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Parsha

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PARSHAS YISRO | 20 SHEVAT 5769 | 14 FEBRUARY 2009

Parsha Perspectives

RABBI LEIBY BURNHAM

**וישמע יתרו כהן מדין חתן משה את כל אשר עשה אלקים למשה
ול ישראל עמו כי הוציא ה' את ישראל ממצרים**

"Now Moses' father in law, Jethro, the chieftain of Midian, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel, His people that the Lord had taken Israel out of Egypt." (Exodus 18:1)

This week's parsha starts with the arrival of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. When Moses came to Egypt he sent back his wife and children to Midian so as not to bring more people into a land committing atrocities against the Jews. Now, after the Jews were freed, Moses' father-in-law came to meet the Jews in the desert bringing with him Moses' wife and children. When he got there, he converted and joined the Jewish people.

attack that inspired Jethro, but the fact that there was such an attack in the first place. Jethro wondered how could it be that after the splitting of the sea, a miracle of gargantuan proportions that rocked the entire world, that someone could dare to come and attack the Jews? Egypt, the superpower of the world, was brought to its knees by ten terrible plagues, but did not stop persecuting the Jews. They then followed the Jews to the sea, and were thoroughly vanquished by the raging waters. Wouldn't that be enough to keep everyone away from the Jews?

Somehow, shortly after the splitting of the sea, Amalek came with an army to attack the Jews. This showed Jethro that when someone sees a huge miracle, it doesn't necessarily change them; it just provides an impetus for change. And if one doesn't seize the moment, it gets lost and loses all its power. This is how the nation of Amalek was able to attack. They let the miracles they saw slide right off their backs, and blithely continued with their evil plans. Jethro realized that he didn't want this to happen to him, so he seized the moment and came to the desert to join the Jews.

Many times we experience powerful moments in our life, and we are left with a feeling of inspiration. What Amalek and Jethro teach us is that if we don't capitalize on that moment, we can lose it forever, and if we do we can elevate ourselves dramatically. Let us try to be Jethros and not Amalekites! *Carpe Diem!*

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The events leading up to Jethro's arrival are described in the first verse of the parsha noted above how Jethro "heard" what G-d did for the Jews. Rashi asks what exactly Jethro heard which prompted him to come to the desert and join the Jews, instead of just sending his daughter and grandchildren. He answers that he heard about the splitting of the sea and the war that the Jews had fought with Amalek.

One part of this answer makes perfect sense, while the other seems troubling. G-d splitting a sea and allowing the Jews to walk through on dry land is something spectacular, and a good reason for someone to come and join the nation. (The Sages even tell us that every

body of water in the world split on a smaller scale to give the world a glimpse of the miracle!) But the fact that they had fought a war with Amalek and won doesn't seem to be such a great reason for a person to uproot themselves from a land where he is well respected and come out to the desert and join a new nation! It would seem reasonable that if Jethro's motivation to join the Jews was based on the splitting sea and the 10 plagues or the splitting sea and the exodus from Egypt. But what was so significant about the war with Amalek that Rashi tells us that this caused Jethro to radically change his life?

One explanation offered is that it was not the fact that the Jews defeated the Amaleky

Dedicated **לע"נ Rav Noach Weinberg, יצחק מתתיהו** of Blessed Memory,
who taught the world that doing the right thing is always within our reach.

Parsha POINTERS

Talking Points YISRO

RABBI ELAZAR MEISELS

1. FOR THE LOVE OF IN-LAWS

"And Moses went out toward his father-in-law and he bowed down and kissed him and each man asked about the welfare of the other and they came to the tent." 18:7

And he bowed down – This is an example of Moses' exceptional humility. He, the leader of the entire nation, bowed down before his father-in-law, behaved deferentially toward him, and related all the events that had transpired. – Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor

Toward his father-in-law – Why does it not say "toward Jethro, his father-in-law?" The answer is that Moses's respect for Jethro extended beyond the fact that he was his father-in-law. Regardless of who he was, Moses would have gone out to greet him. The mere fact that he was his father-in-law was more than enough to earn Moses's respect, for an in-law plays an integral role in the upbringing of one's spouse. Thus, one is obligated to respect his in-laws just as he is obligated to respect his own parents. – Sifsei Kohan

Massas HaMelech adds that this is not just good practice, but rather it is a halachic obligation to honor one's in-laws. Otherwise, Moses, who had the legal status of a king, would not have been permitted to humble himself before his father-in-law. If he did so, that is proof that he was obligated to do so.

2. A NATION OF PROPHETS

"And Hashem said to Moses, 'Behold, I will come to you in the thickness of a cloud so that the nation should hear as I speak to you and in you they will believe forever,' and Moses shared the response of the people with Hashem." 19:9

In the thickness of a cloud – Although the Almighty usually communicated with Moses with even greater clarity, in a manner known as "face to face"; this time, He would be speaking to him through the thickness of a cloud so that not only Moses, but all of the people too, could hear His voice. Although this diminished his experience somewhat, it offered an additional benefit in that

now that they'd experienced prophecy firsthand, they would no longer doubt Moses' ability to review Divine prophecy and they would accept the dictates he passed on in the name of the Almighty. – Ohr HaChaim (Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar)

Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia Sforno) explains that what the people doubted was not Moses' ability to prophesy. This was something known from much earlier times since others had done so as well. Their doubt lay in his ability to do so while fully awake without having to enter a trance-like state. Therefore, the Almighty promised that this time, they too would experience prophecy while fully conscious, albeit only through a cloud, and no longer would they doubt Moses' ability to do so. It was crucial that they accept this because it was this unique ability of Moses that endowed his words with greater legitimacy and authority than that of all other prophets.

3. TRADING SPACES

"Do not covet the house of your fellow, do not covet the wife of your fellow, his servant, his maid, his ox, his donkey, and all that is to your fellow." 19:6

Do not covet – Many people wonder how the Torah could ask us to control our thoughts to such a degree and abstain from coveting something that truly appeals to our senses. The answer is that just as a bedraggled street urchin does not ever contemplate earning the princess's hand in marriage, so too, should a person feel about that which Hashem has granted someone else. Clearly, it wasn't meant for you or the Almighty would have granted it to you. Obsessing over it makes as little sense as wishing you had the wings of a bird so that you too could fly. Knowing that it cannot ever happen convinces you to waste no time doing so. – Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Avraham ben Meir)

Do not covet – It is important to note that this prohibition does not preclude one from seeing something that another person has and purchasing a similar item for himself. There is nothing whatsoever wrong with that. Rather, the prohibition extends only to items which are not possible to duplicate such as his wife, home etc.

Do not covet – Although it is forbidden to covet ones material possessions, it is perfectly acceptable to covet one's Torah knowledge for this will inspire a person to pursue ever greater heights in Torah and observance. – Rabbeinu Bachya

Why does the Torah conclude this verse with, "and all that is to your fellow" after offering so many examples that already made this point? The commentators explain that the reason we covet that which another person has is because we don't bother to look at the bigger picture. We see one aspect of his life that appears ideal and we yearn for that while never bothering to consider what else comes along with his situation. We don't bother to contemplate all the hardship that went into obtaining it or the other aspects of his life that aren't as appealing. Thus, the Torah admonishes us, "Do not covet his wife, servant, ox, donkey... unless you are also willing to take the rest of what he has, "all that is to your fellow." Once a person thinks about the entire picture, he'll rarely wish that he was in the other person's shoes.

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PartnerTALK

MOSES VS. ABRAHAM

RABBI ELAZAR MEISELS

Dear Rabbi,

I have been studying with my partner for almost a year and it has proven to be a worthwhile experience. I am learning to read Hebrew and have been keeping up with the weekly parasha.

I was wondering about Moses receiving the Torah for the Jewish people...

Why did Hashem give the Torah to Moses and not to Abraham?

I would appreciate your thoughts on this subject.

*May all your days be filled with peace,
Chandra S.*

Chandra,

I'm so glad to hear that you're finding the Partners in Torah experience satisfying. Your question is a very important one and the response is somewhat comprehensive, so please bear with me as I share with you a few essential points.

1 – Abraham was a single individual, not a nation. The purpose of the creation of the universe was so that there'd be at a minimum a large group of people [i.e. a nation] that worships G-d by observing His Torah. Ideally, all of mankind would do so. In lieu of that, at a minimum, an entire nation must do. Abraham could not receive the Torah because it was not intended for the entire nation. It was not until Moses' time when the Jewish people were no longer just a large extended family but totaled in the millions, that they would constitute a critical mass large enough to receive the Torah.

2 – Although he was not actually given the Torah, the Talmud tells us that Abraham intuited its ideas and observed

them meticulously. Not only did he observe what later were explicit commandments, but he even observed rabbinic stringencies that were only enacted many years later. His son Isaac, and grandson Jacob did likewise. Thus, his lack of having been given the Torah should not be understood in any way as a taint on his record.

3 – The Torah contains a wide variety of *mitzvos*, some applicable only to men, some to women, and some to both. Some apply only to a *Kohen*, some only to a *Levi*, and some only to a *Yisrael*. Some apply only to people who live in the land of Israel, while others are universal. In sum, one person cannot possibly observe all of the *mitzvos* in a technical sense. For that, a large body of diverse people is needed. As an individual, Abraham was not in a position to accept the entire Torah, only those aspects of it that were relevant to his personal life. Thus, it was necessary to wait until such time as it was feasible for the entire Torah to be accepted jointly by the entire nation. This did not occur until Moses' time.

4 – The Torah, by its very nature, is not suitable for all. It is a very demanding set of rules to live by, and while immensely fulfilling, requires true commitment and perseverance. Many people are initially attracted to it only to see their enthusiasm wane when they realize the sort of commitment necessary to remain loyal to its message. Although Abraham demonstrated the commitment necessary to retain it, it could not be assumed that his children would do so as well until they themselves underwent many of his early experiences that cemented his commitment to it. Therefore, the Jewish people first had to undergo the 210 years of enslavement in Egypt, a culture that represented the exact opposite of what the Torah stood for, and overcome their natural temptation to assimilate. This experience, while full of suffering and hardship, helped encode in their genes a commitment to the Torah's ideals that sustains us until today. That's why it had to wait until the time of Moses and could not be given to Abraham alone.

Wishing you continued growth in your studies,

Rabbi Elazar Meisels

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TABLE TALK

FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

OZER ALPORT

א) We are taught (Peah 1:1) that the *mitzvah* of Torah study is so important that it is equal to all of the other *mitzvos*. If so, why isn't it included in the 10 Commandments?

ב) Rashi writes (20:1) that Hashem initially said all of the 10 Commandments simultaneously, and then stated each one individually because the human ear isn't capable of understanding two things said at the same time. That being the case, what possible purpose could Hashem have had in initially stating the commandments in an incomprehensible manner?

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Soul Talk

The Torah describes Hashem's patience and forbearance in the context of delaying the punishments of the Egyptians and of the evil Titus. In both those cases, the punishments were delayed. This was not because the sinners might repent, but because the time for the appropriate penalty had not yet arrived. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, in his *Tomer Devorah* (1:2, 1:5), tells us that Hashem also delays retribution at other times, being patient with a sinner although he has not yet repented.

This is the second of Hashem's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, the *Tomer Devorah* says, denoted by the prophet's words describing Hashem (Michah 7:18): **נִשְׂאָ עוֹן**, "Who bears iniquity." The significance of Hashem bearing iniquity is best appreciated, he explains, with the understanding that when a person sins, he creates a destructive celestial being — a *mashchis* — representing that sin.

Everything in the world exists only through Hashem's continual will for its existence. Logic would dictate that Hashem say to the *mashchis* — which was created through the contravention of Hashem's wishes — "I will not support you — let the person who caused you to come into being sustain you!" Then the *mashchis* would go to the sinner and take his life or punish him until the sin is erased. At that point the *mashchis* would have no more reason to exist, and justice would be served.

But Hashem, in His kindness to man, bears iniquity — He supports this *mashchis* until it does not need to be sustained anymore. This could be either because Hashem has punished the sinner, or because the sinner repented and thereby made the *mashchis* cease to exist.

We have an obligation to emulate Hashem's ways and apply the lessons we learn from His attributes to our daily interactions with people. The practical lesson we can learn from here is that a person must be extremely patient with others. Even when someone was wronged and the effects of that wrong are still in existence, one should try to bear those burdens until either the offending person makes amends or circumstances cause them to become irrelevant.

Another related Attribute of Hashem's Mercy is the fifth: **לֹא יִהְיֶה זַעַם לְעַד אָפוּ**, "He does not maintain His wrath forever." Included in this attribute is the fact that even if a person sins and does not immediately repent, Hashem holds His anger back from the person. Hashem waits, giving the sinner a chance — perhaps he will repent: **לֹא יִלְנָצֵחַ יָרִיב וְלֹא יִלְעוֹלֵם יִטּוֹר**, "He will not quarrel for eternity, nor will He forever bear a grudge" (Psalms 103:9).

This is also an important lesson to apply to our interpersonal relationships. Even when one has the power and opportunity to punish someone who has wronged him, one should not do so. This is certainly true when one has no right to bear ill will toward the wrongdoer (one is generally not permitted to hate a fellow Jew). But even in a case where it is permitted to hate him (see Pesachim 113b), the Sages instruct us: **תַּשְׁבּוּק מֵה דִבְלִבְךָ**, "abandon your feelings" (Targum Onkelos, Shemos 23:5). Instead, bring an enemy closer with love — perhaps that will help. And that is precisely this attribute — not to maintain wrath forever.

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