

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת יתרו

ויאמר יתרו ברוך ה' אשר הציל אתכם מיד מצרים ומיד פרעה אשר הציל את העם מתחת יד מצרים

“Yisro said: Blessed is Hashem, Who has rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh, Who has rescued the people from under the hand of Egypt” (18:10)

The Gemara in Sanhedrin 94a says that it is an embarrassment to Moshe Rabbeinu and the entire Jewish nation that nobody blessed Hashem for all the miracles that He performed for them in Egypt until Yisro came and did so. Any criticism of Moshe cannot be taken lightly. We can learn an important practical lesson from this Chazal. It is always much easier to be a follower than a leader. People are often reluctant to be trailblazers and implement their own new ideas. The same is true in serving Hashem. Many people do not want to be in the forefront, but would rather wait for someone else to start and will gladly follow once someone else takes the first step. Very few people are willing to take the risk of being the first to do something. This is the criticism of Moshe. He should not have needed to wait for Yisro to bless Hashem. This is something that he could have done on his own. We have to ask ourselves why we wait for someone else to come up with an idea and then follow that example. When something is correct and the proper course of action, we should not be afraid to do so first. We should not be afraid to make the first move to start a project. There is no need to wait until someone else develops a good idea that we can follow. Instead, we should seek to be innovative and take the lead. This criticism speaks to every generation, even in modern times. As long as the idea is in line with our tradition and our laws, we should not be afraid to start out on our own.

ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני ויחנו במדבר ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר
“They journeyed from Rephidim and came to the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness; and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (19:2)

Why does the posuk say that they left Rephidim? We already knew from the previous parsha that they were there?! Rashi quotes the Mechilta which answers that the Torah compares the departure from Rephidim to the arrival at Sinai. Just as they arrived at Sinai in a state of teshuva, they also left Rephidim in a state of teshuva. What is the significance of this fact?

The Netziv answers that the Jews already began to prepare for the acceptance of the Torah in Rephidim, before they had even reached Har Sinai. By the time they left Rephidim, they had already done teshuva and were already mentally preparing for the Torah. The lesson we can learn from this posuk is that preparation is key to any spiritual achievement. If the Jews would have just woken up one day and received the Torah without proper preparation, they would not have appreciated the Torah nearly as much and it would not have fully impacted them. Because they already began their preparations back in Rephidim, they were able to truly appreciate Matan Torah.

We can implement this lesson in our own lives and reap its rewards. There is a tangible difference in one's davening if he arrives in shul before the minyan begins and is able to clear his mind first. A few minutes of preparation make a world of difference. Another example is Shabbos. There is a mitzvah for every individual to partake in the Erev Shabbos preparations. When one does not rush into Shabbos and even takes a few minutes to prepare for its arrival, he appreciates Shabbos much more. Another example is the Yomim Tovim. Every festival bears a message for us each year which we should dwell upon and absorb into our daily lives. If a

person wakes up and finds that it is a Yom Tov, he will not be able to benefit fully from the tremendous spiritual potential that is contained in a Yom Tov. If a person prepares by consciously reminding himself that a Yom Tov is coming, by physically preparing for the holiday and by studying the laws pertaining to it, he will greet the Yom Tov fully prepared to enjoy it and gain from it.

The Gemara in Bava Metzia 85b tells the story of R' Chiya, who once planted flaxseed, plowed the field, harvested the plants, took the flax and wove nets, took the nets and trapped deer, slaughtered the deer and skinned them, took the hides and treated them, made parchment from the hides, wrote sefarim on these hides and took these sefarim and taught Torah to children from them. Why did he go to such great lengths in order to create sefarim? Surely someone other than the great Torah sage could have done the manufacturing?! R' Chiya knew that the Torah study from scrolls prepared with the intent to be used for learning could not be compared to Torah study from scrolls purchased from a manufacturer. To him, the time and effort invested in the preparation for Torah study was well worth it because he knew how much it would improve the quality of the resultant Torah study. The amount of preparation invested in any act of serving Hashem greatly increases its effects on the person.

יידבר אלקים את כל הדברים האלה לאמר

“Hashem spoke all these statements, saying” (20:1)

There is a story told about a teacher and student who were traveling and got lost in the forest. After wandering aimlessly for a few days, they spotted a house in the middle of the woods. They ran toward the house, relieved that they would soon find someone who would be able to show them how to get home. They knocked on the door, only to discover that the house was occupied by bandits. The ruffians grabbed the two men and tied them up. After a short while, they were led out into the forest to a young tree. The leader of the bandits told them that if they could bend the tree branches to the ground, they would be allowed to live. If not, they would be put to death. However, they were able to bend the tree easily because it was young and pliable. They were then taken to a second, sturdier tree and given the same ultimatum. This time, it took more effort to move the branch, but they succeeded again in bending it to the ground. They were moved to a third tree, a fully mature tree, and were again told to bend the branch to the ground. This time, no matter how hard they pulled and how much they jumped on the branch, it would not bend very far because it was much thicker than the first two trees. The bandits took the men to a clearing in the forest and tied them up again. The men were trembling and feared for their lives. Finally, the leader of the bandits said to the teacher, "Do you know who I am?" "No," said the teacher. "But I know you," said the bandit. "You are a teacher in the school in my hometown. I was your student. I was like the first tree, the young one that was easy to bend. Even though I did not have the best character as a child, you could have easily changed me. You gave up on me and I matured while keeping my bad habits. Now I am like the mature tree and I cannot be changed. I do not wish to harm you, only that you should learn a lesson from my story and not repeat this mistake."

Pirkei Avos begins: “Moshe accepted the Torah from Har Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua.” If the tractate deals with ethics, why does it begin with the transmission of the Torah from Har Sinai? R’ Ovadia MiBartenura answers that this shows us that ethics were also given over to Moshe on Har Sinai. They are just as much a part of Torah as the mitzvos themselves. The teachings of the Torah mold us and straighten us out. The written laws of the Torah are not all that came from Sinai. The ethics and moral lessons that are derived from it were also given to Moshe. Torah study is the way through which a person can perfect himself

and improve his character. If the teacher in the story would have had more patience with the student, the teachings of the Torah would have reached him and would have refined him and turned him into an asset to society.

The story teaches a lesson for young and old alike. For the youth, it is a reminder to take advantage of the formative years of life. Lay the foundation for life now and do not delay. Young people often say, "Leave me alone and let me do as I please while I am still young. When I grow up, I will change my ways and settle down." This is not the right attitude. The youth should seek to capitalize on the years when he is not yet set in his ways and can still change. For the older person, the story is a reminder to maintain the pliability of youth. A person should never become totally set in his ways so that he finds it impossible to improve himself. The bandit was wrong in saying that it was too late to fix himself. An older person can change, it just becomes harder to do so. As a person grows older, he should always look for new ways to improve and different areas where improvement can be made. In this way, a person can keep the benefits of youth throughout his life.

ששת ימים תעבד ועשית כל מלאכתך

“Six days shall you work and accomplish all your work” (20:8)

The Mechilta says: "Is it possible for a person to complete all his work in six days? Rather, the posuk teaches that when Shabbos comes one must feel as if all his work is done. He should not worry about his weekday pursuits on Shabbos because there is nothing left to do." The Semak writes that when a person feels on Shabbos as if all his work is completed, there is no greater enjoyment. This is one of the ways to fulfill the mitzvah to enjoy Shabbos. "Oneg Shabbos" means to feel the moment on Shabbos and to appreciate it. When one does this, he allows the holiness of Shabbos to seep into him. He is not weighed down by whatever workload he has during the week. This allows the Shabbos to become truly special. One should not feel that Shabbos is a burden because it interrupts his ability to do what he needs to get done. A person can only feel Shabbos when he puts all his weekday occupations aside and focuses solely on Shabbos itself, as if there is no weekday to worry about.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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