

OHR NET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

AN OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE

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

Some 3,000 years ago, a little-known Middle-Eastern people gathered around a small mountain in a trackless wilderness and underwent an experience that changed world history.

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

"...And they stood under the mountain."

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

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

THE SIXTH DAY

At the beginning of the book of Genesis, it says *yom hashishi* — "the sixth day." When speaking of the other days of creation the Torah does not use the definite article "the." It just says *"second day...third day..."* Translators add the word "the" to make the English more idiomatic, but in Hebrew only the sixth day is referred to

as "the sixth day." Why?

The anomaly of the addition of word "the" teaches us that on that first sixth day, at the very moment of the completion of the physical world, G-d placed a condition into creation. G-d made a condition that the universe would remain in a state of flux and impermanence until the Jewish People accepted the Torah at Sinai. And that was to be on another "sixth day." The sixth of Sivan — *Shavuot* — the day of the giving of the Torah.

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

WHO'S RUNNING THE SHOW?

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

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

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

As an offer you can't refuse.

Sources:

Midrash Tanchuma I; Talmud Shabbat 88a; Maharal of Prague

SPEAKING SOFTLY

Our sages instructed a man to say three things in his household on Erev Shabbat before nightfall: 1) Have you tithed? 2) Have you made an *eruv* (to permit carrying from one house to another within the same courtyard) 3) Light the candles.

All three of these reminders of preparations which must be made before the advent of Shabbat, says the Sage Rabba bar Bar Chana, should be said gently in order that they will be well received by the wife and anyone charged with these responsibilities. When this statement came to the attention of Rabbi Ashi, he declared that even before hearing this in the name of Rabba bar Bar Chana he practiced this policy based on his own understanding.

Maharsha raises the question that Rabba bar Bar Chana also gave his advice based on his own understanding and not from any mishnaic source. What then did Rabbi Ashi mean by stressing that it was he who practiced if from his own understanding?

His answer is that there is a difference in the reason given by each of these sages for issuing those three reminders gently. Rabbah bar Bar Chana was concerned that a reminder issued in rough fashion might actually be counterproductive. In order for each of these three preparations for Shabbat to be effectively

executed, the head of the household must appoint an agent to act in his behalf. If he does not speak gently to the agent he appoints, that agent may refuse to accept the appointment and thus render the tithing, *eruv* or candle-lighting ineffective.

Rabbi Ashi, however, approached the need for gentleness from an entirely different angle. Even if it is certain that the members of the

household will accept the appointment as agents for these preparations out of respect for the head of the household, Rabbi Ashi practiced a policy of issuing such orders gently out of his own understanding that a man should always speak gently to people in all situations.

This last point of Maharsha is obviously based on what our sages tell us (*Mesechta Yoma 86a*) that the ideal behavior of a Torah scholar includes speaking gently to everyone.

• Gittin 7a

GREATER ERETZ YISRAEL

Syria was conquered by King David and annexed to Eretz Yisrael. Did Syria thus acquire the status of Eretz Yisrael or was it still considered *chutz la'aretz* (outside the Land)?

This depends, says the *gemara*, on whether we consider conquest by an individual as the kind of conquest which makes territory an integral part of Eretz Yisrael.

But why is David's conquest of Syria considered conquest by an individual when it was done by the king of the nation?

Rashi's explanation focuses on the manner in which this conquest was carried out while Tosefot stresses its timing.

Conquest by the nation which can transform a territory beyond the borders into the status of Eretz Yisrael, says Rashi, depends on two factors which were present in the initial conquest of the land by Yehoshua. The entire nation must be involved in the war and the territory must be acquired for the use of the nation at large. In the case of Syria the conquest was a private venture of David, utilizing only a portion of the national force and dedicated to providing territory for royal rather than national utilization.

Tosefot, however, cites a Midrashic source (*Sifrei, Devarim 11:24*) which criticizes David's conquest of Syria while he had still not driven out the Jebusites around Jerusalem. Said Hashem to David: "How dare you go and conquer Syria and Mesopotamia when you have not yet conquered those near your own palace!"

On the basis of this Sifrei, Tosefot concludes that after all of Eretz Yisrael was indeed conquered, the Torah's promise that "Wherever you shall tread shall be yours" (*Devarim 11:24*) means that territory conquered even by an individual like David also has the status of Eretz Yisrael.

• Gittin 8b

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Dedicated in loving memory of our mother and grandmother

מרים רוזמן בת ישראל ז"ל

כ"ח שבט תשנ"ט

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Yitro had 7 names. Why was one of his names *Yeter*?
2. News of which two events motivated Yitro to come join the Jewish People?
3. What name of Yitro indicates his love for Torah?
4. Why was Tzipora with her father, Yitro, and not with Moshe when *Bnei Yisrael* left Egypt?
5. Why does verse 18:5 say that Yitro came to the desert — don't we already know that the *Bnei Yisrael* were in the desert?
6. Why did Moshe tell Yitro all that Hashem had done for the Jewish People?
7. According to the *Midrash* quoted by Rashi, how did Yitro respond when he was told about the destruction of Egypt?
8. Who is considered as if he enjoys the splendor of the *Shechina*?
9. On what day did Moshe sit to judge the Jewish People?
10. Who is considered a co-partner in Creation?
11. "Moshe sat to judge the people, and the people stood before Moshe...." What bothered Yitro about this arrangement?
12. Why did Yitro return to his own land?
13. How did the encampment at Sinai differ from the other encampments?
14. To whom does the Torah refer when it uses the term "*Beit Yaakov*"?
15. How is Hashem's protection of the Jewish People similar to an eagle's protection of its young?
16. What was Hashem's original plan for *Matan Torah*? What was the response of the Jewish People?
17. How many times greater is the "measure of reward" than the "measure of punishment"?
18. How is it derived that "Don't steal" refers to kidnapping?
19. In response to hearing the Torah given at Sinai, how far backwards did the Jewish people retreat in fear?
20. Why does the use of iron tools profane the altar?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

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

1. 18:1 - Because he caused a Parsha to be added to the Torah. *Yeter* means addition.
2. 18:1 - The splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek.
3. 18:1 - Chovav.
4. 18:3 - When Aharon met Moshe with his family on their way down to Egypt, Aharon said to Moshe: "We're pained over the Jews already in Egypt, and you're bringing more Jews to Egypt?" Moshe, hearing this, sent his wife and children back to Midian.
5. 18:5 - To show Yitro's greatness. He was living in a luxurious place, yet he went to the desert in order to study the Torah.
6. 18:8 - To draw Yitro closer to the Torah way of life.
7. 18:9 - He grieved.
8. 18:12 - One who dines with Torah scholars.
9. 18:13 - The day after *Yom Kippur*.
10. 18:13 - A judge who renders a correct decision.
11. 18:14 - Yitro felt that the people weren't being treated with the proper respect.
12. 18:27 - To convert the members of his family to Judaism.
13. 19:2 - The Jewish People were united.
14. 19:3 - The Jewish women.
15. 19:4 - An eagle carries its young on top of its wings to protect them from human arrows. So too, Hashem's cloud of glory separated between the Egyptians and the Jewish camp in order to absorb Egyptian missiles and arrows fired at the Jewish People.
16. 19:9 - Hashem offered to appear to Moshe and to give the Torah through him. The Jewish People responded that they wished to hear the Torah directly from Hashem.
17. 20:6 - 500 times.
18. 20:13 - Since it is written immediately after "Don't murder" and "Don't commit adultery," it is derived that "Don't steal" refers to a crime carrying the same penalty as the first two, namely, the death penalty.
19. 20:15 - They backed away from the mountain twelve *mil* (one *mil* is 2000 cubits).
20. 20:22 - The altar was created to extend life; iron is sometimes used to make weapons which shorten life.

THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER WHAT?

From: Daniel Serfer in Vermont
<dserf60@hotmail.com>

Dear Rabbi,

I go to school in Vermont where there are not many Jews and I was never “bar mitzvah-ed,” however after law school I intend to be Orthodox. Right now I have a question for you: In the Ten Commandments, at least in my English version, G-d says “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Does that mean that other gods exist?

Dear Daniel Serfer,

This is sort of a mistake in translation. The Hebrew word *elohim* most often refers to G-d, but it is actually a descriptive word meaning “one of power” or “force.” Thus, it can also mean an angel (Genesis 32:29) or a powerful leader (Exodus 7:1).

Other forces seem to exist — wind, fire, radioactivity, electromagnetism, chi, yang, etc. — so the Torah tells us that they have no independent power. G-d is all powerful and all other forces are merely G-d’s “agents” and they should not be deified.

The great commentator Rashi explains that the proper translation is not “other gods” but rather “gods of others.” That is, anything that others believe in as a god, we should not.

So, you can believe the sun exists, but don’t worship it.

WHY PIGS ARE WORSE

From: Jenny Stosser in Melbourne, Australia
<jenerator@ozemail.com.au>

Dear Rabbi,

I wanted to pass on an anecdote from a few years ago: My kids attend a local Jewish kindergarten. One day I walked into the littlest kids’ room and saw that the kids were learning about farm animals. Someone had taken a piece of blank paper and pasted over the picture of the pig; however all other animals in the display were quite visible.

I was quite angry over this, because I do not believe in hiding my children in a corner of the world and pretending that non-kosher animals don’t exist. I spoke to the teachers and said that I would only accept their covering up the pig if they also covered up the picture of the horse and the sheep-dog too, as they are equally unkosher. The next day I came in to find the picture of the pig uncovered. I was quite relieved!

Dear Jenny Stosser,

You’re right that the other animals are equally unkosher. There are even things “more” unkosher than the pig, such as insects (chocolate covered ants, anyone?).

On the other hand, the pig is seen as the most “insidious” of the unkosher animals, as it is the only animal known which has a true split hoof like a kosher animal, but does not chew its cud. In this, our Sages saw it as the “worst” of the unkosher, as it “puts on an outer show” of being kosher (split hooves), yet on the inside (chewing its cud, which is a function of digestion) it is “*treif!*” Thus, it symbolizes falsehood, the antithesis of Judaism.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles and reactions concerning previous “Ohrnet” features

Re: Ohr.Edu’s “Ask the Rabbi” Service:

Thank you ever so much! Yours is the first cogent answer I’ve found in my research. I never expected such a prompt reply, nor such a settling one. I can stop pacing the floor over this now, and continue my writing.

• Gale Boyd <Gale_Boyd@email.msn.com>

Re: A Day at the Races (Ohrnet Vayechi):

On your recent exposition about the origin of different races, I have the following comment: The Talmud’s view sounds more like Lamark than Darwin — *i.e.*, the theory of adaptation to the environment rather than the theory of sur-

vival of the fittest. They are both theories, not substantiated by controlled, reproducible experiments — and hence subject to error and doubt. Just like the “Big Bang” theory of Creation — a theory concerning which, when I challenged it, a famous mathematical physicist admitted to me privately: “Vell, it’s grown-up games.” (He was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who was so high up at the University of Heidelberg that nobody there was high enough to countersign and witness his forced resignation papers, so it had to be countersigned and witnessed by Hitler himself.)

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