

Candle Lighting

5:48

S"Z Kriat Shema

9:48

Sunset

6:07

Motzei Shabbat

6:42



Parshat HaShavuah

יתרו

YITRO

י"ח שבט תשע"ה

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Ashreinu

חלקינו מה טוב

Enriching and Enhancing Your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion

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EVERY PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

RABBI JOSH GRAJOWER

We often associate “being part of the group” as a sacrifice of self-worth and personal importance. If we are part of the group, we lose our value as individuals.

Ironically, the opposite is probably true.

In the beginning of פרק יט Rashi quotes the famous midrash that when the Jewish people arrived at הר סיני they were “like one man with one heart.” The midrash seems to be emphasizing a need for conformity and unity in order to receive the Torah. This idea seems to highlight a focus on the Jewish people as a *nation* receiving the Torah, without regard for each individual’s acceptance.

Later on, in פרק יט, God tells Moshe to warn the people not to come too close to the mountain, lest there be casualties. The language of the pasuk is “ונפל ממנו רב” — “and a multitude of them will fall” (19:21).

The literal meaning of the verse suggests that God is nervous that many people will be injured. Rashi, however, cites a midrashic interpretation that if even one person would die that would be considered before God as רב, many. Here, immediately before the receiving of the Torah, God is focused on the individual, not simply the Jewish nation as a whole.

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TWO SIDES OF THE SAME TABLET

LEOR LEVENSON ('16)

MONTHLY WRITER

In this week's parsha, Hashem gives the famous *aseret hadibrot*, the ten commandments, to the Jews. According to tradition, these laws were divided into two sets of five, and each set was inscribed on its own tablet.

Most opinions hold that the dibrot are separated based on the recipient of the mitzvah: the first five are actions that are *bein adam l'makom*, between man and God, and the last five are actions towards other humans, *bein adam l'chaveiro*. If this is true, why is the fifth commandment, honoring one's parents, included on the *bein adam l'makom* side? It seemingly has nothing to do with God!

In order to explain this peculiarity, Rabbi Avigdor Miller compares *kibud av va'em* to another mitzvah: *birkat hamazon*. He says that if one eats a great meal at a restaurant but fails to thank the waiters and the cook, his *birkat hamazon* will most likely be flawed. Humans generally think about concrete facts first, and then start wondering about the abstract. In this case, since one fails to appreciate the human effort involved with the food, one cannot begin to comprehend God's more complex role in the matter.

Similarly, one must recognize the amount of love, care, and support that he receives from his mother and father. They raise him, educate him, and support him throughout his entire life. Without properly appreciating the amount of time, effort, and love that his parents invest in him, a concrete concept, it is impossible for a person to be grateful for God's help, an abstract idea.

This is why *kibud av va'em* acts as the bridge between the two sides of the *luchot*—it connects the *bein adam l'makom* side with the *bein adam l'chaveiro* side. This law shows us that both worlds are required in our lives. We cannot disregard our fellow human beings and still think that we are capable of serving God with full dedication and appreciation. In order to serve God properly, we have to be appreciative of others.

YITRO'S SEARCH

BAILA EISEN ('15)

MONTHLY WRITER

The first perek of this week's parsha tells of Yitro's decision to join the Jewish people. The decision is an odd one – after all, the Jewish nation has only recently been freed from slavery and is now wandering the desert seemingly at random. Furthermore, Yitro held a position as High Priest, so he was living comfortably. Even if life wasn't so amazing for him in Midian, joining the Jewish nation hardly seems like the best choice of how to start anew.

The *pshat* of the Torah provides an explanation for Yitro's actions: he “heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel” (18:1). Rashi elaborates that there were specific feats that really impressed Yitro. For example, the way God caused the sea to split and how Bnei Yisrael won the war against Amalek particularly impressed him.

Continued page 3





Eisen continued

But I'm still not satisfied. After all, half the world had heard of Bnei Yisrael's accomplishments by that point – these were some pretty unusual events, certainly making headlines all over the world. Yet we don't see tons of people lining up to join the young nation with the powerful God. We only see Yitro. So what made him different? What made him see the same events that everyone else had seen in a different light? What made him see something convincing enough to make him leave his home and entire lifestyle behind?

The answer lies in a closer reading of the *pshat*. Simply speaking, what do we know about Yitro?

He was a moral man, willing to take Moshe into his home to repay the simple kindness of drawing water for his daughters. He even allowed Moshe, a stranger from a foreign land with no apparent noble or religious background, to marry his own daughter – simply for the sake of kindness and *hakarat hatov*. He was also a spiritual man, a high priest, searching to serve God in the best way possible. Finally, we know that he abandoned his previous lifestyle at a moment's notice to go join the Jewish people.

If we connect all these facts, we piece together the story of a very interesting man. As a moral person, Yitro was a man who tried his best to make the world a better place, to serve God to the best of his ability. But, like many of us, he ran into the problem of figuring out exactly how to go about being a good person. After all, the issue is not so cut and dry. Issues like what is right and what is wrong and how to connect spiritually have been debated for as long as humanity has existed.

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PICK A FIGHT YAEL ATTIAS ('16)

Parshat Yitro begins by telling us that Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, heard what Hashem had done for the Jewish people when he took them out of Mitzrayim and he therefore took his family and joined Bnei Yisrael in the desert. Rashi comments that one of the things that Yitro saw that led him to join the Jewish people was the war with Amalek, not because of Bnei Yisrael's victory, but because of the battle itself. The obvious question is, how does seeing a war compel Yitro to leave his homeland and become a stranger with a new nation?

The sole reason that Amalek picked a fight with Bnei Yisrael was to break the fear factor that the rest of the world had towards Bnei Yisrael after Hashem performed all the miracles in Egypt. Bnei Yisrael did not do anything to elicit this attack. Amalek chose to start this battle simply because they wanted to pick a fight.

When Yitro saw this battle and understood the reasoning behind it, it made him think about the battles that he himself was choosing to fight in his life. After recognizing Hashem's power in the world, Yitro knew he wanted to be a part of Bnei Yisrael and their God. Despite how hard he knew it would be to join a completely new nation with a different culture, language, and values, he chose to fight that battle because it was something he believed in.

A very significant lesson can be learned from this. Ask yourself what battles you are fighting in your life and recognize that YOU are essentially choosing to fight them. Think about why you are fighting them and if they are actually important enough to you to be worth fighting for.



These two midrashim are not contradictory at all and I believe can be explained based on a simple analogy. A 1000 piece puzzle only has value by combining all the pieces into a beautiful work of art. Each piece on its own has very limited beauty. At the same time, if a person is missing just one piece of the puzzle, the entire puzzle loses its value! Meaning, while each piece has almost no value on its own, in the context of the puzzle it is invaluable.

This is a new way to understand the conformity and individuality of each and every Jew. Each individual has a limited value. However, in the context of the puzzle of the Jewish people, each individual's role is invaluable and irreplaceable.

In this light we can understand both midrashim which precede the receiving of the Torah. On the one hand, we need to be a united people. The only way we can receive the Torah is if we're a united people. On the other hand, one should not believe this focus on the community denounces the value of the individual. Just the opposite is true, the focus on unity and the interconnectedness of the Jewish people gives value to the individual's role. This is why immediately after the declaration of our unity, God is worried lest we lose even one person. Each and every piece is invaluable, as long as it finds its place within the greater puzzle of the Jewish people.

Eisen continued

So Yitro began to study the first religion available to him – the most prominent one in the place he lived. He served those idols as best as he could, rising through the ranks, finally becoming a high priest. However, he felt like something was missing. When he heard of this fantastic God who saved His people, who cared about their well-being, Yitro immediately ditched the comforts of his old lifestyle to find the true meaning that he had been searching for all his life. He joined Bnei Yisrael and never turned back.

Yitro was truly a remarkable man whose story set the stage for generations and generations of converts and ba'alei teshuva who have found their connection to spirituality and morality through the Torah. Even your average Orthodox Jew often goes through a period of searching for connection, for a path through life that seems right and good. For people like me, who grew up in a Jewish home, the answer is right under our noses. After a few angst-filled teenage years of searching, I'm sure that I, like my parents before me and like Yitro, will find the answer in Judaism. Judaism provides all of us with the opportunity to live not only a happy but a fulfilling and meaningful life, just like that first generation of Jews from long ago.

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