**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT YITRO**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara in Masekhet Kiddushin (31a) comments that when the gentile nations heard of the first several of the Ten Commandments, such as the proclamation of “I am the Lord your God” and the prohibition against idolatry, they were unimpressed. They said, “*Li-khvod atzmo hu doreish*” – God was issuing these commands for His own honor and aggrandizement. The people of the world attributed to God the natural human desire for prestige, and thus assumed that He demanded His subjects’ respect and exclusive allegiance just as any mortal ruler would. The nations’ perspective changed, however, when they heard the fifth of the Ten Commandments, the command to honor parents. When they learned that God wants His subjects to give honor to not only Him, but also to His “partners” in the creation of people, they were impressed and acknowledged that even the first commandments were proper and just.

*Chazal* here depict the natural tendency to cynically and suspiciously dismiss matters of value and importance, and the people who promote such matters. It is easy and tempting to write off religious leaders and teachers as self-promoters who simply seek prestige, to respond to meaningful religious messages by charging, “*Li-khvod atzmo hu doreish*” – it is all a cheap attempt to exert control and gain respect. The Midrash’s depiction of the other nations’ cynical response to the first several commandments likely symbolizes the similar response that is often given to those who sound the voice of conscience and call for greater devotion to God.

There is, however, another message conveyed by the Gemara’s comment. Namely, people are not going to take religion seriously as long as its representatives give the impression of self-aggrandizement. We cannot expect to bring honor to our religion as long as people find a basis to claim, “*Li-khvod atzmo hu doreish*,” that we are driven by impure, self-serving motives. It is only when we make it clear that we are sincere in our commitment to God, that we seek to bring honor to Him and not to ourselves, that we can begin achieving this goal.

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (17b) comments that if a person engages in Torah learning “*she-lo li-shmah*” – with insincere motives – then “it would have been preferable for him not to have been born.” Tosefot, in Masekhet Pesachim (50b), explain this as referring to people who study for the purpose of gaining stature and prestige. Such a person does not merely lack an important element that must accompany our religious engagement. Rather, he defames the entire enterprise of Torah, making it seem like just another vehicle for earning fame and honor. *Chazal* warn that the cynics are going to accuse us of “*Li-khvod atzmo hu doreish*” until they are proven otherwise, and it is our obligation to avoid providing any fuel to this charge, to make it perfectly clear that we learn and practice Torah out of sincere devotion to God, and not out of devotion to our egos.

Sunday

One of the differences between the two texts of the Ten Commandments – the one that appears in Parashat Yitro (Shemot 20) and that in Parashat Vaetchanan (Devarim 5) – relates to the fourth commandment, the command to observe Shabbat. In Parashat Yitro, this command is formulated as, “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat*” (“Remember the day of Shabbat”), whereas in Parashat Vaetchanan the wording is, “*Shamor et yom ha-Shabbat*” (“Guard the day of Shabbat”).

Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, famously comments, “*Zakhor ve-shamor be-dibur echad ne’emru*” – the commands of “*Zakhor*” and “*Shamor*” were both issued in a single utterance. Although these two refer to different aspects of Shabbat – “*Zakhor*” speaks of the requirement to designate Shabbat as a special day, and “*Shamor*” speaks of the activities that are forbidden on Shabbat – they were given together. Rashi proceeds to give other examples of pairs of commands that were given together in a single utterance, even though they are actually in conflict with one another. For example, one verse designates Shabbat desecration as a capital offense (Shemot 31:14), and another (Bamidbar 28:9) mandates offering sacrifices on Shabbat, an act which would otherwise be forbidden. These two verses, even though they in a sense oppose one another, were presented “*be-dibur echad*” – “in a single utterance.” Rashi also gives the example of *tzitzit*, which requires tying wool strings to linen garments, despite the prohibition of *sha’atnez*. These two conflicting commands – the requirement of *tzitzit* and the prohibition of *sha’atnez* – were given “*be-dibur echad*.” The final pair of commands noted by Rashi is the prohibition against marrying one’s brother’s wife and the *mitzva* of *yibum*, which requires doing just that when the brother dies without children.

How might we explain the significance of this concept, “*be-dibur echad ne’emru*”? Why do *Chazal* seek to draw our attention to the fact that these pairs of different or conflicting commands were given in a single utterance?

The answer, perhaps, is that Torah life imposes a wide range of obligations and requires many different commitments, many of which at times conflict with one another. Certainly, limits in time, energy and resources make it difficult to satisfactorily tend to all our different obligations. Additionally, we are expected to balance conflicting characteristics and values. We are to be bold and cautious; private and social; generous and responsible; tolerant but firm in our beliefs and convictions. So much of Torah life follows the model of “*Zakhor ve-shamor be-dibur echad*” – two vastly different, or even opposing, ideals that somehow need to be balanced against one another.

The concept of “*Zakhor ve-shamor be-dibur echad ne’emru*” is mentioned also in the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 27a), which adds, “which the mouth is incapable of uttering, and the ear is incapable of hearing.” Meaning, only God is capable of issuing two commands in a single utterance. Perfect balance and harmony between conflicting ideals and values is not human; only God can achieve such perfection. Nevertheless, we are to strive to maintain as perfect a balance as possible. We must ensure never to focus exclusively on “*zakhhor*” or on “*shamor*,” on a particular religious value or requirement, without taking note of the other side of the equation. The Torah must be learned, understood, internalized and practiced in its totality, with proper attention given to all its various components, so that the numerous different ideals and obligations it encompasses blend together into a single, integrated, balanced life of religious commitment.

Monday

Parashat Yitro begins with the story of the arrival of Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, at the Israelite camp at Mount Sinai. The Torah relates that Moshe told his father-in-law about the miracles of the Exodus, and Yitro reacted with exuberance: “*Va-yichad Yitro*” – “Yitro rejoiced” (18:9).

Whereas the plain meaning of the word “*va-yichad*” is joy and elation, the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (94a) cites two other interpretations of this word, both of which associate “*va-yichad*” with the Hebrew word for “sharp” (“*chad*”). According to one view, “*va-yichad*” means that Yitro “ran a sharp knife over his flesh,” that is, he underwent circumcision as part of his formal conversion process. The other interpretation is that Yitro’s flesh became “prickly,” a reference to the pain he experienced upon hearing of the suffering of the Egyptians, a people with whom he had previously been affiliated.

Interestingly, both these interpretations of “*va-yichad*” speak of an experience of pain and discomfort – the precise opposite of the plain meaning of the word. One view understands “*va-yichad*” as a description of physical pain, and the other as referring to emotional pain, but both explain that the Torah describes Yitro going through an uncomfortable experience during his reunion with Moshe.

The message that emerges, perhaps, is that joy does not necessitate the absence of discomfort, that one can experience true joy even while enduring a degree of physical or emotional pain. The Torah here clearly tells us that Yitro rejoiced – and *Chazal* want us to realize that Yitro experienced immense and sincere joy even as he endured the physical pain of circumcision and the emotional pain of hearing of the Egyptians’ suffering. Our joy must not be dependent on the absence of all pain and discomfort. Very often we are forced to endure “pain” of one kind or another, and many times we make the mistake of thinking that we cannot experience joy until the discomfort passes. The Gemara’s interpretations of “*va-yichad*” perhaps remind us that we can and must find joy even amid hardship, that we are capable of rejoicing over God’s blessings and goodness even when we find ourselves beset by difficult challenges.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Yitro of how Yitro, Moshe’ father-in-law, observed Moshe sitting “from morning until evening” single-handedly tending to the nation’s legal cases (18:13). Yitro thereupon advised Moshe to appoint a network of judges to serve under him so he would not have to bear this burden alone, and Moshe heeded his advice.

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (10a), as Rashi cites, raised the question of how it is possible that Moshe sat and judged the people “from morning until evening.” When, the Gemara asks, would Moshe have devoted himself to his own studies if he spent the entire day serving as judge? To answer this question, the Gemara resorts to an allegorical reading of the verse, interpreting it to mean that a judge who renders proper, honest rulings becomes the Almighty’s “partner” in creation, which began with the creation of day and night.

Why is a fair judge considered God’s “partner in creation,” and why is this message conveyed through the metaphor of “morning until evening”?

One of the important aspects of creation is the harmony maintained between conflicting forces, which is best symbolized by the division of day and night. Creation consists of light and darkness, heat and cold, fire and water, and countless other pairs of conflicting entities. God, in His infinite wisdom, created and sustains the world by perfectly balancing these opposing forces. It is in this sense, perhaps, that a judge becomes God’s “partner” in creation. His job, essentially, is to bring peace between “morning” and “evening,” between two individuals whose interests clash. A judge is called upon to follow his Creator’s example, to find a way to allow quarreling litigants to coexist peacefully, just as God found a way for light and darkness to coexist in the world.

Significantly, *Chazal* make this comment specifically in reference to Moshe judging the people, and according to one view, this occurred after Moshe had returned from spending forty days and nights atop Mount Sinai. We might have thought that Moshe had already established a close “partnership” with the Almighty by bringing His Torah to *Am Yisrael*, by living as an angelic being in the heavens receiving the divine law. And yet, the Gemara speaks of Moshe’s “partnering” with God specifically in the context of his role as judge, presiding over the people’s cases, hearing their complaints – some of which were likely petty and trivial – and issuing his verdicts. We become God’s partners primarily by performing the work of “morning and evening,” working to maintain peace and harmony among people. While we of course bear numerous other obligations, it is by bringing peace among people that we attain the special status as partners of the Almighty in creating and sustaining the world.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Yitro tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s encampment at Mount Sinai, where God later revealed Himself to them and presented the Torah. We are told in the introduction to this section that *Benei Yisrael* arrived at Sinai after journeying from their previous station, Refidim – “They journeyed from Refidim and arrived in the Sinai desert” (19:2). The *Mekhilta* comments that the Torah makes this comment for the purpose of comparing the nation’s experiences journeying from Refidim and their experiences at Sinai: “Just as when they traveled from Refidim they angered the Almighty and in a brief moment repented and were accepted, upon their arrival at the Sinai desert, too, they angered the Almighty and in a brief moment repented and were accepted.”

In both Refidim and Sinai, *Benei Yisrael* angered God, faced the dire consequences of their wrongdoing, and then earned forgiveness through *teshuva*. In Refidim, *Benei Yisrael* complained about the lack of water and questioned whether God was with them helping them (“*Ha-yeish Hashem be-kirbeinu*” – 17:7), whereupon Amalek attacked (see Rashi to 17:8). During the ensuing battle, *Benei Yisrael* turned their eyes and hearts upwards to the heavens in prayer (Mishna, Rosh Hashanah 29a), and they defeated the enemy. Likewise, in Sinai, *Benei Yisrael* worshipped the golden calf, whereupon God decided to annihilate the entire nation and produce a new nation from Moshe (32:10). Moshe interceded on the people’s behalf, they repented, and they earned God’s forgiveness.

What might be the significance of this comparison? Why did the *Mekhilta* find it necessary to draw our attention to this similarity between the events in Refidim and those in Sinai?

The answer, perhaps, can be found in what is likely the most significant difference between the nation’s experiences in Refidim and in Sinai, namely, *Matan Torah.* Unlike in Refidim, at Sinai *Benei Yisrael* beheld God’s revelation and heard Him proclaim the Ten Commandments. They underwent an unparalleled transformative experience, which *Chazal* compared to resurrection (Shabbat 88b). No such event transpired in Refidim. The *Mekhilta* perhaps draws our attention to the fact that the same process of spiritual failure and recovery which the people went through in Refidim was necessary at Sinai, after *Benei Yisrael* received the Torah. As transformative as the experience of *Matan Torah* was, it did not result in perfection. The people were still capable of sinking to the depths of idolatry, from which they then had to climb to regain God’s favor. Despite the dramatic and inspirational spectacle of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, the process of Refidim still had to be repeated.

The *Mekhilta*’s message, then, is that there is no point at which we are guaranteed not to stumble and fall. Mistakes occurred at Sinai after *Matan Torah* just as they had previously. We are always prone and susceptible to mistakes, regardless of how much we have grown and accomplished, and regardless of what kind of meaningful experiences we have undergone. The process of struggle and growth must be ongoing, throughout our lives, and does not end even after experiencing something as powerful and transformative as *Matan Torah*.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Yitro of the suggestion proposed by Yitro that Moshe should appoint a network judges, and the various qualities which Yitro felt the judges should possess. One of these qualities was “*yir’ei Elokim*” – that the judges should be “God-fearing” (18:21). The *Mekhilta*, interestingly enough, explains this to mean, “*she-osin peshara ba-din*” – that the judges are inclined to search for a compromise between the two litigants.

Why is this quality described with the term “*yir’ei Elokim*”? Why does it take special “fear of God” to help quarreling litigants reach a mutually acceptable compromise?

Rav Chaim Efraim Zeitchik, in his [*Torat Ha-nefesh* (Parashat Yitro)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2726&st=&pgnum=337&hilite=), suggests that the critical element to which *Chazal* here refer is sincerity. Often, when litigants come before a court, they harbor feelings of bitter enmity towards one another, each insisting that he is correct and being victimized by the other party. With tensions running high and resentment on both sides boiling over, there is little chance of the two parties reaching an agreement with which they both feel comfortable. They key to exerting positive influence upon the litigants, and to gradually making them more flexible and open to compromise, is sincerity. If the parties see that the judge has no personal stake whatsoever, if it is clear to them that he speaks to them genuinely and truthfully without any ulterior motives, his words have a chance of achieving the desired goal. The moment they suspect the judge of acting for his own interests rather than theirs, that he does not truly take their concerns into account, his words are bound to fall upon deaf ears. The key to softening hardened hearts and inspiring flexibility is palpable sincerity and honesty.

Rav Zeitchik suggests that it is to this quality that *Chazal* refer when they associate compromise with “*yir’at Elokim*.” If a person is truly God-fearing, driven by a genuine desire to fulfill God’s will, then his sincerity will be clear and evident. The litigants will sense that the judge is genuinely concerned and is not simply looking for an easy solution for the sake of convenience, and they might therefore be receptive to his proposals.

Rav Amital *zt”l* often remarked that honesty and genuineness are among the critical elements of education. If we want to positively influence our children, students, or anybody else, the first prerequisite is “*yir’at Elokim*” – sincere motives. If we are driven by a desire to be obeyed, to feel important, or to earn respect, then we are not likely to succeed. Our chances of success hinge upon our sincerity, our genuine desire to fulfill our obligation to positively impact and inspire the people around us in the manner that God wants and demands. If we act with true, honest “*yir’at Elokim*,” then our sincerity will be felt, allowing our words and personal example to have the effect that we want them to have.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted that one of the qualities that Yitro deemed necessary for a judge was “*yerei Elokim*” – fear of God” (18:21).

[Malbim](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=40081&st=&pgnum=276&hilite) discusses the particular importance of *yir’at Shamayim* in the

context of judgment. Yitro also noted other qualities which are necessary for a judge – such as honesty (“*anshei emet*”) and disinterest in wealth (“*son’ei batza*”) – but he also found it necessary to add “*yir’ei Elokim*.” Malbim suggested that without *yir’at Shamayim*, even if a judge is scrupulously honest and beyond suspicion of bribery, he might be lax when it comes to relatively minor cases. If the amount of money under question is small, and the consequences of the trial are not all that significant, the judge might not invest the time and mental energy needed to thoroughly study the case and issue the correct ruling. If, however, the judge is infused with genuine *yir’at Shamayim*, then he understands and senses that he works for the Almighty, who demands the highest standards under all circumstances. A judge with *yir’at Shamayim* sees not only the litigants standing before him, but also God, who is likewise present at every trial (“*Elokim nitzav ba-adat Kel*” – 82:1), and who draws no distinctions between large and small sums of money. With this awareness, a judge tends to all cases with proper attention and focus, regardless of the sums at stake.

The message conveyed by this comment of Malbim applies not only to judges, but to all of us and all areas of religious life. Without *yir’at Shamayim*, we are prone to disregarding the seemingly trivial matters, the minute details of *Halakha* to which we are bound. If we view religious observance only through our human lenses, we will allow ourselves the freedom to focus on what appears to us as important, and neglect the nitty-gritty details. With *yir’at Shamayim*, however, we realize that it has all been commanded to us by the Almighty, that both the “big” and “small” requirements and restrictions are part of the divine code by which we are to live. And while certainly some laws will take priority over others when conflicts arise, fundamentally, we are equally committed to them all. Just as a judge bears the responsibility to carefully evaluate and examine even the small cases that come before him, we, too, must give our full attention to even the seemingly “trivial” areas of halakhic observance, with the realization that they, too, constitute part of our obligation to the Almighty.