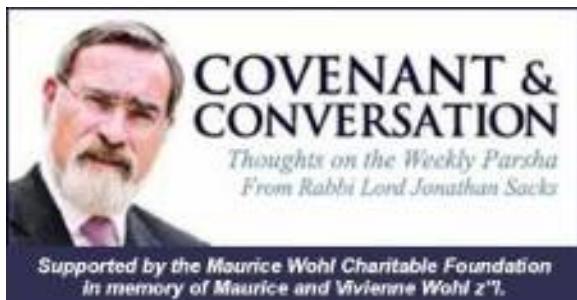


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## On Leadership: A Nation of Leaders

This week's parsha consists of two episodes that seem to be a study in contrasts. In the first, in chapter 18, Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, a Midianite priest, gives Moses his first lesson in leadership. In the second, the prime mover is God himself who, at Mount Sinai, makes a covenant with the Israelites in an unprecedented and unrepeatable epiphany. For the first and only time in history God appears to an entire people, making a covenant with them and giving them the world's most famous brief code of ethics, the Ten Commandments.

What can there be in common between the practical advice of a Midianite and the timeless words of revelation itself? There is an intended contrast and it is an important one. The forms and structures of governance are not specifically Jewish. They are part of *chokhmah*, the universal wisdom of humankind. Jews have known many forms of leadership: by prophet, elders, judges and kings; by the Nasi in Israel under Roman rule and the Resh Galuta in Babylon; by town councils (*shiva tuvei ha-ir*) and various forms of oligarchy; and by other structures up to and including the democratically elected Knesset. *The forms of government are not eternal truths, nor are they exclusive to Israel.* In fact the Torah says about monarchy that a time will come when the people say, "Let us set a king over us *like all the nations around us*," - the only case in the entire Torah

in which Israel are commanded (or permitted) to imitate other nations. There is nothing specifically Jewish about political structures.

What is specifically Jewish is the principle of the covenant at Sinai, that Israel is the only nation whose sole ultimate king and legislator is God himself. "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws, *Halleluyah*" (Psalm 147: 19-20). What the covenant at Sinai established for the first time was *the moral limits of power*. All human authority is delegated authority, subject to the overarching moral imperatives of the Torah itself. This side of heaven there is no absolute power. That is what has always set Judaism apart from the empires of the ancient world and the secular nationalisms of the West. So Israel can learn practical politics from a Midianite but it must learn the limits of politics from God himself.

Despite the contrast, however, there is one theme in common to Yitro and the revelation at Sinai, namely the *delegation, distribution and democratization of leadership*. Only God can rule alone.

The theme is introduced by Yitro. He arrives to visit his son in law and finds him leading alone. He says, "What you are doing is not good" (Ex. 18:17). This is one of only two instances in the whole Torah in which the words *lo tov*, "not good," appear. The other is in Genesis 2, where God says, "It is not good [*lo tov*] for man to be alone." We cannot lead alone. We cannot live alone. To be alone is not good.

Yitro proposes delegation:

You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people-men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain-and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because

they will share it with you. (Ex. 18: 19-22)

This is a significant devolution. It means that among every thousand Israelites, there are 131 leaders (one head of a thousand, ten heads of a hundred, twenty heads of fifty and a hundred head of tens). One in every eight adult male Israelites was expected to undertake some form of leadership role.

In the next chapter, prior to the revelation at Mount Sinai, God commands Moses to propose a covenant with the Israelites. In the course of this, God articulates what is in effect the mission statement of the Jewish people:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Ex. 19:4-6)

This is a very striking statement. Every nation had its priests. In the book of Genesis, we encounter Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, described as "a priest of the most high God" (Gen. 14: 18). The story of Joseph mentions the Egyptian priests, whose land was not nationalised (Gen. 47: 22). Yitro was a Midianite priest. In the ancient world there was nothing distinctive about priesthood. Every nation had its priests and holy men. What was distinctive about Israel was that it was to become *a nation every one of whose members was to be a priest; each of whose citizens was called on to be holy*.

I vividly recall standing with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in the General Assembly of the United Nations in August 2000 at a unique gathering of two thousand religious leaders representing all the major faiths in the world. I pointed out that even in that distinguished company we were different. We were almost the only religious leaders wearing suits. All the others wore robes of office. It is an almost universal phenomenon that priests and holy people wear distinctive garments to indicate that they are set apart (the core meaning of the word *kadosh*, "holy"). In post-biblical Judaism there were no robes of office because everyone was expected to be holy<sup>1</sup> (Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, called Jews "a nation of philosophers," reflecting the same idea).

Yet in what sense were Jews ever a kingdom of priests? The *cohanim* were an elite within the nation, members of the tribe of Levi, descendants of Aaron the first high priest. There never was a full democratisation of *keter kehunah*, the crown of priesthood.

Faced with this problem, the commentators offer two solutions. The word *cohanim*, "priests," may mean "princes" or "leaders" (Rashi, Rashbam). Or it may mean "servants" (Ibn Ezra, Ramban). But this is precisely the point. The Israelites were called on to be *a nation of servant-leaders*. They were the people called on, by virtue of the covenant, to accept responsibility not only for themselves and their families, but for the moral-spiritual state of the nation as a whole. This is the principle that later became known as the idea that *kol Yisrael arevin zeh ba-zeh*, "All Israelites are responsible for one another." Jews were the people who did not leave leadership to a single individual, however holy or exalted, or to an elite. They were the people every one of whom was expected to be both a prince and a servant, that is to say, every one of whom was called on to be a leader. Never was leadership more profoundly democratized.

That is what made Jews historically hard to lead. As Chaim Weitzmann, first president of Israel, famously said, "I head a nation of a million presidents." The Lord may be our shepherd, but no Jew was ever a sheep. At the same time it is what led Jews to have an impact on the world out of all proportion to their numbers. Jews constitute only the tiniest fragment - one fifth of one per cent - of the population of the world, but an extraordinarily high percentage of leaders in any given field of human endeavour.

To be a Jew is to be called on to lead.<sup>2</sup>

1. This idea re-appeared in Protestant Christianity in the age of the Puritans, the Christians who took most seriously the principles of what they called the "Old Testament," in the phrase "the priesthood of all believers."

2. On the role of the follower in Judaism, see the future Covenant and Conversation on Kedoshim.



## The Word of God

As the Jews await the revelation at Sinai, they gather at the foot of the mountain, anxiously anticipating the momentous events which would shortly unfold.

In the third month, when the people of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on this same day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. And they had departed from Rephidim, and had come to the desert of Sinai, and had camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount. (Exodus 19:1-3)

Moses receives initial instructions and the people respond enthusiastically:

And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob, and tell the People of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Me. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own treasure among all peoples, for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the people of Israel." And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the Lord commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, "All that the

Lord has spoken we will do..."  
 (Exodus 19: 3-8)

The people agree to uphold their part of the covenant, and heed to the word of God. Three days of preparation, both physical and spiritual, follow:

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the lower part of the mount. (Exodus 19: 16-17)

The rabbinic tradition fills in numerous details of the events. In general, this is considered to be the finest hour of Jewish history, the apex of spiritual experience, which will only be surpassed when all the words of the Torah are fulfilled in the Messianic Age.

## HESITATION?

There are, nonetheless, some expressions which indicate a lowness of spirit and a hesitation in accepting the Divine word. The Talmud, in Tractate Shabbat, describes the scene while focusing on the phrase "stood on the lower part of the mount":

Rabbi Abdimi ben Hama ben Hasa said: "This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, 'tis well; if not, you shall be buried there.'" Rabbi Aha ben Ya'acov observed: "This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah." Said Rava, "Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahashverosh, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and accepted upon themselves, [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before."

While the term in question could be rendered either "by the foot of the mountain" or "under the mountain" the exposition seems strange. What made

the rabbis declare that the acceptance of the Torah had not been whole-hearted?

We have seen that the Jewish people expressed complete willingness to adhere to the word of God, when they declared "all that the Lord has spoken we will do." <sup>1</sup> Furthermore, later there are additional expressions of their acceptance of Torah. While it should be noted that the exact sequence of events is somewhat challenging, the response of the people recorded is certainly part of the same general discussion, regardless of the specific details:

And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the Lord has said will we do." And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basins, and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. And he took the Book of the Covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, "All that the Lord has said will we do and hear." (Exodus 24: 4-7)

The people have responded positively on three occasions:

1. In Exodus 19:8: *And all the people answered together, and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do."*
2. Then again in Exodus 24:3: *And all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the Lord has said will we do."*
3. Finally, the most famous response follows in Exodus 24:7: *And he took the Book of the Covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the Lord has said will we do and hear."*

This last response is the impetus for Divine rapture:

Rabbi Eleazar said: "When the Israelites gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hear,' a Heavenly Voice went forth and exclaimed to them, 'Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the Ministering Angels, as it is written, Bless the Lord, ye angels of His. You mighty in strength, that fulfil His word, that hearken unto the voice of His word. First they fulfil and then they hear.'"

On the one hand we notice that the people's acceptance of the Torah was clearly viewed as an act of heroism. On three occasions the people wholeheartedly accept the word of God.

## COERCION?

Therefore, the contention that God lifted the mountain and threatened their lives turns the revelation into the proverbial "offer which they could not refuse." This does not seem consistent with either the Biblical account or the rabbinic tradition articulated in the other sources.

If we analyze the various responses we will find that the first *we will do* is a response to *all that God has spoken*. Here they respond affirmatively to *"Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant."* The word of God is acceptable to the people.

In the second instance, the positive response is to *And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the Lord has said will we do."* Again, it is the word of God with which they are in agreement. Apparently, the people are understandably prepared to accept what God says. The awesome word of God is the subject of their acceptance.

While this was certainly a lofty response, this is not referred to as "the secret of the angels." Upon reflection one can even ask, what choice did they have? When God speaks -- directly to man -- does man truly have the ability to reject God's word?

The direct communication at Sinai was most certainly an overwhelming experience. Furthermore, when Moses descends from Sinai and transmits and explains those words, the people must have perceived the message itself as an extension of the Divine.

Perhaps this is what the rabbis mean when they speak of the mountain being lifted and dangled over them. Standing at Sinai, the people were overwhelmed, awed, unable to escape the immediacy of God's self-revelation.

Significantly, the Talmud relates that the Jewish People accepted the Torah during the era of Ahashverosh, the despotic ruler of the Purim epoch.

This period of Jewish history is described as a time of *hester panim*, "concealment of God's face." For the first time in Jewish history, the word of God was not heard. The age of prophecy had come to an end. Instead of the word of God, silence reverberated.

### VOWS RENEWED

It was specifically in this state of spiritual and physical exile that the Jews renewed their collective vows. Now the mountain no longer hung precariously over their heads. Now they were no longer overwhelmed by the word of God. To accept the Torah at this point was totally different than that first time at the foot of the mountain.<sup>2</sup>

Now, despite the silence, the leaders act heroically and choose to anticipate what the Torah would have required of them in such a situation.

The relationship with God has shifted somewhat: With the end of the age of prophecy, man must take a proactive role in applying the Divine mandate, values and mores. This new process of extrapolation, analysis and application resulted in the institution of the first "rabbinic" holiday -- Purim.<sup>3</sup> The establishment of this holiday indicated man's willingness to become an active partner with God. This was a new type of acceptance of the Torah, a new covenant.<sup>4</sup>

It was, however, the third acceptance of the Torah, which elicited the impassioned response from above.

And he took the Book of the Covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the Lord has said will we do, and hear."

Upon hearing God's word, the People promise to "do and hear," or, perhaps, "do and obey."

The question that this raises is obvious. Clearly, the text seems inverted: "hear" should logically precede "do." Man cannot "do" the word of God unless he

hears it first. For this reason, translators have such difficulty with the phrase; it seems illogical.<sup>5</sup>

### ATTENTIVE LISTENING

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in his classic "Beis Halevi," explains (basing himself on the *Zohar*) that the "do" implies the performance of the commandments, while the "hear" implies Torah learning or involvement in Torah -- attentive listening to the Torah's teachings.

The initial acceptance of the Torah involved the word of God.<sup>6</sup> The Jewish people agreed to listen exclusively to what God had said. This is surely a unique level of adherence, but one which pales in comparison to the level reached subsequently, when they vowed to accept that which emanates from the word of God, even that which will be distilled from the word of God hundreds of years in the future, when the actual word is no longer heard.

Perhaps the idea can be explained as follows: The declaration "we will do" implies listening to the word of God, and adhering and acting in accordance with the content of that word. The phrase "we will hear" implies ongoing listening.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, echoing the words of his great-grandfather and namesake, once explained that the phrase *na'aseh v'nishma*, "we will do and hear," is in the present tense. We declared at Sinai that we will always listen to God, with great care and attention we will listen to hear what God is telling us in any situation.

This became an issue in the time of Purim, when the people manifested their partnership with God. They listened attentively and added "rabbinic" law. Now they were no longer silent partners in their relationship with God. Now they boldly joined God, and manifested this special relationship.

This was the secret which had hitherto been the sole dominion of the angels. Angels are truly partners with God, serving as an extension of the Divine hand. If man simply obeys and fulfills the word of God, he is not a partner, but an adherent. When man says that he will forever listen to the Divine decree, he states that he will be a partner in the teaching and "production" of Torah.

This was the exalted level reached by the Jews at Sinai. They became partners with God. The true fulfillment of this partnership took place in Shushan. With the creation of a Rabbinic law, the leaders of that generation courageously displayed the

willingness to manifest a partnership which was formed at the foot of a mountain millenia before.

1. See Tosfot Shabbat 88a where this question is posed.
2. See Maharal Gur Aryeh Shmot 19:17.
3. See Comments of the Or Hachaim Hakadosh Shmot 19:5.
4. For more on this concept see Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berdichav in the Kedushat Halevi on Purim.
5. See the comments of the Kedushat Halevi on Shmot where he suggests that the people, "heard" without speech. This often the manner of prophetic, and mystic communication, and is the meaning of the word *chashmal – chash mal*, "spoken silence."
6. See the Beis Halevi Shmot 19:5 and 24:7.



## The Truth Seekers

Moshe and his wife Tzipporah, the daughter of Yisro, had two sons. The names of the children tell the story of his wandering before he returned to Egypt as Hashem's messenger to redeem the Jewish people (Shemos 18:3-4). "The name of the first was Gershom, because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land.' The name of the other was Eliezer, because 'the Lord of my father helped me and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword.'"

The origin of Eliezer's name is given directly, "because 'the Lord of my father helped me and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword.'" But the origin of Gershom's name - "because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land'" - features the seemingly extraneous words "he said." Why couldn't the Torah have simply stated "because I was a stranger in a strange land"?

The Baal Haturim explains that these words allude to a Midrash in *Parashas Shemos*. The Midrash states that Yisro gave Moshe permission to marry Tzipporah only on the condition that he deliver his firstborn son to be trained for the priesthood of *avodah zarah*. Moshe had no choice but to comply and allow Yisro to have his firstborn son, who turned out to be Gershom. The words "because he said" allude to Yisro. Why did Moshe have to give Gershom to Yisro? Because Yisro had reminded him that he was a stranger in a strange land and was not in

a position to reject his prospective father-in-law's conditions to the marriage.

The Baal Haturim further explains that Moshe believed this was the right thing to do. He wanted to bring Yisro close to Hashem and the Jewish people, and he felt he could accomplish this by marrying Tzipporah. Even though he had to agree to Yisro's terrible condition, Moshe believed his father-in-law would ultimately come around.

The truly puzzling question is: What was Yisro thinking?

According to the Midrash, Yisro was a real truth seeker. He came to the realization that the *avodah zarah* of Midian was nonsense. He then traveled all over the world to investigate the cults of different kinds of *avodah zarah*, and he rejected all of them. Then he returned to Midian, resigned his high office in the indigenous cult and renounced *avodah zarah* altogether.

Yet here is the mystery. He placed the condition on Moshe's marriage to Tzipporah after he renounced all *avodah zarah*. Why would he insist that his grandson be trained for the priesthood of the Midianite *avodah zarah* when he had already determined it was worthless? It makes no sense!

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, *Rosh Yeshivah* of the Mirrer Yeshivah in Jerusalem, offers a penetrating insight into Yisro's mentality. Apparently, Yisro was the ancient counterpart of a 60's flower child. He believed that the best way to arrive at the truth was through a journey of discovery, just as he had done. Yisro believed that the Torah was definitely the truth. But he had learned this important information by experiencing what all other cultures had to offer and determining that the Torah was superior.

This was also how he wanted his grandson to discover the truth. He did not want him brought up in one narrow ideology, sheltered from all other cultures and ideologies. Better that he should use the inquiring mind he would inherit from his grandfather and then follow in his grandfather's footsteps, starting in the priesthood of Midian and then eliminating one false ideology after the other until he discovered the truth of the Torah. This would be intellectually fulfilling and satisfying. His grandson would know he had made his own decision, and he would be comfortable with it.

But this is not the way of the Torah. We do *mitzvot* because we are obligated to do them, because we are servants of Hashem obligated to obey Him, not

because we choose to do these things because we have decided they represent the truth. If Gershom was the son of Moshe, he did not have the luxury of going on a journey of discovery, even it were somehow guaranteed that he would arrive at the appropriate destiny at the end of his journey. Jewish children cannot nibble at the smorgasbord of the ideologies of the world. They have a duty to serve Hashem. This was something Yisro simply did not understand.

Let us take this thought a little further. The Torah introduces (Shemos 20:1) the Ten Commandments with the words, "And the Lord spoke all these things, saying." Rashi cites a Midrash that at first Hashem spoke "all these things" simultaneously, something that the human brain cannot absorb or comprehend. Only afterward did He articulate the Commandments individually.

What was Hashem's purpose in first speaking them all at once if no one could understand what He was saying anyway?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik points to the difference between the first five commandments and the second five. The first five relate to *bein adam laMakom*, the relationship between man and his Creator. Everyone understands that these decrees are of Divine origin. But the second five, the set that relates to *bein adam lachaveiro*, the relationship of man to his fellow man, may not seem to be Divine in origin. "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not lie. You shall not covet." We think we understand these Commandments on a different level. They appear to be the rational attempts of society to regulate and protect itself. Do we need a Divine decree to tell us these things? They seem self-explanatory and self-evident. After all, what kind of society would sanction murder and adultery?

Although they may seem logical to us, that logic is not the rationale for these Commandments. We do not refrain from murder and adultery only because it makes sense to us. We refrain because Hashem has forbidden these things. That is why Hashem first spoke all the Commandments at once. It was to impress upon us that they are all the same, that they are all unfathomable Divine decrees that we must obey without question because such is the will of Hashem.

In today's society we see clearly the difference between a secular prohibition of murder and a Divine one. If murder is forbidden because we consider it

logical, then changing attitudes can permit abortion, euthanasia and even infanticide, which is not unheard of in certain societies. But when the prohibition is Divine, it is absolute. We do not obey because it makes sense to us. We obey because we bow to Hashem's will.

Yisro came to Judaism through rational investigation. Therefore, he made the serious error of directing his grandson toward the priesthood of the Midianite cult. He wanted him to investigate for himself, to find the system that appealed to his reason. That is not the way of the Torah. We only apply reason to recognizing Hashem. Afterwards, it is all obedience

## REMINDERS OF EXILE

Both of Moshe's sons were named as reminders of the trials and tribulations he had experienced during his lifetime (Shemos 18:3-4). "The name of the first was Gershom, because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land.' The name of the other was Eliezer, because the Lord of my father helped me and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword."

Why did Moshe choose these names?

The Pardes Yosef explains that Moshe wanted to ensure that his children grew up with a sense of reality. Growing up in the placid environment of Midian, they could easily have developed a false sense of security. What were these children lacking? They lived with their parents in comfort and peace. They had grandparents. They were respected and honored. Their lives were as near to perfect as could be, but there are no guarantees in life. Jewish children have to be prepared. They have to be aware that they are always in exile, that persecution, hunger, chaos, terror can appear suddenly out of nowhere.

Everything can change in one day.

By choosing these names for his children, Moshe was reinforcing this message in their hearts. Look at me, he was saying. I used to be a prince in Pharaoh's palace. I had everything imaginable. I was a child of privilege. Then everything turned over, and I had to flee for my life, and if the Lord of my father had not rescued me, Pharaoh's executioner would have killed me.

The Pardes Yosef brings the story of the Jews of Spain as an illustration. There was a time when the lives of the Jews in Spain were close to perfect, a true golden age. They were secure, respected and prosperous. They lived in a warm and beautiful land. Their leaders, such as Rav Shmuel Hanagid, were the honored advisers of kings and sultans. The Torah

flourished in their midst. And then things changed. Forces hostile to the Jewish people gained supremacy. The Jews lost favor. Terrible pogroms broke out, and a century of turbulence ended with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 on Tishah b'Av. Could anyone living during the golden age have imagined it would come to this?

Had the Pardes Yosef lived to see the Holocaust, he could have brought an even better illustration of the tables turning on the Jewish people. Things may have been very good for Jews in Germany in the 19th century, but they were still in exile, as time would so painfully tell.

Here in America, we also live under the illusion that we are no longer in exile. This is truly a wonderful country, a merciful country, a blessed country, and may Hashem protect and watch over this country forever. My father, Mr. David Frand, of blessed memory, a true and honest Jew, would buy United States Savings Bonds when they were paying 3.5 percent. "Can't you get a better return on your money?" I once asked him when I was still a youngster. My father told me that the United States took him in when he was running away from Frankfort in 1939, and he felt obligated to acknowledge the favor by buying government bonds even at rates as low as 3.5 percent. That is how we must feel about this country. And yet, there are no guarantees.

The Talmud relates (*Bava Basra* 73b) in the name of Rabbah bar bar Channah, "We were once traveling on a boat and saw what turned out to be a fish. It was so huge that sand collected on its back, and we thought it was an island. We got off the boat and stepped onto this supposed island. We baked and cooked. But when it got too hot for the fish, he rolled over, and we fell off. Had we not been close to the boat, we all would have drowned."

According to the Maharsha, this story is a parable. We are all adrift on the stormy sea of exile, and suddenly we see an island. We think we have found a safe haven. We cook and bake and buy houses and made weddings and bar mitzvahs. We have children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and everything is wonderful. And we say, "We are no longer in exile. We are in a land flowing with milk and honey." And then the island turns over and we realize we have been sitting on the back of a fish all along. And now we consider ourselves fortunate if only we do not drown in the sea of our exile.



## One Step At a Time

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah Portion, Yitro, begins with the verse:

"Yitro, the priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law, heard all that God did for Moses and for Israel his people." (Exodus 18:1).

Although it says that Yitro heard all that God had done, nonetheless the Talmud (*Zevachim* 116a) says that there were three specific things that Yitro heard which inspired him to come running across the desert to join the Jewish people.

1. Splitting of the Red Sea.
2. War against Amalek.
3. Giving of the Torah.

We need to understand why it was specifically these three events which inspired him to come to the camp of Israel.

Furthermore we must examine this verse, which describes Yitro as "the priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law." The first description is a disgrace, referring to his idolatrous past. The second description is one of praise, noting that he is Moses's father-in-law. Why do we label Yitro with these two diametrically opposed titles?

Let us share an idea based on the "Tiferet Shmuel" (volume 2). Even if a person achieves the highest of spiritual levels, it is possible for that person to fall to the lowest of places. This is more likely when a person quickly "jumps levels" and takes on too much at one time. When one takes on more than he can handle in terms of spiritual growth, this can backfire. The person can become frustrated and tense to the point where he cracks and falls back down again.

This is exactly what happened to the Jewish people after they crossed the Red Sea. The "Yalkut Reuveni" says that before the Splitting of the Sea, the angels testified to God that the Egyptians are idolaters and the Jews are idolaters as well (Exodus 14:28). "Why should the Jews be saved and the Egyptians destroyed?" they asked. "Let's destroy them both."

We find that before the Splitting of the Red Sea the Jews were just as involved in idolatry as the Egyptians. They had reached the lowest of the lowest levels. However, immediately after the splitting of the Red Sea, they proclaimed: "This is my God and I will glorify him" (Exodus 15:2). The Midrash (Mechilta) says that even the simplest of Jews saw a vision of God which was even *greater* than that which the prophet Ezekiel saw. It did not take very long to cross the sea, and in that short span of time the Jewish people went from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high. They jumped from the spiritual depths all the way to the top.

Therefore we find toward the end of last week's portion that during the war against Amalek, the Jewish people ask, "Is God with us or not?" (Exodus 17:7) How could this be? A moment ago they all pointed and said "this is my God." How can these very same people doubt that God is among them and performing all these miracles? How can the Jews, who were such great prophets, also be borderline heretics?

Perhaps this happened because they jumped from the lowest to the highest in such a short span of time - something which is not healthy in spiritual growth and can cause a person to fall all the way back down.

## LEVELS OF HEARING

There are different levels of hearing. The commentator Ohr Gedaliyah explains the greatness in the Jewish people's statement, "We will do and we will hear," by noting that the word "we will do" (*na'aseh*) comes first (see also Shabbat 88a). By saying "we will do," the Jewish people expressed their ability to do the will of God even before they were specifically commanded in the mitzvot. They could intuitively "hear" God's desires. According to the Ohr Gedaliyah, this very high level of hearing demonstrated the Jewish people's great love for God, in which they were able to anticipate His wishes.

In the second, slightly lower level of hearing, we are unable to perceive God's desires before He expresses them. Nevertheless, once He articulates His will, we are able to discern the deeper message of the mitzvot.

In other words, through each mitzvah itself, we can understand what God wants from us.

Through this idea, we can understand why the Jewish people use two different expressions - "we will do" (*na'aseh*) and "we will do and we will hear" (*na'aseh v'nishma*). The first expression (*na'aseh*) corresponds to the highest level of hearing. Without hearing explicit instructions, how did the Jews know what to do? It must be that they were able to intuit God's will even without physically hearing them articulated.

The second expression (*na'aseh v'nishma*) corresponds to the second level of hearing, in which we are able to hear, through the mitzvot, what God really wants from us. After acting on what we have been told, we can hear God's will.

The Slonimer Rebbe adds that this second level of hearing applies not only to mitzvot, but also to every situation we encounter in life. Each circumstance in which we find ourselves contains custom-tailored lessons for us to learn, if only we are able to hear them. For example, if a mentally unstable person on the street starts yelling at us for no apparent reason, instead of getting angry at him, we can assume that, for some reason, we are intended to hear his words. Perhaps there is some kernel of truth in what he is saying that can teach us a lesson.

## CLIMBING THE LADDER

The giving of the Ten Commandments in this week's parsha teaches us that growth has to be slow and deliberate. God did not give us one huge commandment, but rather gave us ten individual commandments. This teaches us that growth comes one step at a time. As the Talmud says (Makkot 23b), "Rebbi Chananyah ben Akashia says that God wanted to give the Jewish people merit and therefore he increased the Torah and its Commandments."

Torah has to be absorbed one step and one mitzvah at a time. The Ten Commandments reflects this by stating each mitzvah one after the other. This is the meaning of Rebbi Chananyah ben Akashia's statement. God increased Torah and mitzvot because each is a rung on our spiritual ladder, and the more rungs we have, the safer and easier it is to ascend.

## PERMANENT JOURNEY

This helps us understand the significance of the three things that inspired Yitro to come running across the desert. First came the splitting of the sea, where Yitro saw people at the very bottom jumping all the way to

the top. Then he heard of the war against Amalek, where the Jewish people questioned God's existence. They plunged right back down to being heretics. This was because their process of *teshuva* moved too fast. Yitro knew that he was also a repentant and he worried that perhaps he too had moved too fast.

It therefore says that he heard of the giving of the Torah, which was a gradual process. First God gave the Ten Commandments and then he gave the rest of the laws. He gave the Torah one step at a time, one mitzvah a time. When he saw this, Yitro said "I need to learn how to grow at a slow and steady pace, as opposed to taking everything on all at once and causing myself to rebel."

That is why these three events are singled out. This also helps us understand the answer to the second question of why the Torah refers to Yitro in the opening verse as "the priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law." This shows that even though he became the father-in-law of the great Moses, Yitro recognized that deep down inside him remained a piece of idolatrous Midian. He already tasted that, and needed to make sure that his journey from being a priest of Midian to Moses's father-in-law was going to be a permanent and meaningful one.

God wants us to grow at a pace which is healthy for us and not to take on too much at once and wind up turning our backs on the entire Torah. That is certainly not the will of God. Rather, do it with caution, one step at a time, at a rate which is healthy and productive. That way we can become all we can possibly be.