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Parsha

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Parsha Perspectives

MOSHE GEWIRTZ

**ויקח יתרו חתן משה את צפרה אשת משה אחר שלוחיה ואת שני
בניה אשר שם האחד גרשם כי אמר גר הייתי בארץ נכריה ושם
האחד אליעזר כי א-לקי אבי בעזרי ויצלני מחרב פרעה**

"And Yisro, the father-in-law of Moses, took Tzipora, the wife of Moses, after she had been sent away, and her two sons, of whom the name of one was Gershom, for he [Moses] had said, 'I was a sojourner in a strange land.' And the name of the other [son] was Eliezer, for 'the G-d of my father came to my aid, and He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'" (Exodus 18:2-4)

Rabbi Joseph Pazanovski, author of the *Pardes Yosef*, expounds on the meaning and significance of the names that Moses chose for his sons. He explains: Moses had a dilemma, similar in a sense to one many people grapple with today. When Moses' children were born, he and his wife, Tzipora, were tucked away in the land of Midian, far from the difficult slavery that the rest of the Jewish nation was enduring in Egypt.

Moses was concerned that his children could perhaps think that Midian was the Promised Land. They had family, security, health and wealth – everything they could desire, right where they were. Moses wanted his children to live with a constant reminder that a Jew who is not in the Land of Israel with the Holy Temple is living in *galut*, exile.

By naming his elder son Gershom, meaning, for I was a stranger in a strange land, Moses was telling his son that while it may be comfortable in Midian, you must always remember that we are strangers here. Moses named his second son Eliezer, meaning G-d saved me. With this name, Moses was telling his son, "I grew up in Pharaoh's palace. I had everything. Suddenly, Pharaoh changed his attitude towards me, and tried to kill me. G-d saved me from Pharaoh's executioner, and I became a fugitive. There is no security, even in the king's palace!"

Pardes Yosef adds that there were Jews who lived in the Spanish Golden Age (15th-17th centuries). They grew and prospered to the point that Abarbanel, a great sage of that period, became the treasurer for the king. Jews were comfortable; they had money and prestige. Life was great. Then, on the ninth of Av in the year 1492, the Jews were exiled from Spain. Everything they had built for themselves no longer meant anything in what turned out to be one of the darkest chapters of our history, the Spanish Inquisition.

It can be easy for us in America in 2010 to think that we have made it, to think that we are where we want to be. Indeed, we are blessed with relative comfort and tranquility. Our day schools, synagogues, and communities are growing. We can sometimes catch ourselves thinking, 'Do we really need the Messiah?' or, 'What are we lacking by not being in the Land of Israel with the Holy

Temple?' The truth is that we do have a very large void in our lives. We are missing the ultimate connection to G-d that is only possible in His land through the service in His Holy Temple. We must remind ourselves that while we may be comfortable here now, we are still foreigners in exile. We remain without complete security until the Messiah arrives, are returned to our Holy Land, and resume our close relationship with G-d.

It is well known that Rabbi Nosson Wachtfogel, the late *mashgiach* (spiritual advisor) of Beth Medrash Govoha, kept a freshly pressed suit in his closet, so that he would be ready at a moment's notice to properly greet the Messiah. Early one morning, a student of the yeshiva drove to pick up Rabbi Wachtfogel for their daily study session. The student was surprised that the otherwise very punctual Rabbi was not there when he arrived. After a few minutes, Rabbi Wachtfogel appeared in his robe at the door. He apologized and explained that he had heard a loud sound during the night and was hoping that it was the Messiah, and he was unable to fall back asleep for the remainder of the night.

Someone unfamiliar with Rabbi Wachtfogel's degree of piety and with his consistent spiritual presence is likely to see no more in this incident than confusion resulting from old age. Those who were privileged to know the venerable Rabbi, however, understand that he was merely living the message that Moses wished to impart in the names he chose for his sons: that we are but transient visitors in this land, and will remain so until the Messiah comes. May we merit to see the coming of Messiah speedily in our days!

Moshe Gewirtz can be reached at:
parsha@partnersintorah.org

Parsha POINTERS

Talking Points YISRO

RABBI ELAZAR MEISELS

1. THE RECOUNT

"And Moses related to his father-in-law all that G-d had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt on behalf of Israel, including all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how G-d had rescued them." 18:8

And Moses related to his father-in-law – Although Yisro had previously heard all that had occurred, as the verse [18:1] mentions earlier, nevertheless, Moses recounted all the events in order to draw his heart to bring him closer to the Torah. – Rashi

And Moses related to his father-in-law – Moses wished to emphasize to Yisro that G-d did not only ensure their safety, but he also attended to their myriad needs in meticulous detail at every step of their journey out of Egypt. This was something that Yisro did not necessarily appreciate beforehand and helped him perceive G-d's attentiveness to detail. – Sforno

All that G-d had done to Pharaoh – Moses shared with him something that he couldn't have known earlier. He informed him that not only were the Egyptians defeated, but their Heavenly Advocate [which every nation has] was also slain, rendering them powerless to further enslave or harm the Jews. With this information in hand, Yisro now understood that they were truly free and safe from the Egyptians. – Ohr HaChaim (Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar)

Moses recounted the story to Pharaoh, although he knew it already because there is a special *mitzvah* to recall the events of the Exodus, as it says in the Passover Haggadah, "And all who excessively engage in retelling the story of the Exodus, this is praiseworthy." The events of the Exodus are fundamental to our entire faith and trust in the Almighty, and the more we discuss them, the deeper and more powerful is our trust in Him. This is part of the reason that we recall the Exodus twice daily in the recitation of the *Shema*.

2. THE MAJORS VS. THE MINORS

"Let them administer justice for the people on a regular basis. They will bring every major case to you, but they can judge the minor cases by themselves. By sharing the burden, they will make things easier for you." 18:22

Let them administer justice for the people –

They can judge all cases in which they are experts, and those beyond their expertise, they can leave for you to judge. Those beyond even your expertise, you can pose to the Almighty for resolution. – Ibn Ezra

Let them administer justice...on a regular basis – Currently, due to the shortage of available judges, many people who have legitimate claims fail to pursue them because they do not wish to stand in line for days on end until you, Moses, are available. This creates an incentive for dishonest people to prey on others, knowing that they will probably not get called to justice. By installing a myriad of judges, justice will be administering justice on a regular basis, and peace will be restored among the nation. – Ramban

Interestingly, in describing how this plan was actually put into effect, the verse writes, "The difficult problems, they would bring to Moses, and the simple problems they would judge by themselves." Why does it substitute the words "major," and "minor," used by Yisro, with the words, "difficult" and "simple?" Rabbi Chaim Berlin explains that Yisro's choice of terms reflected his non-Jewish perspective, which maintains that there are "major" cases [i.e. when the sums in question equal millions of dollars,] and "minor" cases [i.e. when the sums amount to small totals]. Those cases do not receive nearly the due diligence or respect that the larger sums enjoy, because they're considered trivial as evidenced by the fact that there's such a thing as "Small Claims Court," where smaller sums are decided. In the Torah's view, it makes little difference whether the sums involved are millions or mere pennies. Each deserves an identical level of scrutiny when adjudicating the case. Therefore, the Torah distinguishes only between the difficult and simple cases, and places no importance on whether the case is major or minor.

3. ACTING HONORABLY

"Honor your father and mother so that your days may be lengthened upon the land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you." 20:12

Honor your father and mother – One can honor parents through the performance of good

deeds which gives them great joy. – Zohar

Honor your father and mother – How does one do so? By behaving in an upright manner that causes others to exclaim, "Fortunate are the parents who brought such a child into the world." – Talmud

Honor your father and mother – The verse contains the word "ess" before the words, "your father" and "your mother." This word is superfluous and is written to indicate that one must honor not only his parents, but someone else as well. The extra words "ess" come to include that one must demonstrate respect not only to a parent, but also to a step-parent, for acting respectfully toward a step-parent is a means of demonstrating respect toward one's natural parent. Properly observed, this little-known obligation can spare families vast amounts of anguish that often accompany a second marriage. – Talmud

Sifsei Kohen explains that the extra words come to include that indeed, we as Jews, are bidden not only to honor our parents, but the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, who are also our parents, too. Everything we do should reflect the fact that we are their spiritual heirs, and that in itself is a means of honoring them with the greatest of respect.

Rabbi Meisels can be reached at: rabbimeisels@partnersintorah.org

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Contact Info for Partners in Torah Mentor Advisors*:

Rabbi Elazar Meisels

732-917-6370

(Sunday & Tuesday 8:00–11:00 pm, and

Thursday 10:00am–12:00 noon)

rabbimeisels@partnersintorah.org

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845-425-6533 (leave message)

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PartnerTALK

IN THE BEGINNING...

RABBI LEIBY BURNHAM

Dear Rabbi,

In my 'History of World Religions' class, I am learning about Islam and how it started through Mohammed's prophecy. It got me thinking about my own religion, which I only recently started to discover. This question may sound silly, but how did Judaism get started? While I'm at it, I wouldn't mind understanding why we Jews think we are unique.

Thanks,
Julie

Dear Julie,

Thanks for your excellent question, one I certainly don't consider silly. While some religions expect its adherents to have 'blind faith,' Judaism demands that we ask questions. We aspire to what is called *emunah*, which is often misunderstood to mean 'faith.' Actually, it means faithfulness. We are expected to search out the answers to all the big questions, and then live our lives with faithfulness and the integrity of living by the truths we learn.

More directly to your question, it is noteworthy that the Torah instructs us to study the history of the generations that come before us. Doing so will help answer your question.

You are probably aware that thousands of religions besides Islam have sprouted up in hundreds of locales from Alaska to Zimbabwe. While the numerous religions may be different in their practices, prayers, or rituals, they share one common aspect – they all began with one or two individuals who had a vision of sorts in which they learned about the spiritual truths they were to convey to the masses. People like Mohammed, Siddhartha Gautama, and

Joseph Smith all claimed to have had a special vision, around which, Islam, Buddhism, and Mormonism are based. The smaller religions (such as Seicho-no-Ie, started by Dr. Masaharu Taniguchi; Tenrikyo, started by Miki Nakayama; and the Messianic proclamations of Sun Myung Moon) also began this way.

These individual visions are not historical anomalies. In fact, this is how every single major religion (and for that matter, cult) in the world began – except for one – Judaism.

In this week's parsha, we read about the revelation at Sinai, where G-d spoke to the entire Jewish people (600,000 adult males, and additionally, a similarly large number of women and children – collectively well over 2 million people). G-d spoke to all of them, as the verse says clearly, "You have seen that from the heavens I have spoken with you" (Exodus, 20:19).

So while thousands of religions were started through individuals who claimed to have been appointed as the religion's ambassadors or prophets, only one claims G-d appeared to millions of people. As a student of world religions, I think you can

appreciate the difference between a claim that G-d privately revealed Himself to one person and another that claims a revelation witnessed by millions of people. That's a claim that would be hard for even the most very charismatic person to sell.

The Torah in fact tells us that we can look throughout history, and we will never find another nation that will claim to have had a national revelation. "For inquire now regarding the early days that preceded you, from the day when Hashem created man on the earth, and from one end of heaven to the other end of heaven: Has there ever been anything like this great thing, or has anything like it been heard? Has a people ever heard the voice of G-d speaking from the midst of the fire as you have heard, and survived?... You have been shown in order to know that Hashem, He is the G-d! There is none beside Him" (Deuteronomy 4:32-35).

Don't take my word for this, Julie. Ask your professor and classmates whether they are familiar with any religion that makes a similar claim. I anticipate that the answer you get will deepen your appreciation for not only how our religion began, but also for the role it could play in your life.

All the best,
Rabbi Leiby Burnham

Rabbi Burnham can be reached at:
rabbiburnham@partnersintorah.org

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THE Back PAGE

TABLE TALK

FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

RABBI LABEL LAM

"Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it. Six days shall you work and accomplish all your work; but the seventh day is Sabbath to Hashem, your G-d; you shall not do any work – you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, your animal, and your convert within your gates – for in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, Hashem blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it. Honor your mother and father, so that your days will be lengthened upon the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you." (Shemos 20:8-12) This selection from the Ten Commandments represents the fourth and fifth commandments.

א) Our Sages tell us that the Ten Commandments are divided in two sections. The first five inscribed on the first section of the tablets address man's relationship with G-d. The remaining five inscribed on the other section of the tablets address man's relationship with his fellow man. Other than a possibly obvious reason, why does man's relationship with G-d come first?

ב) Why would the obligation to honor one's parents appear in the section between man and G-d?

ג) G-d is not a physical entity and as such, surely doesn't tire. What then could be meant by the statement that G-d "rested"?

Rabbi Lam can be reached at: rabbilam@partnersintorah.org

Parsha At-A-Glance

Yisro, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that had happened to B'nei Yisrael. He brought Tzipora, Moses' wife, and their two sons to the desert to be reunited with Moses. Moses elaborated on all the marvelous events of the Exodus from Egypt. Yisro offered sacrifices to Hashem, and he and the elders of B'nei Yisrael ate together.

The next day, Yisro saw that B'nei Yisrael waited in line all day to seek advice from Moses and to ask him to settle their disputes. Yisro suggested that Moses appoint a capable group of men to assist him in judging the people. Moses selected a group of judges who would bring to his attention only the most difficult matters.

On Rosh Chodesh Sivan (the first day of the third month), B'nei Yisrael arrived at Mount Sinai. The nation was imbued with a spirit of devotion and unity. Moses carried Hashem's message to the people, saying that if they would be loyal to Him, they would be His special treasure, a nation of priests and a holy people. B'nei Yisrael unanimously and enthusiastically accepted this destiny. They were instructed to prepare themselves for three days to receive the Torah directly from

Hashem Himself. They were warned not to overstep the boundaries set for them.

A dense cloud covered Mount Sinai. Amid lightning and thunder, Moses was called to ascend the mountain, where he was given another warning to the people. Moses felt it was superfluous, but Hashem insisted, and he descended the mountain to be sure the people understood. Hashem then spoke to His beloved people and revealed to them the Ten Commandments. It was the only time in history when an entire nation heard the voice of Hashem speaking to them. The people were shaken by the experience, and begged Moses to be the intermediary for them, lest they die. Moses assured them that Hashem sought only to raise them to an exalted status, and to place His imprint upon them so that they would not sin.

The parsha ends with a command to build an altar for Hashem, which was to be placed on the ground, not raised on columns. The altar was to be built of stones, but they could not be fashioned with metal tools. Access to the top of the altar would be by means of a ramp, not steps, in order to ensure the maximum degree of modesty.

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Rabbi Eli Gewirtz
NATIONAL DIRECTOR



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