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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

The Nuclear Family

“...And Yisrael encamped there opposite the mountain.” (Shemot 19:2)

When children marry, build their own homes and create new and separate lives, family dynamics change. Rather than those intimate Shabboses of the nuclear family, get-togethers become more like the in-gathering of the clan.

But sometimes Hashem gives us a “gift” that brings us back to that original closeness.

When my mother was nearing the end of her life, all my children except the youngest were able to fly to London to see her. Some were able to fulfill the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick; some did the mitzvah of *levayas hameis*, accompanying the dead to their resting place; and some, both. Some stayed the whole time, and some flew back and forth twice. Such was their love for Gubba – That’s what they all called her. My married childrens’ spouses and children were not able to come, so what happened was that we found ourselves together, just like we were all those years before. And we rekindled an earlier - now lost - intimacy. It was as though my mother had brought us together for a reunion - an echo of that core family bond.

When the Jewish People stood at Sinai, Rashi says they were “*K’ish echad b’lev echad - like one man with one heart*”. This unity was not coincidental, but rather a key condition for accepting the Torah, whose chief principle is love toward others, “*v’ahavta l’reiacha*”.

When leaving this world, my mother - whose life exemplified the acceptance and love toward others - gave us a moment of unified closeness — like the nuclear family of the Jewish people standing together at Sinai.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Hearing of the miracles that Hashem performed for *Bnei Yisrael*, Moshe's father-in-law Yitro arrives with Tzippora, Moshe's wife, and their two sons, reuniting the family in the wilderness. Moshe details for Yitro the Exodus from Egypt, and Yitro converts to Judaism. Seeing that the only judicial authority for the entire Jewish nation is Moshe Rabbeinu himself, Yitro suggests that subsidiary judges be appointed to adjudicate smaller matters, leaving Moshe free to attend to larger issues. After consulting with Hashem, Moshe accepts this advice.

The Jewish People arrive at Mount Sinai where Hashem offers them the Torah. Once they accept, Hashem 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, Hashem's voice emanates from the smoke-enshrouded mountain; He speaks to the Jewish People, giving them the Ten Commandments:

1. Believe in Hashem.
2. Do not worship “gods”.
3. Do not use Hashem's name in vain.
4. Observe Shabbat.
5. Honor your parents.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not kidnap.
9. Do not testify falsely.
10. Do not covet.

After receiving the first two commandments, the Jewish People, overwhelmed by this experience of the Divine, request that Moshe relay Hashem's word to them. The Parasha ends with an exhortation against making idols and the command to build an altar to Hashem.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

BIRKAT HAGOMEL THANKSGIVING BLESSING (Part 3)

“A ship in harbor is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for.”
G.T. Shedd

Birkat HaGomel reads: “**Blessed are You Hashem, our God, King of the universe, Who bestows good things upon the guilty, Who has bestowed every goodness upon me.**

The congregation then responds: “**Amen! May He Who has bestowed goodness upon you continue to bestow every goodness upon you forever.**”

Birkat HaGomel is unique: We have no other blessing that requires any response other than “amen”. Yet, when *Birkat HaGomel* is recited, responding “amen” is not enough; rather, those present respond by blessing the person who made the blessing! After answering “amen”, they add: “*May He Who has bestowed goodness upon you continue to bestow every goodness upon you forever.*”

I once asked Rabbi Shlomo Katz -- the brilliant Rosh Yeshivah of the legendary Chevron Yeshivah and the Rabbi of the Shul where I am a member -- why it is that *Birkat HaGomel* has such a different ending than every other blessing. He offered a fascinating insight:

Amen, he explained, is the “signature” to the blessing; the word *amen*, in effect, completes the blessing and brings it to an end. As he put it, *amen* is the symbolic equivalent of a period at the end of a sentence, and it draws to a close the influence and the inspiration of the blessing that was just recited.

Rabbi Katz made a connection to the way that Rachel named her first son: the barren Rachel watches her sister Leah give birth to six sons, while Bilhah and Zilpah - Leah and Rachel’s maid-servants - each bore another two sons. At long last, after an agonizing wait, it is Rachel’s turn. Having practically despaired of ever meriting a child of her own, Rachel finally gives birth.

How strange it is, Rabbi Katz points out, that Rachel calls this long-awaited son “Yosef”; the Torah explains that the name Yosef is a plea – “*May Hashem add on for me another son*” (*Bereshit* 30:24). Wouldn’t it have been more appropriate for Rachel to give her son a name reflecting the depth of her gratitude to Hashem? But instead, through the name she gives, Rachel reveals her passionate desire for *another* child!

Rabbi Katz explained that by using a name that signified her gratitude to Hashem, Rachel might have been given the mistaken impression that she had been granted *enough* blessings, that she didn’t want more. She saw how her sister Leah -- after naming her fourth son Yehudah to thank Hashem for all the blessings He had showered upon her -- then stopped having children. Rachel realized that by thanking Hashem, Leah had inadvertently given the impression that what she had was enough and that she didn’t need any more. It was as if Leah, by giving her son the name Yehudah (from the Hebrew word for thanks) had said “*amen*” to her own blessing.

Unquestionably, Rachel’s feelings of indebtedness to Hashem were immeasurable, but she did not want to do anything that might inadvertently be the cause of her not being able to have another child. She thus chose the name “*Yosef - He will add*” – expressing her desire for more, rather than a name that signified thanksgiving.

So, too, Rabbi Katz continued, the person reciting *Birkat HaGomel* does not want their blessings to end, but when the congregation answers *amen* it is as if they are saying “enough”. Even though the person reciting the blessing wants to let Hashem know that they need more blessings, they cannot do so, because it is forbidden to add anything to the words of the blessing itself. Instead, the congregation therefore says it on the person’s behalf. When the congregation declares “*Amen!*” *May He Who has bestowed goodness upon you continue to bestow every goodness upon you forever*,” they are asking Hashem to regard their *amen* **not** as the “period at the end of the sentence”, but rather as a ‘comma’, to be followed by a continued inundation of goodness!

To be continued...

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

THE SACRIFICIAL ALTAR

(*Mitzvos* #40 and #41 in *Sefer HaChinuch*)

Do not make [idols] with Me; gods of silver and gods of gold do not make for yourselves. Construct for Me an altar of earth, and you shall offer beside it...In every place I shall mention My name, I shall come to you and bless you. When you construct an altar of stones, do not hew the stones, for it will become profaned if your blade is waved over it. And do not ascend with steps upon My altar, upon which you may not expose yourself

(Shemos 20:21-23).

THE MITZVAH

Following the Giving of the Torah, Hashem commanded us to construct for Him “an altar of earth,” which means that it must be set upon the ground and not upon pillars. In the Wilderness, this altar was made out of copper-plated wood and filled with earth (*Rashi*). The above passage also gives an option to make the altar out of unhewn stones; which is the type of altar that furnished the *Beis HaMikdash*. The Torah forbids ascending the altar by means of steps, it must therefore be accessed by means of a ramp.

EARTH OR UNHEWN STONES

The idol-worshippers used to make altars out of silver and gold, believing that this would draw down blessings through spiritual forces symbolized by these metals. Hashem commands us to sacrifice to Him upon a simple altar, either of wood and copper filled with earth, or of stone, because He does not need conduits of precious metals to bring down blessing (*Ibn Ezra*).

Presumably, gold symbolized the sun and silver symbolized the moon.

The stones may not be hewn with a chisel or with any metal tool, since metal is the material of weapons, which shorten life, while the altar atones and lengthens life. Furthermore, the altar makes peace between us and Hashem, and it is inappropriate to strike it with something that causes destruction (*Rashi*). In addition, Hashem wanted us to use whole stones, because if we were to cut them in two, half of a stone would go to the altar and the other half would be thrown away, which is disrespectful (*Ibn Ezra*). Hashem also intended to discourage the ways of idol-worshippers, who would use metal tools to engrave idolatrous designs on their altars (*Rambam*).

THE RAMP

Ascending or descending steps entails spreading out one's legs. Even though the Kohanim wore pants beneath their tunics, it would still be disrespectful toward Hashem's altar if they were to spread apart their legs. We are therefore commanded to build a ramp, upon which the Kohanim must ascend foot-by-foot so that their legs do not spread apart disrespectfully.

If we are commanded to be sensitive to the dignity of even stone and earth, then we must certainly treat people, who are created in Hashem's image, with the utmost respect (*Rashi*)! It is especially important to treat the altar with reverence because it atones for our sins (*Baal HaTurim*).

In addition, it is haughty to walk with large steps, and haughtiness causes conflicts between people. Since the entire purpose of the altar is to bring peace between us and Hashem, it is not fitting to ascend upon it with large, haughty steps, but rather meekly (*Moshav Zekeinim*).

We may further suggest that the altar needed to be made out of earthly materials and set down upon the earth to symbolize that the offerings that are brought upon it provide atonement for the entire earth (see *Sukkah* 55b). Similarly, it had to be accessed specifically by a ramp for it to be considered an extension of the earth.

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Q&A

Questions

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 in Midian 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 — do we not already know that *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, the Giving of the Torah? What was the Jewish People's response?
17. How many times greater is the “measure of reward” than the “measure of punishment”?
18. How is it derived that “Do not 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?

Answers

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 told Moshe: "We're pained over the Jews who are already in Egypt, and you're bringing more Jews to Egypt?!" Hearing this, Moshe 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 "Do not murder" and "Do not commit adultery," it is derived that "Do not 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 used to make weapons which shorten life.