



Parshas Yisro

For the week ending 18 Shevat 5758
13 & 14 February 1998

Overview

Hearing of the miracles Hashem performed for *Bnei Yisrael*, Moshe's father-in-law Yisro arrives with Moshe's wife and sons, reuniting the family in the wilderness. Yisro is so impressed by Moshe's detailing of the Exodus from Egypt that he converts and joins the Jewish People. Seeing that the only judicial authority for the entire Jewish nation is Moshe himself, Yisro suggests that subsidiary judges be appointed to adjudicate the smaller matters, leaving Moshe free to attend to larger issues. Moshe accepts his advice. The *Bnei Yisrael* arrive at Mt. Sinai where the Torah is offered to them. After they accept, Hashem charges Moshe to instruct the people not to approach the mountain, and to prepare themselves for three days in order to receive the Torah. On the third day, amidst thunder and lightning, Hashem's voice emanates from the smoke-enshrouded mountain and He speaks to the Jewish People, giving to them the Ten Commandments:

1. Believe in Hashem
2. Don't have other gods
3. Don't use Hashem's name in vain
4. Observe the Shabbos
5. Honor your parents
6. Don't murder
7. Don't commit adultery
8. Don't kidnap
9. Don't testify falsely
10. Don't covet

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

Insights

PRIDE AND PRIVILEGE

“These are the words that you shall speak to the Children of Israel.” (19:6)

Rashi: “These words — no less and no more.”

We live in a world where inflation is an everyday part of life.

But there's one thing that's inflation-proof. There's one thing that costs exactly the same today as it did three thousand years ago.

Being Jewish.

You can join the Jewish People today for exactly the same price as three thousand years ago — accepting the Torah and the *mitzvos*.

Anyone can become Jewish if they want to.

The enemies of the Jewish People accuse the Torah of being racist, setting the Jewish People apart as a treasured people and a holy nation. But how can Judaism be racist and exclusive if anyone can join?

It's true, the Jewish People are privileged: They have a special place in the purpose of Creation, to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” With every privilege, however, comes responsibility.

Rashi tells us that the above command, to speak “these words” to the Children of Israel, contains an implicit mandate not to add or subtract from Hashem's words.

However, the Sages tell us that Hashem instructed Moshe to convey the Torah in different ways to different sectors of the Jewish People: For example, when speaking to some people, Moshe was to use gentle words. When speaking to others, Moshe was to use language as tough as sinew.

So how could Moshe on the one hand not change a word, and on the other hand vary his words to suit his audience?

When the Jewish People heard “And you will be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy people,” some heard these as gentle words, words alluding to the glowing reward of such an exalted mission. Others heard these same words, but they heard them as words bespeaking a destiny as tough as sinew. For to be a holy nation and a treasured people is a responsibility of awesome proportions.

Privilege comes only at a price.

THE HUMAN JUNGLE

“And G-d spoke all these words saying...” (20:1)

Why were the Ten Commandments given on two tablets of stone? Why wasn't one enough?

There's a difference between the five *mitzvos* on the first tablet and the five on the second tablet: Included with the *mitzvos* on the first tablet is the reward for keeping them and the punishment for failing to keep them. On the second tablet, the *mitzvos* are stated without mention of reward and punishment.

The first five are *mitzvos* where a person honors the Creator: Believing in Hashem, not making idols, not using Hashem's name for no purpose, observing Shabbos. Thus these first commandments are accompanied by descriptions of reward and punishment.

The second group of five commandments are for the benefit of people. The prohibitions against murder, kidnapping, adultery and false testimony are fundamental to living in peace with society.

Their mere performance is their own reward. Failing to observe them creates a society which is little more than a jungle — and that's punishment enough in itself.

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

info@ohr.org.il

38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

Somayach@MSN.com

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Parshas Yisro — 18 Shevat 5758, 13 & 14 February 1998

Written and Compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

Production Design: Lev Seltzer

HE AIN'T HEAVY...

“Six days shall you work and accomplish all your work; but the seventh day is Shabbos to Hashem, your G-d...” (20:9,10)

A poor villager was trekking the many miles to his destination in the next village. He staggered along under the weight of his enormous pack when suddenly a horse and wagon pulled up alongside him. “Climb aboard!” the wagon driver shouted down to him. The villager huffed and puffed his way up onto the back of the wagon, the driver shook his reins and the horses obediently started to trot.

A few miles down the road, the villager said to the driver “I can’t thank you enough. This is really very kind of you!” “Not at all” said the driver and turned to smile at the villager at the back of the wagon. It was then that he noticed that the villager was sitting crumpled forward with his heavy pack still on his back. Exclaimed the driver, “Why haven’t you taken your pack off!” The villager replied in all innocence “Well, you’ve been so kind carrying me, *I didn’t want to burden you with the extra weight of my pack as well!*”

If Hashem can “carry” us all week — making sure that we have food to eat, clothes to wear, cars to drive, and even air to breathe — He can certainly bear the “added load” of supporting us on Shabbos, even if we don’t go to work!

WINING AND DINING

“Remember the day of Shabbos to sanctify it... Because six days Hashem made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day...” (20:8-11)

Once upon a time, a prince was captured by his father’s enemies. After a long time, the king managed to get a secret message to the prince encouraging him not to give up, and to retain his princely manner even amidst the wolves of prey among whom the prince was forced to live. Soon, the message said, the king would obtain his son’s release, either through war or peaceful means.

The prince was overjoyed and wished to celebrate, but he could not, of course, reveal the secret of his joy. Therefore, he invited his lowly companions to the local inn and ordered drinks for everyone. They celebrated because of the wine and liquor, while the prince celebrated because of his father’s letter.

Similarly on Shabbos, our bodies feast with the good food and drink, but our souls celebrate the opportunity to be close to our Creator.

THE RULES OF THE GAME

“Remember the day of Shabbos to sanctify it.” (20:8)

“What a terrible day — Shabbos! You can’t drive! You can’t write! You can’t even turn on a light! You can’t do this! You can’t do that! What a terrible day!” (Sound familiar?)

Have you ever played basketball?

What a terrible game — Basketball! You can’t stand in one place for more than thirty seconds. You can’t run with the ball. You can’t be a moving block. You can’t do this! You can’t do that! What a terrible game!

It’s precisely the rules of Basketball that make Basketball – Basketball. If there were no rules, someone would grab the ball, hold onto it until everyone else got bored and went off for tea. Then he’d grab a ladder, set it up and pop the ball in the net. Great! But that’s not Basketball!

Just as the rules of Basketball define Basketball, so the rules of Shabbos define Shabbos.

Haftorah: Yeshayahu 6:1-13, 7:1-6, 9:5,6

The revelation of the *Shechina* at Sinai in this week’s Parsha is mirrored in the Haftorah by a revelation of the *Shechina* to the Prophet Yeshayahu.

NO, NO, AFTER YOU

The nature of most people is to want to be first. To demonstrate their superiority over others. This is the driving force behind the desire to have money and power. I’m better than you! *You* go second!

And even when we allow others to go first, it’s usually to demonstrate what elevated character traits we have — in other words — *I’m elevated over you!*

In the *kedusha* that we say at least twice a day, we borrow a prayer from the angels to praise Hashem.

We say “They (the angels) call one to another and say ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the L-rd of Hosts. The whole world is filled with His Glory.’”

Man is not an angel. When the angels say *kedusha*, they begin by calling to each other as if to say “*You go first because you are greater than me.*” To which comes the reply “*No, you are greater than me!*” Finally, they all praise Hashem together.

The angels repeat the word “holy” three times. Anything which is done three times has permanence and perpetuity. Thus the angels never cease saying “holy,” for Hashem is infinitely Holy.

Sources:

Pride And Prejudice - Sfas Emes

The Human Jungle - Ramban

He Ain't Heavy - The Dubner Maggid

Wining And Dining - Toldos Yaakov Yosef

The Rules Of The Game - Rabbi Yehoshua Hartman

LOVE OF THE LAND

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



A SACRED BIRTHRIGHT

The most sacred part of the Beis Hamikdash was in the portion belonging to the Tribe of Binyamin. Since this included the Holy of Holies and the Holy Ark, Binyamin is referred to as “the host of the Divine Presence.” Why did Binyamin merit that the Divine Presence should be in his portion?

Because all the other sons of Yaakov were born outside of Eretz Yisrael. Only Binyamin was born in Eretz Yisrael.

Mechilta Yisro 4:18

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