

PARSHAT YITRO

11 - 17 Shevat 5785
9 - 15 February 2025

Torah: Exodus 18:1 - 20:23
Haftorah: Isaiah 6:1-13

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Negative Commandment 287 Relatives' Testimony

A judge may not accept testimony from a litigant's close relative - whether the testimony is in support of the litigant or against him.

This law applies to all cases - capital and monetary and all close relatives. The verse refers specifically to a capital case and the testimony of a father to demonstrate the extent of this mitzvah. For the Torah even forbids accepting the testimony of a father, who presumably loves his child dearly, against his child (or vice versa) in a capital case—though we'd presume that such testimony is eminently credible.

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TORAH IS FOR IMPERFECT PEOPLE

The Parshah (Torah portion) of Yitro contains one of the most—if not the most—special sections in the entire Torah: the Aseret Hadibrot, the Ten Commandments.

Rabbi Saadia Gaon, the brilliant 10th-century Talmudic scholar, philosopher, and Jewish leader, teaches that all 613 mitzvot are encompassed within the Ten Commandments, and he traces each one back to its source.

Taking it a step further, the Zohar (Jewish mysticism) teaches that the very first word of the Ten Commandments, the “I” (Anochi) in “I am the L-rd your G-d Who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” encompasses the entire Torah.

What kind of word is Anochi? I'm a simple guy from New Jersey. I know that the Hebrew word for “I” is “Ani.” If I wrote the Ten Commandments, which I didn't, I would have started with the word Ani.

What language is Anochi? What is its origin? At first, I thought it was Spanish. But the surprising answer, found in the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, informs us that Anochi is an Egyptian word!

How is it possible for the word Anochi to be of Egyptian origin? How can it be that the word that encompasses the entire Torah, and the word that denotes G-d's essence, is of the language spoken by the most morally bankrupt civilization at the time?

It's Personal

We are taught that every Jewish soul that has ever and will ever come into this world was present at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. G-d gathered every man, woman, and child of the Jewish faith and said, “I am the L-rd your G-d Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” If G-d wanted to impress everyone, why didn't He say, “I am the L-rd your G-d who created heaven and earth”? That's much more impressive.

While “G-d Who created heaven and earth” is indeed impressive, it has very little to do with each of us on a personal level. When I hear “G-d Who took the Jewish people out of

Egypt,” that's personal; that's about me.

It is especially personal when considering the teaching of the Mishnah that, “In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt.” The Hebrew word for Egypt - “Mitzrayim” - can also mean boundaries and limitations. We all have our own constraints, things that hold us back, box us in, chain us down. These limitations can be externally imposed or self-created.

But, G-d promises us: “I took you out of Egypt once; I can also take you out of your own Egypt.” We are connected to the One G-d - Anochi - and we can do anything we set our minds to; there's nothing we cannot accomplish.

Dialogue in Heaven

The Talmud recounts a fascinating dialogue between G-d, Moses, and the angels when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to heaven to receive the Torah.

The ministering angels protested to G-d, saying, “This beautiful, concealed thing [Torah] You desire to give to one of flesh and blood?! You are giving it to a human being?!”

G-d turned to Moses and said, “You answer them.”

Moses was terrified!

“Are You kidding? They're going to breathe on me and consume me with their fiery breath!”

G-d replied, “Don't worry about it. Grab ahold of My throne of glory and it will protect you. But I want you to respond to the angels.”

And so, Moses responded, “The Torah states, ‘I am the L-rd your G-d Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.’ Angels, did you ever live in Egypt? Were you slaves to Pharaoh? You were not. So, what do you need the Torah for?”

Moses continued, “The second commandment says, ‘Do not have any other gods before Me.’ Do you live amongst nations of the world who worship idols that you would learn from them?”

“What else is written in the Torah?” continued Moses, “‘Remember the day of Shabbat to keep it holy.’ Do you work all week that you need to rest on Shabbat? Do you get tired? ‘Do not take G-d's name in vain?’ Will you, angels, ever be asked to swear in court? Do you engage in business dealings? ‘Honor your father and

mother.’ You have no father or mother! ‘Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal.’ Do angels ever become jealous? Do angels have an evil inclination?

“The Torah is not for you,” concluded Moses.

With that, the angels conceded, praised Moses, and even presented him with gifts.

Clearly, not only is Torah also for imperfect people, it is primarily for those of us who struggle, who are tempted, and who may sometimes fall short.

Always With You!

The Rebbe explained that in Moses' first words to the angels he stressed the Anochi, the Egyptian word. “I - Anochi - am G-d Who took you out of the land of Egypt.”

G-d was telling the Jewish people, “I remember you in Egypt. I know what it is to be human. I know what it means to have temptations, to face trials and tribulations. I know what it is to feel boxed in, limited. Anochi! I'm not using Lashon Hakodesh, the Holy Tongue, where everything is rosy and holy and perfect. I am using an Egyptian word. I was with you in Egypt, and I am with you now! I created the evil inclination, and I created Torah as its antidote. This Torah I am giving you will arm you with the ability to transcend your limitations and overcome your personal difficulties.”

Eternally Relevant

As we read the portion of the Ten Commandments, it's crucial to internalize that they encompass the entire Torah, which serves as a blueprint for life.

One might question the relevance of Torah today, asking, “Why are you wasting your time with that?” In truth, however, Torah is the only thing that remains relevant, both today and always. Everything else is transient.

Imagine a doctor using 19th-century medicine or a judge applying outdated laws in a modern courtroom. A computer from a decade ago is considered a dinosaur. Science, technology, the “conventional wisdom” ... everything evolves, but Torah remains unchanged; it is eternal. And Torah is the best prescription for a happy life. When you leave a Torah class and share what you

learned with your spouse, friends, or children, everyone around you will be uplifted.

Everything In Perspective

Is it always easy to adhere to the Torah? Certainly not. Take the 10th commandment, which states, "Do not covet." What should you not covet? "Your neighbor's house, wife, servant, ox, donkey, and everything your neighbor has."

How can we truly observe this commandment? What if my neighbor has a nice car? What if he has a Maserati?! I wish I had a Maserati!

Here's something I heard many years ago and have shared often: The final words of the Ten Commandments are "[Do not covet...] everything your neighbor has."

Having enumerated house, spouse, servants, and animals, what does the Torah add by saying, "and everything your neighbor has?" What else is left?

The answer lies in a beautiful teaching, a lesson we would all do well to bear in mind.

People constantly feel pressured to "keep up with the Joneses" (or the Schwartzes, or the Cohens). We tend to think that the other guy has it all and the grass is greener on the other side.

But before bemoaning the fact that you don't have what your neighbor has, it's important to understand that you don't know the whole story. You know the car and the house, but you don't know the troubles. You have no idea what goes on behind closed doors - one's relationship with their spouse, one's

relationship with their children, the audit or the investigation one is dealing with. You have no idea of the "Tzuris" - the troubles - your neighbor may be experiencing, G-d forbid.

So before you say, "Why can't I be like the other guy?" think about something my mother, Rebbetzin Miriam Gordon, of blessed memory, would always say, echoing what Jewish mothers and grandmothers have been saying for generations: "Everyone thinks the neighbors have it made, but if every family's 'package' was hung out in public and G-d ordered that we each pick one, we would all run to pick our own. After seeing what the neighbor has to deal with, we change our minds! He can keep his fancy car, and he can keep his troubles."

The truth is we'd rather not have "everything our neighbor has."

With that in mind, we can return to the first words of the Ten Commandments, Anochi, the knowledge that G-d gave the Ten Commandments to human beings fresh out of Egypt. Each day, we must tap into our Divine connection to transcend our limitations and achieve freedom from our personal exile. Empowered by the eternal Torah, may we continually ascend higher in our partnership with G-d, utilizing our talents to make His world a better place. May we truly merit to see a world of perfection, with the coming of our righteous Moshiach, may it happen speedily in our days! Amen.

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YITRO IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Yitro," means "Jethro" and it is found in Exodus 18:1.

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles which G-d performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the Jewish camp, bringing with him Moses' wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people.

The children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah. G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend.

G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 11 Shevat 5785 - 9 February 2025 Jews of Colmar Expelled (1510)

Three years after the request by the Council of Colmar, Emperor Maximilian I of the Holy Roman Empire granted permission to expel the Jews of Colmar, Germany (now France) on 11 Shevat 5270 (1510). The community exerted every effort to secure the repeal of the decree of banishment. With the help of Rabbi Joselman of Rosheim, the leader of the Alsatian Jews, the enforcement of the decree was postponed until S. George's Day of 5272 (1512).

Monday, 12 Shevat 5785 - 10 February 2025 Warsaw Ghetto Insurgency Begins (1943)

On 12 Shevat 5703 (1943), the Germans began their second deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto, which led to the first instance of armed resistance. The deportation was halted within a few days; only 5,000 Jews were removed instead of 8,000 as planned. The Nazis retreated, only to return three months later, at which time the Warsaw uprising started in earnest.

Passing of Rabbi Chaim Kapusi (1631)

Rabbi Chaim Kapusi was one of the leading sages of Egyptian Jewry in the late sixteenth and

early seventeenth centuries. He passed away at the age of ninety, on 12 Shevat 5391 (1631).

It is related that Rabbi Chaim once became blind, and the townsfolk spread rumors attributing his condition to bribery, as the verse states, "Bribery blinds the eyes of the wise." Hearing this, Rabbi Chaim got up before the entire congregation and announced: "If it is true that I have accepted bribery, may my eyes retain their sightlessness. But if it is not true, may my vision be restored!" Miraculously, his vision returned immediately, and he proceeded to identify the congregants by name.

Tuesday, 13 Shevat 5785 - 11 February 2025 Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah Schneerson (1942)

The wife of the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneerson, and mother of the 6th Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah (5620-5702, or 1860-1942) lived through the upheavals of the first half of the 20th century. She fled the advancing front of World War I from Lubavitch to Rostov (both in Russia), where her husband passed away in 5680 (1920) at age 59. In 5687 (1927), she witnessed the arrest of her son by Stalin's

henchmen the night he was taken away and sentenced to death, G-d forbid, for his efforts to keep Judaism alive throughout the Soviet empire. After Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak's release, the family resettled in Latvia and later, Poland; in 5700 (1940), they survived the bombing of Warsaw, were rescued from Nazi-occupied city, and emigrated to the United States. Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah passed away in New York on the 13th of Shevat of 1942.

Auschwitz Liberated (1945)

On 13 Shevat 5705 (1945), the Soviet army arrived in Auschwitz, the most infamous of the Nazi death camps, and liberated some 7,000 survivors - those left behind as unfit to join the evacuation "Death March."

Wednesday, 14 Shevat 5785 - 12 February 2025

P'nei Yehoshua (1756)

The 14th of Shevat is the Yahrzeit of Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk Katz (5440-5516, or 1680-1756), author of the Talmudic commentary "P'nei Yehoshua." He served as rabbi of Lemberg (Lvov), Ukraine in 1718, Berlin, Germany in 1730, Metz, France in 1734, and Frankfurt, Germany in 1740.