

YITRO – 5783

This week and last, we read the parshiot which some would argue are the most consequential for the Jewish people and their place in the world. Last week, it was Beshallah which documents the actual exodus from Egypt and the escape from the army of Pharaoh because of the miracle of the parting of the waters of the Sea of Reeds. Historians and theologians alike point to that singular event as the moment the Children of Israel because the to this divide between before and after the Exodus. So much for Beshallah and now what of Yitro. At the end of last week's parsha the Israelites are on their way to Sinai but in Yitro, the actual encounter with the divine on Mount Zion by Moshe and the giving of the Ten Commandments occurs. I would like to argue that the opening verses of Yitro force us to see an important distinction between the two events.

Yitro begins with a very human family drama. Moshe had fled to Midian from Egypt after taking up arms against the injustices he saw at the hands of his adopted people against his birth people. He was taken into the family of Jethro, the high priest of Midian and, in due course, fell in love with his daughter who gave birth to two sons. After the encounter with HaShem before the burning bush, Moses was forced to heed HaShem's call to return to Egypt to secure the freedom of the Israelites in Goshen. He of course left his small family in the protection of his father-in-law. But now, having heard of the events in Egypt, Jethro has led his daughter and grandsons back to Moses. However, before he returns to his life in Midian and departs from the Israelite encampment, he spends some time with his son-in-law telling him how his faith in the divine has changed. He sees the difference in the gods of his former life and the God of his son-in-law. Before he actually leaves the

encampment, he observes how Moses is engaged day and night by the petty squabbles of the Israelites and listens to Moses as he complains about the preoccupation. Jethro tells Moses in no uncertain terms that he must appoint judges to do the work that he has been doing and leave the role as final arbiter to himself. In effect, he leads Moses to see how law and order should be applied in the new nation. This was even before the giving of the Ten Commandments though.

We know that is exactly what happens next, and few of us do not possess only knowledge of the story line but visual images of just what took place. In one of his commentaries for Parshat Yitro, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, points out that first of all, we don't refer to them as commandments, like those which will follow in Parshat Mishpatim, but rather utterances, or words when we call them in Hebrew Asseret HaDibrot. Rabbi Sacks goes on to divide these ten utterances into three separate categories.

- The first three (one God, no other God, do not take God's name in vain) are about God, the Author and Authority of the laws.
- The second set (keep Shabbat, honour parents, do not murder) are about createdness. Shabbat reminds us of the birth of the universe. Our parents brought us into being. Murder is forbidden because we are all created in God's image ([Gen. 9:6](#)).
- The third three (don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness) are about the basic institutions of society: the sanctity of marriage, the integrity of private property, and the administration of justice. Lose any of these and freedom begins to crumble.

But then comes the tenth commandment and I personally have always questioned its placement after the previous three above.

“Do not be envious of your neighbour’s house. Do not be envious of your neighbour’s wife, his slave, his maid, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that is your neighbour’s.”

makes a lot of sense because, as Rabbi Sacks points out, if you stop and think about it, not coveting, not being jealous or envious of others leads inevitably to being thankful for everything that you do have, to appreciating all the bounties that HaShem has provided us and that has played itself out time and time again over the centuries in how the Jewish people have managed to not only survive but thrive, in the face of adversity.

Last week, I watched and listened to a podcast / video recording of a Torah study conducted as part of the yearlong series produced by the Jewish Theological Seminary on various topics. Last week, the one I listened to dealt with the reason why Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, also of blessed memory, was so involved in the Civil Rights movement while he was alive and how that related to his view of the Exodus and its meaning for the Jewish People. In essence the case was made for the fact that Heschel saw in the Exodus story the universal message of Judaism. Heschel believed that the lesson that the Jewish people can teach to the rest of the world is precisely the idea that freedom and thankfulness is something we have given to the entire world. Every world religion accepts the belief in one God and accepts the applicability of the Ten Commandments.

In my mind, while Beshallah gives the Jewish People our sense of nationhood and the fulfillment of HaShem’s covenant made with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs for all time, Yitro gives to us that which has made us the chosen people, the Ten Commandments. But that sense of being chosen does not relate to our religious identity or our national identity but our sense of our place in the world. It is no small coincidence that we say thank HaShem every day for being born and every morning, at the beginning of Shacharit, we give thanks for all that he has

given us. This is in keeping with the 10th Commandment not to complain about what we don't have but to be thankful for that which we do have. We were chosen to be a light onto the other nations to remind them of this very thing and to live up to its dictates every day or all our lives. Modeh Ani, we say, I give thanks. Shabbat Shalom.