the human soul, after the ideals of the Torah are internalized in his heart, it will take root into the innermost soul of Creation, uplifting and refining the entire universe.

In terms of this ultimate goal of the Torah, it is fitting that it be revealed to the world on the seventh day, the concluding day of Creation. In the seventh day, the Torah is linked to the day when Creation was completed - the Sabbath, the day of ultimate perfection and rest.¹

The themes surrounding the giving of the Torah, embodied in the Ten Words, is one of the most—if not the most—significant events in the history of the offspring of Avraham. Surely, it carries the most impact, even for Jewish folks today. For it is here, that HaShem symbolically “takes to himself to a bride.” Let's examine a few of the symbols.

¹ Ayn Aya IV:169

Let's Get Married!

In traditional Jewish thought, a ritual immersion bath, known as a "mikveh" precedes the actual marriage ceremony. In this ritual, the bride immersed herself completely into a pool of water, symbolically cleansing all impurities. She then came up out of the water to meet her husband. The journey of the people through the waters of the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) serves as the symbol of the mikveh in Jewish thought. To be sure, the "mikveh" took place before the marriage ceremony here at Mount Sinai.

In traditional Jewish thought, a marriage involved a ceremony that takes place under a canopy. In modern Jewish weddings, this canopy, called a "chuppah" is the large prayer shawl (tallit) owned by the groom. In Sh'mot 19:17, the Torah tells us that when Moshe brought the people out to hear the thunderous voice of HaShem, that they stood at the "base" of the mountain. The Hebrew words translated as "base of the mountain," support a translation that curiously would read "underneath the mountain!" How on earth could anyone stand "underneath" a mountain? What the text could be hinting at (I'm not trying to be dogmatic here) is that some sort of extremity of the mountain may have served for the people to stand near or under. This would probably look like a cliff or overhang of some sort. On the other hand, it is also possible that a miracle took place that day, and that a part of the mountain actually did take the shape of a "covering," allowing the people to assemble underneath. The point is, the Hebrew of the above-mentioned verse certainly supports the use of the word "underneath" in proximity to the mount, even though that stretches the limits of our understanding of human language.

In traditional Jewish thought, a marriage is also certified by a wedding contract, known as a "ketubah" (say "keh-too-bah"). This legally binding document is agreed upon by both parties, and serves as a visible reminder to all that this bride belongs to this groom and vice-versa. The Hebrew word "ketubah" possesses the root word "katav," which means, "to write." The Torah tells us in 19:3-8 that HaShem delivered them out of the bondage of the Egyptians so that he might enter into a special kind of relationship with them. This relationship would involve them adhering to the covenant that HaShem already made with their forefathers some 430 years prior to this. In this manner, they would become HaShem's most peculiar treasure among all of the peoples of the earth! What was the people's response in 19:8?

"All the people answered as one, "Everything ADONAI has said, we will do.""

This is amazing when it becomes apparent that HaShem hadn't even spelled out the conditions of this contract yet! But what was the contract? Where was the ketubah? The answer is obvious. The Torah is the ketubah, acting as a marriage contract between the groom (HaShem) and his bride (Isra'el)! Let's get

our first look at this wonderful "marriage contract" of theirs. I want to examine each one of the Ten Words and then briefly comment on the meaning of each one. The traditional enumeration of these mitzvot (commandments) is slightly different in a Jewish bible than in your average English translation used by many Christians. I will be using the Jewish outline. I will begin each command with the Hebrew letter used in Hebrew bibles to signify the corresponding number (i.e. "Aleph"=1, "Bet"=2, "Gimmel"=3, etc). My comments will follow in brackets "[]."

Asarat HaD'varim

Sh'mot 20:1:

"Then God said all these words:

ALEPH (verse 1) – "I am ADONAI your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the abode of slavery. [This correctly identifies the one who did the delivering, in respect to the ones who were delivered, as well as, establishes the location of the delivery. Authority is clearly the key here. In other words, there is no one else BUT ADONAI, and it is indeed HE who has freed YOU from Egypt.

Our Torah teacher of blessed memory, Nechama Leibowitz, adds insight by providing a significant quote from the brilliant sage Ibn Ezra. Here is the relevant citation from Ibn Ezra:

R. Judah Halevi, may he rest in honour asked me; Why did the text read: "I the Lord am thy God who brought thee out of the Land of Egypt" and not: "who made heaven and earth and made you too"? This was my answer to him. Know that not everyone is capable of attaining the same level of faith. Some believe in God on the basis of hearsay. Those in authority tell them it is written in the Torah given by God to Moses. Should a heretic question their faith they are dumbfounded because they don't know what to answer. One who aspires to master the sciences which are stepping stones to the desired goal will see the work of God in the animal, mineral and vegetable around him, in the human body, the workings of every limb... he will master astronomy and the laws of nature. The ways of God will lead the philosopher to a knowledge of God. This is what Moses meant when he said: "Make known to me Thy ways and I shall know thee" (Ex. 33, 13). The Almighty stated in the first commandment: "I the Lord am thy God." Only a person of deep intellectual attainments will be satisfied with this formulation. The message of "I (am) the Lord" will satisfy the intellectual elite of any nation.

"Now God had performed signs and wonders in Egypt till He brought them out from there to become their God. Thus said Moses (Deut. 4, 34): "Has God tried to take one nation from another." In other words, God did for

Israel what He did for no other people. Moses referred to the impact of the miracles the Almighty performed in Egypt when he stated (4, 35): "You were made to see that you might know that the Lord He is God." Everyone saw them—both the scholar and the laymen, old and young. He also added to the impact through the revelation of Sinai when they heard the voice of God (4, 36) "From the heavens did He cause thee to hear His voice, to instruct thee."

"Finally he referred to the absolute conviction that there is no God besides Him, to be attained by the believer through clear proofs; "know this day and keep in mind that the Lord He is God, there is no other." "I the Lord" was meant for the intellectual: "who brought thee out" for the non-intellectual."]

BET (verses 3-6) – “You are to have no other gods before me. You are not to make for yourselves a carved image or any kind of representation of anything in heaven above, on the earth beneath or in the water below the shoreline. You are not to bow down to them or serve them; for I, ADONAI your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but displaying grace to the thousandth generation of those who love me and obey my mitzvot. [Continues the authority established in mitzvah **ALEPH**. As their only true God, the people were expressly forbidden to allow another god to occupy the central place in their lives. Such a replacement was identified as idolatry. This idolatry could take the form of another god, spiritually, or it could literally take form itself. Any man-made form or likeness of the creation of HaShem, used for the purpose of adoration or worship, was to be counted as an idol, and thus, forbidden. Such disobedience warranted the punishment of HaShem, even down to the children of the parents committing the idolatrous act, but this was not judgment. We must be careful not to confuse the two. HaShem is interested in restoration and blessing, which is why he only visited the iniquity to the 3rd and 4th generation, yet, graciously granted his favor to the thousandth generation of those whose hearts remained pure]

GIMMEL (verse 7) – “You are not to use lightly the name of ADONAI your God, because ADONAI will not leave unpunished someone who uses his name lightly. [The Hebrew word translated as “lightly” is “shahv,” and comes from a root word meaning “desolate,” “empty,” “false,” or “worthless.” Upon examination of this word, we can deduce that it is not referring to what we call in modern language “swearing” or “cussing.” Rather, the understanding is that the Holy Name of HaShem is to be used with all of the reverence and respect that it is due. For, as it has remained fundamentally true in Judaism, the name is not just a title, but an embodiment of the character of an individual. To make God’s name desolate, or empty, is an affront on God himself]

DALET (verses 8-11) – “Remember the day, Shabbat, to set it apart for God. You have six days to labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Shabbat for ADONAI your God. On it, you are not to do any kind of work—not you, your son or your daughter, not your male or female slave, not your livestock, and not the foreigner staying with you inside the gates to your property. For in six days, ADONAI made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. This is why ADONAI blessed the day, Shabbat, and separated it for himself. [It is impossible to overemphasize this particular mitzvah. The seventh day rest shares many different functions within the Torah. As such, it carries with it many fundamental truths that are beyond the scope of our current study. Here, however, HaShem emphasizes the role of himself as the “Creator of the world,” using the Shabbat as the “signature” of his creative genius. Because HaShem ceased his labor on the seventh day, his creation was to also cease from their labors. Spiritually, this speaks to our position as sons and daughters in Messiah. Before we came to be sons and daughters, we “labored” to become acceptable in the sight of ADONAI. But once we placed our trusting faithfulness in Messiah Yeshua’s atonement, we “ceased” to labor! We now “rest” in the finished work that he freely accomplished on our behalf]

HEH (verse 12) – “Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land which ADONAI your God is giving you. [This is the first mitzvah that carries a promise along with it. While it is not made apparent here why honoring our parents—the mitzvah literally speaks to those directly involved in this covenant—would somehow grant us long life in the Land—of Isra’el—the moral implications certainly carry enough weight for us to become obedient to this mitzvah without question. Obviously, by virtue of being our parents, they are deserving of our honor and respect]

VAV (verse 13) – “Do not murder. [This mitzvah is to be taken literally. Blatant disregard for human—or animal—life was to be considered murder. War, self-defense, accidental death, or ritual slaughter is not to be counted in this same category. This mitzvah could also be understood figuratively, when the topic is our everyday speech. The tongue can just as easily and effectively “murder” an individual, as the sword can]

TZAYIN (verse 14) – “Do not commit adultery. [This mitzvah speaks first to the literal sexual act of joining to one who is not your spouse by marriage. Spiritually, it speaks of the act of following another god. As such, it once again emphasizes the command given in **BET** above. It is fitting that as the seventh mitzvah, it was the very one that, spiritually, Isra’el would have the hardest time keeping. The violation of this command severs a viable relationship between a husband and his wife.

Isra'el's future adultery would serve to have the same effect between she and her husband HaShem]

CHET (verse 15) – “Do not steal. [Self explanatory. If it doesn't belong to you, don't take it as your personal possession. Do not rob another individual of his or her personal blessings]

TEYT (verse 16) – “Do not give false evidence against your neighbor. [Don't lie; don't be misleading. Establishing a system of justice and honesty has always been a priority with HaShem. Giving false reports degrades that judicial system. As such, our honesty one with another is to be a direct reflection of the pure character and honest nature of the Unique God that we serve]

YUD (verse 17) – “Do not covet your neighbor's house; do not covet your neighbor's wife, his male or female slave, his ox, his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” [Actually, this could serve as a precursor to mitzvah **CHET** above. If you do not harbor covetousness in your heart, you will not be prone to steal that which is not yours, in an effort to satisfy your lust. The delineation of possessions shows that from the greatest to the smallest of these things, your neighbor owns them, and you are not to desire them as your own]

Concluding Words (pun intended)

This concludes the giving of the Ten Words. The next verse explains that all of the people experienced the thunder, the lightning, the sound of the shofar (ram's horn), and the mountain smoking.

Again Rav Kook lends an elucidation to this rather unusual phenomenon:

"And all the people saw the sounds... " (Ex. 20:15)

The Midrash calls our attention to an amazing aspect of the Sinaitic revelation: the Jewish people were able to see what is normally only heard. What does this mean?

At their source, sound and sight are united. Only in our limited, physical world, in this "alma deperuda" (world of separation), are these phenomena disconnected and detached. It is similar to our perception of lightning and thunder, which become increasingly separated from one another as the observer is more distanced from the source.

If we are bound to the present, and can view the universe only through the temporal, material framework, then we will always perceive this divide between sight and sound. The prophetic vision at Mount Sinai, however,

granted the people the unique perspective of one standing near the source of Creation. At that level, they witnessed the underlying unity of the universe. They were capable of seeing sounds and hearing sights. God's revelation at Sinai was registered by all their senses simultaneously, as a single, undivided perception.²

As an interesting side note concerning this experience, the rabbis figure that the giving of the Torah here occurred on the same date as the (future) festival of Shavu'ot (Pentecost). Here is what I've explained in an earlier teaching concerning these two events:

"Historically, the rabbis figure the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai to have occurred on [Shavu'ot], that is, in the third month after Am Yisra'el came out of Egypt. Actually, the exact date of this familiar encounter, recorded for us in the book of Exodus, is not explicitly stated; the chronological evidence is convincing, however. At any rate, the author of the book of Acts does testify of the precise timing of the festival of Shavu'ot, and he specifically relates this festival to the pouring out of the Ruach HaKodesh, that is, the Holy Spirit, unto the believers gathered there in Jerusalem.

"Now the display of the tongues of fire and the presence of great sounds is reminiscent of the Sinai encounter. The rabbis also teach that when HaShem presented the Torah to the people, that it went forth in a multiple of fiery substance, inviting each individual Jew to accept the command to follow the whole of the Torah. The account in Acts describes the tongues of fire alighting themselves upon each person. In the Sinai delivery of the Torah, the account says "thunders and lightnings..." (KJV). The actual Hebrew word rendered lightnings is "voices!" This strengthens the connection to the Acts account, with voices being heard."³

Our parashah closes with HaShem reaffirming the prohibition against idolatry, and the fashioning of any type of inanimate shape of any sort. It is ironic that the very first communal sin that the people would participate in would be the making of a golden calf (coming up in Sh'mot chapter 32). "Everything ADONAI has said, we will do (?)" Soon we will recognize the folly of this premature statement. The dynamic, however, is usually the same with us today. In our over-zealousness to do the LORD's bidding, we usually end up committing the very act that we vow that we won't do! Thank goodness for his forgiveness!

Our sin nature makes us prone to disobedience. The Torah of HaShem serves to remind us of how short we fall, when we try to measure up to God's righteousness. While it is true that no one alive could have ever kept all of the

² Moadei HaRiyah p. 491

³ Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, *Shavu'ot* (Tetze Torah Ministries, 2006), p. 10

commandments of God, it is also true that HaShem never expected anyone to be able to! The Torah doesn't demand perfection, else, there would be no need of the upcoming details concerning sacrifices for sin. What the Torah expects from its followers is genuine trusting faithfulness to the giver of the Torah, who is the Holy One of Isra'el! Today, that implies placing one's complete trust in his Only, Unique Son Yeshua!

The Torah is a document of grace, not "Law." We need to begin to understand that this is the true nature and function of the Torah. Translator David H. Stern, in his Complete Jewish Bible stated it succinctly when he explained,

"For the goal at which the Torah aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts." (Romans 10:4)

The closing blessing is as follows:

***"Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-'Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v'chay-yeh o'lam nata-b'tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn."***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

"Shabbat Shalom!"

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