

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת יתרו

וירא חתן משה את כל אשר הוא עשה לעם ויאמר מה הדבר הזה אשר אתה עשה לעם מדוע אתה יושב לבדך וכל העם נצב עליך מן בקר עד ערב

“The father-in-law of Moshe saw everything that he was doing to the people, and he said: What is this thing that you do to the people? Why do you sit alone with all the people standing by you from morning to evening” (18:14)

Why did Yisro feel that Moshe was doing the people an injustice by judging alone? Perhaps it was difficult for Moshe because he had a lot of cases to adjudicate, but why was this arrangement bad for the people? R' Dovid Feinstein explains Yisro's concern on behalf of the nation as follows: If Moshe would be the sole judge, the people would not realize that they also possess the ability to learn things themselves, to study Torah and become scholars. They will feel that such a position is reserved for someone with the stature of Moshe Rabbeinu. Because of this, people will not study and there will be a lack of future leaders. If Moshe would appoint a number of judges to the lower courts, it would give people the impression that they can study and become learned themselves. Everyone has to know that they can become a leader and teach Torah to others. Nobody can give up hope of learning the answers to questions on their own. Everyone has to strive to be a teacher. That is why Moshe as the lone judge was not a beneficial arrangement for the people.

It is important for every individual to recognize that he is meant to be a leader. We see this idea expressed later in the parsha (19:6), when Hashem says that the Jewish people will become His “kingdom of priests and holy nation.” R' Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that there were two distinct commands given here. Every person should be a kohen, a leader among people. He can do this by teaching Torah or by being an example for others through his own behavior. There is also the collective responsibility to be a holy nation. The Jewish people are not meant to be a nation like all the others in the sense that our strength does not come from territory or

military might. That is not the goal. Our task is to be a leader among the nations in moral character and in our devotion to Hashem. By acting in this way, we truly become a holy nation and a light unto the nations around us. Hashem separated us in order to attain holiness, which is achieved by following the dictates of the Torah. This is the communal responsibility that was given to us at Har Sinai, which is our role as Hashem's chosen nation.

ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני ויחנו במדבר ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר

“They journeyed from Refidim and came to the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness; and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (19:2)

The Jewish encampment is described as ויחן, in the singular form, indicating that the Jews were, in the words of Rashi, “as one man with one heart.” It was only under these conditions that the Torah could be given to them, says R’ Dovid Feinstein, as the Torah is referred to as Toras Chesed, a Torah of kindness. In order for the Torah to be fulfilled properly, one has to be kind and treat his fellow Jew well. That is why the astrological sign of the month of Sivan, the month in which the Torah was given, is Gemini, twins. We have to feel “identical” to our fellow Jews, as if we are one person, and maintain the same level of unity that existed at the time of Matan Torah.

כבד את אביך ואת אמך למען יארכון ימך על האדמה אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לך

“Honor your father and mother, so that your days will be lengthened upon the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you” (20:12)

The commandment of Shabbos precedes the commandment of honoring parents. Rabbi Friedman suggests that this hints to the halacha that if a parent asks a child to desecrate Shabbos, the child must not listen. Shabbos overrides the mitzvah to honor parents and, because of this, Shabbos is written before the mitzvah to honor parents. In fact, the connection between the two mitzvos is that the greatest way to honor parents is to keep Shabbos. Whether in this world or the next, parents receive a reward for their children who keep Shabbos and it brings true honor to the parents.

לא תרצח לא תנאף לא תגנב לא תענה ברעך עד שקר

“You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness against your fellow” (20:13)

This prohibition refers to stealing people, kidnapping. In Parshas Kedoshim, the Torah records the prohibition against stealing property. Yet there the Torah states the prohibition in the plural form, whereas here it is written in singular form. What is the reason behind this difference?

The Vilna Gaon answers that few people kidnap, so this prohibition is written on an individual basis. However, many people violate the prohibition against theft, as stated in the Gemara in Bava Basra 165a. Therefore, it is worded as a plural.

How can it be that most people are guilty of theft? The Mesillas Yesharim explains in the beginning of Pratei Midas Nekiyus: “Although we see that most people are not manifest thieves in the sense of openly confiscating their neighbors’ belongings and depositing them among their own possessions, most of them get the taste of theft in the course of their business dealings by allowing themselves to gain through their neighbors’ loss saying, ‘Business is different.’ Many prohibitions, however, were stated in regard to theft: ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not rob,’ ‘Do not oppress,’ ‘And you shall not deny,’ ‘And a man should not speak falsely against his neighbor,’ ‘A man should not deceive his brother,’ ‘Do not push back your neighbor’s boundary.’ These varied laws of theft take in many of the most common types of transactions, in relation to all of which there are many prohibitions. For it is not the overt, acknowledged deed of oppression or theft alone which is forbidden; but anything which would lead to such a deed and bring it about is included in the prohibition.”

ויאמר משה אל העם אל תיראו כי לבעבור נסות אתכם בא האלקים ובעבור תהיה יראתו על פניכם לבלתי תחטאו

“Moshe said to the people: Do not fear, for in order to elevate you Hashem come; so that awe of Him shall be upon your faces, so that you shall not sin” (20:17)

Chazal say that there are three character traits that mark a Jew: shame, pity and kindness. The source for the innate Jewish trait of shame is in this

posuk. The fear of Hashem inspired by the events at Har Sinai caused them to have a sense of shame and modesty regarding their actions. As such, Chazal say that when someone has no shame, it indicates that his ancestors may not have been present at Har Sinai. We have to recognize how important this is. If someone has no shame, we suspect that he may not actually be Jewish. The experience of Har Sinai was such that its effects still linger thousands of years later.

In his addendum at the end of the Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvos, the Ramban counts the imperative to always remember the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai as a mitzvah from the Torah. He says that we must always remember the fact that Hashem spoke directly to our ancestors at that time. When we affirm this belief, we protect ourselves against all those who would tell us otherwise. Even if someone performs miracles and claims that this proves that the Torah is wrong, we know that he is a liar because Hashem spoke directly to our ancestors at Har Sinai. Just as we are obligated to teach Torah to the next generation and ensure its continuity, we are also obligated to pass this belief down to future generations and perpetuate the unbroken chain of tradition that dates back to our ancestors who themselves stood at the foot of the mountain and heard Hashem's voice.

R' Aharon Soloveitchik added that Torah must be learned in the same way in which it was originally given. When we teach Torah, it has to be conveyed with the same fire and energy that was present at its original presentation at Har Sinai.

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