



SHABBAT PARSHAT YITRO · 17 SHVAT 5771 · JAN. 22, 2011 · VOL. 18 NO. 17

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

### AN OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE

*"Moshe brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d, and they stood under the mountain." (19:17)*

**S**ome three thousand years ago, a little-known Middle Eastern people gathered around a small mountain in a trackless wilderness and underwent an experience which changed the history of the world.

For the first time since the beginning of the universe, the Creator spoke to an entire nation. The nation was called Israel. The mountain was called Sinai. At Sinai, G-d gave the Jewish People the Torah, the mystical blueprint of the Creation.

*"...and they stood under the mountain."*

The Talmud (Shabbat 88a) reveals the hidden meaning of this verse. At Sinai the Jewish People literally stood "under the mountain." G-d held the mountain over them like a barrel and said, *"If you accept the Torah, well and good. If not, this will be your burial place."*

This seems strange. Could it be that G-d coerced the Jewish People into accepting the Torah? Was the Torah the original "offer you can't refuse?" This is both unpalatable and contradictory, for we know that it was Israel alone among the nations that was prepared to accept the Torah 'sight unseen'. When the Creator offered the Jewish People the Torah they said "We will do and we will hear..." — meaning that we will accept the Torah before we know all of what it requires of us. If they were prepared to accept Torah voluntarily, why should coercion be necessary?

#### The Sixth Day

At the beginning of the book of Genesis it says *Yom HaShishi* — 'the sixth day'. When speaking of the other days of the Creation, the Torah does not use the definite article 'the.' It merely says "second day, third day, etc." Translators add the 'the' to make the English more idiomatic, but in Hebrew, only the sixth day is referred to as "the sixth day." Why?

The stylistic anomaly of the addition of word 'the' teaches us that on that first sixth day, at the very moment of the

completion of the physical world, G-d placed a condition into Creation. G-d made a condition that the universe would remain in a state of flux and impermanence until the Jewish People accepted the Torah at Sinai. And that was to be on another 'sixth day.' The sixth of Sivan — *Shavuot* — the day of the giving of the Torah.

It's an amazing fact to ponder. The very fabric of existence hung in the balance for two and a half thousand years from the creation of Mankind until Israel's acceptance of the Torah. In other words, the continuation of the entire Creation was predicated on Israel agreeing to accept the Torah. If they had refused, the entire world would have returned to primordial chaos.

#### Who's Running The Show?

There's a problem here. How could the whole future of the world depend on the choice of the Jewish People? How can existence itself — reality — be dependent on a created being? A creation cannot dictate the terms of existence; it can only be subject to them. Only one Existence can dictate existence: He who is Existence itself.

G-d held a mountain over the Jewish People not because they needed a little 'encouragement', but because Existence cannot depend on man's volition. Man cannot govern what must be. Existence depends on G-d alone.

It was for this reason that the Torah had to be given through coercion. For even though Israel was prepared to accept it voluntarily, the Torah, the Will of the Creator, cannot be subject to the will of His creations. Just as G-d must be, so the Torah must be. Just as the Torah must be, so must it be given in a way which must be.

As an offer you can't refuse.

- Sources: Midrash Tanchuma I; Talmud Shabbat 88a; Maharal of Prague

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

**H**earing of the miracles G-d performed for *Bnei Yisrael*, Moshe's father-in-law Yitro arrives with Moshe's wife and sons, reuniting the family in the wilderness. Yitro is so impressed by Moshe's detailing of the Exodus from Egypt that he converts to Judaism. Seeing that the only judicial authority for the entire Jewish nation is Moshe himself, Yitro suggests that subsidiary judges be appointed to adjudicate smaller matters, leaving Moshe free to attend to larger issues. Moshe accepts his advice. *Bnei Yisrael* arrive at Mt. Sinai where G-d offers them the Torah. After they accept, G-d charges Moshe to instruct the people not to approach the mountain and to prepare for three days. On the third day, amidst thunder and

lightning, G-d's voice emanates from the smoke-enshrouded mountain and He speaks to the Jewish People, giving them the Ten Commandments: 1. Believe in G-d, 2. Don't worship other "gods", 3. Don't use G-d's name in vain, 4. Observe Shabbat, 5. Honor your parents, 6. Don't murder, 7. Don't commit adultery, 8. Don't kidnap, 9. Don't testify falsely, 10. Don't covet.

After receiving the first two commandments, the Jewish People, overwhelmed by this experience of the Divine, request that Moshe relay G-d's word to them. G-d instructs Moshe to caution the Jewish People regarding their responsibility to be faithful to the One who spoke to them.

## ISRAEL Forever

### SAVING SHABBAT

**“R**emember the Day of Shabbat to keep it holy." The fourth of the Ten Commandments heard by our ancestors at Sinai will be repeated this Shabbat in synagogues throughout the world.

ArtScroll / Mesorah Publications, the world's largest Jewish publishing house, recently made an announcement which reaffirms the loyalty of observant Jews to Shabbat. While launching an historic project of digitizing its 1500 titles, ArtScroll will refrain from doing the same for its most

popular books – its Shabbat and High Holy Days prayer books. The reason – to observe the prohibition against using electronic devices on Shabbat.

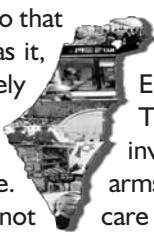
ArtScroll's action should serve as a reminder to many Jews who have almost completely forgotten what Shabbat is all about. A national reawakening to the observance of this holy day, our Sages tell us, could make us worthy of our ultimate redemption and a peaceful and prosperous Israel forever.

## LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PEOPLE

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

### RABBI YITZCHAK LURIA (THE ARY) – THE DELAYED BRIT

**T**he famous leader of the kabbalists in Tsefat, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (Adoneinu Rav Yitzchak), came to that city after living for years in Egypt. Tradition has it, however, that he was born in Jerusalem to extremely righteous parents. The Prophet Eliyahu told his father that he should not allow the *brit* of his son to take place until he appeared to him in the synagogue. When the time of the *brit* arrived Eliyahu had still not appeared. No one among the assembled guests



understood the reason for the delay since the *mohel*, the father and the baby were all there. The father ignored the mounting cries to start the *brit* until Eliyahu finally arrived.

The prophet, who traditionally arrives at every *brit* in invisible form, was this time seen taking the baby in his arms and informing his father that he should take special care of his son, for he would be a light to all Israel and the entire world.

## PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Yitro had 7 names. Why was one of his names Yeter?
2. News of which two events motivated Yitro to come join the Jewish People?
3. What name of Yitro indicates his love for Torah?
4. Why was Tzipora with her father, Yitro, and not with Moshe when *Bnei Yisrael* left Egypt?
5. Why does verse 18:5 say that Yitro came to the desert — don't we already know that the *Bnei Yisrael* were in the desert?
6. Why did Moshe tell Yitro all that G-d had done for the Jewish People?
7. According to the *Midrash* quoted by Rashi, how did Yitro respond when he was told about the destruction of Egypt?
8. Who is considered as if he enjoys the splendor of the *Shechina*?
9. On what day did Moshe sit to judge the Jewish People?
10. Who is considered a co-partner in Creation?
11. "Moshe sat to judge the people, and the people

stood before Moshe...." What bothered Yitro about this arrangement?

12. Why did Yitro return to his own land?
13. How did the encampment at Sinai differ from the other encampments?
14. To whom does the Torah refer when it uses the term "Beit Yaakov"?
15. How is G-d's protection of the Jewish People similar to an eagle's protection of its young?
16. What was G-d's original plan for *Matan Torah*? What was the response of the Jewish People?
17. How many times greater is the "measure of reward" than the "measure of punishment"?
18. How is it derived that "Don't steal" refers to kidnapping?
19. In response to hearing the Torah given at Sinai, how far backwards did the Jewish people retreat in fear?
20. Why does the use of iron tools profane the altar?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 18:1 - Because he caused a parsha to be added to the Torah. Yeter means addition.
2. 18:1 - The splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek.
3. 18:1 - Chovav.
4. 18:3 - When Aharon met Moshe with his family on their way down to Egypt, Aharon said to Moshe: "We're pained over the Jews already in Egypt, and you're bringing more Jews to Egypt?" Moshe, hearing this, sent his wife and children back to Midian.
5. 18:5 - To show Yitro's greatness. He was living in a luxurious place; yet he went to the desert in order to study the Torah.
6. 18:8 - To draw Yitro closer to the Torah way of life.
7. 18:9 - He grieved.
8. 18:12 - One who dines with Torah scholars.
9. 18:13 - The day after Yom Kippur.
10. 18:13 - A judge who renders a correct decision.
11. 18:14 - Yitro felt that the people weren't being treated with the proper respect.
12. 18:27 - To convert the members of his family to Judaism.

13. 19:2 - The Jewish People were united.
14. 19:3 - The Jewish women.
15. 19:4 - An eagle carries its young on top of its wings to protect them from human arrows. So too, G-d's cloud of glory separated between the Egyptians and the Jewish camp in order to absorb Egyptian missiles and arrows fired at the Jewish People.
16. 19:9 - G-d offered to appear to Moshe and to give the Torah through him. The Jewish People responded that they wished to hear the Torah directly from G-d.
17. 20:6 - 500 times.
18. 20:13 - Since it is written immediately after "Don't murder" and "Don't commit adultery," it is derived that "Don't steal" refers to a crime carrying the same penalty as the first two, namely, the death penalty.
19. 20:15 - They backed away from the mountain twelve *mil* (one *mil* is 2000 cubits).
20. 20:22 - The altar was created to extend life; iron is sometimes used to make weapons which shorten life.

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A digest of the topics covered in the seven weekly pages of the Talmud studied in the course of the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle along with an insight from them

## TALMUDigest

## ZEVACHIM 72 - 78

- When forbidden matter becomes mixed with permitted food
- When we do not apply the rule of assuming that an unidentified object came from the majority
- When temporary disqualification of a sacrifice is irreversible
- How it is possible for a *treifah* animal's condition to be in

- doubt
- When the carcasses of sacrifices get mixed up
- Determining the nature of a sacrifice based on gender or age
- Cutting down the time for consumption of sacrifice
- Parts of different sacrifices that got mixed up
- Sacrificial blood that got mixed with water

### MISTAKEN IDENTIFY

In its discussion of what to do when sacrificial animals got mixed up, the *mishna* notes that it is impossible for such a problem to arise in a mix-up of a *chattat* sacrifice and an *asham* one. The reason is that only a female qualifies for a *chattat* while only a male for an *asham*.

Another possibility for recognizing which sacrifice is which is raised by the *gemara*. The Pesach sacrifice, which must be less than a year old, can never become confused with an *asham*, which must be over a year old. Why is this omitted by the *mishna*?

One answer given by the *gemara* is that while it is simple to distinguish between male and female, it is not the same in regard to age, because some animals look older or younger

than their age.

*Tosefot* challenges this conclusion by citing a *gemara* (*Kiddushin* 55b), which rules that a stray female animal found outside Yerushalayim must be assumed to be a *shlamim* sacrifice (because most animals leaving the city are those designated for sacrifice). Perhaps, asks the *gemara* there, it is a *chattat* sacrifice which can also be a female? The answer given is that the animal discovered is over a year old, while a *chattat* sacrifice must be less than a year old. This seems to run counter to what our *gemara* says about the inability to distinguish between a yearling or older one.

*Tosefot* resolves the problem by explaining that the *gemara* in *Kiddushin* meant that the animal found was several years old and was easily distinguished from being in its first year.

• Zevachim 75b

### What the SAGES Say

"There can be a one-year-old animal which looks like a two-year-old and a two-year-old which looks like a year-old."

• Gemara - Zevachim 75b

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## MA, NO THEISM?

From: Jonathan Swartz

Dear Rabbi,

I heard that Abraham's parents were not Jewish. I was wondering then how Abraham was considered the first Jew? If he was the first Jew, what other religion was there? Christianity, yes. I guess my question is if no one was Jewish, how could anyone be Christian? What separated the two religions from one another and how did these religions come to be? Thanks.

Dear Jonathan,

Abraham was the first Jew in that he was the first individual to separate himself from the rest of idolatrous humanity and recognized G-d. That's why the Torah refers to him as "Ivri", which means "on the other side".

It was through Abraham that G-d re-introduced the teachings of Judaism originally taught to Adam and which were preserved until then by only a few. Judaism was thus transmitted through his progeny, the Hebrews – derived from their being the descendants of Abraham the "Ivri"; or Israelites – the descendants of Jacob/Israel.

However, formally speaking, there only became a Jewish People at Sinai where, en masse, the Israelites underwent a proper "conversion" involving acceptance of G-d, the Torah, circumcision for males and immersion in the mikveh for all. (See [The First Jew](#)).

While Abraham lived around 1900 BCE, the events at Sinai took place around 1300 BCE.

There were pagan religions at this time, but no other monotheistic religions. In fact, Abraham's Hebrew teachings pre-date all other extant religions, including Hinduism and Zoroastrianism.

Christianity ("christos" being the Greek word for anointed, i.e. savior) is based on the belief of certain Jews of Jesus' times that he was messiah. This belief was rejected by the vast majority of Jews at that time, which is why the followers of Jesus then directed their belief toward non-Jews. As a religion separate from Judaism, it only took root in the early centuries of the Common Era, particularly under Emperor Constantine who became Christian and enforced it upon all the subjects of his vast Empire.

So the history of Abraham and his descendants, the Jews, spanned a period of at least 1900 years before the Jewish followers of Jesus (himself born a Jew) formed the sect that eventually became Christianity during the ensuing centuries.

By the way, Islam, which in many ways is more similar to Judaism than Christianity, is a relative late-comer, arising only around 700 CE, based on Muhammad's being inspired by the teachings of Judaism which he then spread by power of word and sword, initially among the pagan peoples of Arabia, and later through the Near East and Africa.

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## WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO? ---

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

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### KEEPING YOUR WORD

**Question:** I have been negotiating with a potential buyer of my home and made up my mind to sell it to him at a certain price. I even made a verbal commitment to do so but never legally formalized it in any manner. A higher offer has been made and I wonder if it is ethical for me to back out of my first commitment.

**Answer:** There are different levels of responsibility. If a *kinyan* act of acquisition has been made, such as receiving some down payment, the first buyer can halachically compel you to go through with the deal. (In the case of items which are not real estate, money alone is not considered a *kinyan*, but backing out may incur a Heavenly curse for going back on your word.) Where no *kinyan* has been made there is still an issue of faithlessness (*Bava Metzia 49a*) and a halachic authority must be consulted as to whether there is a

justification for switching to the higher offer after making a verbal commitment to the first buyer.

How high a standard one should strive to maintain in keeping his word is illustrated by the story of the Talmudic Sage Rabbi Safra. He was in the midst of reciting the *Shema* when someone approached him to purchase an item he had for sale. Since Rabbi Safra could not interrupt his recital, the buyer assumed that he was not satisfied with the offer and therefore made a higher offer. When he finally completed the *Shema*, the Sage turned to the buyer and said: Take the article for the amount you initially mentioned, because I had intended to sell it to you for that sum.

This, conclude our Sages, was a fulfillment of what King David praises in one who speaks the truth in his heart. (*Tehillim 15:2*)

## THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY ---

### GIVERS AND TAKERS

The generosity of Jews towards their needy brothers is admirable beyond description. For example, before each Pesach many millions of dollars in cash and grocery items are distributed to needy families in Israel by charitable organizations and municipalities.

One organization made its appeal for funds by featuring on television the heart-wrenching tale of a giver turned taker. A businessman showed viewers ten years worth of

receipts for over 10,000 Shekels in monthly donations he gave to a local food aid organization. Viewers then saw film footage of this same fellow standing in line to receive aid from that same organization after his thriving business collapsed and left him with debts.

People who heard this story could not help seeing it as a vindication of the Talmudic comparison of charity to a wheel, with givers sometimes becoming takers.

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