

# Intercession Shabbat Reader

בשלה – יתרו

תשס"ח – 2008

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## Zemanim for Intersession 2008/5768

<b>Location</b>	<b>Sat Date</b>	<b>Parasha</b>	<b>Candle Lighting*</b>	<b>Friday Sunset</b>	<b>Sunrise</b>	<b>Sunset</b>	<b>Shabbat Ends**</b>
Jerusalem, Israel	1/19	Beshalah	4:19	4:59	6:33	5:00	5:35
	1/26	Yitro	4:26	5:06	6:31	5:07	5:42
Brooklyn, N.Y.	1/19	Beshalah	4:39	4:57	7:15	4:57	5:32
	1/26	Yitro	4:47	5:05	7:11	5:05	5:40
Turnberry, Florida	1/19	Beshalah	5:35	5:53	7:08	5:53	6:28
	1/26	Yitro	5:40	5:58	7:07	5:59	6:34
Orlando, Florida	1/19	Beshalah	5:35	5:53	7:18	5:53	6:28
	1/26	Yitro	5:40	5:58	7:16	5:59	6:34
San Juan, Puerto Rico	1/19	Beshalah	5:51	6:09	6:59	6:10	6:45
	1/26	Yitro	5:56	6:14	6:59	6:14	6:49
Palm Beach, Aruba	1/19	Beshalah	6:17	6:35	7:06	6:35	7:10
	1/26	Yitro	6:20	6:38	7:06	6:39	7:14
Acapulco, Mexico	1/19	Beshalah	6:09	6:27	7:12	6:28	7:03
	1/26	Yitro	6:13	6:31	7:12	6:32	7:07
Cancun, Mexico	1/19	Beshalah	5:10	5:28	6:27	5:29	6:04
	1/26	Yitro	5:14	5:32	6:26	5:33	6:08

**Special Note: Tu Bishbat is on Tuesday January 22, 2008 (see article on page 123)**

**\* Candle Lighting is calculated based on 18 minutes before sunset (Jerusalem is 40 minutes before sunset).**

**\*\* Shabbat end time calculated based on 35 minutes after sunset.**



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# Torah Commentary

## Beshalah

### Leaving Egypt and its Aftermath

#### I. Upon Leaving Egypt

The Parasha's opening clause ויהי בשלח פרעה את העם (Ex. 13:17) speaks of Israel's departure from Egypt in terms of Pharaoh's sending them forth. This phraseology constitutes a subordinate "when" clause, merely marking a point in time to introduce the principal clause which follows\*, which speaks of G-d's leading the nation forth. Why did the Torah not begin this notable juncture with a locution that is more in keeping with the narrative that follows, either "When G-d took Israel out of Egypt" or merely "When Israel departed from Egypt"?

Perhaps ויהי בשלח פרעה את העם was intended to highlight the fact that Pharaoh finally acceded to G-d's שלח את עמי request (Ex. 5:1), reversing his resounding pronouncement of לא אשלח, "I shall not send" (v. 2). It also points out the precise fulfillment of the guarantee Hashem gave Moshe at the burning bush ואחרי כן ישלח אתכם (3:20). In the account of sending Israel forth, the שלח stem had only appeared in conjunction with the Egyptians ותחזק מצרים (12:33), not with Pharaoh. Thus, an aspect of the previous narrative is given "literary closure."

The opening verse continues with ולא נחם אלקים וגו'. This states that G-d did not lead the Israelites via the Route to the Land of the Philistines because it was close; He was concerned that if they promptly confronted battle they might have a change of heart and return to Egypt. Juxtaposing ויהי בשלח פרעה with ולא נחם אלקים וגו' suggests that when Pharaoh finally yielded to G-d's demand, a chapter in Israel's history was concluded and another chapter began under a very different mode of Divine governance. It is one

thing for G-d to overpower and manipulate the heart of Pharaoh, a side player in His plans, to achieve His ends. But He does not want to so manipulate the Israelites, the focus of his present purpose, to remove their free will and force them not to return to Egypt. G-d will not now compel His people to proceed prematurely; He will nurture and educate them, prompting them to develop into the nation He would like them to become. He will respect the condition of free will and lead them in a manner accommodating their immaturity.

G-d's leading Israel via the indirect route to Canaan was no surprise to Moshe or to the reader. Moshe had been informed at the burning bush that upon their leaving Egypt the Israelites would serve G-d "on this mountain" (3:12). He was then at Horeb, located in the general direction of Midian and not in the North of Egypt, near the "Route to the Land of the Philistines." God had decided from early on that the Israelites should not proceed to the Promised Land through the closest route, one that would have taken a matter of days. Of course, this led to the Lawgiving occurring in the wilderness.

## **II. The Pursuit**

What were Pharaoh and the Egyptians thinking after the devastating tenth plague when they agreed to Moshe's request? Moshe had never asked permission for the Israelites to go beyond a three-day distance to serve Hashem, but he also never mentioned that they would return. It goes without saying that previously free people, who had been invited to dwell in the country and had been unjustly enslaved against their will, when away on leave have neither a moral nor legal obligation to return to slavery. This is especially (and always) the case with people who had been treated with inhumane harshness.

When Pharaoh gave permission he said **כַּדְבַרְכֶם** and **כַּאֲשֶׁר דְּבַרְתֶּם** (12:31-32), "according to your words," meaning that men, women and children may go and with their cattle, but presumably only on the three-day-distance journey. Previously, he had intimated to Moshe that he realized that in such an eventuality they would not



return. When after the fourth plague he had at first agreed, he specified that they “not go far” (8:24). Subsequently, he stated that their request was clearly for (what to him was) a nefarious purpose (10:10), which can only mean he sensed they would not return. Of course, he could have sent sentries along, but he didn’t want to grant the leave. On the other hand, G-d could have had Moshe ask for permission to leave permanently; the request for a three-day journey was to reveal the extent of Pharaoh’s stubbornness and illuminate Israel’s predicament.

The Egyptians who pressed the Israelites to leave seem to have done so without mentioning or thinking of any conditions, “hurriedly sending them out, for they said we will all be dead” (12:33). Although we only know of it from Moshe’s assertion in the predictive mode, it may be assumed that Pharaoh’s ministers came to Moshe, bowed, and requested, “Leave, you and all the people that follow you” (11:8). As the psalmist put it: “Egypt was happy when they left” (Ps. 105:38). So while the populace was urging the Israelites to depart at once and his ministers were begging Moshe to leave, Pharaoh’s granting permission, stating **כדברכם** and **כאשר דברתם**, insisting on the point, was only a formality. It constitutes a farcical and pathetic scene of a monarch who in his haughtiness “just doesn’t get it.” He cannot publicly admit that Moshe’s awaiting his permission at this juncture was only to demonstrate that the mightiest of human kings must accede to G-d’s request. This is part of the mockery G-d perpetrates in Egypt (Ex. 10:2).

Shortly after the Israelite’s departure, G-d directed them to make a “detour” in order that Pharaoh would assume they were hopelessly lost in the desert. This provided the Egyptians a basis to rethink their position and pursue the Israelites to bring them back. G-d was preparing the way for another major manifestation of His glory.

When the information that Israel was not returning - and was apparently hopelessly lost in the desert - reached the king, he and his ministers had a “change of heart” and said, “What did we do that we sent Israel out from serving us?” (14:5). For Pharaoh,

granting permission for the journey turned out to be equivalent to sending the nation out of slavery; for his ministers, it seems natural to take their question to mean that when they pressed the Israelites to leave it was understood to be permanent. Regardless, king and ministers regretted what they did and mobilized a mighty force to bring Israel back. The stage was set for the Miracle at the Sea and for Egypt to finally recognize “*Ani Hashem.*”

Despite all that G-d already did for them, when Israel saw the mighty Egyptian army in pursuit they were very fearful and bitterly complained to Moshe, “What did you do to us to take us out of Egypt,” etc. (14:11-12). Ibn Ezra asks, why did they not think about fighting for themselves and their children? He answers: “The Egyptians were Israel’s masters and this generation was trained from its youth to endure the yoke of slavery. Possessed of a subdued disposition, they could not now battle with their masters. Also, they were not learned in war... and would not have been able to battle the Canaanites then, until a new generation arose that didn’t know slavery and acquired a lofty spirit.”

We will discuss the Song at the Sea in our next study.

### **III. Marah**

Immediately following the sea crossing we are informed **וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה** אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיָּם סוּף, that Moshe “moved” Israel from Yam Souf. The active causative verb **וַיִּסַּע** seems to indicate that he had to prod them to leave Yam Souf to continue on their journey, entering the desert, a fearful prospect to be sure. Free from slavery and from pursuit, and in a well-watered area, despite having recently experienced G-d’s great intervention, Israel was reluctant to abandon a comfortable location and enter dangerous territory. At the beginning of the national enterprise the point is made of tension between G-d’s exalted plans for the nation and its mundane, earthly orientation.

Sure enough, they travel three days without finding water. When finally they find water it is bitter and undrinkable (at a location that was called Marah, “bitter”). They complain to Moshe and he

cries out to Hashem who shows him a tree to solve the problem; Moshe casts what probably was a branch into the water and the water sweetens. Although certain trees appear to possess properties that sweeten some types of bitter water (Ramban), the point here is that G-d will provide for Israel. Then and there שם ונסהו, “There He set for it [the nation] statute and ordinance and there He tested it,” officially charging the nation for the first time with the basic principles of responsibility and accountability. A proclamation follows: If the nation is fully obedient to the will of Hashem its G-d “all the maladies that I brought upon the Egyptians I will not bring upon you כִּי אֲנִי ה' רִפְאֵךְ, for I, Hashem, am your healer” (Ex. 15:26).

When the Israelites departed from Yam Souf to enter the desert, like all travelers, they undoubtedly took a large supply of water with them. At Marah the text does not state they were thirsty as it does at a subsequent station, Rephidim (17:3), but that they complained, “what shall we drink?” Perhaps they desired a source of water to drink from rather than having to consume their limited reserves. In any event, Israel must learn to trust that G-d will provide for its needs in a timely fashion. The passage of the manna that follows shortly afterwards expands on this concept.

The Marah episode appears intended to achieve a preliminary status, preparatory to Revelation and the full Lawgiving that follow in due course. “*Hoq umishpat*” - which translate as “statute and ordinance,” unspecified and each in the singular - may possibly be a reference to the “*huqim umishpatim*” categories of law that will be attached to Revelation (see Deut. 5:28; 6:1; et al). This would be providing Israel a mini-Lawgiving containing certain basics as an introduction of sorts to the upcoming Decalogue and the major law compendium attached to it.

A *baraita* cited in the Talmud (BT *San.* 56b) views the Marah passage in this manner. It states (to some degree in an *aggadic* vein) that ten laws were given to Israel at Marah. These were the *Seven Misvot Bene Noah*\*\* - the great foundational code governing the essentials of human comportment - plus *dinim* (civil law, above and beyond what the *misvot Bene Noah* require in that

area), Shabbat and honoring father and mother.\*\*\* Conceptually, “*hoq*” is very appropriately applied to Shabbat, a ritual law central to the Decalogue that defines man’s relationship with G-d, and which is prominent in the upcoming episode of the manna. “*Mishpat*,” justice, may readily be seen as referring to “*dinim*,” laws regulating interaction between man and man, the later Decalogue commandments.

But it is also possible that “*hoq umishpat*” may be referring to the Covenant itself, to be translated as “a fixed law and justice,” possibly a hendiadys, meaning the fundamental principle central to the relationship between G-d and Israel (see *Natan Hokhmah Lishlomo* pps. 153-5). Upon Hashem’s benefaction on behalf of Israel, sweetening the water, He charged the nation with an increased degree of commitment to the relationship with Him. The attached verse constitutes a brief statement of basic covenant protocol (see our study *On Covenant Format in the Torah*). In it G-d requests a full measure of loyalty to His will and provides a promise of reward for compliance and a hint of punishment for betrayal. Such an explanation is supported by a passage in the Book of Joshua.

When Yehoshu`a “cuts” the Covenant with Israel וַיִּכְרַת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּרִית לַעֲמָ (Josh. 24:25), the continuation of the verse, apparently furnishing a description of the procedure being transacted, states, וַיִּשָּׂם לָוּ חֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט בְּשִׁכְמְךָ, using the identical locution as here. The Yehoshu`a passage relates to ours in standard chiasmic fashion. In the verse preceding his “cutting” the Covenant the people say to him, וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֵעָם... אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ נַעֲבֹד וּבְקוּלוֹ נִשְׁמָע, a statement that corresponds with the proclamation that follows the “*hoq umishpat*” of our passage. In addition, the last clause of the people’s statement to Yehoshu`a parallels the first clause of the proclamation of our passage, which begins by calling for וַיֹּאמֶר אִם... שְׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָע לְקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ. The first part of the people’s statement to Yehoshu`a is a summary of the second, third and fourth clauses of the proclamation of our context. Yehoshu`a next engages in what clearly are covenant-concluding procedures, namely, writing down the agreement and designating a large stone as witness.

Upon executing the latter details he sends the people home - the Covenant renewal was complete.

“*Hōq*” is widely attested as parallel to *berit* (covenant), apparently being somewhat of a synonym for it. Concerning the earth’s defilement for violation of the moral code, Isaiah states: “For they transgressed the teachings, abrogated *hōq*, annulled the ancient covenant” (Isa. 24:5). In reference to the fixed laws of nature, G-d states, “If My Covenant was not with day and night, if the *hūqot* of heaven and earth I did not appoint” (Jer. 33:25). In the Psalms it states: “He established it unto Yaaqob as *hōq*, to Israel as an eternal *berit*” (Ps. 105:10).

This matter requires further research.

#### **IV. Elim and Midbar Seen**

After Marah the Israelites come to Elim, where there were twelve water fountains and seventy palm trees “and camp there on the water.” The numbers twelve and seventy (as a decimal multiple of seven), in accordance with ancient Near Eastern symbolism undoubtedly possess figurative meaning in our context. They very likely allude to the distinguished, but limited, level of spiritual achievement attained by the Israelites before the Mount Sinai experience. This is before establishment of the numbers thirteen and eighty (the decimal multiple of eight) to symbolize achievements associated with the one G-d and the Covenant. (See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon.*) Elim coming after Marah is consistent with the notion of Marah having been a preliminary stage to the Sinai Covenant.

The following verse speaks of Israel’s arrival at “Midbar Seen, between Elim and between Sinai on the fifteenth day of the second month from leaving Egypt” (Ex. 16:1). By providing the date, the Torah is seemingly emphasizing that Israel was then midway to Mount Sinai when the following complaints and events occurred.

The people complain against Moshe and Aharon because of the shortage of food. They express nostalgia for Egypt, where “we sat by pots of meat and ate bread to fullness” (16:3). They feel they are doomed to die in the wilderness. It should be recalled that the people left Egypt with their cattle and flock and it was then just over one month following the Exodus. Thus, the present situation was not one of life and death. But obviously, the people do not want to partake of their livestock. Once again, it is an issue of trust in G-d.

## V. Trials and Tribulations

Although, as stated at the sea crossing, Israel believed in Hashem and in Moshe his servant (14:31), the people had not sufficiently internalized their commitment for it to be maintained through the vicissitudes that arise in life. Complaints and trials were common. *Parashat Beshalah* contains six of the ten instances that the Mishnah (Abot 5:4) makes reference to (according to the Rambam’s enumeration) wherein Israel “challenged” G-d during the wilderness period.

1. The complaint at Yam Souf, before the sea splitting (Ex. 14:11- 12)
2. The complaint for water at Marah (15:24)
3. The complaint for food, followed by the quail and manna (16:2)
4. Some individuals retaining manna until morning (16:20)
5. Some individuals going out to gather manna on Shabbat (16:27)
6. The complaint for water at Rephidim (17:2-3).

All this between Yam Souf and the arrival at Sinai - approximately six weeks as described in the narrative! Nevertheless, with great forbearance, G-d proceeds with His plans for *Mattan Torah*; apparently, although disappointed with Israel’s failings, He viewed them as frailties which to some extent are part of the human condition; they were indications of Israel’s great need for an educative process, but not reasons to postpone Revelation. On the contrary, the inability of Israel to abide by the

preliminary Lawgiving/Covenant of Marah supports the need for a more comprehensive Lawgiving/Covenant that will ultimately discipline them more fully.

Of course, even with the Sinai Lawgiving it is understood that the vision of the Torah is lofty and sublime and will not totally remake the character of the people overnight. Many would not abandon their habits and previous commitments without protracted effort. A national transformation requires G-d to extend His extraordinary patience and perseverance over the long term. But when Israel commits the golden calf apostasy it is a different matter altogether from the violations preceding Sinai; it was a breach of the Covenant after *Mattan Torah*. Then, G-d considered annihilating everyone except for Moshe and starting a new nation with him (32:10). The prophetic message in these passages may be providing a telescoped view of the macrocosmic reality at work in Israel's history.

## **VI. The Battle With Amaleq**

*Parashat Beshalah's* concluding passage is the story of the coming of Amaleq to battle against Israel (17:8-16). Moshe appointed Yehoshu`a to lead the military campaign as he, with the rod of G-d in his hand, together with Aharon and Hūr, ascended to the hilltop. When Moshe held his hand aloft, Israel prevailed; when he let it down, Amaleq prevailed. Moshe's hands became heavy; Aharon and Hūr placed a stone for him to sit on and supported his uplifted hands, which remained faithful until the sun set.

The literal explanations proffered here are implausible. When Moshe holds the rod of G-d high, perhaps with a flag or symbol attached to it, Israel's soldiers see it, are encouraged and succeed; when his hand is down they are deflated and fail. Or when he raises his hand he focuses G-d's supernatural intervention in Israel's favor. Or when he raises his hand and inclines the rod of G-d upon Amaleq, he brings plagues upon them.

The Mishnah Sages recognized that a literal reading of this passage was problematic and ask rhetorically: “Is it possible that Moshe’s hands win or lose the war?” (RH 3:8). Of course not! This incisive question brushes aside literal explanations. The Sages cannot believe that military ups and downs are the result of the position of Moshe’s hands or that the status of his hands somehow reflects military ups and downs. The Mishnah acknowledges that the Torah is to be read with logic and common sense. Whenever clearly indicated that a passage is not literal it must be so acknowledged.

In this case the Mishnah itself provides an allegorical interpretation. Moshe’s lifting his hand represents Israel turning their hearts toward their father in Heaven, and then they triumph; when they do not do so, they fail.

Not that in the course of that particular battle with Amaleq at some moments the Israelite soldiers turned their hearts heavenward and prevailed and at some moments turned their hearts away and failed. Rather, those verses connecting Moshe’s hands with victory or defeat refer to a general spiritual truth applicable at all times and in all battles. The Mishnah further informs us that the case of the copper serpent (Num. 21:9), that all who were bitten and looked at it were healed, should similarly be understood in such allegorical fashion.

The Mishnah teaches that the Torah’s primary intention cannot always be discerned from the literal translation of the words (see our study *On Interpreting Midrash*).



## Endnotes

\* The verse is complex and its syntactical parsing is in dispute. The principal clause may be the assertion immediately following the statement of when Pharaoh sent them out, that G-d did not lead the nation via the most direct route. Alternatively, the latter statement as well as the following ones explaining His reason for doing so may also be subordinate to the next verse's announcement that He turned the nation toward the desert.

\*\* There is discussion as to details but the standard enumeration comprises belief in G-d, prohibition of blasphemy, murder, adultery (as well as incest), stealing, a requirement that there be a legal justice system and the prohibition of eating a limb shorn from a live animal (exemplifying cruelty to a living creature).

\*\*\* Shabbat and honoring father and mother are derived from the fact that in the Deuteronomy text of the Decalogue, the phrase **כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ** - “as Hashem your G-d had [previously] commanded you” - is mentioned only with those two commandments. Since that version recited by Moshe is understood to reflect verbatim what was said in the original Decalogue proclamation, it is interpreted to mean that those two laws had been commanded before the Decalogue, at Marah.



# The Song at the Sea

## I. Introduction

The “Song at the Sea” (Ex. 15:1-18) is a poetic response to the monumental occurrences recounted in the previous chapter, a glorious celebration of the final and climactic act of Hashem’s consummate triumph over His opponents with the miracle at *Yam Souf*. It does not provide any new information about the extraordinary events at the sea; it rather highlights Israel’s recognition of those happenings as being the direct activity of the omnipotent and incomparable G-d. As a religious expression of exultation at His prodigious deeds, it promotes a more transcendent perspective on them. Given that the Song closes the section in the Book of Exodus describing His successful intervention to liberate Israel from bondage, poetry and melody were most appropriate at this point to give grateful and passionate expression to the emotions fostered by the supernatural events that were experienced.

The *Shira* does not include a single praise of a human hero as it concentrates exclusively on G-d’s supremacy. This is in striking contrast to compositions of this genre in the ancient Near East, but consistent with the Torah’s portrayal of G-d’s thoroughgoing interest in discouraging man’s personal aggrandizement in place of His glory. Indeed, Moshe, who appeared so prominently in the previous chapter’s account stretching forth his hand to signal the coming of the wind to split the sea (Ex. 14:21), as well as doing so again to mark the sea’s return and the drowning of the enemy (v. 27), is not mentioned in the Song.

Here, Hashem stretches forth His hand (15:12). The mighty east wind that drove back the sea (14:21) is now recognized as the direct “breath of Your nostrils” (15:8). Neither are His angel, the cloud or the darkness (as in 14:19-20) here present.

Remarkably, even G-d's rescue of Israel from the Egyptians - the immediate purpose of His intervention - is not explicitly remarked upon, a detail we will address in due course.

## **II. On Content And Structure**

The Song is comprised of two major segments or stanzas, namely, verses 1-11 and 12-18. Each stanza divides into subunits, or strophae. The first stanza focuses on the miracle at the sea and contains three incrementally progressing strophae: vv. 1-3, 4-6 and 7-11. (Literary indications for this division will be pointed out shortly.) By recognizing the subunits we can more fully appreciate the exquisite order in the Song and realize that we are not dealing with random praises and non-chronological movements.

The second stanza (vv. 12-18) also contains three subunits. It moves far beyond the victory at the sea, applying the impact and inspiration generated by the great Divine triumph to the major forthcoming events of national import. It provides a telescoped view of highlights of Israel's near future: Hashem's gracious guidance of the nation; His leading it to His holy place, possibly alluding to Mount Sinai and the Lawgiving or more likely to the Promised Land (the Temple Mount?); the panic created within the leaders of the Canaanite and neighboring nations who heard of His mighty acts and of Israel's approach; and His bringing and implanting His nation in the land of His heritage centered around His holy sanctuary.

The second stanza begins with a two-verse "transitional" strophe (vv. 12-13), composed of three clauses, that moves from the events at the sea to the future. It is followed by a strophe describing the fearful reaction of the neighboring nations (vv. 14-16) and a final strophe that resumes the theme of G-d's direct providence that concludes with an affirmation of His eternal kingship (vv. 17-18).

As a G-d-centered song, expressions of His praise are strategically placed throughout. The key manifestation of His victory - the destruction of His enemy's military forces - is referred to in each strophe of the first stanza, each succeeding description employing

vocabulary and imagery expanded over the previous. Each of these three strophae concludes with a distinctively framed praise of G-d in an ascending pattern, creating a remarkable dual crescendo effect of victory and veneration.

Accordingly, in the opening verse, within the context of expressing gratitude to Hashem, the *Shira* articulates a pithy summary of His military victory by briefly stating *סוס ורכבו רמה בים* (horse and rider He cast into the sea). This is substantially augmented in the second strophe with mention of the drowning of Pharaoh's chariots, his army and choice officers (vvs. 4-5). The third strophe contains an extensive elaboration. Its description of the foes' destruction includes a depiction of their inner thoughts, their plans, their motives, and provides insight into their character (vvs. 7-10).

Paralleling this process of gradual amplification of the victory description is a series of praises of Hashem. The first strophe's final verse has, "Hashem is a man of war" and concludes with, "Hashem is His name" (v. 3). The second strophe closes with the clause "*Yeminekha Hashem tir`as o'yeb*" (v. 6) and the third with the verse containing "*Mi khamokha ba'elim Hashem*" (v. 11). Thus, the lines ending the strophae constitute an ascending movement of glorification. The first provides a state-of-being description of Hashem, asserting an attribute of Him together with a statement about the meaning of His name. The second articulates His right arm in action crushing His enemies while the third strophe's ending is an exclamation that proclaims His incomparability with all beings.

It should be noted that all three of the first-stanza strophe-ending verses contain a key word or phrase repeated within the verse, achieving a heightening of expression. In verse 3, Hashem's name is restated, in verse 6 it is "*Yeminekha Hashem*" and in verse 11, "*Mi khamokha.*" In the second stanza, the penultimate strophe also contains a phrase within its last verse (v. 16) that is attested twice, *עד יעבר*. These four are the only such repetitions within a verse in the *Shira*. In accordance with the *Shira's* content, this design, besides its aesthetic value, appears to be a device meant to serve

as a marker to inform of a strophe's conclusion (assisting the reader in that matter).

The first strophe of the second stanza does not conclude with word repetition but it is distinctly set apart from the succeeding strophe by another type of repetition, alliteration and similar consonantal make-up. Thus, the opening word of each of the three clauses that comprise that subunit, “*natita*,” “*nahita*” and “*nehalta*” is a three-syllable verb that begins with a “נ” (n) sound and concludes with a ת (ta) sound. They each point to Hashem's active providence and each is followed by a word that describes an aspect of the Divine action. In each case the second word concludes with a “ך” (kha) sound - נהלת; נחית בהסדך; נטית מינך - בעזך, a most artistic play on the phenomenon of poetic repetition.

Of course, the final strophe does not require an indicator setting it off from what follows.

The *Shira's* last verse proclaims that Hashem will be king for eternity (v. 18), employing the word “*yimlokh*,” a root not otherwise attested for Him in the Torah except in Balaam's oracle (Num. 23:21). It is possible that this rare usage was selected here to deride the kingship of Pharaoh who had been officially contesting Hashem's sovereignty.

Following the *Shira* proper is a one-verse subscript (Ex. 15:19) that contains a concise summary of the events. It begins with the word “Because,” and seems to close an “envelope” that is formed with the superscript (v. 1a). Taking the latter into account, the subscript states that they sang this song because of the following.

The pericope concludes with the notice that Miriam took timbrel in hand, and as modesty dictates, led the women in their own celebration, and they sang and danced the same theme as the men.

It is most fitting that this section, and with it the first portion of the Book of Exodus, concludes with Miriam leading the women in celebration. This detail recalls the rescue of the baby Moshe and Miriam's involvement with Pharaoh's daughter and the baby's

mother. It also calls to mind the activity of the midwives in the remarkable series of events described at the beginning of the Book of Exodus that helped bring about the redemption.

### III. Some Poetic Features

Among the many characteristics of Biblical poetry that are here deftly crafted to create various artistic and thematic effects are: a) parallelism, usually with increased specification and/or intensification within the line, b) a variety of sound plays, c) allusion through secondary applications of words, and d) a significant degree of intertextual connectedness. We will illustrate each of these techniques, as well as others, while surveying one section of the *Shira*, the five verses (7-11) that comprise the concluding strophe of the first stanza.

The strophe opens with וַיִּבְרַב גְּאוֹנֶךָ תִּהְרַס קִמְיֶךָ - “In Your exceeding exaltedness You destroy those who rise against You” (v. 7). Use of גְּאוֹנֶךָ echoes the Song’s opening phrase, כִּי גָאָה גָאָה. Here, the adjective וַיִּבְרַב is used to expand upon G-d’s exaltedness in place of the “doubled” expression of His exaltedness in the first verse and the more intimate second-person construction replaces that of third-person. The term גְּאוֹן contains an additional allusion since in Biblical Hebrew it connotes the great surging of the sea. When attested in the writings of the prophets it is usually in a primordial context wherein Divine intervention was required to keep the waters within bounds, such as: וַפֹּא יִשִׁית בַּגְּאוֹן גְּלִיךָ, “Here you shall cease with your surging waves” (Job 38:11. Also see Ezek. 47:5; Ps. 46:4, 89:10). Thus, it is a most appropriate term to attribute to the Deity when speaking of His manipulation of the *Yam Souf*, suggesting His total command of the swelling sea.

The strophe proceeds to extol Him in terms of accomplishing the most exalted deeds. Verses 8-10 provide details for the more general verse 7 while verse 11 will culminate the strophe and stanza.

Verse 8, which refers to G-d’s parting the waters, possesses three colons of essentially equal length that comprise four words each.

The commonplace “*mayim*” of the first colon becomes the more specific “*nozelim*” (flowing streams) in the second and, finally, the weighty “*tehomot*,” which alludes to the great deep of the Creation narrative, which in turn points to the cosmic dimension of the event. The waters first “*ne`ermu*” (heaped up), then “*nisebu khemo ned*” (stood attentively as a mound) and ultimately “*kafe`u*” (solidified), recalling the “wall” of water of the previous chapter (14:22,29). The intensifying movement within the verse gives the impression that the miracle was achieved step by step, consistent with the cumulative effects of the mighty easterly gale of the previous chapter that blew the whole night long (14:21). To maintain equivalent colon length, the second and third parts of this verse assume the subject of the first part - וּבְרִיחַ אֶפֶךְ (At the breath of Your nostrils) - and only the predicate is altered. Also to preserve balance, a location specification - בְּלִבַּיִם (in the heart of the sea) - was added only to the third colon. The result is a verse of highly exacting standards gradually moving toward a climax.

It should be noted that beginning with verse 6 and except for the very last verse of the *Shira* all references to G-d are in the second person. The last verse is a proclamation of universal import and as such does not lend itself to second-person formulation. The change from third to second person reflects an advance to greater closeness while providing a continuous backdrop rhyme of the “*kha*” suffixes. In the center of verse 8, at a spot where a string of “*kha*” rhymes was interrupted, the diction produces alternate sound play with the “*noon*”: “*ne`ermu*,” “*nisebu*,” “*ned*” and “*nozelim*.”

In verse 9 the scene shifts to the enemy. With the waters parted (and Israel presumed to have crossed, a detail that, strikingly, is not explicitly mentioned), the stage was set for the enemy to decide to pursue (the unmentioned Israel) into the sea. The foes’ foolishness and wicked intentions are vividly portrayed with a powerful series of successive verbs without conjunctions, using alliteration and assonance in word after word. The three statements following the introductory אָמַר אֵיבֹב, namely, “אֶרְדֹּף אֲשִׁיג” (I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoils”), all begin with the future singular “*aleph*,” meaning “I will.” They



reflect an energetic and confident foe with expectation of quick success and booty to apportion, and focus attention on the opponents' self-centeredness and on material desires being central to their motivation.

The attached three phrases, each ending with the “ee” sound, meaning “mine,” [*timla'emo nafshi - ariq harbi - torishemo yadi*], while continuing the depiction of self-absorbed individuals, describes cruel and base human beings intent on vengeance and on their own blood-thirsty fixations. “*Torishemo*,” meaning “dispossess,” may allude to the intention to bring the Israelites back as slaves.

The imagery of this verse responds to a point of the reader's curiosity stirred in the previous chapter (14:23): What were the Egyptian soldiers thinking or with what were they obsessed that they ignored the cumulative signs of Divine intervention on Israel's behalf and felt impelled to rush headlong into the parted sea?

The contrast with the immediately following verse 10 description of Hashem's sudden and total victory over His charging foes is spectacular. נשפת ברוחך - He breathes and the sea covers them, they sink as lead in the mighty waters! נשפת ברוחך recalls וברוח אפך of verse 8. As His breath parted the waters so did His breath turn them back over the pursuers.

The triumphant pride in Hashem's incomparability expressed in the foregoing generates the emotional outburst of verse 11's rhetorical question: “Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem?,” etc., and the section is concluded. Although “*elim*” may mean “gods,” it is also widely used in Tanakh to connote celestial bodies as well as members of G-d's heavenly court and angels who are at His service (see Ps. 89:7 with preceding and following verses). Such a statement is not indicative in any way of a belief in the existence of other gods. Moshe employed a similar term in conversation with Hashem upon expressing awe at all he had seen of His incomparability: “...for which god in heaven or on earth - אשר מי אל בשמים ובארץ - can do as Your deeds...” (Deut. 3:24).

Psalm 96 states about Hashem, “He is awesome above all the gods (על כל אלהים), for all the gods of the nations are idols” (Ps. 96:4b-5a). In any event, such expressions were then the standard way of the language to say, essentially, “There is none like You, Hashem!”

The Song’s diction is especially rich. For example, portrayal of the terror that fell upon the leaders of the Canaanite and neighboring nations when they heard about G-d’s feats on behalf of Israel includes eight different successive verbs or verbal clauses: ירגזון-חיל אחז-נבהלו-רעד-נמגו-אימתה-ופחד-ידמו כאבן (vv. 14-16).

The *Shira* contains a significant number of literary idiosyncrasies. Eight suffixal pronouns take the archaic form of “*mo*” or “*moo*” (יאכלמו in v. 7, etc.). Several words possess what in prose would be considered an extra letter, such as the “*tav*” at the end of “*zimrat*” and the “*noon*” in “*va’aromemenhu*” (both in v. 2) and the “*yod*” at the end of “*ne’edari*” (v. 6). The verse 2 “*zimrat*” lacks a “*yod*” at its end. Modern scholars consider most of these features of Biblical poetry to have been instituted for euphonic purposes, to increase the harmony and pleasantness of sound. However, we cannot be certain of that.

Not a single noun in the *Shira* appears with the definite article. In place of the relational pronoun “*asher*,” Israel is twice referred to as “*am-zoo*” (vvs. 13, 16) and in some cases the relational pronoun is altogether lacking (v. 17), compacting the locution.

Some of these stylistic features have been compellingly shown to be linked to contemporaneous poetry, particularly to that of neighboring Ugarit. A lesson to be learned is that the monotheistic revolution in thought and practice is in the content; the cultural form of the existing society was acceptable to be the vehicle for the Torah to articulate its meaning. The same principal explains usage of the contemporary suzerain-vassal covenant format for the G-d-Israel Covenant\* as well as for the framework and wording of many clauses in the legal sections of the Torah. As concerns the outward form of rituals attached to idolatrous service, however,

even when intended to be used in the service of the one G-d, they are strictly prohibited (Deut. 12:31). In those cases, the direct association and fear of the “slippery slope” come into play.

#### **IV. Regarding the Omission**

The omission from the Song of any mention of Israel’s rescue requires explanation. It appears inadequate to merely say that Israel was excluded because the focus is on Hashem’s doings and the honor due Him. Particularly after verse 8, which constitutes a profuse description of His preparing the sea for human crossing, we are informed of the enemy’s energetic pursuit, without so much as a hint at Israel’s crossing. Who is the enemy pursuing? Although the *Shira* is not an epic narrative that can be understood from within itself but requires the attached prose account, the absence of a statement referring to Israel’s crossing is eminently conspicuous, even, at first sight, astonishing.

M. D. Cassuto suggests that explicit mention of Israel’s rescue was omitted so that the depiction of Hashem’s victory could serve a dual purpose. Besides its function on the plane of human history on behalf of the Israelites vis-à-vis the Egyptians, it could also be applied on the prehistoric cosmic plane of Near Eastern mythology, in which the sea god and other presumed divine beings were in a battle against other gods. As the Israelites were subject to such mythological influences in ancient times, the Torah here, as the prophets do in various places, establishes Hashem’s absolute dominion over the sea, the depths and all creatures. In this respect, the *Shira’s* duality would be similar to that in Isaiah’s call to Hashem, when he refers to His mighty ancient victories over the primeval monsters and the sea, followed by invoking His having transformed the sea into a path for the redeemed. The prophet cries out: “Awake, awake,... O arm of the Lord! Awake as in days of old... It was you that hacked Rahab in pieces, that pierced the Dragon (Tanin)... that dried up the Sea, the waters of the great deep; That made the abysses of the Sea a road that the redeemed may walk” (Isa. 51:9-10, NJPS).

However, it is not clear that this answers the question of why Israel's crossing was totally omitted. Hashem's absolute triumph over the sea and primeval beings could have been incorporated in the poem while Israel's crossing could have been referred to, similar to the Isaiah passage that incorporates both the human element and the cosmic one and as elsewhere in Tanakh.

Perhaps the explanation is that when celebrating G-d's miraculous rescue and reflecting upon His awesome intervention, Moshe and Israel were imbued with such an overwhelming degree of humility that they could only utter His acclaim. They could not place themselves in the role of the rescued. It is as if to say: Who are we to be the recipients of such colossal Divine doings? In the poetic dimension they chose to allow their role to be assumed, passed over in respectful silence. Their gratitude may be understood as taking the form of pure praise. Together with the *Shira*'s omission of specific mention of any human being, this appears to be in keeping with G-d's goal of fostering a disposition of humility in His nation, a key element in its fulfilling its mission to bring His blessing to the world.

## **V. Linkage to Exodus 6**

The *Shira* is closely linked to the section that began with Hashem's momentous revelation of His Tetragrammaton name in Exodus 6. There, just before He began His wondrous intervention, He proclaimed that in the near future He would manifest Himself by that name, something He had not done in the case of the patriarchs. At that point "they did not heed Moshe due to a crushed spirit and rigorous labor" (Ex. 6:9). Here, finally, Israel proclaimed its recognition of that name and its implications. Thus, the response to "Tell Israel I am Y-H-V-H" (Ex. 6:6) is "Y-H-V-H is His name" (15:3). Between these two poles is a steady progression toward the goal. At the end of the prose account in previous chapter it does state that Israel then "believed in Hashem and in Moshe His servant" (14:31). This is the poetic counterpart to that statement.

As the Tetragrammaton was extremely prominent in the Exodus 6 passage (as pointed out in our study on *Parashat Va'era Part I*), it is also so here. It is the most frequently attested word in our passage, appearing nine times, excluding the superscription and summary verse. In the pure form, that is to say without prefix (a category demonstrated to be significant, examples of which are given in our *Va'era* study), it appears eight times, a signifier of the Covenant as we have often demonstrated.\*\*

The Exodus 6 passage of Hashem's message (excluding superscription) contains 102 words and the first stanza of the *Shira* (also excluding superscription) contains 102 words. The Exodus 6 passage divides into two parts of fifty and fifty-two words (an especially meaningful structure as explained in our *Va'era* study) and the *Shira's* first stanza also divides into sections of fifty and fifty-two words, combining the first two strophae, which can be viewed as subdivisions of a unit. In addition, the *Shira's* first strophe, which concludes with "Hashem is His name," appropriately comprises twenty-six words, the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton's *gematria*, consistent with the remarkable *gematriot* of that Exodus 6 passage. The *Shira's* final two strophae combined (vv. 14-18), concluding with **ה' ימלך לעלם ועד**, also contain fifty-two words.

## Endnotes

\* See our study *On Covenant Format in the Torah*

\*\* See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*



## On Interpreting Midrash

In their comments on the Amaleq passage of *Parashat Beshalah* (Ex. 17:8-13), the Tannaitic Sages illustrated their unwillingness to accept a Torah passage literally when it conflicted with their sense of logic and common sense. They ask, as formulated in the usually legalistic Mishnah (RH 3:8): “וכי ידיו של משה עושות מלחמה או שוברות?” - Is it possible that Moshe’s hands (the raising and lowering of them) govern the ups and downs of the battle? Of course not! Although the Torah teaches that on occasion G-d overrides the rules of nature and performs a miracle, when doing so He abides by “rational” standards. The miracle is not casual or random, it fits into the natural order, it is not for trivial purposes, it suits the overall context and accomplishes G-d’s stated objective. He does not do things that do not make sense to the human observers. That the battle would fluctuate according to Moshe’s raising and lowering his hands does not meet the Sages’ criteria for being one of G-d’s miracles. Hence, they interpreted the passage allegorically.

That discussion concerned a Biblical passage. Surely the principle that guided the Sages in interpreting Torah passages should apply to interpreting their own statements!

In this study we will address the subject of rabbinic Midrash and Aggada (the latter term usually designated for Talmudic “midrashim”) in the light of five of the leading authorities of the late gaonic period and that of the early *rishonim*, the tenth through the twelfth centuries. They may not be in full agreement with each other on all points but they contain a common denominator regarding Midrash and Aggada. We will excerpt several relevant statements from them. In the second section we will survey a cross-section of *midrashim* and *aggadot* drawn from the Talmud and classical compendiums of this material from those associated with *Parashat Beshalah*. It is our intention to point out that it is often clear from a careful reading of them that the authors did not intend their words to be interpreted literally.

Rab Sherira Gaon (906-1006, head of the Pumbedita Academy) wrote: “Those points brought out from Scriptural verses called Midrash and Aggada are assumptions. Some are accurate - such as Rabbi Yehudah’s statement that Shimon’s portion was included in that of Yehudah, for we find it corroborated in the Book of Yehoshu`a - but many are not.... We abide by the principle, “According to his intelligence is a man commended” (Prov. 12:8). As to the *aggadot* of the students’ students - Rabbi Tanḥuma, Rabbi Osh`aya, and others - most of them [the realities] are not as they expounded. Accordingly we do not rely on *aggadot*. The correct ones of them are those supported by intelligence and by Scripture. There is no end to *aggadot*” (*Sefer Ha`eshcol, Hilkhhot Sefer Torah*, p. 60a).

Rab Hai Gaon, son of Sherira (939-1038, head of the Pumbedita Academy): “Aggada and Midrash, even concerning those written in the Talmud, if they do not work out properly and if they are mistaken, they are not to be relied upon, for the rule is, we do not rely on *aggada*. However, regarding what is ensconced in the Talmud, if we find a way to remove its errors and strengthen it, we should do so, for if there were not some lesson to be derived it would not have been incorporated. Concerning what is not in the Talmud, we investigate - if correct and proper we expound and teach it and if not we pay no attention to it” (*Sefer Ha`eshcol, Hilkhhot Sefer Torah*, p. 60a).

Further from Rab Hai Gaon: “You should know that *aggadic* statements are not like those of ‘*shemu`a*’ (a traditional *halakha* statement, handed down). Rather, they are cases of each individual expounding what came to his mind, in the nature of ‘it can be said,’ not a decisive matter. Accordingly we do not rely on them” (Comments on BT *Hag.*).

Rab Shemuel ben Ḥofni Gaon (960-c.1034, head of the Sura Academy), in his “Introduction to the Talmud” (published at the end of *Masekhet Berakhot*, erroneously attributed to Shemuel Hanagid, translated and abridged by Rab Shemuel ben Ḥananya in the 12<sup>th</sup> century), stated: “Aggada constitutes all the explanations



in the Talmud on any subject that does not refer to a *misvah*. You do not learn from them except what seems acceptable to the mind.... Concerning the [*aggadic*] expounding [of the Sages] on Scriptural verses, each one expounded what chanced to him and what he saw in his mind, so what is acceptable to the mind we learn from and the rest we do not rely upon.”

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) in his Bible commentary often alludes to the importance of recognizing the inapplicability of *midrash* to understanding the true intention of the Torah. For example, concerning the variant between the two Decalogue passages in the Torah, wherein one states “*zakhor*” (remember) the Shabbat day to keep it holy while the other has “*shamor*” (observe), he comments:

...the Sages said *זכור ושומר בדבור אחד נאמרו*, that “*zakhor* and *shamor* were said in the same pronouncement” (BT *Shabuot* 20b) ... Heaven forbid saying that they did not speak correctly for our minds are meager in comparison to their minds, but people of our generation think that their words were intended to be taken literally which is not the case....

It would not be possible to say *zakhor* and *shamor* were uttered simultaneously except as a miracle, but we must admit that even so there is a question why was it not written *zakhor v'shamor* in both the first and second formulation? And what about those other verses [of Decalogue variants], were they also said simultaneously like *zakhor* and *shamor*? Why did the Sages not mention those, for they are more astonishing, how can they even miraculously be uttered at once, many verses whose meaning is not the same as is the case with the two words *zakhor* and *shamor*?... and in the first formulation Hashem did not say “that it should be well with you,” so did He simultaneously say it and not say it?... and [concerning reversed sequence] did He simultaneously utter a statement one way and the opposite way?

The mind cannot bear the thought of such literal interpretations... for every miracle Hashem performed through

Moshe there is some remote resemblance in reality that the intelligent will understand, but this claim that Hashem spoke *zakhor* and *shamor* at one moment is so amazing that it would be more fitting to be written in the Torah than all the other wonders and miracles that were written.... And if we say Hashem's speech is not like human speech, how could Israel have understood Hashem's words? For if a person hears *zakhor* and *shamor* at the same instant he would not understand either. Even one word like *zakhor*, if he does not hear the *zayin* before the *khaf* and they before the *resh* he would not understand what the speaker is saying...if we say it was a miracle that *zakhor* and *shamor* were uttered at the same time, how did the ear hear them? If we say that also was a miracle...why did the Sages not mention that miracle, a greater one than speaking two words at the same time?....

The explanation is that when Hashem uttered *zakhor* (to remember the Shabbat day) everybody understood it means in order to observe it, so Moshe wrote *shamor*.

It should be acknowledged, as explicitly pointed out by the Rambam, that situations that in and of themselves, *by definition*, are impossible to exist, cannot exist. In the latter's words: "... it is no deficiency in the One [G-d] that He does not conjoin contraries in one substratum, and His power is not affected by this and by other similar impossibilities..." (Guide, Pines translation, I:75, first method). "...[W]e do not attribute to G-d, may He be exalted, incapacity because He is unable to corporify His essence or to create someone like Him or to create a square whose diagonal is equal to its side." (5th method). "It has then become clear that, according to every opinion and school, there are impossible things whose existence cannot be admitted. Power to bring them about cannot be ascribed to the deity" (III:16)

The Rambam (1135-1204) wrote extensively on our subject. In his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*, in a statement regarding how to approach rabbinic Midrash and Aggada, he points to the fact that the Mishnah Sages themselves assume that even the Torah text must be read with logic and common sense. When confronted

with a passage that looked impossible to take literally they resorted to allegorical interpretation. He cites several examples: In 1 Chronicles 11 the text relates some amazing deeds of King David's warriors, such as killing a lion in the pit on a snowy day, which the Sages took allegorically. The Book of Job narrative, that means to say the very existence of that man, and the resurrection account in the Book of Ezekiel (37) were also interpreted allegorically by some Sages. How much more so, he asks, is it imperative to be rational when dealing with their own teachings, the *aggadic* and *midrashic* statements of rabbinic compendiums?

Regarding those who interpret all *aggadot* and *midrashim* literally, he states there:

...they destroy the Torah's glory and darken its brilliance; they make G-d's Torah the opposite of what was intended. He stated in the perfect Torah regarding the nations who hear about all these statutes, that they will say, "what a wise and insightful people this great nation is" (Deut. 4:6). But when the nations hear how this group relates the words of the Sages in a literal manner they will say, "what a foolish and ignorant people this insignificant nation is." Most of these expounders explain to the public what they, themselves, really do not understand. Would that they be quiet or say "we do not understand what the rabbis mean in this statement or how to interpret it." But they think they understand and endeavor to make known according to their poor understanding - not according to the Sages' intention - and expound at the head of the assembly the *derashot* of Tractate *Berakhot*, the chapter *Heleq* and other sources, literally, word by word....

In his Guide he added:

[Our Sages] use the Bible text as a kind of poetical language [for their own ideas], and do not intend thereby to interpret the text... This style was widespread in ancient days; all adopted it in the same way as poets... Our Sages say, in reference to the words, “and a paddle (*yated*) thou shalt have upon thy weapons” [*azeneka*, Deut. 23:14]: Do not read *azeneka* “thy weapon” but *ozneka*, “thy ear” - if you hear a person uttering something disgraceful, put your fingers into your ears. Now, I wonder whether those ignorant persons [who take the Sages’ interpretations literally] believe that the author of this saying gave it as the true interpretation of the verse quoted, and as the meaning of this precept... I cannot think that any person whose intellect is sound can admit this. The author employed the text as a beautiful poetic phrase, in teaching an excellent moral lesson... poetically connected with the above text. In the same sense you must understand the phrase, “Do not read so, but so,” wherever it occurs in the Midrash.

*Guide For the Perplexed, III:43, Dover edition, slightly abridged, pps. 353-4*

The methodology employed in our Torah studies accords to a great extent with the general perspective described above. Since, however, numerous traditional adherents of the Torah uncritically subscribe to a literalist view of Midrash and Aggada, and are often disturbed by other approaches, this is an appropriate opportunity to comment on the matter.

The formulations of the Sages teach all sorts of valuable lessons. Frequently, they use the Torah text as a springboard to elaborate an idea or as a mnemonic device to anchor an insight and assist in its being remembered. In doing so they are often engaging in moral education and inspirational edification that in their days would have been difficult to accomplish in a straightforward manner. As long as the reader/listener realizes that a proposed interpretation of a text is not necessarily its true meaning, often having no genuine connection to the actual intention (*peshat*) of

the relevant verses, and that the highly improbable, often fantastic and sometimes impossible realities portrayed are not literal, no harm is done and a benefit is derived from the lesson.

It may also be that some Sages, contrary to the Rambam's opinion, employed such methods even when they knew their audience thought that the literal message they expounded was intended to explicate the meaning of the passage. It appears that there were cases when they felt it necessary to do so. This would have been probable when they were dealing with minimally educated people who lived in social contexts that precluded them from access to scientific knowledge about realia or historical knowledge about events. Such people already believed in the fantastic, such that their taking an impossible interpretation literally created no conflict for them and only provided the benefit of the lesson.

But with the immense advances in knowledge in recent centuries the situation is different. The most basic general education in modern times, indeed, merely being an alert individual living in present-day society, provides an enormous amount of information and sophistication about many subjects that the *midrashim* continually touch upon. An average person can hardly not be deeply impacted by this knowledge, as elementary education and the mass media are involved in this process. And many people are now accustomed to read widely and critically, think rationally and approach knowledge with intellectual integrity. Today, as has been the case for well over a century, taking *midrashim* and *aggadot* literally tends to cause sincere individuals prodigious conflicts between their religious faith and their knowledge of reality.

Attempts to avoid the difficulties have generally promoted apologetics with numerous false harmonizing resolutions. For many people, particularly the brighter, more educated and rationally oriented members of society, and most seriously for those with intellectual integrity, these explanations have served to merely postpone the problems for a time.

All this has contributed to mass defection from tradition on the one hand and in the development of defensive measures to prevent exposure to contradictory knowledge on the other. The latter often includes discouragement, if not prohibition, of advanced general studies, insisting the Torah be studied without the benefit of modern scholarly research as well as strictly limiting interaction with and participation in the life of the wider society. Of course, such measures create further serious, negative consequences, impacting on psychological, social and economic well-being.

As the Rambam stated, when the Torah intends to be allegorical, which it surely at least sometimes does, we must not be distracted by a tendency to literalness. When studying the Torah for its intention and straightforward meaning we must not permit the *midrashic* interpretations of even the greatest Sages to divert us from its proper study.

The teachings of the Sages are often clearly recognizable as non-literal to one who only must acknowledge that they may be so. Below we will provide a sampling of different types of *midrashim* and *aggadot* taken from those on *Parashat Beshalah* that teach many wonderful and extraordinary lessons but which upon thoughtful consideration of time frame, theme and text will be seen as clearly not the intended meaning of the verses they are attached to. We will thus illustrate an important aspect of classic rabbinic methodology and help clarify the main point discussed above.

1. On our Parasha's first verse, Rabbi Yehoshu`a ben Levi stated: G-d did not find it consoling (satisfactory) ולא נהם אלקים) to bring Israel to its land quickly - why? - because it is comparable to a king who has twelve sons and ten portions of land. If he distributes his lands then he will cause conflicts among his sons. He will wait until he acquires two more portions of land. Similarly, the land of Israel was not adequate for the twelve tribes. G-d decided to take Israel the long way around so that in the process they will conquer additional land which the two and a half tribes will take, thus making the Land of Israel sufficient for all the tribes (*Shemot Rabbah* 20:14).

This is excellent advice to a father but surely not the intention of the verse. It depends on translating הַחֲמִשִּׁים according to another meaning the word may have but that is not its meaning in its present context. Additionally, the interpretation counters the verse's main message, the reason for taking the long route.

2. Israel left Egypt הַחֲמִשִּׁים (Ex. 13:18). The *Mekhilta* first interpreted הַחֲמִשִּׁים as “armed” - or “provisioned” - citing Joshua 1:14 and 4:12, generally considered the *peshat*. It continues with other explanations. *Ḥamushim* means that:

only one fifth of the Israelites left Egypt, some say one in fifty came out, some say one in five hundred. Rabbi Nehorai says not even one in five hundred... as we expound... they were giving birth to six at a time. When did they die? During the three days of darkness, so that Israel buried its dead and gave thanks and praise to the Almighty that their enemies did not see and rejoice in their destruction.

*Yalqut Shimoni* (*Shemot* 287) adds: “Rabbi Yose says: *ḥamushim* means the fifth generation came out.”

Several lessons are taught in this collection of explanations. It compliments the valor of a minority, sometimes a tiny minority, who hold fast to their beliefs against the assimilationist tendency of the many. Those who do not remain faithful do not share in the good G-d brings to Israel. It stresses the importance of keeping national problems private. But surely the radically different interpretations of the “other explanations” are not addressing the meaning of our verse or describing the historical setting it presents.

3. Yosef had Israel swear they would take his bones with them out of Egypt (Ex. 13:19). Rabbi Levi stated: This is like a person who discovered that thieves had stolen his wine barrels and drank the wine. He told them: You drank the wine, but at least return the barrels. Yosef said to his

brothers: You stole me alive from Shechem, please return my bones there (*Shemot Rabbah* 20:19). Very valuable advice: a wrongdoer should be considerate of his victim, he should minimize his wrongdoing and not cause unnecessary harm to the injured party. But this lesson does not explicate the true meaning of the verse.

4. Moshe took Yosef's bones with him (Ex. 13:19). The *Mekhilta* comments:

How did Moshe know where Yosef was buried? Serah, Asher's daughter, was still alive and she had seen them bury Yosef. The Egyptians had made a metal casket for him and sunk it in the Nile. Moshe stood by the Nile, cast a pebble in and called "Yosef, Yosef, the time for HQBH's fulfillment of His oath has arrived, give honor to Hashem, G-d of Israel, and do not delay us, for you are now holding up our departure. If you do not rise promptly we will be free from the oath." Immediately Yosef's casket floated to the top... Rabbi Natan says: Yosef was buried in the royal tomb of Egypt... And how do we know they also took the bones of the other tribal heads (Yosef's brothers) out with them, for he stated [in the oath he placed on them] מִזֶּה אֶתְכֶם (Ex. 13:19).

For some, the lengthy fantastic account enhances the prestige of Moshe and Yosef as well as of Serah, whose keen observation turned out to be so valuable. It highlights the value of proper burial and supports the concept that the individual survives bodily death. It brings out the importance of fulfilling vows made by parents. Rabbi Natan rejected the account outright for a more common sense approach. In *peshat* there is no reason to assume that Yosef's burial place was not known.

5. Rabbi Yoḥanan commented on the verse וְלֹא קָרַב זֶה אֶל זֶה כָּל הַלַּיְלָה (Ex. 14:20). When Hashem's angel moved from being in front of Israel's camp to the back of it, followed by the cloud, a defining moment in the Egyptians' downfall, the



ministering angels desired to utter a song. “HQBH said to them: ‘The creations of My hands are drowning in the sea and you would utter a song?’” (BT *Meg.* 10b). A most elevating concept, but not the intention of the passage.

A brief digression: Angels are not independent beings with ability to act contrary to Hashem’s will but are His messengers and manifestations of His activity. From the wind and burning fire (Ps. 104:4) to the “voice” that stopped Abraham from slaughtering his son (Gen. 22:11) to the appearance revealed to Moshe at the burning bush (Ex. 3:2), the angel represents an aspect of His will and endeavors. The term for angel, מַלְאָךְ, related to מְלָאכָה (work), appears to designate its definition. In a strictly literary usage, angels served in parables to concretize certain thoughts. Concerning destruction of the wicked pursuers in our passage, an idealistic person would feel jubilation at the rescue of the righteous and sadness that it had to end as it did, with human beings, created in the image of G-d, dying. As Beruriah said, we should hope and strive to assure that sins will be terminated from the land, not the sinners (BT *Ber.* 10a). Rabbi Yoḥanan represents the conflicting feelings by projecting them to G-d and the angels.

6. It was taught in a Baraita that Rabbi Meir said: When Israel stood at the sea the tribes were arguing, each one said “I will be first to enter the sea.” Benjamin jumped into the sea first, as it states שֵׁם בְּנִימִין צַעִיר רוּדָם, אֵל תִּקְרִי רוּדָם אֲלֵא רָד יָם (Ps. 68:28). The officers of Judah threw stones at them, as it states, שָׂרֵי יְהוּדָה רִגְמָתָם (ibid.). Therefore, Benjamin was selected to become the “host” for the “Might” (the Holy of Holies is located in its portion of land). Rabbi Judah said, that was not how it was. Rather, each tribe said “I will not be first to enter the sea,” whereupon Nahshon ben Aminadab (of Judah) jumped into the sea first. This is as stated, סַבְבוּנִי קָל בַּכַּחַשׁ אַפְרַיִם וּבַמְרֵמָה בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהוּדָה עוֹד רָד עִם קָל (Hos. 12:1), which is explained by, “Save me O’ G-d, for the waters have reached my throat, I am sunk in deep mud and have no standing....” (Ps. 69:2-3) together with “Do not let the

floodwaters sweep me away....” (v. 16). Moshe was lingering in prayer. HQBH said to him, “My beloved are drowning in the sea and you are lingering in prayer before Me? ... speak to Bene Yisrael that they should travel and you raise your staff and incline your hand over the sea and split it.” Therefore Judah merited to have rulership in Israel, as it states, “When Israel left Egypt... היתה יהודה לקדשו ישראל ממשלותיו הים ראה וינס (Ps. 114:1-3), Why did Judah ascend to the status of ... because the sea saw and fled.

BT *Sota* 36b-37a

There are several lessons here in faith and courage, in psychology and proper behavior in an emergency. But neither side in the dispute between the Sages is expounding the straightforward meaning of the Exodus passage or the other passages marshaled for evidence.

7. Upon the defeat of Pharaoh and his troops, the Torah states (Ex. 14:28): לא נשאר בהם עד אחד (generally translated: “there did not remain from them even one”). Taking עד אחד to mean “until one remained,” Rabbi Nehemiah in the *Mekhilta* states that Pharaoh was spared. *Pirque D’Rabbi Eliezer* (42), in the name of Rabbi Nehunia ben Haqanah, adds:

When Pharaoh said, “Who is like You among the elim, Hashem, Who is like You, majestic in holiness,” (Ex. 15:11), HQBH saved him from the dead so that he would relate His power to others, in accordance with what is stated: ‘for this purpose have I allowed you to stand... and in order that My name be recounted throughout all the land’ (9:16). Pharaoh became king in Nineveh... When HQBH sent Jonah to prophesy that Nineveh will be destroyed, Pharaoh heard, rose from his throne, rent his garments, donned sackcloth and ashes [and brought the city to repentance].

Surely this is a most potent cluster of messages about repentance. It also is an extravagantly imaginative tale spreading over many centuries based on a most fanciful interpretation of a verse.

8. Israel called out, “Who is like You among the אלים, Hashem?” (15:11). Among its explanations of the difficult word “*elim*,” the *Mekhilta* proffers the following:

“Who is like You among the אֱלֹהִים?” (interpreting אלים of the text as אֱלִמִים, “mute,” based on their having similar sounds). Who is like You that You can hear Your sons’ humiliation and be silent, as it states (Isa. 42:14), “I have been silent from ages ago, I have been still and restrained, I will now cry as a woman in labor, both gasping and panting.” That means to say, in the past I was silent and restrained, but from now on it will be different. “I will scorch mountains and hills, and dry up their vegetation, make rivers into islands and dry the pasture lands, I will lead the blind by a route they knew not, by a path they did not know will I guide them, I will make the darkness before them into light and the craggy places into a plain” (vvs. 15-16).

This is a beautiful thought concerning the Exodus in the light of Israel’s past affliction. It is also a relevant hope and inspiration during the crushing difficulties Israel was enduring at the time of the author of this Midrash, but surely not the meaning of the verse it is expounded upon.

9. Following the crossing of the sea, the Torah states: וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם סוּף (Ex. 15:22). In a masterly synthesis of *midrashim*, Rashi comments on the active causative verb. “Moshe had to force Israel to travel because the Egyptians had decorated their horses with ornaments of gold, silver and precious stones, and Israel was finding them in the sea. The spoils of the sea were greater than the spoils in Egypt.” This constitutes an insightful commentary on the folly of the haughty and overconfident as well as on the huge

temptations Israel must rise above to serve Hashem. These include the problems often presented by opportunities, even those stemming from Hashem's graciousness. But this interpretation is not an actual description of the circumstances of the verse being expounded.

10. Regarding the manna, "When the sun became hot it would melt" (16:21). The *Mekhilta* states: "Melted manna would flow into rivers and into the great sea, animals would drink that water, hunters would capture the animals and members of other nations would eat them and get a taste of the manna that descended for Israel." This is an instructive lesson regarding indirect influence, perhaps reflecting how the Torah's message spread to the world, but not a depiction of a particular physical process.

11. In the battle against Amaleq, Moshe's hands were faithful until the sun set (17:12). *Midrash Tanhuma*, cited by Rashi, asserts: The Amaleqites were calculating through astrology the propitious time that they could be victorious. Moshe stopped the sun and confused their calculations. The message is clear. The enemy may possess many skills and use all sorts of means against Israel, but steadfastness in commitment to Hashem will thwart them. The scientifically knowledgeable individual knows that such a statement, were it literal, would be depicting a miracle of the very highest order, which is not even hinted at and has no foundation in the text, and which was not cited by the other schools of Sages. Clearly, it was not intended to be taken literally. And G-d cannot be manipulated by astrology.

12. The following passage, dealing with topics of our *parasha*, appears in a Talmudic discussion on the Mishnah's statement of reciting Hallel toward the conclusion of the Passover *seder* (BT *Pes.* 118:b):

Rabbi Natan said, the verse ואמת ה' לעולם "the faithfulness of Hashem is forever" (Ps. 117:2), was said by the fish in the sea. This is in accordance with Rabbi

Huna, who said that Israel in that generation [of the Exodus] were of little faith. This is as Rabbah bar Mari expounded: What is the meaning of the verse, “They rebelled at the sea, the Yam Souf” (Ps. 106:7)? This teaches that the Israelites were skeptical at that moment [upon crossing the sea] and said: “just as we are ascending from the sea on one side so are the Egyptians ascending on the other side.” HQBH then told the Minister of the Sea to spew forth [the dead Egyptians] upon the dry land. He answered, “Master of the Universe, does a master give a gift to his servant [the many corpses, food for the fish] and then take it back?” He responded, “I will give you [in the future] one and a half times their number.” He replied, “Can a servant make a claim to collect from his master?” He told him: “נחל קישון (the Brook of Qishon) will be My guarantee.” Immediately he spewed the bodies forth upon dry land and Israel came and saw them, as is stated, “Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea-shore” (Ex. 14:30). What is the meaning of “one and a half times their number?” Regarding Pharaoh it states, “six hundred choice chariots” whereas in the case of Sisera it states, “nine hundred chariots of iron” (Judg. 4:13). When Sisera came... HQBH brought the stars out of their orbits against them [Sisera’s army]... they became heated whereupon they went to cool themselves in the Brook of Qishon. HQBH said to the Brook of Qishon, “Go and deliver your guarantee.” Immediately, the Brook of Qishon swept them away and cast them into the sea, as it states, נחל קישון גרפם נחל קדומים (5:21). What is the meaning of נחל קדומים, “the ancient brook”? The brook that had been the guarantee in ancient times. At that moment the fish said, ואמת ה' לעולם “the faithfulness of Hashem is forever.”

Major values are expounded here. In the midst of an enormous miracle on behalf of the Israelites, G-d regarded and alleviated their skepticism by further altering the natural order. Since this action clashed with another’s expectations

of a benefit for his charges, G-d repaid the latter's loss with interest. He accepted the argument that it was proper to have a guarantee and gave one. He permits His creations to think independently and present their viewpoints to Him. And He is interested in justice even for the fish. Many precedents for appropriate human behavior are exemplified here, particularly to counteract the hubris and disregard of others sometimes found among the affluent. Nobody should disappoint another with merely, "Sorry, I changed my mind for an important reason." Nobody should say, "I'm good for my commitment, you do not need a surety." People are expected to argue for those who cannot do so for themselves. And everybody should be concerned with the welfare of even lower creatures. But, obviously, this has nothing directly to do with the intention of the verses being expounded nor of the existence of heavenly ministers complaining to G-d.

Between the *Talmudim* and classical compendiums of Midrash there are many thousands of statements commenting and elaborating on Tanakh words and verses that contain great wisdom but that are not the actual interpretation of those words and verses. And in subsequent times many rabbinic authors wrote in that style. Great caution must be taken in studying and teaching this material to gain the benefit without the harmful consequences described in the first part of this study. HaRambam's words are as relevant today as ever.

# Yitro

## Yitro's Visit

### I. On Context and Linkage

Yitro's visit to Moshe is narrated immediately prior to the Lawgiving. But whether the visit took place before or after the Lawgiving has been a matter of dispute at least since Talmudic times. Many are of the opinion that it occurred after the Lawgiving, thereby viewing the text as out of chronological order (BT AZ 24, Zeb. 116, Mekhilta, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, et al). As the Sages say: אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה, "there is no early or late as regards textual sequence in the Torah" (BT *Pes.* 6b). Of course we assume that if it is out of chronological order there must be a good reason for such an arrangement. Since important consequences are attached to this issue, we will survey the major proofs proffered for each side in a later part of this study.

Ibn Ezra suggested that this narrative was placed where it is in order that it be attached to *Parashat Amaleq* (the passage immediately preceding our *parasha*), to contrast the latter's hatred for Israel with Yitro's love. It indicates to Israel that just as it is obliged to battle Amaleq it must treat Yitro's descendants with compassion, an objective that historically required discriminating care. When King Saul was commanded to punish Amaleq (1 Sam. 15:6), before the battle he warned the Qeni tribe - the ancestor Qeni was termed חתן משה (Moshe's father-in-law) in Judges 1:16 - to remove themselves from the vicinity of Amaleq so that they would not be harmed, since they had been kind to Israel upon its leaving Egypt.

Expanding on Ibn Ezra, Cassuto pointed out the high concentration of striking literary correlations between these two passages, demonstrating the intent that they be interpreted in some manner of close association:

- ויבא עמלק וילחם, Amaleq came and made war is in contrast to ויבא יתרו, Yitro came and greeted לשלום, for peace.
- Moshe there instructs Joshua לבחור לנו אנשים, “select men” for war, while here ויבחר משה אנשי חיל, Moshe “selects men” for the judiciary.
- There וישב משה, “Moshe sits” to pray for Divine assistance in the battle, whereas here וישב משה, “Moshe sits” to dispense justice.
- In the battle, Moshe’s hands were כבדים, heavy, while here the task is כבד, heavy.
- There, מחר, the morning following Amaleq’s coming, Moshe is נצב, stationed on the mountaintop; here ממחרת, the morning following Yitro’s coming, the people are נצב, stationed upon Moshe.
- The battle with Amaleq extended until sundown, similar to Moshe’s judging which continued until evening.
- The concluding phrase in the Amalek passage views the long term: מלחמה לה’ בעמלק מדר דר, “a war for Hashem against Amaleq, generation after generation.” This contrasts with Yitro’s final words regarding Israel, על מקמו יבא בשלום, “to its destination it will arrive in peace.” In both, the closing creates an envelope with the opening.

The linkage is there. Cassuto considered the Yitro account an appropriate introduction to the Lawgiving because it replaces the negative passions engendered by the Amaleq narrative with positive feelings fostered by an outsider who admired and was helpful to Israel. This notion is congruent with G-d’s upcoming promise at Revelation that Israel will be a treasured nation in the world. In addition, assuming Yitro’s visit is in chronological order, the judiciary system he recommended prepares the way for the Lawgiving.

Actually, Yitro’s proposals covered much more than a judiciary. He also addressed the need to have a system to disseminate law and provide guidance to the nation (18:20). Indeed, the hierarchy of “chiefs of thousands,” “chiefs of hundreds,” etc. (v. 21), containing “heads upon the nation” (v. 25), appears to contain the



infrastructure of a broad civil administration. In the Amaleq section a national military capacity was instituted. The linkage of our passage to it may be suggesting - expanding on Cassuto - the establishment of a complete governmental framework that was awaiting the final ingredient, the Lawgiving. The elaboration of the latter will take up most of the rest of the Torah (see Propp, AB commentary on Ex. p. 634).

The fact that the details of the Yitro narrative appear just before Revelation also seems intended to transmit several lessons of moral instruction that should be appreciated prior to that monumental event. On a crucial yet basic matter such as administering justice, Moshe benefited from another's advice. His modesty, his willingness to accept correction and learn from others are aspects of his worthiness to lead Israel into the Lawgiving. This is a great example for all Israel. Even the greatest of human beings cannot be an expert in everything. We should all have this disposition to realize that we could benefit from the insight of others. And on the threshold of its transcendent experience, Israel is taught that it should not think of itself as required to live in a self-contained world that precludes learning from outside its circle but that there is great wisdom in the world from which it could and should benefit.

## **II. Regarding Yitro**

Yitro represents the finest of priests. This is supported by the basic facts that Moshe - who cannot tolerate injustice and exploitation of others - married his daughter and remained with him, shepherding his flock. Moshe was apparently willing to continue doing so indefinitely, until G-d called upon him to return to Egypt (4:18).

In our chapter Moshe accorded Yitro great public honor. Yitro appreciated Hashem's intervention on behalf of Israel and recited a wonderful *berakha*. If not monotheistic he surely appears to have been on the path to becoming so, perhaps being monolatrous. In any event, his praise, "Now I know Hashem is greater than all gods" (18:11) should be interpreted in accordance with the

linguistic conventions of the times; it is an expression of the natural outpouring of enthusiastic feelings for the greatness and uniqueness of Hashem, not necessarily implying belief that those “others” he mentions are true gods. This definitely is the case with a number of other similar statements in Tanakh where the contexts of the expressions demonstrate no belief whatsoever in idolatry, indeed, derision of idolatrous beliefs. See our comments on “Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem” (Ex. 15:11) in our study on *The Song At the Sea*, and many other pertinent examples (Deut. 3:24; Psalms 86:8, 89:7, 96:4b, 135:5).

Yitro’s “Now I know” may mean, “Now, after hearing all that transpired.” But here also, linguistic usage makes it possible to understand it as, “Now I have it confirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt,” similar to the meaning of that identical phrase when Hashem said it to Abraham upon his passing the *aqeda* test (Gen. 22:12).

Aharon and the elders of Israel acknowledged Yitro’s eminence by partaking of his sacrificial meal. Yitro is a Midianite, a descendant of Abraham (Gen. 25:2). Some of the patriarch’s “gifts” that he presented to his sons (v. 6) were undoubtedly associated with his religious worldview and likely remained with his descendants to some extent, a topic we will touch on in the next paragraph. (Abraham’s intention in fathering more children in his later years after the birth of Yishaq was probably associated with his interest in instilling more values into the world.) It should be noted that despite Israel’s problems with Midian described in Numbers 25 and Judges 6-8, some of Yitro’s descendants - the Keni - maintained long-term cordial relations with Israel (Judges 4:11; 1 Sam. 15:6; 30:29; 1 Chron. 2:55; Jer. 35).

Whether Yitro came before the Lawgiving or not, the placing of his arrival, counsel and note of departure beforehand makes an important statement. It proclaims that he played no role regarding the content of the Covenant and Lawgiving that immediately follow. This constitutes what may have been an extremely relevant statement in those times. Some modern scholars claim to have uncovered evidence that at a time roughly contemporaneous

with *Mattan Torah*, in the region of Midian, which was a loose confederation of diverse tribes, a nomadic tribe was developing a religious system without paganism (see our comments on Deut. 33:2 in our study on *Vezot Haberakha Part I.*). If so, we may assume that Yitro was one of their leaders, as their priest, and perhaps the preserver of the Abrahamic tradition. But his input into Israelite culture is emphasized as being ancillary to *the* Lawgiving and to be differentiated from the content of the theophany.

Number symbolism points toward Yitro's prominent status. His name is attested seven times in our passage (and it should be recalled that he had seven daughters), indicative of his having achieved eminence and completion in the pre-Covenant sphere. It also informs us that he was not within the Covenant proper, which is symbolized by the digit eight. The יתרו stem in reference to him is attested thirteen times in our passage. This invokes his in-law linkage to Moshe in conjunction with his having achieved a level of relating to the one G-d, undoubtedly with the help of his son-in-law, thirteen being the *gematria* of "*ehad*" (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*).

### **III. Before Or After the Lawgiving?**

It is a well-founded principle of Bible exegesis that although Torah passages are not necessarily chronological, the preferable approach is to assume chronological order unless there is compelling evidence to regard it otherwise (see Ramban). Many have claimed to see such evidence in the case of Yitro's visit. We will cite some of the major arguments and parrying responses.

Yitro came "to the desert that [Moshe] was encamped at, *Har HaElokim*" (Ex. 18:5), a reference to the site of the Lawgiving. Not that the term "*Har HaElokim*," in and of itself, implies that the Lawgiving had already occurred, for we earlier read that Moshe led Yitro's flock to *Har HaElokim* (3:1) and Aharon went there to meet Moshe (4:27). Even had the site received its designation from the great event that was to occur, the Torah employs geographic

sites anachronistically (as Ibn Ezra often points out, citing the case with “Dan,” in Gen. 14:14). Or perhaps *Har HaElokim* was a site considered holy from pre-Mosaic days.

The argument is based on the fact that prior to the account of Yitro’s coming, Israel was camped at Rephidim, the site of the battle with Amaleq (17:8). Following the Yitro story we read that Israel traveled from Rephidim to the Sinai Desert (19:1,2), at which point the preliminaries to the Lawgiving began followed by the Lawgiving. Since the account of Israel coming to *Har HaElokim* is not narrated until after the Yitro account is concluded, Yitro must have come after the Lawgiving and for some reason the account of it was inserted beforehand.

Others counter that even had Yitro come to *Har HaElokim* in the days before the Lawgiving there may have been reason not to mention Israel’s having traveled there beforehand. The Torah may have wanted to keep the account of Israel’s arrival at Sinai attached to the essential purpose for which they came there, to create a cohesive unit of the Lawgiving narrative. This would be a miniature *איך מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה*, merely delaying mention of Israel’s arriving at the site until after the Yitro narrative was concluded.

The Ramban goes further. He conjectures that Moshe may have sent advanced word to Yitro that Israel was going to the well-known site of *Har HaElokim*. (Moshe knew it was on the agenda from the beginning of his mission, when G-d informed him of it at the burning bush, Ex. 3:12.) Yitro may have arrived there before Israel and from there sent his message to Moshe, who was in the neighboring region of the desert. Carefully parsing our verse 5, the Ramban points out that it states Yitro had arrived at the “desert region” at which Moshe was encamped, meaning Yitro arrived at *Har HaElokim* while the latter was still on the way. Alternatively, *Har HaElokim* itself may refer to the region.

Another indication cited to place Yitro after the Lawgiving is that Moshe declared he makes “G-d’s statutes and teachings” known to the people (18:16). However, these may refer to “natural”

religious law and the nation's cumulative traditions. Additionally, there was the *שם שם לו חק ומשפט* at Marah (15:25), the “statutes and ordinances” that may have referred to a partial Divine Lawgiving prior to the Sinai Lawgiving (as assumed in BT *San.* 56b). In any event, the portrayal of Moshe dispensing justice and teaching G-d's statutes to the people on an individual basis is consistent with what we might imagine the situation to have looked like before a comprehensive lawgiving had occurred (Shadal).

Some consider Yitro's sacrifices - *`olah* and *zebahim lelokim* (18:12) - an indication that he came after the Lawgiving (even post-Mishkan, in the second year), since there is no record of a sacrificial altar erected before the Lawgiving. However, it may be that Yitro, a non-Israelite priest, was allowed to bring his sacrifices even before an official Israelite sacrificial altar was established. He surely possessed spiritual dignity and did acknowledge the uniqueness of Hashem, the G-d of Israel, a point mentioned immediately prior to his bringing the sacrifices. Non-Israelites were not necessarily required to adhere to the extensive demands of the Second Commandment; it may have been sufficient to recognize the uniqueness of the one supreme G-d, who may have been thought to have had heavenly “ministers” subordinate to Him (see Deut. 4:19).

Rabenu Abraham ben HaRambam writes that his father assumed Yitro came after the Lawgiving because of practical considerations. There was not ample time before the Lawgiving for someone living in Midian to have heard about the Exodus, travel with Moshe's family to meet him, observe him in action, proffer advice and Moshe implement it. However, this argument has been viewed as overemphasizing the normal way things are done in the world. People do not usually hear about events, plan a trip, travel many days, observe an administrative system in action, recommend major changes and see them implemented in less than a span of many months or years. But theoretically, there surely was adequate time for all this to have taken place in the month and a half between the Exodus and the Lawgiving given that Midian was not that far from Horeb. This is especially the case when

people are anxiously tuned in and ready, willing and able to get on with an exciting agenda.

Our passage concludes with the statement that Moshe sent his father-in-law home and he returned to his land (Ex. 18:27). In Numbers 10:29, during the second year from the Exodus (subsequent to the Lawgiving) Moshe asks “*Hobab ben Re`uel HaMidyani hoten Moshe*” to remain with Israel, praising him with, “and you have been for us as eyes.” If Hobab is Yitro, based on Judges 4:11, which terms Hobab “*hoten Moshe,*” and if we understand Moshe’s praise as referring to Yitro’s Exodus 18 advice, that would mean that Yitro was living among Israel during the second year. It is far-fetched to assume that he went home, returned to Israel and took leave again.

However, the Exodus statement that he departed does not necessarily mean that he did so at that time. Even had it been at a later time it would have been appropriate to place notice of it with the narrative concerning him as a fitting close to the chapter. That type of *אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה* is common. Also, Hobab may be Yitro’s son (Ibn Ezra) and it was he who was around in the second year. “Hoten” may possibly designate a marriage relative and in the Judges verse may mean “brother-in-law.” That it may be Re`uel, Hobab’s father, who was Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, is consistent with a straightforward reading of Exodus 2:18.

Ibn Ezra draws what he considers decisive proof that Yitro came after the Lawgiving from Moshe’s fortieth year review in Deuteronomy 1. After relating that G-d gave instructions to proceed from Horeb (the Lawgiving site) to the Promised Land, Moshe said, “At that time... I requested you select heads... and I instructed your judges,” etc (Deut. 1:9-18). He continues, “we traveled from Horeb” (1:19), indicating that the charge to the judges was the last significant event at Horeb before departing, clearly post-Lawgiving. Since this latter discussion appears to refer to Yitro’s advice in Exodus 18, he must have come after *Mattan Torah*.

Abarbanel rejects this proof. He posits that although Yitro came before the Lawgiving and gave his recommendations then, their implementation was after that event, as related in Deuteronomy. According to him, the last four verses of the Exodus 18 passage that narrate Moshe's setting up the judiciary and Yitro's departure (vv. 24-27) are out of chronological order but placed with the passage to keep the story complete. In a similar vein, the Tosafists (BT A.Z. 24b) assume that Yitro's arrival was before the Lawgiving but his advice (v. 13 ff) was given afterwards. (Such divisions of Exodus 18 also respond to the Rambam's "proof" brought above.)

It is noteworthy that the Deuteronomy passage varies significantly from the Exodus 18 account. In Deuteronomy, Yitro is not mentioned or hinted at in any way. Moshe initiates the idea of establishing a leadership infrastructure and asks Israel to select heads according to their tribes. They agree, he takes the tribal heads, sets up the multi-level system, and instructs the judges. In Exodus 18, after Yitro's advice, Moshe himself selects men from among all Israel and there is no mention of a tribal dimension. Also, the criteria are different. In Deuteronomy, the emphasis is on intellectual qualities: "wise, discerning and men of stature to your tribes." In Exodus, character traits are stressed: "men of valor, G-d fearing, men of truth who hate ill-gotten gain." Some have assumed both sets of criteria were necessary and others view them as related, but Abarbanel interprets this matter to mean that Moshe did not do exactly as Yitro advised but adapted his suggestions in accordance with his own judgment and first-hand knowledge of Israel's situation.

The Ramban suggests a strong proof that Yitro came before the Lawgiving. The Torah states that Moshe related to Yitro all about what Hashem did to Pharaoh and Egypt as well as about all the travail on the journey from which He delivered Israel (Ex. 18:8). What about the unique event that stands at the pinnacle of the enterprise, the Lawgiving? Had it already occurred would Moshe omit it? Along the same line of thought, after Moshe related to Yitro what transpired, the Torah states that Yitro was joyous over all the good Hashem did to Israel, namely, that He saved the nation from Pharaoh (v. 9). What about the culmination of the

entire narrative, the Lawgiving? And why is his blessing of Hashem (v. 10) focused only on His saving activity with not a hint to the Covenant and Lawgiving?

Immediately after the Lawgiving (that is to say, after the Decalogue and the laws of *Parashat Mishpatim* that are attached to it), Moshe ascended the mountain to receive the Tablets and remained there forty days (24:12,18). Upon ascending he instructed the elders *שְׁבוּ לָנוּ בְּזֵה עַד אֲשֶׁר נָשׁוּב אֵלֵיכֶם*, apparently meaning that they are to substitute for him, fulfilling his responsibilities. He also designated Aharon and Hūur to be in charge, “whosoever has a litigation matter shall approach them” (v. 14), perhaps referring to someone whose case was not settled by the elders. Is this an indication that Yitro had not yet arrived and Moshe was establishing temporary procedures until his return? Or was he appointing the elders together with Aharon and Hūur to take his place as the final authority on difficult issues, the rest of the cases to be handled by the new infrastructure?

In any event, the golden calf incident occurred before Moshe descended from the mountain. Immediately upon his rejoining the camp he was involved in extensive efforts for national forgiveness (32:31). If Yitro came after the Lawgiving, the Exodus 18 scene of “all the people coming to Moshe from morning to night” could not have taken place until at least a number of months later. How did Israel manage during that extended period of time, subsequent to the Lawgiving, without a structured judicial system?



## Reflections on the Decalogue

### I. Innovative Concepts

The Ten Commandments or the Decalogue - the latter title (derived from the Greek-Latin) a more accurate translation of “*asseret hadebarim*,” the ten words or pronouncements, a term thrice-attested in the Torah (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13, 10:4) - comprises a unique compendium in the annals of world history, having introduced concepts of the highest order to mankind. It appears twice in the Five Books, once in Exodus 20, embedded in the Torah’s narrative presentation of the early stages of Israel’s development as a nation, and again in Deuteronomy, in Moshe’s review before his death of the preceding forty years. (We will address the several differences between the two formulations in our study “*On Decalogue Variations*.”) It is not an exaggeration to say that the Decalogue is fundamental to Israel’s national identity.

Following are four major features of this remarkable proclamation that manifest original, even revolutionary concepts. Each contains several associated innovative notions.

1. The Decalogue constitutes the essence of Hashem’s Revelation to Israel. Its precepts were the foundation upon which He enacted a Covenant with the nation, establishing an intimate relationship between Him and man, an association with far-reaching consequences. The tablets on which the Decalogue was inscribed are termed “Tablets of the Covenant” and the ark in which they resided is the “Ark of the Covenant.” Through acceptance of the Decalogue and the laws that were understood to be attached to it, G-d had declared He would make Israel His “treasure” among the nations and it would become a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). Analogous to priests serving within a nation Israel is to serve among the nations, ever focused on its responsibility to bring the consciousness of Hashem to the world

and inspire the nations to fulfill His will. Thus will the hope that He expressed to Abraham at the initiation of the enterprise of creating a new nation from his progeny, that it will be a source of blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3), be realized.

As far as is known, the notion of such a relationship between a deity and a nation was unprecedented, although commitments requiring exclusive loyalty were popular in the ancient Near East in covenant relationships between suzerains and their vassal nations or with their subjects. To formalize the G-d-Israel Covenant the Decalogue articulates in a compact form the most essential elements contemporary protocol prescribed for enacting suzerain-vassal treaties:

- The opening verse begins with Hashem's majestic self-identification, stating His name as well as His relationship to Israel.
- This is followed by a reminder of the great benefaction He bestowed on Israel by redeeming it from the house of bondage.
- Next, the fundamental stipulations He demands from His people are enumerated. (It is understood that additional ones would subsequently be added.)
- A statement of punishment for violation and reward for compliance is attached, in this case to the most serious demand only, the prohibition of idolatry. Also, "length of days on the land" is mentioned with the precept of honoring father and mother.

The remaining covenant requirements - all technical details - which consist of committing the particulars to writing, designating witnesses, providing for its appropriate safekeeping, partaking of a ceremonial meal and associated Blessings and Curses, are described in succeeding chapters. Indeed, the Books of Exodus-Leviticus combined on the one hand and the Book of Deuteronomy on the other, each in a self-contained manner, are structured in accordance with contemporary covenant protocol as we hope to demonstrate in a study on covenant format in the

Torah. Utilizing the conventional model for the external framework of the Covenant conferred the highest degree of significance upon it since kings had vigorously insisted on the supreme importance of covenantal commitments. It also helped make clear to the recipients what was being accomplished.

As it established a relationship with the eternal G-d who was also concerned for the long-term future, the covenant concept transformed Israel into a permanent corporate entity. This innovative development, in turn, prompted a number of major applications. Each individual in the nation was to be viewed as in a direct relationship with and personally charged by G-d, having to answer to Him, as opposed to being exhorted by a king, priest or tribal chieftain. This is reflected in the second person singular employed in the Decalogue and is part of the democratization process promoted by the Torah. It is connected to the lofty status granted each human being by virtue of everybody being derived from common human ancestors created by the one G-d and from His having created all humankind “in His image” (Gen. 1:26-27), applications of the Torah’s revolution in thought.

2. The first two pronouncements\* enunciate details of the immense advance in religion related to belief in one G-d. Israel must recognize Hashem as its sole G-d, whose sovereignty extends over all realms of the world, and be completely faithful to Him. All manner and aspects of idolatry are strictly prohibited. When fully developed and applications spelled out by the prophets, the belief that there is only one G-d led to the uncompromising responsibility for consistent moral and ethical action. Superstitions were ruled out as were all sorts of rationalizations for inappropriate and divisive behavior that the belief in multiple deities fostered. Idolatry became recognized as man’s subtle conceit, stemming from his undisciplined raw drives and his unbridled ego, serving his own creations. Belief in one G-d heightened recognition of the universal brotherhood concept latent in the Creation account and promoted abiding concern for all human beings, leading to the vision of an eventual end to wars with peace on earth.

3. The Fourth Commandment, Shabbat, is a multi-faceted innovation of enormous significance with applications in various realms. As a day “for Hashem,” set aside on the seventh day of each week without exception on which work must cease, it provides a recurring national reminder of Hashem having created the world and all in it in six days and resting on the seventh. It is a day to be perceived as His having already sanctified and blessed from Creation. And since the prohibition to work is not limited to one’s family but includes male and female slaves, animals, and “your stranger within your gates” (who is dependent on you), the implication is that G-d’s compassion is on all His creation. Releasing the slave from labor for twenty-four hours cannot but prompt thoughts of his welfare and foster advances in social justice.

In the Deuteronomy version of the Decalogue, Shabbat’s primary purposes are defined as, “in order that your male and female slave may rest as you do” and that “you remember you were a slave in Egypt” and Hashem redeemed you from there (Deut. 5:14-15). The Shabbat passage in *Parashat Ki Tissa* highlights the day as a celebration of the Covenant (Ex. 31:12-17).

A day of rest rejuvenates and transforms life in both the physical and domestic spheres. Having to sanctify the day and distinguish it as dedicated to Hashem, in whichever manner such responsibilities were to be put into practical effect, promotes spiritual welfare as well as family and communal cohesiveness. We read that in the days of the prophets these principles were fulfilled by establishing Shabbat as a joyous festival on which the values the day stands for were celebrated (Isa. 58:13) and making it an occasion to visit a prophet (2 Kings 4:23) or the sanctuary (Isa. 66:23).

Although seven-day units were employed for various purposes in the ancient Near East - reflecting the symbolic prominence of the number seven - it is only Israel that had established the week as an ongoing, regularly occurring subdivision of time. In addition, all Near Eastern major celebrations were then associated with one astral phenomenon or another involving sun, moon or stars. Thus,

it surely is meaningful that a week does not correspond to any celestial movement and the Shabbat celebration is free of any such linkage.

4. The mode of articulation of most of the Decalogue commandments is unique and in a legally advanced form. Except for those demanding exclusive service of Hashem and Shabbat, the other precepts were “on the books” of the world’s great civilizations prior to *Mattan Torah*; regulations prescribing respect for the names of the gods and the honoring of parents and prohibitions of murder, adultery, stealing and false testimony had already long been recognized and legislated in Near Eastern society. However, there are major differences between the manner the pre-Torah world understood and codified these laws and their formulation in the Decalogue. In no pre-Torah society were they recognized as categorical imperatives that derived from a Divine source, incumbent upon each member of society to fulfill at all times regardless of social status or any personal considerations, as they are presented in the Decalogue’s terse and apodictic style.

That the Covenant was contracted before Israel entered the Promised Land, an occurrence that was to be relatively imminent, also possesses an innovative character. It is important for a nation to possess its own land, a matter generally conceived as critical to its identity. G-d had promised a land to Abraham from the very beginning, one of the reasons undoubtedly being for it to become an arena in which the laws of the Torah may fully flourish and an example may be set for other nations. Nevertheless, He did not consider it necessary to establish the Covenant upon the nation’s land. Israel’s self-identity as a nation was established through the Covenant contracted in the wilderness!

## II. Direct Perception and Moshe's Mediation

An ancient tradition recorded in the Talmud (BT *Mak.* 23b-24a) relates that the people heard the first two commandments “*מפי ה' הגבורה*,” directly from Hashem, whereas the remaining eight they heard through the mediation of Moshe. This is likely based on a *peshat* interpretation of the Decalogue format as indicated by the syntax. In the first two commandments G-d speaks of Himself in first person, addressing the people in second person: I, Hashem, am your G-d; you shall have no other gods besides Me... for I, Hashem your G-d, am a jealous G-d, etc. In the third, fourth and fifth commandments, He is referred to in the third person: Do not take in vain the name of Hashem your G-d; a Sabbath for Hashem your G-d; that you may have long days on the land that Hashem your G-d is giving you. The last five commandments are tense-neutral in this respect, but from the overall context it would appear that they continue along the same line as the previous three.

The reason for the change appears to be described in the brief account immediately following the Decalogue in both Exodus (20:15-18) and Deuteronomy (5:20-24). The people were awe-struck and terrified by the overpowering experience of encountering the Divine and felt they could not maintain the high level of discipline required. They were committed to G-d's program but feared that they would die and so they asked Moshe to relate the Divine words to them. Although the text records this request subsequent to the Decalogue, it may very well be describing the people's reaction and dialogue with Moshe that occurred at some point in the midst of the experience, but in order not to interrupt the proclamation, the request was described afterwards.

In his Deuteronomy retrospective, just before recounting the Decalogue, after reminding the people that Hashem spoke to them “face to face from the midst of the fire,” Moshe explicitly reminded them that he “stood between Hashem and you at that time to relate to you Hashem's word as you feared the fire...” (Deut. 5:4-5). In the post-Decalogue passage there, the people are described as having expressed the fear that they would die if they

“continued” hearing Hashem’s voice (5:22), affirming that they did hear some of His words. This probably means they heard the first part, at which point they communicated their fears to Moshe and a change in format was instituted.

In Exodus, when the people requested Moshe’s mediation, we are informed that he reassured them, explaining that G-d’s purpose for them to have had a direct national prophetic experience was to test them (to challenge and prove them) and to instill reverence for Him in order to prevent their sinning. Having etched in its consciousness such an encounter with G-d would be a powerful motivational factor for the nation to maintain its future reverence for Him. In introducing His purpose for Revelation, He told Moshe: “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and also so that they shall trust in you evermore” (Ex. 19:9). A purpose of Revelation was for the people to believe that G-d does communicate His will to human beings and that they should be able to trust His legitimate prophet.

In Deuteronomy, after reciting the Decalogue and reminding the nation of its request for his mediation, Moshe quotes G-d to the general effect of being satisfied with the people’s positive disposition in requesting Moshe’s mediation with the hope that they would maintain their reverence for Him in the future.

At a later point in Moshe’s Deuteronomic discourse, when he exhorts Israel not to heed soothsayers and sorcerers, etc., as do the nations G-d is dispossessing from before them, he returns to our subject. Once again he quotes Israel’s statement and G-d’s response, with further details:

...not such has Hashem your G-d designated for you. A prophet from your midst, from your brethren, like me, Hashem your G-d will raise for you, him shall you heed. In accordance with what you asked from Hashem your G-d at Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying: “Let me not continue hearing the voice of Hashem my G-d and this great fire let me not see, that I not die.” And Hashem said to me, “They did well in what

they spoke. A prophet will I raise for them from their brethren, like you, and I will place My words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him” (Deut. 18:14-18).

The prophetic experience was to continue into the future in one form or another. It is the alternative to the various forms of divination that the pagan nations engaged in. The latter practices, steeped in idolatrous magic and wonder-working, are intertwined with abominations (as the previous verses in that Deuteronomy 18 passage make clear), whereas the prophet who receives his inspiration from G-d will lead the nation in the moral path.

The people’s decision at the Lawgiving not to see the fire accords with the system of G-d inspiring individual prophets for the benefit of the masses. But one cannot help but think of Moshe’s response to his disciple Joshua. Upon hearing the report that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp, Joshua had asked Moshe to restrain them. His response: “Are you jealous for me? Would that all Hashem’s people be prophets that Hashem place His spirit upon them” (Num. 11:29).

### **III. Symbolism of the Fire**

In Deuteronomy, the people’s fear that they would die if they continued to hear G-d’s voice was expressed with reference to being consumed by the great fire (Deut. 5:22-23). Regarding that fire - extensively cited by Moshe in Deuteronomy but significantly subdued in the Exodus account - and what it represents, it is worthwhile to read Rabbi S. D. Sassoon’s statement on the Symbolism of the Fire. (Excerpted and translated from *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, Heb. section, p. 191.)

...It may be that most of the Ten Commandments were previously acknowledged, such as You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, etc., but what was new to their



consciousness at Sinai was that these laws possess absoluteness... drawn from the absolute unity of the Creator, which spreads over the whole creation and is reflected within it and brings about an absoluteness to the values of compassion and justice, which are expressions of G-d's unity.

At Sinai, as G-d's absolute unity became known to them, they recognized His will is absolute in its demands and that it is the sole dispenser of life and true sustenance to each creature. This reality brings about the situation that whomever distances himself from the path of life G-d revealed is destined for total destruction....

G-d's words come out of the fire... the command didn't come as an aesthetic and worthwhile precept but as an absolutely required one that doesn't tolerate annulment, and whose abandonment is complete destruction. This destruction is symbolized by the fire... That is why the term *מתוך האש* in conjunction with G-d's words at Sinai appear ten times in Deuteronomy (4:12,15,33,36; 5:4,19,21,23; 9:10; 10:4). This is also the reason the Torah represents G-d as fire (Deut. 4:24; 9:3).

Although this fire consumes and destroys all that is in opposition to G-d's will, it also has the power to illuminate the path we should travel in. For it is easier for the one who achieves perception of this fire to separate from the evil and unseemly. That is the meaning of what is written that the fire that preceded the nation showed or illuminated the way (Deut. 1:33).

Being that the appearance of fire pointed to G-d's presence and governance... the prophets prophesied that the time will once again come when G-d will illuminate before the nation (Isaiah 60:19-20; Micha 7:9)....

## Endnote

\* There are several views as to how to divide the overall passage into ten. Most of the millennia-old disputes centered on how to interpret the first verse, that of “*Anokhi*.” Though it is essentially a declarative sentence and does not contain an imperative verb, Targum Yonatan rendered it as the first commandment, as did several Talmudic and Midrashic Sages, followed by Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ramban and the general tradition. They understand it as requiring the acknowledgment of the existence of G-d or the recognition that Hashem alone is our G-d. Other Sages, Josephus, Philo and a number of commentators considered the first verse as introductory. Hasdai Crescas, Abarbanel and others presented strong philosophic arguments against the first view. It should be noted that the prohibition against idolatry does appear to naturally divide into two.

The Masoretic Text, judging from its *setumot* and *petuhot* divisions, appears to consider the first verse together with all the idolatry verses as one command and divides the *lo taḥmod* verses into two commands. To the extent that it does not significantly affect our comments, we will use the more prevalent division counting the first verse as the first precept.

# On Decalogue Variants

## I. General Remarks

The two formulations of the Decalogue in the Torah (Ex. 20:2-14 and Deut. 5:6-18) differ from each other in a number of ways. Most of the variations appear to be slight - the presence or absence of a “*vav*,” use of a synonym or a different manner of expressing the same idea. Several are clearly significant. We will not discuss the widely divergent opinions on this matter except to touch briefly on the view of Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089 - 1164), widely recognized as perhaps the leading influence on *peshat* commentary on the Bible since his time.

In Ibn Ezra’s opinion there is no essential difference if a word in the Torah or in the other Books of the prophets was written one way or another, for example, with or without a “*vav*.” The prophet, as is the case with all scribes, may vary his style, sometimes writing this way, sometimes that way. He posits that many variants exist “because the Torah guards the meanings, not the words.” Thus, there may be no special reason why in writing about a subject a second time in the Torah a synonym was substituted for a word or phrase used in the first context - the meaning is what counts. In addition, a word that is not a synonym may be substituted even when quoting a spoken statement if it contributes to a fuller comprehension of what was said. After all, prophecy was not transmitted as dictation but through concepts that the prophet was responsible to channel into writing.

Modern Bible research, particularly during recent decades, has compellingly demonstrated that variants are generally purposeful and were intended to transmit an additional dimension of meaning. The Torah text has been shown to be punctilious and specific, extremely sophisticated. While it may be read with value by all people on their level, it addresses the most highly attentive, capable and conscientious readers with literary artistry. It often

presents insights through subtle nuances in syntax, grammar and diction that could only have resulted from the intention to be meaningful. Deft and discreet intertextual associations and symbolic allusions are common. Thus, both Decalogue versions as they are attested in the Masoretic Text are equally worthy of study and each variant may be assumed to have a message.

If it could in fact be determined which Decalogue version was first, and if signs of intertextual linkage concerning the variants could be detected, it surely would be helpful in gaining deeper insight into their purpose. It is the thesis of this study that there is significant internal evidence to this end present in the texts of the Decalogue.

In this regard it is helpful to review an aspect of the views of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon regarding the many variations between Deuteronomy and the other four books of the Torah, a most profound and complex subject. He was of the opinion that as Deuteronomy - for the most part - is presented as Moshe's historical retrospective, its narration of historical events should not be thought of as containing a significant degree of allegorical expansion or hyperbolic exposition beyond the standard historical record, notwithstanding that it was written under G-d's prophetic inspiration. The other four books, however, constitute prophecies from G-d that, as regards strict historicity, are not restricted to merely surveying the historical record; there may be substantial expanded dimensions to the material recorded in them. The full interpretation of these elaborations is part of the Oral Torah.

To illustrate, consider the two Torah passages concerning Amaleq's attack against Israel (Ex. 17:8-16 and Deut. 25:17-19). The Deuteronomic passage is presented from beginning to end as a strictly historical account, while the corresponding account in Exodus very much appears to contain an allegorical dimension, as pointed out by the Mishnaic Sages (R.H. 3:8). They ask, *וכי ידיו של משה עושות מלחמה או שוברות מלחמה* - is it possible that Moshe's raising and lowering his hands govern the ups and downs of the battle?, a question that impacts on a number of other details in that passage. An allegorical interpretation that goes beyond the

historical particulars of the underlying subject being narrated was indicated.

## II. *Temunah*

There is a variance between the two Decalogue statements in how the prohibition against making a sculptured image/likeness is formulated. In Exodus we read *כָּסֵל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם וְכוּ'*, “sculptured image or likeness of whatever is in the heavens above, the earth below or in the seas beneath the earth.” (The “*vav*” connecting *pesel* and *temunah* obviously has the meaning here of “or” as it often does.) The “*pesel*” (sculptured image) and the “*temunah*” (likeness) are both objects of the verbal clause “Thou shalt not make,” both denoting man-made artifacts constituting idols. The prohibition of these images and likenesses encompasses their being a representation of any item or shape in the heavens, on earth or in the seas.

However, the verse does not actually contain a word for the “item or shape” in the heavens, on earth or in the seas that the command prohibits to make the artifact a representation of. After mentioning the artifacts that one is forbidden to make, which are understood to be idols, it merely states *אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם וְכוּ'*, that are in the heavens, on earth or in the seas, as if the artifacts themselves are in the heavens, on earth or in the seas. Those items or shapes of which the artifacts would be representations are not mentioned or referred to! It is an extraordinary absence, surprising the reader that he must mentally furnish the phrase “of all items or shapes” that are in the heavens, etc., especially considering the comprehensiveness and wordiness of the prohibition and its importance.

In Deuteronomy, however, we read *כָּסֵל כָּל תְּמוּנָה* without the “*vav*.” The absence of that one letter creates two possibilities in interpreting the phrase. *כָּל תְּמוּנָה* may be an expansion of *pesel*, including artifacts similar to *pesel*, thus having a meaning very close to (though not identical with) the Exodus version. Similar expanding constructions are common in Deuteronomy (cf. 15:21; 16:21) and this may merely be an instance of the Deuteronomic

way of articulation. Or, in contrast to Exodus, כָּל תְּמוּנָה may not be referring to the concrete man-made artifact at all, but denotes the shape of the items in the heavens, on earth or in the seas that the *pesel* would represent. כָּל תְּמוּנָה פְּסֵל would be in the construct state and the meaning of the verse would be, “Do not make a sculptured image of any likeness found in the heavens above, etc.” Unlike the Exodus formulation, only one term - *pesel* - would designate the prohibited artifact.

The word “*temunah*” denoting the shape or appearance of the external item that is prohibited to represent with an artifact or to worship occurs five times in Deuteronomy 4, the chapter immediately preceding that in which the Decalogue appears. All five attestations refer to Revelation:

- “*utmunah enekhem ro'im*” (v. 12)
- “*ki lo re'item kol temunah*” (v. 15)
- “*pesel, temunat kol samel*” (v. 16)
- “*pesel, temunat kol*” (v. 23)
- “*pesel, temunat kol*” (v. 25)

In none of these phrases can *temunah* be given the meaning of a man-made artifact. “*Temunah*” referring to an abstract likeness also appears elsewhere in Tanakh (Num. 12:8; Ps. 17:15; Job 4:16). Significantly, besides in the Decalogue, its use as “idol” is not attested a single time in Tanakh! Interpreting it in the Deuteronomic Decalogue consistent with its other occurrences of “likeness” appears indicated, and in this formulation the problem discussed above of the lack of such a word in the Exodus formulation is, of course, solved.

But the Exodus passage cannot take such an explanation because of the “*vav*.” This appears to indicate that Deuteronomy was the first version and that Exodus, referring to, indeed, subtly relying upon the Deuteronomic formulation for the full expression, expanded the scope of “*pesel*” with the coinage of another term, “*temunah*,” to refer to man-made artifacts that serve as idols. (For an example of a similar pattern see our discussion on the linkage

between Exodus 13 and Deuteronomy 6-7 in our study *On Exodus Chapter 13.*)

### III. *Zakhor* and *Shamor*

In Exodus, Shabbat is introduced with “*Zakhor*” (remember, keep in mind); in Deuteronomy, the introductory word is “*Shamor*” (keep, observe, protect). The rest of the clause that follows each of these words is identical in both contexts. If only one version was explicitly proclaimed at the Lawgiving - a reasonable assumption - and the other expounded upon the first, whatever the mechanism that may have been, which formulation was first?

In other Scriptural passages “*shamor*” is invariably the standard usage with Shabbat. Thus, Exodus 31 contains three attestations of various forms of the ש-מ-ר stem with Shabbat: את שבתתי תשמרו (Ex. 31:13); ושמרתם את השבת (v. 14) and ושמרו בני ישראל את השבת (v. 16). In Leviticus, the phrase את שבתתי תשמרו appears three times (Lev. 19:3, 30 and 26:2); in Isaiah, the שמר שבת usage appears twice (Isa. 56:2, 6.) Regarding זכור however, besides the one attestation in the Exodus Decalogue, there is not a single other such usage associated with Shabbat elsewhere in Tanakh! This appears to point toward viewing “*shamor*” as more suitably fitting the context that defines Shabbat’s nature and comprehensive regulations. “*Zakhor*” - which calls forth memory - is an expansion, a type of Biblical *midrash*. This suggests an enlightening approach as to what might have transpired.

Possibly, the Exodus “*zakhor*” is drawn from the Deuteronomy Shabbat passage and we may theorize as follows. In the Deuteronomic explanation for Shabbat, the word “זכרת” (and you shall remember) is prominently employed, albeit not to remember Shabbat but to recall Israel’s past slavery. In Exodus, since that part of the Deuteronomy Shabbat formulation does not appear (with another concept substituting for it), the ז-כ-ר word-root may have been retained to maintain the connectedness with the other Decalogue formulation and utilized to remember a different object - the Shabbat day itself. In this way, the two Shabbat formulations

combined provide a more comprehensive prescription and the two passages are enriched with intertextual linkage.

Another instance of the Exodus Decalogue drawing from the portion of the Deuteronomic one that is not to be attested in its formulation, may involve the use of the word וַיָּנַח (and He rested). In Deuteronomy, יָנוּחַ refers to the slave having rest on Shabbat, part of the Deuteronomic explanation for Shabbat that does not appear in the Exodus version. Exodus' use of the word יָנוּחַ in describing G-d having rested on the seventh day is the only attestation in *Tanakh* of וַיָּנַח in relation to G-d!

To summarize, it appears likely that the Exodus version of the Decalogue incorporated from the Deuteronomy version the key word of each of the two interrelated explanatory phrases for Shabbat that were going to be omitted in its own formulation - וַיָּנַח and וַיִּזְכֹּר - and adapted them for its elaboration.

#### **IV. The Reason for the Shabbat Commandment**

In the Exodus version of the Decalogue the explanation given for observing Shabbat is that it commemorates G-d's creation: "for in six days Hashem created the heavens and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day" (Ex. 20:11). In Deuteronomy, we read: "in order that your male and female slave may rest as you do. And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and *Hashem Elokekha* redeemed you from there... therefore *Hashem Elokekha* has commanded you to observe the Shabbat day" (Deut. 5:14-15).

In Deuteronomy, the passage fully and clearly informs us of two related purposes or reasons for Shabbat: "in order (למען) that your slave may rest as you do" and "that you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and *Hashem Elokekha* redeemed you from there... therefore (על כן) *Hashem Elokekha* has commanded you to observe the Shabbat day." There is no ambiguity whatsoever about why this precept was commanded; not only does the verse distinctly spell it out, but it also definitively informs us that it is providing the reason with על כן and למען.



In Exodus, the connection to the reason for Shabbat, Creation, is made with “*ki*” (for), a somewhat less definite term to articulate a purpose compared to Deuteronomy’s *למען* and *על כן*. In addition, in Exodus there is not any statement explicitly specifying “this is G-d’s reason” for commanding this law, such as Deuteronomy’s *על כן*, which reinforced the reason furnished by *למען*. And the explanation “for in six days G-d created...and rested on the seventh day” is a statement of fact that points to a correspondence and implies a reason without actually elaborating the reason. It is left to the recipient of the message to elucidate why desisting from work on the seventh day as G-d rested on the seventh day constitutes an appropriate act commemorating G-d’s creative activity. An unusual formulation.

The Exodus passage does employ a “therefore” (*על כן*) in the Shabbat passage furnishing a reason but for a very different syntactical purpose. Indeed, the Exodus *על כן* is unusual and of a most surprising connection with what precedes in the verse. It provides information that is essentially extraneous to the reason Israel must observe Shabbat, although it may be interpreted as indirectly related to it. It basically informs us of matters in G-d’s domain, namely, His reason for having blessed and sanctified Shabbat in the first place. In other words, after the passage provides the rationale for observing Shabbat, it proceeds to a “therefore,” leading the reader to expect that forthcoming will be another detail or a fuller explanation of why we are commanded to observe Shabbat, as the *על כן* does in the Deuteronomy case and as it usually does. Instead, it furnishes an explanation as to why Hashem blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy! This is information on a related facet of the subject but not serving the anticipated purpose; it is a proclamation that does not primarily belong within the formulation of a commandment.

If the Deuteronomy version was earlier, we may assume that a process similar to what we maintained in the previous section regarding *וזכרת* and *ינוה* may explain the *על כן*. In order to maintain the linkage with the original, the Exodus formulation duplicated the *על כן* format of the Deuteronomy explanation that it was not going to incorporate and, employing it in a manner that suited its

explanation, expounded another important concept relevant to Shabbat.

Thus, three key terms of the Deuteronomy version that represent the three clauses (actually, each of these terms begins another of these clauses) that were not to appear in the Exodus version were adapted for use in the latter passage in a creative manner.

Finally, it should be noted that the Deuteronomic reasons of benefiting slaves and focusing the nation on recalling weekly its gaining of freedom from Egypt are apropos to the immediate historical context in which the Decalogue was proclaimed. The more abstract explanation of commemorating creation befits a more contemplative mode and appears more suitable to the realm of prophetic *midrash*. The amount of time between the formulations is not relevant to this discussion; it is merely the question of which was the original formulation, allowing the second, even if propounded in a similar time frame, to refer to it in its expounding and expanding.

## V. כאשר צִוְּךָ ה'

In the Deuteronomy version, two precepts include a note informing us that they had previously been commanded by Hashem to Israel, Shabbat and the honoring of father and mother. Both contain the phrase כאשר צִוְּךָ ה' אלקיך (as Hashem your G-d had commanded you). There is no such comment in the Exodus version. Some commentators have considered this an indication that the Exodus version was first, as there we are not informed of any interjections by Moshe, who presumably related exactly G-d's words. In Moshe's fortieth year review, just as he chose to insert in the midst of his words ה' אלקיך כאשר צִוְּךָ ה' - referring, they assume, to the original Decalogue proclamation, as if he wrote ככתוב בתורתך - he can be supposed to have taken other modifying liberties, accounting for the variants (see Ibn Ezra).

However, this is not truly a question on the thesis that the Deuteronomic version was earlier, constituting the original formulation. For as Moshe was reciting the Decalogue long after

the event, it is very possible that he thought it appropriate to remind his audience that he was enunciating G-d's commands as originally transmitted and thus inserted **ה' אלקיך**. He inserted that phrase only when dealing with the precepts of Shabbat and the honoring of parents for reasons we will soon discuss. Thus, this phrase does not provide any evidence that he made any modifications in the content, accounting for the variations.

Some Sages view Moshe's fortieth year **ה' אלקיך** to be harking back to Marah (Ex. 15:25), a pre-Decalogue experience, regarding which the Torah informed us **שם שם לו חק ומשפט**, that on that occasion Hashem set for Israel "statute and ordinance." They identify these two as Shabbat and honoring of parents respectively (BT *San.* 56b). That they did not take Moshe's fortieth year **ה' אלקיך** as referring to those two commandments in the original Decalogue proclamation rather than to the ambiguous Marah may indicate that they understood those words to have already been said by Moshe in the initial transmission of the Decalogue and repeated verbatim in Deuteronomy, assuming everything he recited in the Deuteronomy version was in accordance with the original proclamation. Hence, that school of thought apparently considered the Deuteronomic version to be the initial one.

However, that Talmudic statement, which appears to be *aggadic* in nature, is one view in a dispute (as recorded in the *Mekhilta*), and it does not cite the evidence for its position. Moreover, as we explained in our *Parashat Beshalah Part I* study with considerable support, the *peshat* of the **שם שם לו חק ומשפט** verse may be referring to establishment of a preliminary covenant prior to the Sinai Lawgiving.

Assuming the **ה' אלקיך** does not refer to Marah but to the initial proclamation of the Decalogue and Moshe chose to insert those words, what might have been his reason to add the phrase only to Shabbat and honoring parents? Of course, such a statement could not have been added to the first two commandments as Hashem proclaimed those in the first person and Moshe quoted Him verbatim. The third commandment, speaking of our

obligation to respect His name, is a thematic continuation of the first two. Although formulated in the third person, it fits right in with the previous two, and thus would not be suitable to receive a motivational reminder separating it somewhat from them. The last five, formulated in a terse, apodictic style, contain no third person word. Whether or not they were originally part of what was transmitted through Moshe's mediation, they are unmistakably perceived as G-d's words. It is only the commandments of Shabbat and the honoring of parents, as they contain third person phraseology, that lent themselves to the addition of the motivational reminder "as Hashem had commanded you."

We will discuss some of the variations in the Tenth Commandment formulations in our study on that commandment.

## Visiting Iniquity of Fathers Upon Sons

### I. A Jealous G-d

After prohibiting all forms of idolatry, the Second Commandment concludes with: “For I, Hashem your G-d, am a jealous G-d....” The attribute employed - קנא - invokes imagery of an indignant husband resentful of his wife’s directing her affections to another. Hashem’s Covenant with Israel - although at this point it may not as yet have addressed the issue of the non-existence of other deities - requires exclusive faithfulness to Him; infidelity is construed as provoking His wrath as it does that of a jealous husband. (Marriage imagery in association with the Covenant is attested a number of times in Tanakh.)

The verse continues: פקד עון אבות על בנים וגו’ “who visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons, upon the third and upon the fourth [generations] to those that hate Me, and who does kindness to the thousands [of generations] of those that love Me and keep My precepts.”

Multi-generation retribution is attested four times in the Torah, in each instance connected with the most egregious of transgressions. In both Decalogue formulations it is invoked for idolatry. In Exodus 34:7, Hashem includes it among His attributes in the context of the reestablished Covenant subsequent to the golden calf apostasy. In Numbers 14:18, Moshe cited it in his prayer for forgiveness following the nation’s rejection of the Promised Land, also a major Covenant breach. Multi-generation retribution appears to be designed only for major breaches of the Covenant.

How is such retribution to be understood? Does G-d punish innocent children for their parents’ sins? If so, even if the purpose of such a policy is to serve as a deterrent, can it be reconciled with the natural, almost intuitive human definition of justice?

At the outset it must be emphasized that all the cases of multi-generation retribution in the Torah refer exclusively to retribution meted out directly by the Deity in His own legal justice realm. Regarding sentencing measures dispensed by a human court, the Torah states (Deut. 24:16): “Fathers shall not be put to death for sons, nor sons be put to death for fathers; a person shall be put to death only for his own sin.” This verse unquestionably refers to the realm of earthly administration of justice. It appears amid a cluster of human responsibilities and is formulated as a directive to a human court; indeed, a statement concerning the Divine court of justice at that point would be anomalous. The key verb יָמַתוּ is elsewhere always employed for execution at human hands. King Amaziah quotes this verse as the legal source that prohibits execution of the sons of his father’s assassins (II Kings 14:5-6). Although speaking about the death penalty, this proscription has been understood as totally banning all human vicarious punishment.

Thus, in discussing *poqed `avon abot `al banim*, we are theorizing about what the Deity does in His realm. Whatever explanation we give does not affect the reality of things since it does not relate to any action that may be undertaken by human initiative.

## II. A Major Qualification

The Talmud (BT *Ber. 7a, San. 27b*) significantly diminishes the scope of *poqed `avon abot `al banim*. It construes it as only applicable when sons continue in the evil ways of their fathers. It cites a verse in the Leviticus execration that implies this principle: “And they that are left shall waste away in their sins... and even in the sins of their fathers that are with them shall they waste away” (בְּעוֹנֹת אֲבוֹתָם אִתָּם יִמָּקֶוּ, Lev. 26:39).

Although the Talmud does not cite it, some scholars detect this qualification in the Decalogue passage itself. The *poqed `avon* phrase specifies לְשׂוֹנְאֵי (to those that hate Me, i.e., engage in idolatry). This may be a reference to the sons that hate G-d, restricting retribution for fathers’ sins to such children. Similarly,

His kindnesses that extend to future generations **לאֶהְבִּי וְלִשְׁמֵרֵי מִצְוֹתַי** would extend only to those children who maintain love for Him and are faithful to His *misvot*.

However, others understand the word **לְשֹׂאֵי** as referring to the sinning fathers, not their children. The syntax fits the fathers very well. Hashem warns: Do not engage in idolatry, for I am a jealous G-d who visits fathers' sins on their sons, for those (fathers) who hate Me. That would imply that the sins of those who do not hate Him (less severe sinners) are not visited upon their children. This supports the distinction pointed out in the previous section between major and non-major transgressions. Either way, **לְשֹׂאֵי** restricts the scope of *poqed `avon*.

In the two non-Decalogue Torah attestations of *poqed `avon* the word **לְשֹׂאֵי** does not appear. The explanation may be that in those contexts *poqed `avon* is mentioned in the abstract, as one of a number of G-d's attributes, not addressing any specific sinner and therefore not requiring any possible qualification of the action.

It appears that a support for the view that the Decalogue's **לְשֹׂאֵי** applies to the sinful fathers may be brought from Deuteronomy 7:9. That verse, in standard chiasmic fashion, paraphrases the multi-generational reward statement of the Decalogue with sequence reversal of the clauses: "to those who love Him and guard His misvot" followed by "until a thousand generations." In this case, "those who love Him" clearly refers to the parents. Analogously, although multi-generational punishment does not appear in that passage, the Decalogue's statement "to those who hate Me" would also refer to the parents. (That this verse speaks of a "thousand generations" in contrast to the Decalogue's "thousands" may be a result of the absence of the word "generations" in the Decalogue. Both mean "indefinitely.")

Scriptural support for the thesis that *poqed `avon abot `al banim* is restricted only to sons who continue in their father's sinful ways has been brought from Jeremiah 32:18-19. In consecutive verses the prophet cites Hashem's attribute of multi-generational reward

and punishment immediately followed by the principle of individual accountability.

18. Who does kindness to the thousandth (generation) and compensates the iniquity of fathers upon their sons after them....

19. ...whose eyes observe all the ways of men to give each according to his ways and according to the fruits of his doings.

In order that these verses not contradict one another, not to speak of complementing each another, which surely appears to be the intention, the first has been understood as referring to children who continue in the ways of their parents, the second to those who do not. The qualification need not be explicitly stated as these verses are within a context of the prophet speaking to G-d.

### III. Interpretations

Concerning the matter of the justice of *poqed `avon abot `al banim*, many have found a “naturalistic” interpretation appealing. As G-d created the world with the natural order that possesses a great degree of constancy and human tendencies and effects as we know them, to a certain degree consequences that generally flow from this state of affairs may be considered as His doings. The reality of the world is that a man’s evil behavior usually influences his children, causing them to commit fresh offenses. A sinner places the burden of his behavior upon his children and to some extent upon their children also. Thus, by virtue of being the author of the natural order, it can be said that G-d visits the iniquity of fathers on sons.

Although all may agree that this reflects the prevalent reality of the world as we experience it, many have considered it strained to assume the Torah translates so naturalistic a process - with its many exceptions - into so active and definite a verbal clause as *פקד עון אבות על בנים*. Also, why should cross-generational punishment only apply against those that breach the Covenant, as it appears to be so qualified? Further, naturalistic influences



would not account for the huge dissimilarity between four generations of punishment and thousands of generations of reward for the faithful. Some have answered that negative naturalistic influences are only formidable when the father is a flagrant violator and that eventually positive societal influences neutralize the sinner's impact. And the complex workings of human free will cannot be ignored. In any event, although the questions may not be insurmountable, they have been widely invoked to reject the naturalistic approach in favor of the view that in *poqed `avon* the Torah is depicting an aspect of G-d's active dispensing of retribution.

In a refinement of the naturalistic argument, M. D. Cassuto commented as follows (Commentary on Shemot):

...the verse is directed to the [concept of the] totality of the nation being a united entity throughout its generations throughout time. Since man, particularly an Israelite man, is grieved at his children's and grandchildren's afflictions not less but even more than at his own afflictions, Scripture issues a warning, in order to keep man distant from sin, that in the course of the nation's life it is possible that children and grandchildren will suffer as a consequence of their fathers' or grandfathers' sins. From the other angle, Scripture moves our hearts toward the love of G-d by the guarantee that the beneficent results of such love will endure in the life of the nation and will be imparted upon children, grandchildren and their descendants till thousands of generations.

He also stated: The Covenant between G-d and Israel is the essence of the nation's identity and the foundation of its purpose. It is appropriate for every member of the nation to sacrifice a great deal for the opportunity to have this relationship with G-d. If the most potent way to assure the viability of the Covenant in Moshe's time was for G-d to treat father and son to some degree as a single entity such that there is cross-generational reward and punishment, it is understandable.

Such an interpretation is not viewing multi-generational punishment as a case of “the ends justify the means,” setting a precedent for a dangerous doctrine. The system directly benefits everybody by providing a deterrent to all - sons are also fathers. In addition, even if the “natural order” interpretation is not accepted as the Torah’s intent in *poqed `avon*, it nonetheless describes a general evil that usually afflicts the sons of sinning fathers. Thus, G-d’s meting out multi-generational punishment could be viewed as a deterrent and would usually redound to the son’s great advantage, helping to address the issue of comprehending its justice.

Some have explained *poqed `avon abot `al banim* as associated with Hashem’s mercy. In Numbers 14:18, Moshe cites this Divine characteristic in his prayer for forgiveness. This may perhaps be understood as asking Hashem in His mercy to spread the full measure of retribution through the generations, to allow the present generation the opportunity to live and mend its ways or at least to keep the Covenant extant. In this way, the future generations would also benefit. However, such an interpretation does not fit the Decalogue’s tenor, where the statement is used to warn against idolatry.

The significance of four generations appears to be that an average full lifespan usually extends through great-grandchildren. It is these descendants whom we assume the idolater cares about. The righteous, on the other hand, are different. They are not self-centered and limited in their concern only for their immediate descendants. They identify with G-d’s goal for the betterment of the world and care about the welfare of future generations, even very distant future generations. They are particularly concerned as regards their descendants, those future people that they caused to be born into the world. It is great satisfaction to the righteous to know that they helped someone, that they participated with G-d in instilling *hesed* into the world, even if they do not specifically know who the recipients will be.

This subject of *poqed `avon abot `al banim* is part of the larger and perhaps most difficult issue in religion, that of theodicy - the

fairness of G-d's system of dispensing reward and punishment. This matter was brought up several times by the prophets and discussed on a number of occasions by the Sages. Although it is not the primary topic of this study, several comments are in order.

#### **IV. Additional Comments**

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yoḥanan in the name of Rabbi Yose states that Moshe asked Hashem to reveal to him why some righteous receive a favorable portion in life while other righteous suffer and some wicked receive a favorable portion while other wicked suffer (BT *Ber. 7a*). Rabbi Yoḥanan asserts that the answer Hashem gave was that it depends on the father - a righteous person may suffer because of his wicked father, etc. The Talmud, in an אמר מר analysis of a later generation, rejects the possibility that Rabbi Yoḥanan ever transmitted such a view and provides a different explanation as to what he said Hashem answered Moshe. Those righteous who receive a favorable portion in life are completely righteous while the righteous who suffer are not completely so and the same principle applies to the wicked.

The reason the Talmud took the unusual step of rejecting the “tradition” received from Rabbi Yoḥanan and imputed a totally different explanation to his statement was because it accepted as an axiom that “Hashem punishes sons for the sins of their fathers only when they continue in their fathers’ ways.” Accordingly, the original formulation cited in Rabbi Yoḥanan’s name was assumed to be mistaken. (In that passage, Rabbi Meir is cited as disagreeing with the statement of Rabbi Yoḥanan in the name of Rabbi Yose. He was of the opinion that Hashem never answered Moshe’s question, for לא תוכל לראות את פני, “you cannot perceive My countenance” (Ex. 33:20), meaning that the answer to Moshe’s question is a matter beyond human comprehension.)

Within classic rabbinic tradition there is the view that G-d sometimes visits the iniquity of parents even on innocent children, but only when those children are very young. The Talmud, in several places, refers to this concept. For example: “Ribi states: For the sin of violating one’s vows, one’s young children may

die” (BT *Shab.* 32b). Although the Talmud does not connect it to the Decalogue, some view it as an application of *poqed `avon* and of course only relevant for a violation in G-d’s sphere.

The Rambam wrote: “There are transgressions for which the punishment is exacted from... one’s young children, for a person’s young children who do not yet have *da`at* and did not reach the obligation of *misvot* are treated as the parent’s possessions” (MT Laws of Repentance 6:1).

Abarbanel summarizes what he considers the primary rabbinical view:

...this is when very young, before the age of accountability for their own actions, for they are then considered extensions of their fathers and may be punished for his sins... until the fourth generation, those that the original idolater may see in his lifetime... [he] does not have a close feeling to later descendants... When older, they may be punished for their fathers’ sins only when they continue perpetrating those sins... and only in the case of idolatry. Concerning other sins, even if the son continues his father’s evil ways he will only be punished for his own sins (Commentary to Exodus, 20:5).

## **V. Individual Accountability**

In Ezekiel 18, the prophet resoundingly proclaimed in Hashem’s name the principle of individual accountability. People in Israel used to quote a proverb: “Parents eat sour grapes and their sons’ teeth are blunted” (Ezek. 18:2), referring to the punishment of sons for the sins of their fathers. A short time prior to Ezekiel, in Jeremiah 31:28, amid a series of consoling prophecies, G-d told Jeremiah that days are coming when this proverb will no longer be cited, but that each man will die in his own sin - he who eats the sour grapes, his teeth only will be blunted. It appears that at that point it was not yet recognized to be the operative principle in theodicy, but there was an assertion of Divine acknowledgement that a transition was in formation.

Ezekiel states in Hashem's name:

What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, "Parents eat sour grapes and their sons' teeth are blunted"? As I live - declares the Lord God - this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel. Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die.... a son who has seen all the sins that his father committed but has taken heed and has not imitated them.... he shall not die for the iniquity of his father, but shall live... and now you ask, "Why has not the son shared the burden of his father's guilt?" But the son has done what is right and just, and has carefully kept all My laws: he shall live! ...The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child's guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone... And if a wicked person turns back from the wickedness that he practiced, and does what is just and right, such a person shall save his life. Because he took heed and turned back from all the transgressions that he committed, he shall live; he shall not die... Be assured, O House of Israel, I will judge each one of you according to his ways... Cast away all the transgressions by which you have offended, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, that you may not die, O House of Israel. For it is not My desire that anyone shall die... Repent, therefore, and live! (Ezek. 18:2-32, NJPS).

This proclamation, which explicitly states that the righteous son will not share in his wicked father's guilt, etc., contradicts the Biblical verse of "visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons" if taken without qualification. In the Talmud (BT *Mak.* 24a) this contradiction is addressed in a manner other than cited earlier:

Rabbi Yose bar Hanina said: Four decrees Moshe Rabenu decreed upon Israel - four prophets came and annulled them... Moshe said, "visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons" - Ezekiel

came and annulled it, “the person who sins - only he shall die.”

In Ezekiel’s days Israel’s situation had greatly deteriorated and was extremely bleak; indeed, the nation’s very survival was in doubt. Whether this prophecy of Ezekiel was proclaimed after the Temple’s destruction and the nation’s dispersal or shortly before - after the exile of Yehoyakhin together with the leaders, eleven years earlier - is not easily resolved, but in any case the people were in deep despair. They felt doomed by their fathers’ sins and were beginning to give up all hope in a restoration. It was becoming impossible to maintain their commitment to the Covenant without a modification on this critical point. The prophet empathized with their problem and represented their situation to G-d.

Rabbi Yose bar Ḥanina’s language - that Moshe decreed and Ezekiel annulled - is unusual. This is a theological matter of the highest order, describing G-d’s mode of governance in the world! Why is it called Moshe’s decree? How can we understand this degree of relativity in G-d’s governance?

When asked about such matters, Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon commented along the following lines. Genuine prophets - fully dedicated to G-d’s will - play a crucial role in matters of the world that fall into their sphere. Their input possesses cosmic significance. Their monumental efforts kept the Covenant extant. G-d considers the prophets’ comprehension of His mode of governance crucial and He may modify His methods according to their judgment. G-d taught this lesson to Abraham upon the latter’s exemplifying his extraordinary care for strangers in need and in his obvious commitment to instill “derekh Hashem” into the world through his descendants and followers. G-d asked: “Am I to conceal from Abraham that which I am doing?” (Gen. 18:17). He then revealed to Abraham His plans concerning the destruction of Sodom. In the ensuing dialogue that He had with Abraham, He was receptive to the arguments of His faithful servant. A faithful

servant of G-d, who works with total dedication to promote G-d's will, must have a full measure of personal integrity. Abraham expected a standard of Divine providence that human reason may sincerely embrace and Hashem agreed with him.

Life, humanity and society are complex and dynamic. The prophets' conceptions as to what is "appropriate" in G-d's relationship to the world may change from time to time, based on their sincere ego-less position and the circumstances and standards of society. Rabbi Yose bar Ḥanina teaches that G-d is ever sensitive to His faithful servants' honest conceptions and takes their views - to a certain extent representing the thinking and situations of their constituencies - into account.

# The Tenth Commandment

## I. Meanings of *Lo Tahmod* and *Lo Tit'aveh*

This study will survey the basic traditional views concerning the definition and scope of the Tenth Commandment\* as well as some interpretations of the several differences between the Exodus and Deuteronomy formulations of it.

In Exodus, “לֹא תַחְמַד” (you shall not covet) is stated twice in what at first sight appears to be an unusual formulation. The first time it is exclusively in connection with one’s fellowman’s “*bayit*” while the second addresses “your fellowman’s wife, his male slave, his female slave, his ox, his donkey, and all that belongs to your fellowman.” In Deuteronomy there also are two statements, first “לֹא תַחְמַד” followed by “וְלֹא תִתְאַוֶּה” (which at this point we will translate “You shall not crave”) your fellowman’s house, his field or his male or female slave, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your fellowman.”

What is the precise meaning of the two key phrases that articulate the Tenth Commandment prohibitions of “*lo tahmod*” and “*lo tit'aveh*?” Although a thorough analysis of these words as deployed throughout Tanakh leaves a degree of ambiguity - as we will note in the course of citing a number of sources - the translators’ preferences have been to take “*lo tahmod*” as “you shall not covet” and “*lo tit'aveh*” as “you shall not crave,” or a slight variation thereof.

The question regarding these translations has been as follows: how is it possible to prohibit an emotion! The emergence of a desire within an individual appears to be an aspect of the human condition beyond a person’s control, often arising spontaneously, and not a matter that could be addressed by a command.

Ibn Ezra addressed this fundamental problem. Just as people are able to condition themselves not to squander time and energy in



craving to obtain that which clearly is beyond the realm of possibility, they can also habituate themselves to viewing all that is prohibited as unobtainable and removed from thought. This disposition is linked with one being satisfied with his lot in life, who realizes that true happiness is not achieved by acquisitions, who trusts in G-d that He provides for him what is necessary. (Perhaps prohibited desire would momentarily arise even in such an individual but he would be sufficiently disciplined to immediately shun it.)

The Mekhilta has a different approach, based on a different translation of the key words. Perhaps it did not accept the concept of the prohibition of the mere desire or craving. It defines and differentiates between “*lo tahmod*” and “*lo tit’aveh*,” cited here as codified by the Rambam (MT, *Hilkhot Genebah VeAbedah*, 1:9-12), as follows:

Whoever is ‘*homed*’ a male or female slave or house or vessels of his fellowman... and implores him with friends and presses him until he purchased it from him, although he paid him well for it, transgresses the Biblical negative precept “*lo tahmod*.”... Whoever is ‘*mitaveh*’ the house or wife or vessels of his fellowman... when he reflected upon how he can acquire this item and was seduced in his heart in this matter, transgresses the Biblical negative precept “*lo tit’aveh*.”

According to this view, violation of either of these precepts involves some movement toward acquisition of a coveted object belonging to another. “*Lo tahmod*” prohibits implementation of a scheme to obtain the item while “*lo tit’aveh*” prohibits focusing on the goal of attaining it and developing a scheme to that end.

A number of Scriptural proof-texts have been cited to support this understanding that “*lo tahmod*” implies action. In Exodus 34:24 it states that when the males go on their pilgrimage to the central sanctuary three times a year there will be no cause to worry about their land’s safety ולא יחמד איש את ארצך (“no one will covet your land when you go to appear before Hashem your G-d”). If

‘*yahmod*’ only means ‘covet’, plain and simple, it has been argued, it would be stating that the land of Israel is not desirable, surely not the intention of the verse! The Divine guarantee should be understood as assuring that no one will appropriate the land while the males are away (Mekhilta). (Ibn Ezra, however, posited that *h-m-d* sometimes means desiring and sometimes means appropriating.)

Many have rejected the above interpretations, claiming they did not capture the straightforward, intended meaning of the Decalogue verses and have proffered other distinctions between ‘*tahmod*’ and ‘*tit’aveh*’. The Malbim interprets “*lo tahmod*” as referring to the desire that is stirred by visual contact with an object. He points out that the root *h-m-d* often appears with the meaning of something which is a delight to the eyes in a context that does not abide a connection to an action. Consider: “*nehmad lemareh*,” in regard to the trees G-d caused to sprout in Eden (Gen. 2:9); “*hahamudot*,” in describing Esav’s garments (27:15); “*karme hemed*” (Amos 5:11); “*mahamade ayin*” (Lam. 2:4).

“*Lo tit’aveh*,” on the other hand, he defines as referring to inner longings and cravings or imaginations, as illustrated in the following verses: “The riffraff in their midst *hitavu ta’ava* (had a gluttonous craving).... and said, who will give us meat to eat?” (Num. 11:4); when you have the urge (*te’aveh nafshekha*) to eat meat (Deut. 12:20); David had a craving (*vayitaveh*) and said, “who could get me water to drink from the well in Bethlehem” (2 Sam. 23:15).

This distinction leads the Malbim to a novel answer to the question as to why Deuteronomy employs “*lo tahmod*” in framing the prohibition toward another’s wife and “*lo tit’aveh*” in articulating the prohibition toward another’s possessions. The prohibition regarding another’s wife, he proposes, is not addressed in the first instance to the general sensual urge in itself. Rather, it is directed to the particular instance of a specific married woman, the thought of whom may be an object of delight to a man and stirs his desire. Regarding house, field, servants and animals, however, “*lo tit’aveh*” addresses a person’s general urge for

ownership, wealth and various material needs, regardless of the delight he may have in a particular object.

The Mekhilta's proof-text of *ולא יחמד איש את ארצך* (Ex. 34:24), demonstrating that "*lo tahmod*" implies appropriation, has been countered with an alternate interpretation. While you are away on your pilgrimage you would not have to worry about your land (although it may be desirable), for outsiders will be so respectful or fearful of you that the emotion of desiring it will not arise in their hearts. (Somewhat analogous to Ibn Ezra's explanation of a person training himself to prevent a desire welling up within him.)

A number of scholars, recognizing the frequent close connection in *Tanakh* usage between *h-m-d* and an appropriating action, while also recognizing the root's basic meaning of desire, have taken a middle path in translating "*lo tahmod*." They understand it as referring to a step beyond mere desire, but a step that is still before action - an intermediate state. According to them, the Torah is prohibiting the intention to act to acquire the object of one's desire. Consider: "...*lo tahmod* the silver and gold on them and take it for yourselves" (Deut. 7:25); "*Veḥamdu* fields and stole them, houses, and took them" (Mic. 2:2); "*Va'eḥmedem* and I took them" (Josh. 7:21). Although in these cases *h-m-d* clearly did not refer to the appropriating - an attached verb refers to the actual taking - the usage points to a close association with it, the step just before appropriation.

If *h-m-d* includes the step after desire - the intention to take - but before action, the Exodus 34:24 verse translates smoothly, stating that nobody will have the intention to appropriate your land although they may, indeed, desire it.

Some halakhic authorities have considered the above distinctions between "*lo tahmod*" and "*lo tit'aveh*" as unconvincing, and take the two as virtually synonymous. A problem they cite with the Rambam's explanation is the following: How is it possible that the Deuteronomy prohibition regarding possessions - "*lo tit'aveh*" - is stricter (prohibiting an earlier stage of contemplation) than

that regarding a wife, a more serious category? (See *Sefer Misvot Gedolot*).

## II. Further Regarding Variations

In the Exodus Decalogue, the first object specified in the Tenth Commandment is a fellowman's house, followed by wife, slaves, animals and all that belongs to him. In the Deuteronomy formulation, first is wife followed by house, field, slaves, animals and all that belongs to him. In Exodus, "*lo tahmod*" is used twice and "*lo tit'aveh*" not at all, while in Deuteronomy "*lo tahmod*" is used once and "*lo tit'aveh*" once.

Ibn Ezra, assuming that the Exodus formulation was first, suggested that G-d placed "house" first because in the proper life style, young men should first acquire a house before getting married.\*\* In Deuteronomy, Moshe, exercising the latitude granted him in reviewing the Decalogue, placed the "wife" prohibition first because he saw the young men caring more about that. However, it appears that this interpretation is overly dependant on societal norms and variable individual psychology and has therefore not been widely accepted in explaining the *peshat* of the variation.

In all cases of variants in the Torah, if the initial version can be determined, much insight might be gained into the purpose of the variation. As we pointed out in our study *On Decalogue Variants*, it appears that the Deuteronomic Decalogue is first and the Exodus formulation followed, referring to words and concepts of the former for further exposition and expansion. Concerning the Tenth Commandment, it appears that a support to an application of this thesis may be brought from a Ugaritic cuneiform tablet dated to no later than the 12th Century B.C.E., and probably earlier. It contains a general list of possessions with the exact same items and order as the Deuteronomy formulation. Other evidence has also been found indicating that this was the standard list of possessions in the ancient Near East (see *Olam HaTanakh*).

Regardless of which interpretation is accepted, we may understand why this command is placed at the end of the Decalogue - it is a bastion of support to the “between man and man” precepts, a permanently timely precautionary measure insuring that the previous commandments not be violated.\*\*\* One who violates the Tenth Commandment is on a path that may lead to violation of one or another of those prior precepts; indeed, violation of each of the previous four usually begins with violation of the Tenth.

Some have seen it as more directly addressed to Commandments 7 and 8, not to commit adultery and not to steal. The Deuteronomy order of another’s wife followed by his house and other objects corresponds smoothly to adultery and stealing. This also explains use of a different term for each category: “*lo tahmod*” for the command against adultery and “*lo tit’aveh*” for the command against stealing.

The Exodus order of house followed by wife and then other objects, omitting “field,” and the repetition of “*lo tahmod*” a second time, requires an explanation. “*Bayit*” in this context may mean “household,” in other words all that belongs to another, and the formulation would thus be seen as beginning with the broad general statement followed by particulars. In this manner of explanation, when addressing the details, prohibiting another’s wife is actually first as in Deuteronomy.

If “*lo tahmod*” is taken as prohibiting an act or an intention to act, and the Deuteronomy formulation is first, part of the relationship between the Exodus and Deuteronomy statements may be explained as follows. Deuteronomy, with “*lo tit’aveh*” for possessions, is the more fundamental and idealistic. The Exodus version may be seen as more practical, stressing the connection to, and expanding upon, the prohibition to steal.

## Endnotes

\* Through its *setumot* and *petuhot* divisions the Masoretic Text appears to consider the *lo taḥmod* verses as comprising the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, but for our purposes we will retain the more traditional formulation.

\*\* Some have noted a similarity to the sequence of the announcements of milestone exemptions at the mustering before war (Deut. 20). A new house is there mentioned first, followed by a new orchard and then by a betrothed wife. In the Deuteronomy execrations, when things are going wrong (28:30), the sequence is betrothed, house and orchard.

\*\*\* This is analogous to *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*, a precept that appears to correspond to the Tenth Commandment in Leviticus 19, immediately following a section of law that expounds the previous laws of the Decalogue. In that context it serves as a general precept that reinforces the prior commandments, as we point out in our study on that chapter.

# A Brief Note on the Haftarah

## Haftarat Beshalah – Shoftim 5:1-31

This week's *haftarah* is the "Song of Deborah." The Sages selected it because the "Song of the Sea" (*Az Yashir*) is a central feature of this week's parasha and both songs are expressions of thanksgiving to G-d for His providing Israel a great victory over their enemies. Both are poetic compositions that follow the prose account of the events they refer to.

Deborah was a prophetess who judged Israel in the days of the "Judges," that is, after the death of Joshua (early eleventh century B.C.E.) and prior to establishment of the monarchy (late eleventh century B.C.E.). Yabin, the Canaanite king in a northern region of the Promised Land and his commander Sisera, had succeeded in grievously oppressing the Israelites.

Deborah informed Barak, the chief general of the Israelites, that he was to lead the battle against Sisera. He insisted that she accompany the campaign. She roused the Israelites to revolt and inspired them to a great victory. The main battle was near Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo near the Kishon River (in the Valley of Jezreel, in the Galilee region). Taanach has been excavated and the indications are that it was destroyed about 1125 B.C.E.

Sisera escaped on foot with Barak in pursuit. Yael, a Kenite, drew him into her tent and through a ruse, killed him. The Israelites followed with further successes until they destroyed Yabin and "the land was tranquil for forty years." The victory was a milestone, cited by the psalmist in a prayer requesting Hashem to vanquish Israel's enemies as He did to "Sisera, as to Yabin, at the Kishon brook" (Ps. 83:10).

In the Song of Deborah, as well as in Psalm 68, which also includes a celebration of a battle victory, the Sinaitic Revelation is invoked with the words “this Sinai” (Jud. 5:5; Ps. 68:9). Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon was of the opinion that this phrase does not appear to be merely stating that the earth or mountains trembled as at the Lawgiving on Sinai or to be limited to any such allusion. He explained the phrase as follows. The Tablets – the stones of which surely were quarried out of Mount Sinai – and the Ark in which they “resided,” were called “Sinai,” and the presence of the Ark was called the presence of Hashem. When the Ark was taken to battle, those who viewed it were required to relate to it as to the Mount Sinai Revelation. They would receive inspiration from the experience, renew their commitment to the Covenant and hence merit Divine intervention. The wondrous victories Israel enjoyed were performed in the presence of the Ark or “Sinai,” as “Sinai” was carried to those locations and observers could point to the Ark and say “this Sinai” (cf. *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, pps. 71-72).

*RMS*



## Haftarat Yitro – Isiah 6:1-13

Since the central topic of Parashat Yitro is G-d's Revelation to Israel, the Sages selected for the *haftarah* the account of Isaiah's prophetic vision of G-d's Revelation to him. Although it is in chapter 6 of the Book of Isaiah, this passage describes Isaiah's initial prophecy (Ibn Ezra). It occurs shortly before the death of King Uziah (perhaps in or shortly before 732 B.C.E.). Isaiah is one of the four major prophets of the eighth century B.C.E., together with Hoshea, Amos and Micha.

Isaiah has a vision of Hashem in a majestic setting in His Temple with His *seraphim* proclaiming His holiness and asserting that His glory fills all the earth. The doorposts shake and the room fills with smoke. The prophet is fearful for he recognizes himself as impure of lips and living among a people impure of lips, unworthy of the vision he has had. One of the *seraphim* touches his mouth with a coal taken from the altar and declares him cleansed. He hears G-d's voice asking, "Whom shall I send?" and he volunteers. G-d accepts him and gives him a message for the people.

The message is pessimistic and difficult to interpret. The prophet is to tell the people, "Hear but do not understand, see, but do not know" (v. 9). In the next verse, Hashem adds: "Fatten their hearts, make their ears heavy, shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and repent and become healed." Some translate the verse as describing a situation that has already become reality, "their hearts have become fattened," etc. They have become so unresponsive to G-d's call that there is little hope for them.

Isaiah asks G-d, "Until when?" and G-d describes terrible destruction in store for the nation. But a small remnant (a tenth part, the remaining stump) shall remain that will repent, and it will be holy seed (from which the nation may be restored).

The angelic praise of G-d that Isaiah heard may be translated as follows: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory” (OJPS). Based on the meaning of the Hebrew, “*qadosh, qadosh, qadosh*” appears to point to His being “above and beyond,” distinct and separated from all other creatures and creations in every way. The heavenly court setting of that scene, especially with the continuation of the angels’ praise, which proclaims, “the whole earth is full of His glory,” further connotes the monotheistic principle. While He is transcendent He also is “present” in the world. Surely it is in this spirit, if not literally, that *Targum Yonatan* translates that threefold usage of our key word: “Holy, in the high exalted heaven is the dwelling of His presence; Holy, upon the earth is the work of His strength; Holy, forever and ever.”

The Sages selected this verse to be central to Israel’s sanctification of Hashem in communal prayer. They prescribed that it be recited in a minyan in the *hazara* of *shahrit* and *minha* (in *Naqdishakh*, which makes reference to the *seraphim*’s veneration of Hashem). We also recite it in the *yoser* prayer and after *tehilla leDavid* even without a minyan, but not as an official proclamation of sanctification but merely as a description of an event.

*RMS*

# Shabbat-Table Talks

## Introduction

*You have given your people a day of rest and qedusha...  
A rest that is a loving gift,  
A rest of true faithfulness,  
A rest of blissful and secure peace,  
An absolute rest that you find pleasing  
Your children will realize and know that  
Their rest comes from You  
And through their rest they qedushify<sup>1</sup>  
Your name.*

(From the Shabbat Minha Prayer)

**W**hat a beautiful gift Hashem gave to us when he gave us the Shabbat. It is a gift that shows His deep love for us. A gift that is not just a day of physical rest from the weekly routine, or just a day of relaxation, but it is a day when our highest ideals and values get revitalized; a day that radiates its beauty throughout the week and throughout our lives.

The day was sanctified by Hashem from the time of Creation. Yet to have its full effect upon us it must be sanctified every week by us, through the way we spend our time on that day and through the words we use. We qedushify it through our words when we pray, when we begin our meal by *qiddush* (prayer of sanctification) and through our “table talk.” This is more than just a break in the “action” when someone says a “*dvar Torah*.” It is about engaging our children, guests and family in a thought-provoking discussion about Torah values as they are articulated in our Torah. It is about applying those values to real-life situations that face our children, family and guests. It is, in short, about deeply instilling the Torah’s values in us and in our families.

Ideally, value-filled discussion should predominate if not completely permeate our table conversation. The Shabbat meals

are a time for the family to share with each other their feelings about important issues and they are a time for parents to convey their deepest Torah values to their children. Yet it usually does not happen unless someone makes a conscious decision to make it happen.

These Shabbat Table Talks are designed to help the table talk leader by providing thought-provoking discussions along with questions (and possible answers) that will engage his or her family and guests. They are intended to be used as prompts and not to be read by the discussion leader at the table. They can also provide a model for the type of questions that can lead to value discussions. Namely, open-ended questions that can get people talking.

*“May the Merciful One grant us an existence that is totally Shabbat and rest, for life everlasting.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Ezra Labaton who coined this neologism. The word “sanctify” that would normally be used in this context falls far short of expressing the idea of “qedusha” which contains the idea of Hashem’s complete transcendence of time and space; that He is absolutely and completely beyond comprehension and conceivability; that any attempt to understand Him ultimately is severely lacking. When we “qedushify” Hashem’s name we testify that Hashem is completely beyond the natural and *‘am Yisrael* as Hashem’s chosen people, bear witness, through our behavior of Hashem’s transcendence. When Hashem “qedushified” Shabbat, He set it apart from all other days to infuse His *qedusha* (separateness, uniqueness) through the behavior of *‘am yisrael*. From this point on I will use “sanctification” to mean “qedushification.”

## How to Run a Shabbat-Table Talk

Open-ended questions are the key to a successful discussion. Open-ended questions, those that do not have one definite answer, allow for creative thinking. They cause people to internalize the Torah and start "thinking Torah." Very often they can revolve around feelings or reactions to things in the perasha. Emphasize the open-endedness of the question by including phrases like, "what do you think" or "in your opinion."

It is fun to occasionally tell a Torah story, stop in the middle and then ask a member at the table, "Noah, how did you feel when Hashem told you he was going to destroy the whole world?" then ask another family member or guest the same question. Another type of discussion is to let the participant ask a question of the character in the story. "If Abraham Avinu were sitting right here at our Shabbat Table, a few days after the Akedah, what would you ask him?"

Of course, the words of the Torah commentators are precious. Therefore, if possible, we should try to connect the answers or questions that our family and guests give to comments of the commentators. "Did you know that Ramban asks a similar question?" Or "Rashi's comment on the pasuq is coming to answer the question that you raised." This would require some extra preparation on your part--it is well worth it. We could even construct the discussion so as to bring our family members and to "independently" arrive at the same answer or questions of the commentators.

The Shabbat-table Talks included in this book are ideas on how to take issues in the weekly perasha and apply them in an interesting way to our lives. The "answers" included in the parentheses are not meant to be the sole answers, they are just a few possible approaches to the question. Do not read them unless you have to! It is much better to really try to grapple with the question yourself as your family and guests will.

Most importantly, the discussion should be calm and encouraging, not heated and caustic. Difference of opinion is appreciated more when it is accompanied with a heavy dose of mutual respect. As the discussion leader encourage mutual respect by noticing when people do not interrupt, even when they have something important to say. We can teach proper discourse when we prevent interrupting and comment on the benefit of "hearing a person out."

Enjoy the Shabbat-table experience with your family and friends by having a thought-provoking or inspiring Shabbat table talk. These discussions can turn a fine meal, into a great Seudat Shabbat.

# Beshalah

## Recognizing Our Sustenance Comes From God

**Value: Recognizing that our sustenance comes from God.**

**Discussion:** Family Torah observance leads to a life rich in symbols. Often, we carry out these symbols assuming that our family understands them. It is true that some symbols do not require explanation. For example, everyone understands, without explanation, the symbol of the handshake or the hug. Other religious symbols can benefit from inspired explanation to help us absorb their full import. Our children might be aware, technically, of the “right” explanation of a symbol, without really absorbing its significance and deeper meaning. Our discussion of familiar symbols can serve to turn the “spit back” kind of performance that our children are used to giving on multiple-choice exams, into a thoughtful, inspired integration of the idea behind the symbol.

The use of two halot on Shabbat is a powerful symbol that can deepen our understanding about the source of our sustenance.

### **Texts:**

After the splitting of Yam Suf, our perasha this week describes the beginning of Israel’s sojourn through the wilderness. After God and Moshe solve the problem of Israel’s lack of water, Israel complained about the lack of food.

Would that we had died by the hand of Hashem in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate bread till (we were) satisfied! For you have brought us into this wilderness to bring death to this whole assembly by starvation. (Shemot 16:3)

Hashem solved the problem in a miraculous way:

Hashem said to Moshe: Here, I will make rain down upon you bread from the heavens, the people shall go out and glean,

each day's amount in its day, in order that I may test them, whether they will walk according to My Instruction or not.

But it shall be on the sixth day: when they prepare what they have brought in, it shall be a double-portion compared to what they glean day after day. (Shemot 16:4-5)

Now it was on the sixth day that they gleaned a double portion of bread, two “omers” for each one.

God gave a double-portion of mahn on the sixth day to last for the sixth and seventh days. We use two loaves of bread on the Shabbat table to symbolize the double-portion.

R. Abba said: On Shabbat, one must break bread on two loaves as it is written: “a double-portion.” (Babylonian Talmud Masekhet Shabbat 117b)

**Method:** Ask your children: Why do we use two loaves of bread on Shabbat? (The children will either a) give the “textbook” answer “to remember the mahn.” Or b) they will not know the reason.)

a) If the children give the textbook answer, ask them: What does that mean? Why is it important to remember the mahn? (Give them time to think of answers and time to give full, elaborate answers (remember last week's Table Talks where we spoke about “wait time”!)

b) If the children do not know the answer tell them the story of the mahn with elaboration, and tell them that our rabbis told us to put two loaves of bread on Shabbat just like the mahn. (See the texts above)

Ask: Is our bread mahn? (No) What is the difference? (Our bread is bought in the store with money that we earned, the mahn came from the sky-- we did not have to pay for it.)

Why did our very smart Rabbis want us to think of our bread like mahn? (Because in some ways our bread is like mahn.)



In what way is our bread like mahn? (In the sense that God caused it to rain, allowing the wheat to grow. He gave us the capacity to work and to make money so that we can buy the things we need, like food.)

We use two loaves to remind us that on the sixth day God gave us a double-portion so that on the seventh day we should rest. Likewise, our weekday work is blessed so that we have enough food for Shabbat without having to work on Shabbat as well.

When we see the two loaves of bread on our table we should consider that the food that we have is just like the mahn, coming to us through several miracles, even though they are less apparent. God provides our food, just as he did in the time of the wilderness sojourn. We should never take our ability to provide for our families, or the simple fact of having food to eat, for granted. It is a gift from Hashem as if it fell from the sky.

\*\*Note that one of the reasons given for covering the halot on top with the halah cover and on bottom with the tablecloth is to remind us of the mahn as well, that fell on a layer of dew and was covered with a layer of dew. (Pesachim 100b, Tosafot “she`en...”, Tur Orah Hayyim 271)

We should be aware that even though we have “unpacked” the symbol, it still has many other meanings and messages. Symbols affect us on a different plane than ideas. Symbols are experienced rather than merely thought about or discussed. Even though we “know” what the symbol means, it is still important to make the symbol a part of our lives.

## **Remember to Pray; Remember to Act**

**Value: Remember to pray; remember to act.** When we are involved in a project, taking care of the many things that are necessary to achieve our goal, we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that we are solely responsible for our success. We can sometimes forget to pray. Prayer reinforces the idea that all I do is in God's hand--without His providence I will not be able to accomplish anything. Conversely, we should take action to realize the things for which we pray. For example, if we are praying for someone's health, we should also do the things that we can to help that person. After you have successfully achieved your goals, have the attitude that it was mainly due to God's help that you succeeded.

### **Text: Shemot 17:8-16 (Especially verse 9 and 16)**

Now 'Amaleq came and made-war upon Israel in Refidim.

(9) Moshe said to Yehoshua: Choose us men, and go out, make war upon Amaleq! On the morrow I will station myself on top of the hill, with the staff of God in my hand. Yehoshua did as Moshe had said to him, to make war against Amaleq.

Now Moshe, Aharon and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And it was, whenever Moshe raised his hand, Israel prevailed and whenever he set down his hand, 'Amaleq prevailed. Now Moshe's hands are heavy; so they took a stone and placed it under him, and he sat down on it, while Aharon and Hur supported his hands, one on this side and one on that side. So his hands remained steadfast until the sun came.

And Yehoshua weakened 'Amaleq and his people, with the edge of the sword.

The Lord said to Moshe: write this as a memorial in an account ("bassefer") and put it in Yehoshua's hearing: Yes, I will wipe out, wipe out the memory of 'Amaleq from under the heavens!

(16) Moshe built an altar and called its name: The Lord My Banner. He said: Yes, Hand on Yah's throne! War for the Lord against 'Amaleq generation after generation.

**Method:** Prepare by reading the “background for parents” sections. Read the text in Hebrew with the translation when necessary, or in English. [There are many interesting points in this passage that your children might raise and question. Allow the discussion to flow to those questions if that is what the children want.]

**Discussion questions:**

- How did Moshe respond to the attack? (Two ways—action and prayer. The lifting up of Moshe's hands was to beseech Hashem's help.)
- In what is the Torah more interested, Yehoshua's strategy or Moshe's activities? Prove it from the text. (The Torah devotes most of its description to what Moshe did on the mountain and not to what Yehoshua did on the battlefield.)
- From the section that we read what is the main reason for the victory?
- Do you have any projects that you are working on? Why should you include prayer for success as part of your preparations? (Prayer reminds us that we are dependent upon God for our success and that we should not expect that we can do everything necessary. It is a liberating feeling that we must do what we can and as much as we can but that ultimately it is God who will decide whether we succeed or not. )

**Background for parents:** (the approach to aim for in the discussion questions, not to be read to the children before the discussion.):

[Moshe's response to the attack was twofold. 1) He sent Yehoshua to handle the military matter of choosing the men that will do battle (Israel probably did not have soldiers yet, even though they did come out of Egypt with arms). 2) Moshe would be stationed

on top of the mountain, where he could view the battle and be seen by the people. He would take the staff of God with him.

This division clearly portrays the belief of Moshe and Israel that success in battle does not come by might alone (nor through prayer alone, for that matter) but through a combined effort of battle and prayer. This is an idea that recurs throughout the Tenakh. Interestingly, the very name of Israel's first military leader, Yehoshua (lit. God saves), reflects this idea as well.

This idea is reflected in the way the narrative continues as well. The Torah reports that Yehoshua did as Moshe commanded him. Moshe and Yehoshua carried out the plan. The Torah had a choice which of the two stories to follow--the events at the battle or the event at the mountain. The Torah chose the events at the mountain as those that were more critical to the outcome of the battle. We are not told of Yehoshua's successful military strategy but of the Moshe's strategy to insure his steadfast concentration on his prayer and the difficulties that he faced. ]

By the way, we also should pray for the things that we want. Most importantly, we should pray that our children turn out well and let our children know that it is one of the things that we feel it is important enough to pray for. My wife Michal, upon noticing the fine character of a neighbor's children asked the mother what was the secret of her success. She replied that she does three things:

1. She listens goes to classes and listens to tapes on parenting and reflects upon the ideas she hears.
2. She prays for her children to turn out well
3. Anytime the household has to make a decision, she will discuss the decision with her child and end with "let Hashem Guide you in making the right decision."

May Hashem help us to raise our children to have the Torah values imbued deeply in their hearts.

## **Singing for our Enemies' Destruction?**

**Value: Singing for our enemies' destruction?** One of the constants in Jewish life is the existence of enemies. As you read these lines (and as I write them), dozens of countries would like to see people like us erased from the earth, and many other countries couldn't care less. Millions of people around the world would take joy in murdering us and our children and washing their hands in our blood. The more chilling fact is that this has been the case for thousands of years and, with technological advancements, more and more people hate us. What is the Jewish attitude towards enemies? From what is found in the Torah and the rabbinic tradition, we see that the attitude is complex. The subtlety of the Jewish position is that it is both realistic and hopeful at the same time.

**Background:** Arrogant Pharaoh, after being forced to free Israel, realized the gravity of his error. "What is this that we have done, that we have sent free Israel from serving us," Pharaoh exclaimed. He immediately rallied his forces and pursued Israel, trapping them hopelessly by the sea. Israel's fear was apparent as they start to complain to Moshe, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us out to die in the wilderness? What is this that you have done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ...It is better for us serving in Egypt than our dying in the wilderness!" Moshe encouraged the people, reminding them that Hashem will save them. Moshe's prophecy was fulfilled as the sea split, Israel crossed and the entire Egyptian army met their watery end. Moshe and Israel reacted by singing.

Let us examine two texts that present contradictory attitudes towards singing about our enemies' destruction.

### **Text 1: Shemot 15:1-6**

Then sang Moshe and the Children of Israel this song to Hashem, and they said: "I will sing to Hashem, for He has triumphed, yes, triumphed, the horse and its charioteer he flung into the sea! My fierce might and strength is Hashem,

he has become deliverance for me. This is my God and I honor Him, the God of my father—I exalt Him. Hashem is a Man of War, Hashem is His name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army He hurled into the sea, his choicest teams of three sank in Reed Sea. Oceans covered them, they went down in the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O Hashem, majestic in power, Your right hand, O Hashem, shattered the enemy. In Your great triumph You smashed your foes, You sent forth your fury, consumed them like chaff.

### **Text 2: Babylonian Talmud Megila 10b**

R. Yohanan said: What [is the meaning of what] is written: "And they did not approach one another the whole night" ("Velo qarab zeh el zeh kol hallayla") (Exodus 14:20)? The ministering angels wanted to recite a song, but the Holy One blessed be He said to them, the works of My hand are drowning in the sea and you are singing?!

The context of the Talmudic passage is to prove that Hashem does not rejoice at the downfall of the wicked. Rather He desires the repentance of the wicked.

**Analysis:** There could be several approaches to these excerpts from our tradition. One approach would be to see them as presenting differing opinions as to how to react to our enemies' destruction. Another approach could be to see them as applying at different times to different peoples. A third approach would be to try to see them as both applicable on different perspectives. This third approach allows for the proper joy and gratitude to Hashem for saving us from enemies that would love to butcher us, and at the same time, recognizing that the ideal is that our enemies should realize that they are wrong and repent so that they would not have to be destroyed by Hashem. Moshe and Israel sing and praise Hashem because He had saved them. They were personally involved, therefore they can sing their gratitude. The ministering angels, on the other hand, viewing the world from an ideal perspective, should not sing. They should rather focus on the ideal of the wicked people repenting and therefore avoiding destruction.

The failure to meet this ideal and the subsequent destruction of the works of God's hands is nothing to sing about.

**Discussion:** Read the two passages to your children, explaining the context of each passage. Ask: Do you think it is right to sing about our enemies' destruction? (Allow your children time to discuss this, possibly taking different sides of this question.)

How would you feel if Saddam Hussein or Yasser Arafat were assassinated? (We would feel happy that these murderers were removed from the world and grateful to those who carried out the assassination.)

How would you feel if they really changed their ways and sincerely repented? (This is a difficult question. On the one hand, there should be punishment for what was done, on the other hand they have changed their ways and repented. Personally, even if they changed their ways and sincerely repented, they should spend the rest of their lives in prison--perhaps, meeting with the victims' families, hearing of their pain and suffering.)

While we can hope for the ideal, we must be aware of the real situations that face us. In those situations, we pray that we can defend Israel against our enemies, and destroy the enemies. While at the same time we hope that the enemies will realize the suffering that the continuing conflict causes their own people.

The Talmud (Berakhot 10a) relates that once some hooligans were harassing R. Meir so badly that he prayed for them to die. His wife Beruria corrected him based on a verse in Psalms (104:35). She interpreted the verse to mean that we should pray for sin to be annihilated, not the sinners. In other words, that people would no longer behave like sinners.

May it be Hashem's will that we should see those who want to destroy our people stopped and that no more innocent people should suffer.





# Yitro

## Delegating Responsibilities

**Value: The value of delegating responsibilities.** This is a value that might be usually thought of in a business context, but could work in a family context as well. Involving the children in some of the responsibilities of the household can be a growth experience for the children when applied consistently. Identify the tasks that have to be done and divide the responsibilities. Even if at first the child doing the task is less competent than you might be, over time the child builds up competence and confidence in having done a good job.

[To a younger family the idea can be expressed as teamwork, cooperation. The idea that everyone working together can get jobs done faster and better. When we work together, we can do things that are impossible to do alone.]

The task might be something relating to the Shabbat preparation, like setting the Shabbat table, helping with the cooking, or shining dad's shoes for Shabbat. This should be done even if (and especially if) there is a housekeeper in the house. (Having help in the house does not exempt us from teaching our children responsibility. Just because there is a housekeeper, it does not mean that our children do not have to learn responsibility.) Having to take part in keeping the house would make the children more appreciative of what is done as far as the house's upkeep... And remember there are always those days when the housekeeper takes off.

Not delegating has a cost to the person in charge. He ends up taking on too much and not developing the competence of the people around him. He will not function as well in the things that only he could do, because he is spending time in doing things that others could do as well.

**Text: Shemot 18:13-23** (Schocken Bible Translation: Note about the translation—When reading the passage to your family make sure you adapt it to the level that will be understood. Feel free to change the translation as you read.)

Now it was on the morrow: Moshe sat to judge the people, and the people stood before Moshe from daybreak until sunset. When Moshe's father-in-law saw all that he had to do for the people, he said: What kind of matter is this that you do for the people—why do you sit alone, while the entire people stations itself around you from daybreak until sunset?

Moshe said to his father-in-law: When the people come to me to inquire of God, --when it has some legal matter, it comes to me—I judge between a man and his fellow and make known God's laws and his instructions.

Then Moshe's father-in-law said to him: Not good is this matter, as you do it! You will become worn out, yes, worn out, so you, so this people that are with you, for this matter is too heavy for you, you cannot do it alone.

So now hearken to my voice, I will advise you so that God may be-there with you: Be there, yourself, for the people in relation to God. You yourself should have the matters come to God; You should make clear to them the laws and instructions, you should make known to them the way to go, and the deeds that they should do; but you—you are to have the vision to select from all the people men of caliber; Holding God in awe, men of truth, hating gain, you should set them over them as chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens, so that they may judge the people at all times.

So shall it be: every great matter they shall bring before you, but every small matter they shall judge by themselves. Make it light upon you and let them bear it with you. If you do thus in this matter when God commands you further, you will be able to stand, and also this people will come to its place in peace.

**Discussion:** Why did Moshe want to do everything himself? What is the benefit of having Moshe do everything himself? (People would get the best judge for all their cases. The decisions would be as right as humanly possible all the time.)

What are the disadvantages of Moshe doing all the judging? (Inconveniencing the people. Delaying justice. People would more often take the law into their own hands because they would not want to wait for Moshe. That is why “justice delayed is justice denied.”)

What are the characteristics of the people that would help Moshe judge? Why are these necessary? (Discuss each of the characteristics mentioned above and why they are important for a judge to have.)

How would they know how to judge? (Moshe would teach them the laws and they would use their judgment to know what was the right thing to do in any situation. That is why they had to be God-fearing people.)

What are the things in our family that we should delegate?

What about a football team? Can even a very talented player win the game by himself? Why not? How does a football team work? What jobs does the coach or quarterback delegate?

**Further reading:**

Stephen Covey in his “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” (p. 171-179) distinguishes between two kinds of delegation. He calls them “Gofer Delegation” and Stewardship Delegation.” Gofer Delegation is where the person is told “go for this,” “do that” “do this” and “tell me when it’s done.” Stewardship delegation is focused on results instead of methods. It gives people a choice of method and makes them responsible for the results. It takes more time in the beginning, but it’s time well invested. Stewardship delegation involves clear, up-front mutual understanding and commitment regarding expectations in five areas.

1. Desired results — what needs to be accomplished. What, not how. Results not methods.
2. Guidelines – parameters and restrictions within which the person will operate. But not methods of how to operate.
3. Resources — upon which resources can the person draw to accomplish the desired result.
4. Accountability — standards of performance that will be used in evaluation. When the evaluation will take place.
5. Consequences — what are the consequences of a job well done or not well done? These could also be the natural consequences that accrue from the job being done the right way or vice versa.

## Giving Constructive Criticism

**Value: Giving constructive criticism.** Learning how to criticize constructively can improve the lives of the people around you. Focusing on the way you can benefit others and making certain that you are motivated by a strong desire for improving the lot of others is an essential prerequisite of constructive criticism. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of wanting to criticize just in order to feel good and useful (or superior). Criticizing in the context of a positive relationship makes the criticism more acceptable and effective.

**Background:** Yitro heard about Israel's exodus from Egypt and came to the wilderness to see Moshe. On the day of his arrival, Yitro marvels at the miracles that God had wrought for Israel. Full of joy, Yitro blesses God's justness of the God of Yisrael saying: Barukh Hashem who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that Hashem is greater than all gods, yes by the result of their very schemes against the people. (Exodus 18:10-11;NJPS)

Yitro's second day begins with a different tone. He saw Israel standing about, waiting for Moshe to judge their cases and Yitro is critical. Yitro says:

**Text: Shemot 18:14, 17-19, 23**

What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?

...The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you!

[Yitro details his plan for Moshe to institute a hierarchical judicial system. Yitro concludes:]

Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied.

**Analysis:** What made Yitro criticize the way Moshe was judging the people? (He wanted the best for Moshe and the people.)

Was it okay for him to criticize? (Absolutely. Being able to help people sometimes means pointing out a better way to do things. If we learn how to do it in a way that does not lead to a backlash, it is not only appropriate, it is an obligation—an act of kindness.)

Why do you think Moshe was better able to accept Yitro’s ideas? (From Yitro’s joyful statements of the previous day, it was clear that Yitro identified with Israel, and wanted only their good. Yitro sincerely developed a good relationship with Moshe and Israel. Although Yitro’s criticism was direct (“the thing you are doing is not right”), Moshe was able to accept it. )

From Yitro we can learn some important lessons about how to give criticism in a constructive way.

- Develop a sincere positive relationship
- Be motivated by a desire to benefit

**Discussion:**

What kind of criticism do you hate to get?

Is there any time that you appreciate criticism?

Can criticism ever be helpful?

How would you like to be told about the ways you can improve?

**Story:**

The following story reveals some of the positive and not so positive motivations of criticism.

Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan Spektor (1817-1896), the Rav of Kovno, once summoned a man who had been very critical of a group in the community which had transgressed certain Torah laws. “What right do you have to criticize them so sharply?” Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan asked. “What gives you the authority to humiliate them publicly?”

The man was startled by the question. “Rebe,” he replied, “you yourself have admonished them. Why are you upset with me for what I said about them?”

“You are right,” said Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan. “We do share a similarity. Both of us are upset that those people have sinned. However, there is a great difference between you and me—the difference between a housewife and a cat.”

“A housewife and a cat?” the startled man asked.

“Yes,” answered the great sage. “I am like the housewife who chases mice from her home because she wishes them out. You are like the cat that chases mice because she wants to eat them. The housewife would be happier if the mice never showed up in the first place. The cat would rather that the mice appear, so that he can torment, hound, and devour them.

“I would have preferred that those people had never sinned. You, on the other hand, revel in the fact that they have sinned so that you have the opportunity to chastise, humiliate, and reproach them.”

(From *Further along the Maggid’s Path*, Rabbi P. Krohn, p. 108)

The story compares people who criticize to housewives and cats. Spend some time to understand the metaphor before going on to the story’s meaning.

Who is the housewife? (The person who criticizes because he wants fewer mistakes.)

Who is the cat? (The person who is happy when someone else makes a mistake so that he can correct him.)

What are the mice? (The mice are the mistakes.)

When giving criticism, we should be motivated by a sense of wanting to improve the situation. We would be happier if the situation were already good, but now that it is not, we feel the obligation to improve it, because we love the people and cannot see them suffer.



## Remaining Inspired by Routine Activities

**Value: Remaining inspired by routine activities.** The routine of religious observance is one of the pitfalls of organized religion, as opposed to the freshness of spontaneous religious experience and expression. On the other hand, if we were to wait for the religious experience to occur in a spiritual vacuum, we could be waiting for a long time. The spiritual person, who is a part of an organized religion, must find ways of infusing spirituality into the routine. This is the art of living inspired in every activity, not only in religious practice. Infuse new life into the routine. A midrashic comment on one word in our perasha informs this approach.

**Background:** After the miraculous exodus from Egypt and defeat of the Egyptian army at Yam Suf, and after surviving hunger, thirst and enemies, with God's assistance, Israel came to Sinai, where it was about to experience a unique event in history—the revelation at Mount Sinai. The power of this event left an indelible mark on the spirit of Bne Yisrael. In the verse that begins the chapters describing the build up to the revelation, an unusual word draws midrashic attention.

### **Text: Shemot 19:1**

On the third month after Bne Yisrael went out of the land of Egypt, on this day (Hebrew “bayyom hazzeh”) they came to the Wilderness of Sinai.

Rashi: This was on the New Moon. Scripture should have written, “On that day” (“bayyom hahu”) why did it write “on this day?” [Scripture wanted to teach us that] the words of the Torah should be new for you as if they were given today.

**Analysis:** The straightforward explanation of the verse does not really make this point. It merely points out that on that very same day that was mentioned Israel had arrived in the Sinai Wilderness. The Midrash notices an interesting anomaly and derives a beautifully true value from it. The verse referring to that day in the

past should have used the more common word for distant reference. The use of the word of closer reference allows the Midrash to make its point. Since this whole section is the preface for the giving of the Torah, the Midrash is able to refer the idea that the revelation contained in the Torah should be as excitingly novel to you as if it were given today, and not a text that was given to our people over three thousand years ago.

**Discussion:** Read the verse and Rashi's comment to the verse. Explain to your children that Rashi's comment is, in fact, a Midrash and that the straightforward (peshat) explanation of the Torah is merely that they arrived on that very day of Rosh Hodesh to the wilderness. Explain the importance of the Midrash as a way that our Sages connected important ideas, values and even laws, to the verses of the Tenakh.

**Ask:** What does the Midrash mean when it says that the words of the Torah should be as new in our eyes as if they were given today? (You can explain this idea by using an example that your children will relate to. How do you feel when you get a new toy? You can't wait to play with it and even when you cannot play with it, like when you are in school, you are thinking about when you will play with it again. We should feel the same way about Torah. Even though we have learned that section already, or have done that misvah many times, each time it should be as excitingly new as if we were given to us this day.)

How can we treat it as new when it is really very, very ancient? The Torah has many deep principles and messages that apply to all times. These principles and their application to new situations that face us become more apparent to us when we are in situations that require a new Torah answer. In addition, as we grow older we can understand more of the Torah's wisdom and relate it to events in our own lives. (I recently reread a modern-day Torah book that I was unimpressed with when I first received it as a gift seven years ago. This time I was very inspired by the book's insights and wisdom. It is amazing how much the book had changed in seven years!)

The Torah has many misvot that we do every day, for example, prayer. How can we pray the same thing every day and be inspired by it? (1. Although the prayer is the same every day, we are not. When there are certain aspects of the prayer that relate more to what we are experiencing these have more meaning for us. 2. Take the time to focus on the deep meaning of the words of the prayer--even if it means going slower. Remember, prayers are not a race to the finish line, but a reflective time in our lives when we focus on what is truly important to us as Jews. 3. Add some things in your prayer that reflect what is happening in your life. If it is important to you, pray about it. Since we always have different important things happening in our lives, our prayer can always be new.)

Another example is with Shabbat. Although Shabbat comes every week, and has the same basic structure, there are many different ways of experiencing Shabbat that are well within the framework of the halakha. One could think of the constant misvot as providing the framework within which many different things can happen. If Shabbat is getting boring for you, change the nature of your Shabbat activities to something else that is within the Halakha. For example, if you are bored with a Shabbat that is comprised of praying, eating, sleeping and then some more praying eating and sleeping, followed by praying and eating then change it; change the way and place where you pray, with whom you eat and skip some of the sleeping and enjoy the company of family and friends; spend some time in a Torah class; read an inspiring book; converse with friends etc. There are many ways of making the day inspiring within the framework.

By analogy, when we play basketball, the rules are the same, but every game is unique and sometimes exciting. Likewise, things that have a basic, unchanging framework can still contain many diverse experiences.

We can apply this idea to many other misvot and other aspects of our lives. For example, the people in our lives that we see and speak to every day. Have we taken the time to think about how

our parent, spouse, child or teachers are special? What are their unique qualities? What do I want to know about them? A little reflection about the important (and not so important) people in our lives can lead to deepened relationships and more inspired living—even within the common.

I once heard a song from a film that made a similar point of how to live inspired by life. The refrain of the song said, “Each time is the first time.” The character sings that he plays the bouzouki (a Greek guitar) and that “you can’t imagine how often I have played the bouzouki, but each time is the first time.” Relish each moment with the people that we know and the opportunities to do misvot as the first time we are doing it and preserve the freshness of the Torah as if it were given this very day.

## Some Hilkhote Shabbat Guidelines

In recent generations, among the authorities our community has accepted were Hakham Matloub Abadi z"l (1889-1969), who was a rabbi in Aleppo before World War I and served the Brooklyn Syrian community for over fifty years and Chief Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin z"l (1900-1994), who was a rabbi in Jerusalem in his youth and led our community from 1933 until shortly before his passing away.

The numerous *halakhic* decisions of Rishon Lesion Hakham Obadiah Yosef, *sheyihye*, often coincide with the position of the aforementioned rabbis. It is advisable to be knowledgeable in his responsa. Most of the following collection comprises *halakhot* discussed in his works. Several are from the published volume of Hakham Matloub's responsa, *Magen Ba'adi* and several are straight from *Shulhan Arukh*. Sources are cited so that one may easily acquire additional details on each *p'saq*. As there may be qualifications and reservations, it is best to refer to the sources. Hakham Obadiah's *Yabiah' Omer* will be signified YO, *Yehave Da'at* YD, and *Livyat Hen*, LH. Roman numerals denote volume, digits the response number. *Magen Ba'adi* will be MB.

In some of the following permitted cases, for various reasons, it may sometimes be advisable to *mahmir*, but not indiscriminately.

1. SOAP AND TOOTHPASTE: It is permitted to use solid soap (YD II 50). It is permitted to brush one's teeth with toothpaste except if it definitely causes bleeding (YD IV 27).

2. HEATING FOOD: One may heat fully-pre-cooked solid food even from the refrigerator by placement on a "blech" (a metal covering over the fire). This may apply even when there is a little liquid in the pot (YD II 45). (It should be noted that this remains a matter of controversy amongst the community rabbis.) Fully-pre-cooked liquids may be placed on the "blech" to bring them to lukewarm if one is watching to make sure they will not be allowed to get hot to the extent of "yad soledet bo" (LH 51).

3. It is permitted to pour hot water from a Keli Rishon on coffee and sugar (YD II 44). One may pour hot water from keli rishon into a thermos container and cover it (LH 4).
4. Regarding use of a teabag on Shabbat. Magen Ba`adi #3 permits placing a teabag in *keli sheni* hot water while YO VII:40 only permits pouring hot water from a *keli sheni* unto a teabag but not placing the teabag straight into *keli sheni* hot water.
5. One may open a twist off soda bottle by separating cap from ring (YD II 42).
6. It is permitted to cut vegetables into small pieces for the upcoming meal. One may mash bananas or cooked vegetables (ready-to-eat items) with a fork to eat promptly (YD V 27).
7. It is permitted to break and eat biscuits or cake that has writing on it (LH 119).
8. One may open and close a book that has writing on its outer edges even though by doing so the appearance of writing is being eradicated and formed (LH 120).
9. When necessary, it is permitted to set a washer or dryer, etc., to operate before Shabbat even if it continues into Shabbat (YD III 18).
10. If necessary, one may give an item to a non-Jew for repair or cleaning (*bekablanut*, where he is not your employee) before Shabbat and pick it up after Shabbat even if there was not enough time for the non-Jew to do the job on *hol* – even in a Jewish neighborhood and with an item known to belong to a Jew (YD III 17).
11. One may place flowers in water even if they were not in water before Shabbat except if there are buds that would open (YD II 53).
12. WATCHES: One may wind a wristwatch that is running (wearing a self-winding watch) (YD II 48). One may wear a

wristwatch into *reshut harabim* (YD III 23). It is permitted to reset the dial on regular (non-electronic) watches (YD II 48). One may wear an “electronic” watch that displays the time without having to press buttons. Pressing such buttons is prohibited (YD IV 49).

13. Women may use face powder, even colored powder (YD IV 28).

14. It is permitted to spray aerosol fragrance into the air and on one’s skin, but not on clothing (YD IV 25). One may place fragrant spices in foods or drinks (LH 68).

15. One may spray pesticide in the vicinity of flies but not directly at them, provided a window is open for them to escape (YO III 20).

16. It is permitted to use diapers with adhesives in the normal manner (YD VI 24).

17. It is permitted to pin diapers or to pin an ornament to a garment (LH 121).

18. It is permitted to make ice (YD I 30).

19. One may squeeze a lemon even into an empty vessel (LH 57).

20. Damp clothing hanging on a line to dry at the beginning of Shabbat that are expected to dry by the next day are not *mukseh* and may be worn on Shabbat (LH 37).

21. One may knock on a door with a doorknocker (LH 111).

22. Grape juice is acceptable for *qiddush* (YD II 35). Soda, tea, coffee or milk are not acceptable even for havdala or daytime *qiddush* (YD I 38).

23. HADLAQAT NEROT: The *berakha* should be recited before lighting the candles (the *berakha* does not imply *qabalat Shabbat* unless the person has such in mind) (YO II 16). Single girls do not light candles for Shabbat separately from their mothers – if they do, they cannot recite the *berakha* (YD II 32). If candles or oil are

unavailable, the misvah may be fulfilled on an electric light bulb with *berakha* (YD V 24).

24. Women are obligated in *habdala* (YD IV 27), *seuda shelisheet* and *seuda rebi`it* (YD IV 25).



## **Tu Bishbat: History and Customs**

### **by Joseph Mosseri**

Tu Bishbat (טבשכ ו"ט) is a minor Jewish holiday celebrating the New Year of the Trees. It is one of the four Rashe Shanah ("New Years") mentioned in the Mishnah. Tu Bishbat marks Rosh HaShanah La'ilanot (תוגליאל הנשה שאר) "the New Year of the Trees". The name Tu Bishbat comes from the date of the holiday, the 15th day of Shebat (טבש). Shebat is the name of a Hebrew calendar month and ו"ט, read as "Tu," is how the number 15 is represented by Hebrew numerals using the Hebrew alphabet. This date generally falls on the second full moon before Passover, or, in a leap year, the third full moon before Passover.

Tu Bishbat started out as merely the date used in calculating the tithe on tree fruit, and evolved into a minor holiday.

Tu Bishbat is not mentioned at all in the TaNaKH. The earliest mention of it is the Mishnah which was completed around the year 200 CE. In fact even in the Mishnah it is only mentioned once in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah 1:1, which states there are four new years. Only two of the new years listed have any observances associated with them today: Rosh Hashanah and Tu Bishbat.

The Mishnah states: There are four New Years. On the first on Nisan is the New Year for Kings and for Festivals. On the first of Elul is the New Year for the tithe of the animals, but according to Ribbi Eliezer and Ribbi Shimon it is on the first of Tishri. On the first of Tishri is the New Year for the years and for Sabbatical Years (Shemithah) and for Jubilee Years (Yobel) for planting and for vegetables. On the first of Shebat is the New Year for Trees, according to Bet Shammai, but according to Bet Hillel it is on the fifteenth.

We follow the opinion of Bet Hillel and observe the fifteenth of Shebat as the New Year for Trees. Even so the Mishnah does not state anything festive about this day nor does it mention any

particular celebrations or observances associated with this day. It is very probable that this day took on a more special meaning when the Nation of Israel was exiled from its land after the destruction of the Second Bet HaMiqdash around 68 CE. After many years living outside of Israel this day added another connection between the people and the land that their ancestors were thrown out from. That connection was none other than that of partaking of the fruits of Eress Yisrael that Israel was blessed with.

Over the centuries this custom became well known among Jewish communities in every corner of the globe but it wasn't until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that this holiday was given a greater dimension. The Meqoubalim of 16<sup>th</sup> century Safed invigorated this holiday by prescribing what fruits and nuts to eat and in what order. They also said that four different cups of wine had to be drunk just like when the Hagadah would be recited on the night of Pesah.

These Meqoubalim were generally great Sephardic Rabbis who were steeped in the mysteries of the Torah. They had a belief that Creation is composed of four separate worlds, or levels. Classifying fruits that are eaten on Tu Bishvat into these separate categories helped to symbolize these levels.

The four worlds are:

1. Asiyah: "action" --- our world, the lowest level,
2. Yessirah: "formation" --- the second lowest level,
3. Beriah: "creation" --- next to highest level, and
4. Assilut: "emanation" --- highest and purest level.

There are no fruits that could fit into the highest level but there are fruits for each of the other three levels and it is preferable to have 10 fruits for each level, corresponding to the ten Sefirot.

Group 1 is all fruit. BERIAH. Holiness at this level needs no protection. (Some of the fruits included in this group are not actually considered totally edible by most people, such as apples; small seeds are ignored in the symbolism.)

The 10 items are:

Grapes or Raisins

Figs

Apples

Etrog (Citron)

Kumquat

Pear

Quince

Mulberry

Trilobed Sorbus

Carob

Group 2 outer fruit with a large center pit. YESSIRAH. These fruits are edible on the outside, but have pits on the inside, such as peaches. The edible portion symbolizes holiness. At this level, holiness can be left exposed, but its inner core, its "heart," must still be protected.

The 10 items are:

Olive

Date

Cherry (Must be sweet)

Jujube

Peach

Plum or Prune

Apricot

Sour Morello Cherry

Hawthorn Berry

Loquat

Group 3 outer peel and inner fruit. 'ASIYAH. These fruits all have an inedible outer shell, such as nuts. The edible part of the fruit represents holiness. In our world, holiness is hidden and we have to seek it out. The fragile holiness has to be protected within our world.

The 10 items are:

Pomegranate

Walnut

Almond

Chestnut

Hazelnut

Acorn

Coconut

Pine nuts

Pistachio

Another nut like Pecan, Brazil, Macadamia or Banana.

There have been Sephardic Jews in every country over the last 350 years who have been reading from a book entitled Peri Ess Hadar (Salonika 1753) and following this ritual of eating fruits, drinking wine, and reading portions of the TaNaKH, Mishnah, and Zohar.

Among Sephardim in different countries this holiday was given nick names like:

Hamishosar, El Khabat, Eid El Sjar, Tafqi' El Sajar, Frutas, etc.

It was very common for special bags to be made for friends and neighbors, and especially children and fill them with all types of dried fruits and nuts.

In old Jerusalem where the majority of the Jews once spoke Ladino trays of fruit were sent as gifts like Mishloah Manot. These were known as Platiko. The special bags as Frutas Bolsas and kids would compare what they got and trade favorites with each other. These same customs existed in many other countries as well but without the Ladino names.

Many people would just try and have as many fruits as possible just to praise God and share this bounty with relatives and friends. Others would take this opportunity to study the laws of Berakhot and teach them to all those who celebrated with them.

In Aleppo Syria there was a special folkloric Judeo-Arabic song for this holiday whose tune is still popular today even though most people have forgotten the happy words. Another custom associated with Tu Bishbat in Halab was the reading of the Aseret HaDiberot with the translation (Sharh) of Se'adyah Gaon. This was done on Tu Bishbat in preparation of Perashat Yitro and the giving of the Ten Commandments which is always the Shabbat after Tu Bishbat.

Tu Bishbat is a happy day on which no Tahanunim are said it is a day that reconnects us with the Land of Israel and there is a new custom (over 100 years old) to plant trees in Israel on this day. The tradition of planting trees started in 1890 when the teacher and writer Zeev Yabetz went out with his students in a school in Zikhron Yaaqob for a festive planting. This initiative was adopted in 1908 by the Israeli Teachers trade union and later on by the Land Development Authority (Keren Haqayemet LeYisrael, also called the Jewish National Fund). Many Jews throughout the world call Israel on this day and make donations to plant trees and forests through out Israel on this New Year of Trees.

**Tizku Leshanim Rabot Ne'imot VeTobot!**