

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Yisro

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רפואה שלמה פעסל בת גאלדא / לזכות חילינו

LISTENING EAR

Kotzker Rebbe

“And Yisro, the minister of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that Hashem did to Moshe and to Israel His people.” (18:1)

What Yisro heard, others heard as well. But there are those who hear but do not listen, as the words do not penetrate their ears, hearts, and minds. Yisro’s attribute was that he heard and he knew what he heard!

PURSUING INSPIRATION

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“And Yisro heard...” (18:1)

Rashi quotes the Gemara (Zevachim 116a) that wonders what Yisro heard. The Gemara answers that Yisro heard about Krias Yam Suf and the war against Amalek. After hearing about these two incredible episodes, Yisro chose to join the Jewish people.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian (Lev Eliyahu) asks why Yisro was the only person affected by the events which had just occurred. Why weren’t other people from other nations motivated to join the Jewish people the way Yisro was?

Rav Lopian explains that Yisro was looking for the truth. He had practiced many forms of idolatry and other religions and was continually dissatisfied. As a result, he was on high alert waiting for emes to be presented in front of him. Therefore, when Yisro heard about the miracles performed that highlighted Hashem’s existence, Yisro had the cognizance to run towards them. The other nations of the world, however, were not searching for emes, and, as a result, the miracles that took place had absolutely no impact on them.

In life, we often sit and wait to be inspired. We hope that something will jump out and excite us. Rav Lopian is teaching us that we can’t expect to *be* inspired but instead have to *get* inspired. Like Yisro, we need to actively pursue opportunities to recharge ourselves spiritually so that when those chances present themselves, we can make best use of them.

FIGHTING FOR LOVE

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“And Yisro, the minister of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that Hashem did to Moshe and to Israel His people.” (18:1)

G-d punished the Egyptians not for having violated His will, but for the sake of Moshe and His people, Yisrael. For this reason, a previous verse says, “For G-d is waging war for them against Egypt,” specifically mentioning “for them.” (That is, G-d fought on behalf of Moshe and the Jewish people as an expression of His love for them rather than an act of vengeance against Egypt.)

DAILY REVELATIONS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“And Yisro heard...”

The Splitting of the Sea, the war with Amalek, and Yisro’s conversion to Judaism were all prerequisites to the Giving of the Torah.

We must relive these events in our daily lives, for G-d gives us the Torah anew each day, granting us new and higher insights into life every day from the infinite well of the Torah. But before this can happen, we must first subdue our inner Amalek, i.e., silence our doubts about Divine providence. Then, we must convert our inner Yisro, i.e., win over the part of us that still prefers to serve the idols of excessive material desires.

But in order to take these steps, we must first “split the sea and enter it,” i.e., temporarily immerse ourselves totally in holiness, through our morning prayers and regular Torah study. The Divine consciousness we experience this way enables us to bring a higher awareness into all aspects of our daily lives: eating, earning a living, interacting with others, and so on. Then, when we make time during our day to study the Torah, we will be able to uncover new insights that make it eternally relevant, thus hearing G-d’s voice from Sinai on a day-to-day basis. (Based on Likutei Sichot, vol. 11, pp. 74) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SPEAKING TO THE HEART

Rebbe Nachman

“And Yisro, the minister of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that Hashem did to Moshe and to Israel His people.” (18:1)

Only Yisro allowed the message to enter his heart. From this, we may infer that a teacher should transmit Torah only in a way that enters his student’s heart. (See Likutey Moharan I, 47)

TRUTH SEEKER

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And Yisro, the minister of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that Hashem did to Moshe and to Israel His people.” (18:1)

The verse tells us that Yisro heard everything that Hashem had done for the Jewish People. But what did Yisro hear exactly? Rashi explains that he heard about the splitting of the sea and the war which Amalek waged, and therefore he came.

The obvious question is, the whole world heard about these events, so why does the Torah say that only Yisro heard?

(The entire world would have known what had happened, as we see from the Midrash which explains that when the sea split for the Jewish People, all of the water in the whole world split too, even the water contained in a small bottle [Yalkut Shimoni, Shemos Chap. 14, Remez 234]. And regarding the battle with Amalek, we learn that Moshe caused the sun to stand still in order to prevent Amalek from using astrology to determine their moment of victory [see Rashi, Shemos 17:12].)

And since everyone heard the same as Yisro why did they not come too?

Rashi (Shemos 18:11) explains that Yisro had tried every form of idol worship that existed in the world before committing to the Torah. We see from here that Yisro was someone who was constantly in an honest pursuit for the truth. Everyone else was not interested in the truth; rather, they were happy living a blissfully ignorant and idolatrous lifestyle. So, when they heard about all of the miracles performed for the Jewish People, it did not have a great impact on their lives. Yisro, on the other hand, was actively searching for the truth, and therefore when he heard everything that Hashem had done for the Jewish People, he recognized that this was coming from the ultimate source of truth, and because this is what he was genuinely searching for, his whole life was changed forever.

And perhaps this is why Yisro’s Torah Parsha contains the topic of choosing judges; for it is only fitting that someone who spent his whole life searching for truth at all cost merits to have the portion of judges affiliated with his name, for that is the role of a judge - to seek out the truth.

SEEING THE REBBE

Lizensker Rebbe

“And Yisro heard...” (18:1)

Even when there is so much literature on morality and spiritual behavior, there is still great significance of going to the Rebbe to understand serving Hashem.

It says in the Torah: “And Yisro heard.” Rashi asks what is it that Yisro heard, and Rashi answers, “He heard about the splitting of the Yam Suf and about the war against Amalek.” If he heard, why did he have to go to Moshe?

Although Yisro heard about the greatness of Hashem, the splitting of the Yam Suf, and the war against Amalek, nevertheless he went to see Moshe, who was the Rebbe at that time. It shows the meaning of the statement, “There is no comparison of hearing to seeing.” When one goes to the Rebbe, one sees the greatness of Hashem and it remains with the individual forever.

Even though we learn and *hear* about the greatness of Hashem, we go to the Rebbe to *see* from his actions the greatness of Hashem.

TEACHER NEEDED

Sichos Tzaddikim

“And Yisro heard...” (18:1)

What was the report that he heard so that he came [to visit Moshe]? The splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek. (Rashi)

Why did Yisro have to go to Moshe? Couldn’t he have become and remained a believer in G-d in his home?

However, he went to Moshe because he was disturbed by the news that such a revelation of Divine Providence as the splitting of the Red Sea could be followed by a withdrawal of Divine favor such as Amalek’s attack. This report convinced him that the Torah cannot be understood properly by studying it by oneself.

Yisro realized that he must receive instruction from a teacher and that he must never cease to strive for the improvement of his character to be able to overcome the forces of evil that seek to blind our eyes to truth and righteousness..

PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“And her [Tziporah’s] two sons, the name of one was Gershom for he [Moshe] said, ‘I am a foreigner in a strange land.’ The name of the other was Eliezer because ‘My father’s G-d saved me [Moshe] from the sword of Pharaoh.’” (18:3-4)

The Torah recounts Yisro bringing his daughter, Tziporah, and his grandsons, Gershom and Eliezer, to reunite with Moshe. In the context of this story, the Torah shares the meaning behind Gershom’s and Eliezer’s names.

Rashi comments that when Moshe thanked Hashem for saving him, he was referring to when Dasan and Aviram had told Pharaoh that Moshe killed a Mitzri. Pharaoh tried to kill Moshe with a sword against his neck, but Moshe's neck turned into marble, which saved him.

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck (Eish Tamid) wonders why Moshe's sons were named out of order. It would seem that his first son should have been named Eliezer, which reflects when he was still in Egypt and was saved after killing the Mitzri, and his second son should have been named Gershom, which highlights when he arrived in Midian afterwards. Why did Moshe reverse the order when naming his children?

Rav Druck explains that Moshe would not name his first son in a manner in which he was thanking Hashem for being saved while his brothers and sisters were still suffering and enslaved. How could he celebrate when Klal Yisrael was experiencing such hardship? Therefore, he named his first son Gershom, which represented his current position as a stranger. Moshe's second son was born when he had already been charged with liberating Bnei Yisrael from Mitzrayim. Once he was commanded to lead the Jewish people and was able to see their salvation on the horizon, Moshe was then comfortable expressing his own personal salvation by naming his second son Eliezer.

As Jews, it is incumbent upon us to realize that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. When other Jews celebrate, we need to be right there with them experiencing their joy. When other Jews are suffering, we need to sit beside them and feel their pain as though it is ours. Let us follow the ways of our great leader Moshe Rabbeinu and make sure that we are always with our brothers and sisters of Klal Yisrael throughout all the ups and downs of life!

LIFE OF OUTREACH

Rebbe Nachman

"The name of the one was Eliezer because 'My father's G-d saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'" (18:3-4)

"The name of the one" - the one and only. (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:7)

Although this verse refers to Moshe's son, it has a secondary meaning as well. Moshe's lifework was to bring as many people as possible to recognize and serve G-d. This was also the mission of his descendant, Rabbi Eliezer the Great, who was "one" in the sense of being uniquely gifted. (See Likutey Moharan I, 215)

A tzaddik must be great enough to show those who are spiritually accomplished that they have not yet begun to fathom the Infinite G-d, and to show those on a relatively low spiritual level that G-d's glory fills the entire world and therefore they are close to G-d. Moshe was such a tzaddik.

Those who are spiritually accomplished are represented by Moshe's "son" (i.e., his descendant) Rabbi Eliezer the Great (רבי אליעזר הגדול), whose name is an acronym for the phrase *עין לא ראתך יעשה*, "No eye has seen it but You, O G-d, Who acts" (Yeshayahu 64:3). This phrase alludes to the World to Come, indicating Rabbi Eliezer's spiritual greatness.

Those on a relatively low spiritual level are represented by Rabbi Yehoshua (רבי יהושע), whose name is an acronym for the phrase *יקומו הקיצו ורננו שבני עפר*, "Arise, awake and sing out, you who dwell in the dust" (bid., 26:19). (See Likutey Moharan I, 7:14)

HONORED DWELLING

Chasam Sofer

"Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, brought Moshe's sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of G-d." (18:5)

The place where Moshe camped became a "mountain of G-d." It was through Moshe's presence that it became a dwelling place for the Shechinah. A place is honored by the person who dwells there.

DON'T PROCRASTINATE

Belzer Rebbe

"Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, brought Moshe's sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of G-d." (18:5)

While the Torah typically says "went" and not "came" when discussing going to a destination, in the case of Yisro, it states that Yisro heard and he came. Yisro had made no plans for a journey, but as soon as he heard of the Exodus, he immediately wanted to join Moshe.

Had Yisro taken time to consider his decision, he might have hesitated to take his family through the hardships of the desert, and that would have caused him not to join the Israelites in accepting the Torah.

From this we learn that when the opportunity arises to perform a mitzvah, we should do so without deliberation.

GOING DOWN TO HIS LEVEL

Reb Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

"And he said to Moshe, 'I, your father-in-law Yisro, am coming to you...'" (18:6)

Go on my account. (Mechilta)

What is meant by this statement in the Mechilta? Yisro asked Moshe to "go," to descend a little from his own high station, "on my account," for Yisro's sake, to enable Yisro to establish a connection with him so that when Moshe rose again to his lofty place Yisro would rise with him. This is what Yisro meant by the request: "Go on my account."

WARMTH TOWARDS ALL

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Moshe went out to greet his father-in-law, bowing and kissing him. They asked after each other’s welfare and went into the tent.” (18:7)

Yisro was an idolater; there was no idolatry in the world that he had not served. Moshe was a tzaddik who would receive the Torah directly from G-d. The distance between the two was very great. Nevertheless, Moshe was extremely amicable towards Yisro, treating him like an old friend.

This is the way of the tzaddik: to be friendly and warm to all who wish to draw close to G-d. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 464)

FRIGHTENED WITH DISBELIEF

Chiddushei HaRim

“And Yisro rejoiced for all the goodness that Hashem had done to Israel, in that He had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.” (18:9)

His flesh shivered with horror. (The Hebrew word va’yichad - “and he rejoiced” is related to chiddudim, an expression denoting prickling with horror.) (Rashi)

Yisro was stung with horror that the Egyptians did not mend their ways but had to be destroyed because of their corruption.

UNIFYING JOY

Rebbe Nachman

“And Yisro rejoiced for all the goodness that Hashem had done to Israel...” (18:9)

In general, people experience the joy of an event in a fragmented fashion. For example, at a wedding, some people are happy for the couple, some because of the festivities, others due to the food, and still others as a result of the music. But the main reason for joy is that at their source, all the fragmentary manifestations are one.

Va’yichad Yisro (Yisro rejoiced) can also be translated as “Yisro made a unity.” That is, Yisro made a unity of all the joy that he had experienced. He saw beyond its material manifestations and recognized that it all came from G-d, the Source of joy. (See Likutey Moharan II, 34)

THANKING FOR OTHERS

Radomsker Rebbe

“Yisro said, ‘Blessed is Hashem, Who rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh.’” (18:10)

Those few words of Yisro taught us the importance of thanking Hashem for the kindness He shows others.

PUTTING OTHERS FIRST

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Aharon and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with Moshe’s father-in-law.” (18:12)

Moshe himself, however, did not eat at this meal; he was busy hosting and serving his guests (Rashi).

The lesson here is that regardless of our social status (and who can claim a higher social status than Moshe’s?) we should consider it more important to take care of others’ needs than to see to our own.

This applies both to other people’s physical needs and to their spiritual advancement. (Sichot Kodesh 5741, vol. 2, p. 519) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

INFINITE ASCENTS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“On the day following [Moshe’s descent from Har Sinai], Moshe sat to judge the people.” (18:13)

When our spiritual lives seem to flow smoothly, we may think that we have overcome the challenges of life and can sit back and relax. For the proper response to this sentiment, we need only look at Moshe’s example. While on Har Sinai, Moshe reached the peak of spirituality, yet, as soon as he rejoined the people, he plunged directly into his new task of judging the cases that the people brought before him.

Similarly, even when it feels as though we have reached the pinnacle of holiness, there is still tomorrow - when, like Moshe, we should set our sights even higher. (Hitva’aduyot 5742, vol. 2, pp. 871-872) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

TRUTHFUL VITALITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

“[Yisro said,] ‘What are you doing to the people? Why are you sitting by yourself and letting all the people stand around you from morning to evening?’” (18:14)

One who arbitrates a true judgment is considered G-d’s partner in Creation. For here it states: “From morning to evening,” and there it states: “It was evening, and it was morning” (Bereishis 1:5). (Rashi)

Rebbe Nachman teaches that only when the beginning, middle and end are all absolute truth can something be called true. When a judge studies the case before him and filters out falsehood so that only absolute truth remains, he rectifies faith (which implies faithfulness and honesty).

When faith is rectified, prayer is rectified, since faith and prayer are synonymous. And when prayer is rectified, vitality and bounty flow to all levels of creation. Therefore, a judge who arbitrates a truthful judgment is considered G-d’s partner in Creation, for he brings vitality to all the worlds. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 2)

ROLE OF THE LEADER

Ramban

“And Moshe said to his father-in-law, ‘Because the people come to me to seek G-d, when they have a matter, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his fellow, and I make known to them the statutes of G-d...’” (18:15-16)

A Jewish leader has three tasks to fulfill: first, to pray for any Jewish person in trouble (“Because the people come to me to seek G-d”); second, to act as arbitrator in financial disputes in accordance with the laws of the Torah (“and I judge between a man and his fellow”); and finally, to teach his people about G-d and His law (“and I make known to them the statutes of G-d”).

Since Moshe had to discharge all these obligations single-handedly, the people “stood about him from morning to evening” (Shemos 18:14).

IMPARTIAL JUDGEMENTS

Reb Alexander Zusia Friedman

“When they have a matter, it comes to me...” (18:16)

Why doesn't the text read: “When they have a matter, they come to me?”

Because Moshe viewed each case as if the matter, rather than the individuals involved, had come before him. This means that he treated each “matter” impartially and objectively, without regard to personalities or other extraneous considerations involved.

JUDGING WITH EMPATHY

Reb Asher Horowitz of Rimanov

“When they have a matter, it comes to me...” (18:16)

Moshe meant that when a Jew had a problem, a disappointment, or a conflict with someone, Moshe wanted him to come because he could feel his pain, and therefore understand the problem. This outlook gave him the ability to judge his people.

PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“[Yisro told Moshe,] ‘For this matter is too much for you; you will not be able to do it alone.’” (18:18)

Being a consummately righteous individual has both its advantages and its disadvantages. Someone who has never had to repent has never felt estranged from G-d, but neither has he tasted the sweetness of reconciliation. A penitent - precisely because he has experienced spiritual “darkness” and has successfully transformed that darkness into light - is able to serve G-d with more drive, and at times more insight, than someone who has never experienced spiritual darkness.

Yisro therefore told Moshe to delegate aspects of his leadership to individuals of lesser spiritual stature than him. These people would then be able to contribute their talents and experiences - which Moshe himself lacked - toward leading the people.

The lesson for us is that we must not let the established leadership assume sole responsibility for the material and spiritual welfare and the future of the world. Each of us has unique talents and experience to contribute, and therefore each of us has a unique role to play in guiding the Jewish people in particular and the world in general toward fulfilling its Divine mission. (Hitva'aduyot 5726, vol. 1, pp. 359-361) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

BASED ON EXPERIENCE

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Now, listen to my voice. I will give you advice, and G-d will be with you...” (18:19)

Yisro came from an idolatrous background and had experienced much evil, yet he was able to reject that evil, purify himself, and draw close to G-d.

Thus, it was specifically Yisro who advised Moshe about setting up a judicial system, because he had exercised judicial intelligence by knowing when to draw close and when to reject. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 210)

DELICATE CRITICISM

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“Now, listen to my voice. I will give you advice, and G-d will be with you...” (18:19)

Yisro came to Moshe and the first thing he did was criticize him! Doesn't that seem strange? However, Rav Yerucham Levovitz zt'l says that the true greatness of Yisro was not just his ability to criticize, but to criticize constructively. In fact, it was this discerning quality that actually brought him closer to the truth of Yiddishkeit. Yisro had tried out every single type of idol worship in the world and was critical of each one. This led him to the belief in the One and only true G-d. His critical eye enabled him to view the unadulterated truth.

The trait of criticism is extremely powerful for good and for bad. One must discern where criticism is coming from. Does it stem from a place of truth or from jealousy and negativity? This is what we must ask ourselves before we attempt to “help” others and “set them straight.” Even if we truly have the other person's best interest at heart, we must realize that words of criticism can be powerful and damaging. The words בקורת (criticism) and קוברת (burying) employ the same letters because we can really bury someone with harsh and critical words, even when we mean well.

We must remember to encourage and build. We may suggest improvements, as long as we do not strip the recipient of his honor.

Similarly, the word עִידוּד, which means encouragement, comes from the root עוּד, which means more. Only through encouragement and positive criticism can we expect more positive behavior and willingness to accept criticism. This great lesson is learned from Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe.

LEARNING FROM ALL

Degel Machaneh Ephraim

“And you should seek out from among all the people men of wealth, men who fear G-d, men of truth, who despise gain and you shall appoint them officers of thousands.” (18:21)

Yisro remarked to Moshe, saying: “When you, Moshe, who are the wisest of all and a teacher, will listen to all people, then you will emphasize for all time the statement: ‘Who is wise? One who learns from all people.’”

AUTHORITATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Rebbe Nachman

“And you should seek out from among all the people men of wealth, men who fear G-d, men of truth, who despise gain and you shall appoint them officers of thousands, officers of hundreds, officers of fifties, and officers of tens.” (18:21)

Techezeh (you should identify) literally means “you should see.” Moshe could see the true spiritual level of each of his followers. With that ability, he could assign to each the proper level of responsibility within the community.

Furthermore, just by looking at his followers, a tzaddik can transmit his own intellect to them and illuminate their minds. (See Likutey Moharan II, 72)

Every person has a level of authority. At the very least, an individual has authority over himself. He must strive to control his evil inclination. As for the person who wields power over others, he must use that authority not for his own benefit but solely for the sake of G-d. (See Likutey Moharan I, 56:1)

GLEANNING AT THE TZADDIK

Reb Noson of Breslov

“And you should seek out from among all the people men of wealth, men who fear G-d...” (18:21)

Techezeh (you should identify) literally means “you should see.” You should look carefully at the tzaddik, at his writings, etc. Then you will see... (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 96a)

WISE JUDGES

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And you should seek out from among all the people men of wealth, men who fear G-d, men of truth, who despise gain...” (18:21)

Mashal: Two litigants presented their case before Rav Binyamin Diskin zt'l and placed five thousand rubles in escrow with him pending resolution of their dispute.

Several days later, one of the parties approached the rabbi, asking him to release three thousand rubles for just a few days. He was in a tight squeeze for cash, and he assured the rabbi that he was an honorable person who would return the money shortly. R' Diskin shook his head.

“I’m so sorry I can’t help you,” the rabbi responded shrewdly. “You see, just two days ago the other claimant was here and also requested three thousand rubles. But don’t worry, he promised me he would have it back within a few days.”

At this news, the man pounded his fist angrily on the table. “What? You released escrow money that was entrusted to you? You have no right to do that!”

“Oh, I didn’t give it to him, of course,” the rabbi said calmly. “I just told you that he had asked for it. But now you yourself have effectively ruled out my giving you any money either.”

The embarrassed man left without another word.

Nimshal: The great advice that Yisro gave to his son-in-law, Moshe Rabbeinu, was that he choose worthy individuals to assist him in judging the nation and teaching them the laws by which they should live. He gave four qualifications to locate these worthy men: “Men of wealth, G-d-fearing men, men of truth, men who despise money.”

He did not say “wise men” or “learned men” for it is understood that like the rav in the story, men who have these characteristics are truly wise and learned in all matters - in Torah law as well as in worldly affairs.

RECEIVING IN PARTS

Reb Noson of Breslov

“And you shall appoint them officers of thousands, officers of hundreds, officers of fifties, and officers of tens.” (18:21)

The Torah is a very great light which cannot be attained in its entirety; it must be divided into smaller units to be received.

By subdividing the nation, Moshe taught the people that the only way to receive the entire Torah is to acquire a measure at a time until it builds into a whole. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 32)

POSSIBILITY FOR COMPROMISE

Rabbi Chaim Berlin

"If you shall do this thing - and G-d commands you - so then you shall be able to endure, and all this people also shall arrive at its destination in peace." (18:23)

The Sages term a compromise "peace" because in such an arrangement neither of the disputing parties emerges as the loser. However, according to Jewish law, a compromise can be made only in cases where the Court of Law has no clear directives as to how the law of the Torah is to be applied. Once it is known to the Court "how the law of the Torah is inclined" compromises are not permissible.

In view of this rule, Yisro said to Moshe: If you decide all legal questions single-handedly you will not be able to arrange a compromise, for to you the Torah is always abundantly clear. But if you delegate some of the authority to lesser judges, it will be possible for them to arrange compromises since the Torah will not always be clear to them, and then "all this people shall arrive at its destination in peace" - they will be satisfied with the compromise arbitrated in their disputes.

COMPLICATED CASES

Rabbi Chaim Berlin

"...the difficult cases they brought to Moshe, but each easy matter they judged themselves." (18:26)

Yisro said to Moshe, "Every *significant* matter they shall bring to you" (Shemos 18:22), but the narrative states that "the *difficult* cases" were brought to Moshe.

These two statements show the difference between other nations and Jews regarding settling legal disputes.

In other nations, a case's importance is dependent on the amount of money involved. Thus, litigation involving "significant" amounts is assigned to a higher court of justice, whereas cases with smaller amounts at stake are left to lower courts.

In Jewish religious law, however, the amount of money involved in a dispute is of no concern, for "the law concerning one penny is the same as that concerning a hundred maneh (1 maneh equals 150 common shekels)."

Instead, a case's importance is determined by its difficulty. "Difficult cases," i.e., more complex questions, are referred to judges more knowledgeable than those qualified to render judgment in less complicated disputes.

Thus, the Jews brought "the difficult cases" before Moshe even when the dispute was not "significant" in terms of the amount of money involved.

COMPLETE RELIANCE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"On that very day they came to the Sinai desert." (19:1)

In order to receive the Torah, the Jewish people had to venture into the desolate desert, trusting that G-d would provide for them. To their credit, they did this without hesitation.

Just as our ancestors could easily have balked at the notion of following Moshe into the desert, we too can easily find reasons to postpone, minimize, or even excuse ourselves altogether from studying ("receiving") the Torah. Sometimes we may feel that we are discharging our obligations to G-d in other ways; at other times we may feel that we are too distracted, hungry, tired, or so on to concentrate. In such cases, we can learn from our ancestors example that the proper approach to studying the Torah is total immersion in it, abandoning all other considerations and worries.

When we rely on G-d, studying the Torah devotedly, He will provide for all our material and spiritual needs, just as He provided for our ancestors when they relied on Him by "following" Him out of Egypt and into the desert. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 2, pp. 308-309) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

REACHING EXALTED LEVELS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"In the third month of Bnei Yisrael's departure from the land of Egypt, on that very day they came to the desert of Sinai. They had journeyed from Refidim and had come to the desert of Sinai." (19:1-2)

The Torah describes how, in the third month after being redeemed from slavery in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai and prepared themselves for the great and awesome day on which they were to receive the Torah. What is unusual is the wording of the pasuk: "In the third month... they came to the Sinai desert. They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai desert." Why is their arrival at Har Sinai heralded not once, but twice?

R' Shloime Kluger zt'l gives us a penetrating insight into the makeup of the Jewish Nation at the time that Hashem gave them the Torah. This is based on the Gemara (Berachos 34): "In the place where Ba'alei Teshuvah stand, even great tzaddikim are unable to stand there." As unbelievable as it may sound, one who sincerely repents his sins and dedicates his life to overcoming his past misdeeds, is rewarded with a merit and standing that the greatest and most righteous people in the illustrious history of the Jewish people are unable to attain! If a person is able to channel his considerable strength of character to turn away from a life filled with what modern society has to offer, he is deemed a towering personality within the folds of Torah-true Yiddishkeit.

Chazal tell us that Bnei Yisrael sinned in Refidim; "Sherafu yedeihem min ha'Torah - They softened their hands (and minds) from the Torah." However, immediately after that, they did repent and were thus deemed worthy of the greatest of treasures: kabalas ha'Torah - accepting the Torah on Har Sinai.

This, then, says R' Shloime, is what the pasuk is coming to teach us. "In the third month... they came to the Sinai desert" - arriving righteous and worthy of this treasure. And how did they reach this ultimate level of purity and exaltation? It was only because, "They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai desert" - when they sinned deeply and, in turn, did a full and thorough repentance. This alone allowed them to attain the lofty level of Ba'alei Teshuvah, the highest degree that a mortal can attain. Then, and only then, ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר - "Yisrael camped by the mountain."

EMPOWERED BY UNITY

Reb Yaakov Abuchatzzeira

"Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain." (19:2)

We know that every gadol ha'dor (leader of the generation) is helped by the merit of the people of his generation.

When the Jews came to Har Sinai and "Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain," it was as if they all came together as one large stone, with absolute unity. Thus, when Moshe went up and "Hashem called to him from the mountain" - it was only in the merit of Klal Yisrael who came together by the mountain.

UNITED DIFFERENCES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And they had come to the desert of Sinai and camped in the desert. Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain." (19:2)

G-d's presence refuses to dwell amid discord and disharmony. Only when the Jews were unified in harmony with each other could they achieve the harmony with G-d necessary in order to receive His Torah.

The same applies today. Anyone can study the Torah, of course, but the Divine inspiration that grants us additional insight and allows us to sense G-d's presence in the Torah is ours only when we are actively concerned for our fellow human beings.

There is an additional lesson here. The Jews were able to unite at Har Sinai because they were "facing the mountain" - i.e., focused on the Torah. Since we all possess different intellectual faculties, emotions, character traits, and viewpoints, there is no natural way that we can maintain our individuality and still function as one unified body.

Only if we are focused on G-d do our differences suddenly cease to be obstacles to unity. Our differences still exist, for they are all necessary in order to fulfill our collective Divine mission. But our shared devotion to G-d's Will transforms these differences into stepping-stones toward our goal rather than barriers to it. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 11, p. 250) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

NO PLACE FOR ARROGANCE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And they had come to the desert of Sinai and camped in the desert. Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain." (19:2)

Mashal: There was once a young man who was an outstanding Torah scholar. However, he possessed an exceptionally great character flaw - that of extreme vanity. He rejected every offer suggested to him by shadchanim, since he felt that he could not find a kallah who was good enough for him. The years went by, and gradually the shadchanim stopped calling. This outstanding bachur became a rapidly aging bachelor.

One day, his friends came to him and told him bluntly that he must overcome his haughtiness if he ever hoped to find a wife. They suggested that he concentrate on the study of mussar, character development, since this might help him to change his outlook.

The bachelor took his friends' advice to heart and began a serious study of mussar texts. Soon, he reported to his friends that he was a changed person, and that he was ready to try again. Word spread, and once again the shadchanim approached him with offers of fine marriage proposals.

The first of these offers was a young lady who had been suggested to him once before, whom he had rejected. The shadchan believed that the prospective bridegroom, now that he had come to his senses, would see her in a different light.

But he was sadly mistaken. The boy was angry with the shadchan for suggesting the same person again and remarked, "How dare you offer me the same shidduch again!" The young man bristled with indignation. "When I was almost perfect, only lacking the attribute of modesty, I rejected her; now that I have added modesty to my array of talents, so that I am completely perfect - she is certainly even less suitable for me!"

Nimshal: The Midrash describes how all the different mountains expected the Torah to be given on their peaks. One was regal in its height. Another had majestic peaks. Yet Hashem chose Har Sinai, since it was the smallest of the mountains. The lesson is clear: The Torah can only be acquired by one who thinks of himself as small, humble and modest. Arrogance has no place in a G-d-fearing, Torah Jew.

UNITED STRENGTH

Kobriner Rebbe

"Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain." (19:2)

Bnei Yisrael camped there, as one man with one heart. (Rashi)

It is only with unity that we can oppose the strong mountain of wickedness that is constantly surrounding us.

SPIRITUAL DESERT

Reb Noson of Breslov

“They had journeyed from Refidim and had come to the desert of Sinai, and they had come to the desert of Sinai and camped in the desert. Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain.” (19:2)

The primary Torah that a person attains is that which he acquires in the “desert” - i.e., with struggle and with difficulty. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 205a)

The desert is an inhospitable place, devoid of physical comforts and full of dangers to life. In such a place, seemingly bereft of G-dliness, the only advice is to call out to G-d and ask Him to reveal Himself.

ENCOURAGING THOUGHTS

Shem MiShmuel

“They had journeyed from Refidim and had come to the desert of Sinai.” (19:2)

How was it in the case of their arrival in the wilderness of Sinai? They were in a repentant mood. Thus, too, they left Refidim in a repentant mood. (Rashi)

Since the Jews realized their weakness, that they had become lax in the observance of the Torah and were therefore discouraged and dejected, they gained strength from the thought that they “had come to the wilderness of Sinai,” that they were on their way to Har Sinai to receive the Torah. It was the anticipation of the Revelation that gave them new courage and strength to face the tasks ahead.

LIFTING THE LEADER

Reb Yaakov Abuchatzzeira

“Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain. And Moshe went up to G-d...” (19:2-3)

If the Jews, united “as one man of one mind,” can successfully confront the evil impulse, which is like a high mountain, then their leader, too, can rise in G-dliness (“and Moshe went up to G-d”).

TORAH EDUCATION FOR ALL

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And Hashem called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘This is what you shall say to the House of Yaakov and tell to the Bnei Yisrael...’” (19:3)

When the Jewish people received the Torah, Moshe taught the general principles of the Torah to the Jewish women, the Bais Yaakov, after which he learned the minutiae of the laws with the men. The general principles came first, after which the details and particulars followed.

In his later years, a group of men came to the home of the Chafetz Chaim zt’l to inform him about a new “breach” in the ramparts of Torah tradition: the Bais Yaakov women’s seminary that had been established in Krakow. They argued that the Torah forbids all such innovations and cited the Gemara that teaching a girl Torah is like teaching her tiflus (folly) (Sotah 20a).

While they were trying to persuade the Chafetz Chaim to condemn the seminary, a second group arrived to ask for his blessing for the same institution.

The first group was confident that they had proven conclusively that the existence of such a seminary was strictly forbidden, and they were sure that the elderly sage would denounce the newcomers in no uncertain terms. His response, however, was the exact opposite of what they expected. “Oy,” he cried, “such a holy undertaking, and I have no part in it!”

The Chafetz Chaim explained how he could say such a thing, even after hearing all the arguments of the first group.

“True,” he began, “Chazal did compare teaching a girl Torah to teaching her tiflus, but they were talking about a time when girls absorbed an outlook of pure and simple faith in their homes from earliest childhood. In such times, Chazal said that girls should continue to receive an upbringing at home and not go out to study Torah in a school setting.”

“Now, however, the choice is no longer between an education at home or in school. Girls cannot avoid being exposed to profane influences that are found everywhere in contemporary society. This seminary is providing the only way of saving girls from those influences, and there is not the slightest question that all Jewish girls should be required to attend!”

WINGS OF PROTECTION

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

“You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I carried you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me.” (19:4)

Before Matan Torah, God commanded Moshe to deliver a message to Bnei Yisrael, beginning with the following pronouncement: “You saw what I did to Egypt, and that I carried you on the wings of eagles, and brought you toward Me.”

Rashi explains the meaning of the metaphor על כנפי עשרים, which likens Bnei Yisrael’s journey to a flight “on the wings of eagles.”

Other birds, Rashi writes, fly while holding their young with their legs, rather than atop their wings, to protect them from birds that fly above them. Eagles, however, fly at a higher altitude than all other species, and so they have no reason to fear other birds. Their only fear is from the arrows of hunters. They therefore place their young on their wings, so that any arrows that are fired pierce the body of the adult eagle, instead of killing the offspring.

Similarly, Rashi writes, when the Egyptians trapped Bnei Yisrael against the sea, they were hurling stones and firing arrows at them, but the miraculous cloud which God placed behind Bnei Yisrael absorbed the arrows, protecting the people - like the eagle receiving the arrows to protect its young.

The Chiddushei HaRim offers a deeper understanding of Rashi's comments, explaining that God protected us not only from the Egyptians' actual "arrows" and stones, but also from their "arrows" in the allegorical sense.

The Midrash teaches that as Bnei Yisrael stood trapped against the sea, the prosecuting angels in the heavens argued that Bnei Yisrael were not worthy of being miraculously saved. After all, the angels claimed, Bnei Yisrael worshipped idols just as the Egyptians did. Why, then, should Bnei Yisrael be saved while the Egyptians drown? This argument was an "arrow" hurled at Bnei Yisrael at that critical time. Hashem, in His boundless love for His people, shielded them from these "arrows," from these attacks. He saw the people's faith and commitment at that moment, and so He protected them from the "arrows" of the past, from the guilt incurred by their prior misdeeds.

The Chiddushei HaRim writes that this is why Hashem tells the people in the very next pasuk, ... ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו. - "And now, if you heed My voice..." What matters is ועתה - what happens now, the commitment that we make right here at the present moment to obey Hashem.

The avoda zara which Bnei Yisrael had worshiped back in Egypt did not matter once they wholeheartedly placed their trust in God now as they found themselves trapped.

As long as ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקולי, we make a sincere commitment now, in the present, Hashem puts us on His back, so-to-speak, and protects us from the "arrows" of our past.

A person should never feel unworthy of learning Torah, of performing mitzvos, of getting involved, of taking on a role, or of living an observant lifestyle because of the mistakes of his past.

A person might naturally fear the "arrows" that will be thrown at him because of his past history. He might think to himself, or fear that others will think, "Who are you kidding? Remember what you did in high school? Remember how you used to speak? Remember all those fights you got yourself into? Remember what you used to watch? Remember how you used to spend your free time? Remember who you used to hang out with?"

Hashem here declares that He protects us from these "arrows," from these questions regarding our worthiness.

It doesn't matter what happened yesterday - or even what happened this morning. As long as we are genuinely committed ועתה, in the present, then Hashem shields us from all claims of unworthiness, and lovingly embraces us accepts our efforts to grow and improve.

ALWAYS TREASURED

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

"You shall be a special treasure to Me among all the nations, for all the earth is Mine." (19:5)

Rav Dovid Lelover explained this pasuk homiletically. When Hashem describes Klal Yisrael as a treasure (סגולה), this alludes to the Hebrew vowel segol (סגול). A segol, with its two dots on top and one dot directly below the center between them, looks the same no matter how you turn it. Turn it sideways, it still looks the same.

So too, every Jew, no matter what situation you are in, even if you completely turned from Hashem, you remain a Jew in His eyes. Don't give up hope. Hashem treasures you.

WELL-TESTED TREASURE

Sefas Emes

"You shall be a special treasure to Me among all the nations, for all the earth is Mine." (19:5)

I am no expert in treasures, but there is one treasure that I know of, and it has already been well-tested: the Jewish nation.

THE ONLY MASTER

Shem MiShmuel

"Now, therefore, if you will indeed listen to My voice, you shall be a special treasure to Me..." (19:5)

Why did G-d wait until this point to admonish the Jews to listen to His commandments? Because it was only then that the Jews were entirely free from the physical and mental enslavement to which the Egyptians had subjected them. People cannot truly accept the sovereignty of the kingdom of Heaven while they are in the service of mortal masters. Dependence on others does not allow for complete faith in G-d's Unity.

Thus, according to the Talmud, Canaanite slaves in the land of Israel were exempt from reciting the Shema, the acknowledgement of the Unity of G-d, because they had another master beside Him, and as long as they were beneath the yoke of the mortal master they could not fully accept the "yoke of the kingdom of Heaven."

Thus, too, G-d did not demand complete obedience from the Jews until they had left Egypt far behind them and had encamped before Har Sinai. Only then did He say to them: I have removed you from slavery in Egypt and have caused you to be higher than the Egyptians; "I have borne you on eagles' wings" (Shemos 19:4) so that now you no longer have any mortal master above you.

Now you are in a position to accept the Kingdom of Heaven's sovereignty and I expect you to "listen to My voice."

LOVED BEYOND LOGIC

Sefas Emes

"You shall be a special treasure to Me among all the nations, for all the earth is Mine." (19:5)

Segulah (special treasure) refers to a quality that is beneficial but whose properties are ineffable, because they devolve from a high spiritual level called transcendental intellect.

The reason why G-d chose the Jews to be His special nation is ineffable and beyond explanation. (See Likutey Moharan I, 21:9)

TIMELESS TREASURE

Yakar Mipaz

"You shall be a special treasure to Me among all the nations, for all the earth is Mine." (19:5)

G-d said to the Jews: You will be "My special treasure," not only when other nations worship idols - as that would be no strong distinction.

Your distinction lies in that even when the time will come when "all the earth will be Mine," when all the world will turn to Me and all nations will acknowledge G-d's sovereignty, you - the Jews - will still be My favorite people from among all the nations.

OVERTURNING DECREES

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"You will be to Me a kingdom of Kohanim." (19:6)

This verse can be understood on the basis of a saying of our Sages (Moed Katan 16b), "Who rules over Me? The righteous. I decree, but the righteous have the power to nullify the decree." See there.

Thus, the entire Jewish nation, who are all righteous, enjoy the attributes of sovereignty, as it were, and are able to overturn a negative decree issued from Above, transforming it, and instead eliciting kindness for the Jewish people.

Our verse, "you shall be to Me a kingdom of Kohanim," alludes to this idea. A kingdom implies sovereignty, and "to Me" implies on a deeper level that the Jewish people will enjoy sovereignty over G-d, as it were. It implies that they can overturn or cancel a decree from Above.

Yet the sovereignty that the Jewish people enjoy is qualified. The verse specifies "a kingdom of Kohanim" - that is, those who, like the Kohanim, exemplify the attribute of kindness (see Zohar 1:266b). "Only then," G-d declares, "you have sovereignty over Me. But do not, Heaven forbid, try to overturn beneficial decrees from Above for the Jewish people. In this regard, you have no sovereignty (see Bereishis Rabbah 53:4). Only for eliciting kindness do you exercise sovereignty."

INHERITED SANCTITY

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"You will be to Me a kingdom of Kohanim." (19:6)

Another explanation of this verse: There are three crowns - the crown of Torah, the crown of Kehunah, and the crown of sovereignty, but the crown of a good name surpasses them all (Avos 4:13). Now, none of these crowns, with the exception of the crown of Kehunah, can be inherited.

The crown of Kehunah is passed down from father to son, and all the children receive their father's lineage as a Kohen. The crown of sovereignty is indeed inherited, but not all of the king's children inherit the crown. The Kehunah, by contrast, is inherited by all the Kohen's children.

Now, the Jewish people possess the sanctity of the Avos, as the verse states (Devarim 32:9), "For a portion of G-d is His nation, Yaakov a rope of His inheritance." G-d chose the Jewish people because of the sanctity that their fathers bequeathed to them. This is what the verse means when it says "a kingdom of Kohanim."

Just as a Kohen passes on the sanctity of his Kehunah to his children, each Jew receives an inheritance of sanctity from the Avos.

DEPENDENCE ON EACH OTHER

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk

"And all the people answered together and said, 'Everything that Hashem has spoken we shall do!'" (19:8)

It is impossible for everyone to perform all the mitzvot. There are mitzvot for the Kohanim, some for the Levites, others for the Kohen G-del, and others for owners of fields or private property.

That is why the Israelites "answered together" - we are partners in the observance of all the commandments, and not individuals.

PERSISTENT HOLINESS

Pardes Yosef

"And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow.'" (19:10)

Let their holiness persist not only "today," when they hear the Torah and G-d's other moral instructions, but even "tomorrow," when they will go hence.

CLEANING OUR CLOTHING

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[G-d told Moshe to tell the Jewish people,] 'They must wash their clothes [in preparation for the Giving of the Torah].'" (19:10)

Our spiritual “clothes” are our thought, speech, and deed. These are the means by which the soul expresses and presents itself to the outside world, just as we clothe ourselves in accordance with the image of ourselves that we wish to convey to society.

G-d gave Moshe the job of sanctifying the people, but it was the people’s job to cleanse their clothing. Similarly, it is the role of our teachers and rabbis - the Moshe’s of our generation - to inspire us, direct us, and connect us to G-d. Ultimate success, however, depends upon our own efforts to cleanse our thoughts, our speech, and our actions, for only then can they serve as means of expression for Divine revelation. (HaYom Yom, 5 Sivan; Sefer HaSichot 5697, p. 243) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

RESPECTING THE SCHOLARS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“Anyone who touches the mountain will surely die.” (19:12)

The Imrei Emes would bemoan the fact that we are so careful with our tefillin that even if we were to knock an empty tefillin pouch to the ground, we would rush to pick it up and give it a kiss as a demonstration of our love and respect, yet when it comes to those who actually wear the tefillin, we are nowhere near as careful!

The importance of treating all people with respect cannot be exaggerated, but it is especially true when it comes to Torah scholars. For, not only do their merits bring blessings and protection to the entire world (Sefer Magen Avos L’Rashbitz - Pirkei Avos 3:11), but in many respects, they represent the Torah itself!

This point was aptly demonstrated by the Chofetz Chaim in a letter he wrote to a group of anti-religious doctors from Lithuania who sought to close the yeshivos by forming a delegation to “investigate the health and nutrition that yeshiva students were receiving.”

The Chofetz Chaim immediately realized their true intention and sent them a warm letter detailing the constant care the students receive in addition to three healthy meals each day.

At the end of the letter the Chofetz Chaim signed it with further blessings, but then added the following stark warning:

“I wanted to remind your honors that if it is written in the Torah, ‘Anyone who touches the mountain (upon which the Torah will be given) will surely die’ - surely, then, someone who touches the Torah itself should be even more concerned!”

We too must be wary of this message and make every effort to treat those who study Torah with great honor. By doing so, we are not only honoring the Torah, we are honoring Hashem Himself (Kesuvos 111b).

PREPARING FOR UNITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Set boundaries around it for the people...” (19:12)

Every Jew was at Sinai. When we are united, as we were at Sinai, then we merit the revelation of G-dliness. But it takes preparation and effort to be united and to remain united. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 454)

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Malbim

“Set boundaries around it for the people...” (19:12)

This is to teach us that Jews must set boundaries to themselves and not delve too deeply into things Divine that are beyond their grasp. Instead, they should retain a simple, unquestioning faith.

FORWARD LOOKING

Reb Noson of Breslov

“On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and the powerful sound of the shofar.” (19:16)

This corresponds to the shofar of Rosh HaShanah (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 49a-98). The sounds of the shofar are tekiah, teruah, tekiah. Our Sages (Rosh HaShanah 34a) taught that the staccato teruah is either a series of short blasts (shevarim) or very short sounds (teruah).

G-d gave the Torah accompanied by the sounds of the shofar. The tekiah - a clear, simple blast - represents the goodness and kindness of the gift of Torah, which frees us from the evil inclination. Similarly, the shofar will announce the coming of Mashiach. At that future time, we will also be freed of the evil inclination and all troubles will disappear, for the world will experience the joy of Torah.

At present, however, we also hear the teruah - the staccato sounds that represent wailing and mourning over our many troubles. We should fix our sights on attaining joy, overcoming the sadness and depression of this world by looking forward to the joy and happiness of the Future. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 165a)

BRINGING THE PEOPLE FORTH

Imrei Emes

“And Moshe brought the people forth from the camp to meet G-d...” (19:17)

According to the Chiddushei HaRim, it is the task of the Jewish leader to remove his people from corruption and bring them closer to holy things. Moshe fulfilled this task, for he “brought the people forth, from the camp” of everyday life and caused them to rise “to meet G-d.”

RESTING UP FOR THE BIG DAY

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“And Moshe brought the people forth from the camp to meet G-d, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain.” (19:17)

The Midrash says: “On the day of the giving of the Torah, the Israelites were in a deep sleep. Moshe had to wake them and bring them to Har Sinai.”

G-d forbid that a kingdom of priests and a holy people should fall into a deep sleep because of idleness or laziness on such an eventful day as the time of the acceptance of the Torah.

All they did was for the sake of heaven. From the second day of Sivan, they prepared themselves for that important day. They feared that they might be exhausted from all their preparations and that they might not give their full attention to what would be going on. They wanted to have a clear mind at the acceptance of the Torah.

They decided to sleep so that they would awaken with a clear mind to accept the Torah.

EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE IT

Baal Shem Tov

“And Moshe brought the people forth from the camp to meet G-d, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain.” (19:17)

As our ancestors prepared to receive the Torah at Sinai, “they stood at the bottom of the mountain.” Not at the foot of the mountain, but at its bottom, i.e., underneath the actual mountain, for our Sages taught in the name of R' Avdimi ben Chama ben Chasa: “This verse informs us that the Holy One, Blessed be He, held the mountain over them like a barrel.”

Was it necessary for G-d to threaten the Jews by suspending a mountain over their heads? Did they not willingly declare, “na'aseh v'nishma - we will do, and we will obey” (Shemos 24:7)?

Rather, this addresses a common obstacle in Torah study:

We may be inspired to study Torah and dive into its Divine wisdom with enthusiasm. After some time, we suddenly find our passion waning until we are left spiritually dry. At that point, it is hard to continue, and we are wracked with disappointment over our inability to experience our former enthusiasm for G-d's holy Torah.

The solution is to replicate the Giving of the Torah at Sinai:

The Jews arrived with tremendous enthusiasm, but then G-d held a mountain over their heads to impart the message: When your passion fades, apply yourself to your studies as if compelled, as if a mountain were suspended over your heads, for even the words of Torah you utter without enthusiasm remain sacred.

SEEING THE TZADDIK

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder. Moshe spoke and G-d responded to him with a voice.” (19:19)

One of the differences between Moshe Rabbeinu and the other neviim was that the neviim were unable to speak to Hashem; they simply heard His message. Moshe, however, could converse directly with the Almighty.

This distinction between Moshe and the other prophets is made by the Rambam (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 6:7), who further notes that Bnei Yisrael did not have complete faith in Moshe until they witnessed the events at Har Sinai (ibid. 8:1). Hence, Moshe's uniqueness was clearly demonstrated at that time, when the people saw with their own eyes how he approached the mountain and heard him speak directly to Hashem.

Every year, at the annual Agudath Israel Convention, a large crowd gathers to hear and be inspired by words of Torah and hashkafah from gedolei Yisrael, rabbanim and important lay leaders. One of the regulars at the annual convention in years past was a man who came in from out of town especially to hear the speech delivered by Rav Moshe Feinstein zt'l. Year after year, at great expense and effort to himself, he would arrive in time to hear R' Moshe speak and then he would leave.

Many people knew him, as he was an annual participant, but what most people did not know was that this man did not speak a word of Yiddish - and R' Moshe addressed the crowd only in Yiddish! And yet, he came, every year without fail, and sat through R' Moshe's keynote address, concentrating and seemingly appreciating every single word.

Someone who knew him finally asked him, “Why do you come here especially to hear R' Moshe, when you don't even understand what he is saying?”

“What? Do you think I need to understand what R' Moshe is saying?” retorted the man. “When Moshe Rabbeinu spoke at Har Sinai, it says “Moshe yidaber,” but only Hashem could hear him. Obviously, the words are not important. I just need to look at the tzaddik and my neshamah understands everything he says!”

STAYING WITHIN OUR BOUNDARIES

Rebbe Nachman

“And Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Go down, warn the people lest they break [their formation to come nearer] to Hashem to see, and many of them will fall...’” (19:21)

This warning applies to all people, at all times and on all levels. Every individual has his own parameters for serving G-d, based on his health, his mental capabilities, and so on. A person should never go beyond his limitations in his service of G-d. (See Likutey Moharan I, 72; ibid., II, 5:7)

The obstacles, adversities and limitations that a person faces when serving G-d represent his individual tzimtzumim, the parameters that G-d set up for him - just as G-d set parameters when He created the world. A person must take great care never to go beyond his limitations. (ibid., II, 5:7; ibid., II, 9)

NEEDED CONNECTION

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Go down, warn the people lest they break [their formation to come nearer] to Hashem to see, and many of them will fall’... And Moshe said to Hashem, ‘The people are not able to ascend onto Har Sinai because You warned us, saying ‘Make boundaries for the mountain and sanctify it.’” And Hashem said back to him, ‘Go descend, then you shall ascend and Aharon with you, but the Kohanim and the people should not break [their formation] to ascend towards Hashem, lest He make a breach against them.’” (19:21-24)

The Midrash explains that when Hashem went around the different nations to offer them the Torah, each nation asked what restrictions they would have to implement if they were to accept it. Hashem responded to each nation with a specific restriction which that nation felt that they could not keep.

The children of Esav would not accept a Torah which prohibited murder, the people of Amon would not accept it if adultery was prohibited, and Yishmael would not accept a Torah which said not to steal. However, the Jewish People came along and said “Na’aseh V’nishma - we will do and then we will hear what is in it” (Shemos 24:7) and so Hashem gave them the Torah without specifying any restrictions.

Rav Yitzchak Berkovits asked in the name of the Avnei Nezer, if the Jewish People would not have said Na’aseh V’nishma and they would have asked Hashem what was in the Torah, what would Hashem have told them? Which aspect of the Torah runs so contrary to the inner workings of a Jew that he would have refused to be bound by a Torah which contained this prohibition?

The Avnei Nezer answers from the verses mentioned above that we see many times that Hashem warned Moshe to tell the Jewish People not to ascend Har Sinai. They even required physical fences in order to prevent them from touching the mountain even though Hashem had already warned them that anyone who touches the mountain will die. With this, the Avnei Nezer answers his question - What aspect of Torah would the Jewish People have not accepted? They would have rejected any law that limited their spiritual growth and stopped them coming closer to the Ultimate source of Holiness. This is because a Jew’s innate nature is to grow and to seek out and cling to holiness, and anything that would prevent them doing this would not have been accepted as a value system to live by.

DESCENDING TO THEIR LEVEL

Kotzker Rebbe

“And Moshe said to Hashem, ‘The people are not able to ascend onto Har Sinai because You warned us, saying ‘Make boundaries for the mountain and sanctify it.’ And Hashem said back to him, ‘Go descend...’” (19:23-24)

Because of his modesty, Moshe felt that all Israelites were on his level. He could not understand why anyone would not want to listen to the command of G-d and ascend the mountain.

That is why Hashem told him, “Go, descend.” Hashem wanted Moshe to be on the same level as the others, so he would see why extra precautions had to be taken.

DESCENDING AND ASCENDING

Reb Noson of Breslov

“I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” (20:2)

When G-d wished to give the Torah to the Jews, the angels countered, “Give Your glory [i.e., Torah] to the heavens [i.e., the angels].” G-d told Moshe to respond to the angels and he said to them, “Did you descend to Egypt?” (Shabbat 88b)

Moshe specifically asked, “Did you descend?” The only way to attain Torah is by ascending from level to level. However, each time a person is ready to ascend to the next level, he experiences a descent (see Likutey Moharan I, 22:11).

The descent into Egypt transformed the Jews from being landowners in the Holy Land to slaves in Egypt. Yet that very descent made them worthy of ascending, afterwards, to the level of receiving the Torah.

Angels, in contrast, cannot ascend or descend from the level they are at. Therefore they cannot merit to receive the Torah. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 24b)

GETTING TO KNOW THE AUTHOR

Reb Baruch HaLevi Epstein

“I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” (20:2)

In the Aseres HaDibros, the first word “אנכי” is an acronym for the words, “אנא נפשי כתיבת יהבית” - “I myself have given the script.” The Almighty is saying in this one word that if a person wants to know who I am - My character and My methods, then he should study My writing - My script.

Similar to the concept that by analyzing a person’s handwriting and language, one can glean his personality and outlook on life, so too, one who studies the Torah, Hashem’s script, will attain a greater knowledge of Hashem.

UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP

Shach al HaTorah

"I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (20:2)

I took you out so that you would accept the Kingdom of Heaven. (Mechilta)

This commandment was given in the singular ("I am Hashem your G-d, Who brought you") because the knowledge of G-d and the ability to perceive the power and providence of the Creator of the Universe is not given to everyone in equal measure.

Each individual understands these things in a manner commensurate with their mental and spiritual capacities, their knowledge of the Torah and their work on behalf of Judaism, so that every person will have a different conception of G-d Who has proclaimed Himself to be *his* G-d.

IT'S ALL FROM HASHEM

Rebbe Nachman

"I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (20:2)

YHVH (G-d) indicates compassion. Elokekha (your Lord) indicates strict judgments. Both are Anokhi (I), for whether a person is basking in good fortune or suffering difficulties, it all stems from the One G-d.

"Out of the land of Egypt" refers to each individual's exile. "From the house of bondage" indicates that when one subdues his "bondage" - his evil characteristics - he can recognize G-d at all times, be they good times or trying times. (See Likutey Moharan I, 4:10)

ESCAPING BONDAGE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (20:2)

Like the revelation of G-d's greatness that took place at the time of the Exodus, G-d's greatness is always revealed when people leave behind their material bondage and opt for spirituality. Therefore, G-d said, "I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 280)

When one recognizes G-d and believes in Him, he is freed from servitude and bondage. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 272)

Egypt Mitzrayim (מצרים, Egypt) is similar to Meitzarim (מיצרים, narrow straits, constrictions). Through the Exodus, G-d removed us from material constraints; through the Giving of the Torah, He gave us the ability to transcend limitations. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 366)

DUAL ROLES

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (20:2)

Now, why did G-d give the Jewish people the Torah only after they left Egypt, not beforehand?

Consider the following principle: One who serves G-d out of fear is like a servant, but one who serves G-d out of love is like His child (Zohar 3:82b). Had G-d given the Jewish people the Torah before they left Egypt, the Jewish people would have received the Torah predicated upon their fear - afraid that if they did not accept the Torah, G-d would not free them. Thus, they would have received the Torah merely as servants. Consequently, G-d first took them out of Egypt and only then gave them the Torah. By then, the Jewish people would receive the Torah out of love, as G-d's children.

This is what is implied by the words of the verse "Who took you out of Egypt": "Now that I have taken you out, I am giving you the Torah, liberating you from the house of slaves, so that you may serve Me as My children, rather than as slaves."

Another alternative explanation of the teaching of our Sages that at the Sea of Reeds, G-d appeared to the Jewish people as a youth, and at the Giving of the Torah, as an elder:

Youngsters are typically unsettled and wavering; a child does not have the ability to settle on one thing. Similarly, when the Sea of Reeds split, two Divine attributes were exhibited: the attribute of G-d's kindness toward the Jewish people, and the attribute of judgment toward Pharaoh and his people. By contrast, the dominant quality of an older person is that of a settled mind, and he tends to exhibit a single trait - the trait of kindness.

Indeed, at the Giving of the Torah, only the trait of kindness pervaded over the Jewish people, as well as the whole world. As our Sages say (Shabbos 88b), "The whole world was filled with fragrance."

However, the truth is that even when G-d executes judgments against the wicked, He does so only as an expression of His kindness toward the Jewish nation. This, then, is the underlying meaning of the verse "I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt." Although at the Exodus and the subsequent Splitting of the Sea G-d displayed His strict judgment, the main trait He exhibited even then was kindness, because even in exacting judgment, He did so as a kindness toward the Jewish people. This, then, is the import of the verse "I am Hashem, your G-d," meaning, "today I am showing the same attributes that I did when I liberated you from Egypt." This is implied by the fact that G-d refers to Himself here both with the Name Havayah, which indicates His attribute of kindness, and Elokim, which indicates His attribute of judgment. Then, too, everything was, in fact, a kindness.

WORTH CONTEMPLATING

Kotzker Rebbe

“Do not make for yourself an idol.” (20:4)

Do not make an idol out of a mitzvah. Meaning, we should never have the attitude that a mitzvah has only an outer form and not contemplate its intrinsic meaning.

MAGNIFIED KINDNESS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“Who visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons to the third and fourth generations, for My enemies; but Who shows loving-kindness.” (20:5-6)

These verses can be interpreted as follows: When G-d exacts punishment for sin, the sin is reduced by the punishment. The word for “punish” in the verse (פקד) means “visits,” as in visiting a punishment on a person, and also denotes “a reduction,” as in the verse (Shmuel I 20:25) “David’s place was left vacant (ויפקד).” Through being visited by punishment, the sin is reduced.

By contrast, when G-d rewards a person for performing a mitzvah, the mitzvah is not diminished. On the contrary, the mitzvah becomes greater since G-d takes pleasure in bestowing goodness. Consequently, by causing G-d to bestow His bounty, the person’s performance of the mitzvah becomes greater. This, then, explains the continuation of our verse, “I perform loving-kindness to thousands of generations.” When G-d rewards a person, the kindness is magnified.

PEACEFUL SHABBOS

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Remember the Shabbat day to make it holy.” (20:8)

The six weekdays represent work, toil, and dispute, as they correspond to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. They also correspond to the six Mishnaic concepts: permitted and forbidden, fit and unfit, pure and impure. During the weekdays, we toil with these concepts and must struggle to attain a correct decision in matters of law. Shabbat, the day of rest, corresponds to peace. On this day, we clarify all doubts and attain clear perception and inner peace. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 28)

RESTFUL SERVICE

Rabbeinu Bechaye

“Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the Seventh Day is a Shabbos to Hashem your G-d.” (20:9-10)

The Hebrew verb ta’avod (“you shall labor”) may also be rendered as “you shall serve (G-d).” Hence, the Fourth Commandment may be taken to convey a message as follows: “Six days you shall serve G-d by doing all your work, but on the Seventh Day you shall serve Him by resting.” (Said in the name of the Rambam.)

DAY OF REST

Rebbe Nachman

“He [Hashem] rested on the Seventh Day.” (20:11)

The Messianic era will be a great “Shabbat” when we will experience rest from the attacks of our enemies and from other difficulties. Observing Shabbat in the present world is propitious for nullifying one’s enemies and overcoming obstacles. (Likutey Moharan I, 57:8)

OVERCOMING ENVY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“You shall not covet...” (20:14)

G-d provides each of us with all the resources - possessions, talents, and strengths - that we require to fulfill our unique mission in life. We each achieve our ultimate fulfillment by dedicating these resources to our Divine mission and utilizing them to heighten the awareness of G-d in the world.

Any resources that G-d has not provided us with at any given moment are thus not necessary for fulfilling our mission and would in fact sidetrack us from the development of our fullest potential. Reflecting on this truth will cure us of any envy. (Hitva’aduyot 5742, vol. 3, pp. 1661-1662) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

PREDESTINED BELONGINGS

Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra

“You shall not covet...” (20:14)

Many people wonder about the prohibition: “You shall not covet.” How can a person be commanded not to covet something which he finds attractive?

The answer is found in a parable about a villager. If we assume he is intelligent, he does not covet the daughter of the king, for he knows that she is out of his reach.

Similarly, an intelligent person understands that whatever Hashem has given to someone else belongs to that other person and is out of his reach. Therefore, it never occurs to him to covet that which belongs to another person.

ENGRAVING HUMILITY

Rebbe Nachman

“Moshe said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for G-d came only to raise you up, so that fear of Him will be on your faces and you will not sin.’ (20:17)

Moshe attained this level of fear and humility and was able to instill it within every Jew (see Likutey Moharan II, 72).

Moshe is called mechoket (see Devarim 33:21), which means “engraver.” Moshe was able to “engrave” his spiritual attainments into the Jewish people.

To this day, his spirit calls out to each limb of every individual's body, reminding it to serve G-d. The numerical value of the word mechoked (מחקה) is 248, the same as the number of limbs in the human body. (See Likutei Moharan II, 26)

PROPER FEAR

Reb Pinchas Koritzer

"Moshe said to the people, 'Do not fear, for G-d came only to raise you up, so that fear of Him will be on your faces and you will not sin.'" (20:17)

The true fear of G-d is shown through fear of sin and not of punishment.

SEEING THROUGH THE CLOUDS

Rebbe Nachman

"The people stood at a distance while Moshe approached the thick cloud where G-d was." (20:18)

The difference between Moshe and the Jews was that when the people saw "thick clouds" and obstacles, they remained at a distance. But Moshe never wavered.

Even when things looked difficult, even when his objectives seemed distant and clouded, he always knew that he would find G-d - because G-d is always present, even in the "thick clouds" and confusions that a person faces. That is how Moshe attained his exalted level. (See Likutei Moharan I, 115)

FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

Reb Elimelech Lizensk

"And when you will make an altar of stones for Me, do not build them hewn, lest you wave your sword over it and defile it." (20:22)

The sefer Yetzirah (a Kabbalistic text from the third and fifth centuries C.E.) calls letters "stones."

"When you will make an altar of stones for Me" means "When you will sacrifice your evil inclination by occupying yourself in the study of Torah."

"Do not build them hewn" means "Do not flaunt your learning through sophistry and hair-splitting arguments, for they become like hewn stones."

For you have "waved your sword over it" is showing your sharpness for your own honor and ego, and you will "defile it," G-d forbid, for you will show your "nakedness" (Shemos 20:23), meaning your arrogance. Your intent should be for the sake of Heaven and to praise Him.

RISKS OF ARROGANCE

Reb Elimelech Lizensk

"Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it." (20:23)

The Hebrew word ma'alos - "steps" can be rendered also as "virtues." Beyond its literal implications, this commandment symbolically reminds us that one who thinks highly of oneself and boasts of one's virtues will thereby cause one's shortcomings to be exposed. For by one's arrogance, one reveals one's foolishness and faults.

PURE SACRIFICES

Reb Yisroel Friedman of Ruzhin

"Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it." (20:23)

During the days of the Temple, when a Jew brought a sacrifice, he confessed to the Kohen and regretted his wrongdoing, showing his modesty and humility. Today, we do not have the Temple, the altar, nor sacrifices. We have substituted study and prayer. Therefore, one should have in mind that his studying and prayer must be as pure as the sacrifices of old.

RESPECT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it." (20:23)

The priests wore trousers under their tunics, so their bodies would not have been exposed to the altar even on a staircase. Nonetheless, since walking up a staircase gives the impression of exposing one's uncovered body, it is more modest to use a ramp. If G-d requires us not to offend unfeeling stones, all the more so does He require us to respect the feelings of our fellow human beings.

The requirement to show respect to the stones of the altar teaches us to safeguard the honor of other people even when they are not aware that they are being disrespected, even when we do not mean to offend them. Thus, this last verse of this section of the Torah sums up the message of G-d's revelation at Har Sinai: G-d is found in even the most mundane things. Our relationships with other people are part and parcel of our relationship with G-d. And in a positive sense, loving other people is in truth loving our Creator. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 21, p. 124) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

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