

United We Stand

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Parshas Yisro

20th of Shevat 5786

The Parsha's Path

Now listen to my voice. I will advise you and may G-d be with you. You will be for the people opposite G-d, and you will bring the matters to G-d (18:19).

This week's Parsha features the arrival of Moshe's father-in-law, Yisro, who is famous for advising Moshe to delegate his judicial responsibilities to a network of judges. However, Netziv argues that that was only one component of Yisro's advice. While Yisro does suggest the establishment of a judicial system to ease that aspect of Moshe's duties, he first adds two new responsibilities.

When Yisro originally asks Moshe why all the people were gathered before him, Moshe explains that "they come to me to seek G-d, when they have a matter they come to me and I judge between man and his friend, and I inform them the laws of G-d and His instructions." While this statement is conventionally understood as one idea - that the people come when they have a dispute to seek G-d's ruling - Netziv sees Moshe's statement as containing two separate ideas - people come to Moshe for judgments, but they also come to him to learn G-d's commandments.

Yisro told Moshe that teaching G-d's commandments was not enough. There are two kinds of intermediaries between a leader and the people: one that is appointed by the leader, relaying and carrying out his will, and another that leverages his relationship with the leader to lobby on behalf of the people. Moshe was doing his job as appointee of G-d, relaying G-d's will to His subjects. However, Moshe also needed to pray and advocate on behalf of the people. If there was a Heavenly decree against a person or the people, Moshe would, generally, simply relay it. Yisro taught him that he should plead their case in the heavenly court, leveraging his position to be there for the people. Thus, Yisro instructed him, *You will be for the people opposite G-d, and you will bring the matters to G-d.*

In addition, previously Moshe *informed* the people of G-d's commandments. Yisro told him that this was not enough. *And you shall adjure them (regarding) the commandments (18:20).* Moshe, due to his lofty position, had a unique power to give the people *mussar*, to urge and inspire them to follow G-d's ways. Teaching the content is important, but it is insufficient if the content is not internalized and appreciated. Furthermore, Moshe was to *teach them the path that they should walk on*, meaning, according to Netziv, *derech erez*.

It is understandable that Moshe had previously not fully considered these duties. He was overloaded with an unsustainable slew of cases requiring adjudication and instruction. What could seem higher priority than resolving conflict? What loftier role is there than that of *dayan*? Yisro

showed Moshe that as important as judging is, that could mostly be delegated with minimal sacrifice. On the other hand, Moshe's judicial involvement was actually stifling his leadership, preventing him from being the advocate and preacher that only he could be.

Perhaps the Torah recorded Yisro's message because it wasn't just for Moshe. All of us are prone to viewing our place as primarily dealing with problems. Especially in the media age, we are bombarded by conflicts and crises that beg our attention. Unlike Moshe, most of the time this is not even constructive, but even when it is - like personal, family, and local issues where we actually are called on to do something - they can overwhelm our vision and block out the bigger picture. True, when we have a few spare moments we may manage to teach some Torah and spread some good, but even that fails to systemically address the tremendous challenge and opportunity of our generation. Yisro teaches us that there are two jobs that come before all else: advocate and preacher. When problems arise, we cannot limit ourselves to narrowly addressing them, and we certainly cannot just shake our heads and bemoan them. We must, firstly, be an advocate of our people, summoning all our passion and devotion towards praying for a merciful judgment. Secondly, we must be proactive, doing whatever we can to strengthen ourselves, our families, our communities, and our nation in following G-d's Will - whether that be in areas of mitzvah observance, Torah learning, safety, earning *parnassah*, our whatever other issues need addressing. Like Moshe, we must switch from a mentality of dealing with the world as it is to recognizing that it's up to us to change the world - both in Heaven and on Earth. May we all be successful.

Deeper Meanings

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This week's Parsha features the *Aseres Hidibros*, the "Ten Commandments". While the giving of these commandments was a climactic and crucial event in Jewish history, one fundamental question has plagued commentators for millennia: why these ten? Of all the commandments in the Torah, why are these the ones G-d wished to articulate to the whole people at Sinai? There are certainly many other commandments that are equal or greater in severity than some of the ones listed. Some commentators suggest that there's nothing particularly special about these commandments; they are merely a sampling of the other *mitzvos*, to give the Jewish people a taste of what they'll have to keep. However, others suggest that there is something paradigmatic about this set of laws, that they somehow epitomize what the whole Torah is about. But if so, what?

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Rabbi David Fohrman suggests that the five commandments on the first tablet, which deal with matters between man and G-d, parallel the five commandments on the second tablet, which deal with matters between man and his fellow. Understanding these parallels can help illuminate what the commandments are all about.

The first commandment is to acknowledge "I am H', your G-d." The sixth commandment, the first on the second tablet, is "You shall not kill." Rabbi Fohrman suggests that what drives a person to kill someone is the belief that the world would be a better place without them; it would be better if they didn't exist, so you wipe out their existence. Likewise, the fundamental reason a person denies G-d is because they feel it would be better if G-d didn't exist. Denial of G-d removes Him from one's life and allows one to live as they please without feeling the yoke of Heaven upon them. These two commandments adjure us to respect the right of G-d and one's fellow humans to exist.

The second commandment is not to fashion or worship idols, and parallels the seventh commandment, not to commit adultery. Here the connection is obvious: We must not betray sacred relationships. Just as we may not betray G-d by worshipping idols, we may not betray our spouses. The next step after respecting G-d's and others' existence is to afford them this most basic loyalty.

The third commandment is not to take G-d's Name in vain, paralleling the eighth commandment, not to kidnap. G-d's Name is, as it were, His body, the way He is manifested, from our perspective, in this world. A body is a physical manifestation and extension of a person, connecting his soul with reality. Likewise, our recognition of G-d actually brings Him into reality and enables Him, as it were, to act. When we take G-d's Name in vain, treating it as trivial, we violate this representation of G-d and subvert it in a way that is against His will. This is much like how when one kidnaps a person, he violates his body, his physical form, misappropriating it against the person's will. These commands require us to respect the physical autonomy of people and G-d, and treat them accordingly.

The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbos, which is described as a sign and a testimony to G-d's Creation of the World and His dominion over it. By refraining from creative activity, we acknowledge G-d as the Ultimate Creator. Thus, Chazal tell us, to violate the Shabbos is equivalent to denying Creation. This parallels the ninth commandment, not to give false testimony. Giving false testimony is distorting a person's past, accusing them of doing or not doing something when it simply isn't true. Likewise, not keeping Shabbos is giving false testimony by denying G-d's Creation and His involvement in the world. We are adjured in these commandments to respect and acknowledge the past actions of G-d and our fellow man and not distort them.

The fifth commandment, the bridge between the commandments between man and G-d and man and man, is to honor one's father and mother. Just as we are required to honor G-d, our heavenly father, we must honor our parents, who are also responsible for our existence. This parallels the final commandment, not to covet, because just as we must be fully appreciative of those who made us and gave us life and refrain from focusing on what they failed to provide, we must

appreciate everything we have and not feel like we should have what belongs to others.

What emerges is that the Ten Commandments really represent a progression from recognizing G-d and others' existence to recognizing G-d and others' ownership. The Ten Commandments are thus, fundamentally, the first Bill of Rights. Unlike the Bill of Rights, however, the Ten Commandments don't focus on what we're *entitled* to, but rather what we *owe* to others and to G-d. Rabbi Fohrman suggests that the Ten Commandments are best encapsulated by Hillel when he was asked to summarize the whole Torah while standing on one foot: What is hateful to yourself, do not do unto others. Only when we grant this basic respect, regardless of how we may be treated or what others are doing, can a foundation be laid for the ideal of *love your neighbor as yourself* and brotherly reconciliation. We must show our fellow Jews that no matter what, we respect their existence, we would never betray them, we respect their right to act with autonomy, we respect their past - their accomplishments, their hardships, and their perspectives, and we respect their right to what they have and appreciate that G-d gives every person the resources meant for them. May this foundation of respect usher in a new era of love and unity and allow us to merit to once again hear G-d's voice, heralding the Ultimate Redemption, *bimheira viyameinu*.

Goal of the week

Make at least one form of media consumption or other source of negativity less accessible (e.g. website blocker, delete social media, leave phone/computer in a certain location during a certain time, avoid a negative friend, etc.), and/or add one source of positivity to your routine (ego subscribe to the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation's *Aderaba* newsletter).

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Gavriel Margoliot ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror.

Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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