



PREPARING TO RECEIVE THE TORAH (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

The Path To Follow

YITRO

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Seeking Information

It is allowed, and even recommended, to ask for information regarding a person that we are interested in hiring or taking on as a business associate or a partner in a similar kind of activity. This is because we are asking for the purpose of avoiding damages or conflicts, or to prevent any desecration of Hashem's Name. However we must explain why we are asking these questions, otherwise we will be transgressing the prohibition: "You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind." This is because the person answering our questions will not have a practical intention in doing so. Many people err in this regard. We must not, however, address our questions to people that we suspect hate the individual in question. This applies even if his hatred is not visceral, but they are simply part of the same group or they work in the same field. Even if he says that his answer is not influenced by hatred, and we cannot see the harm that can come from it, it is better not to ask such a person for information.

- Hilchot Lashon Hara VeRechilus

It is surprising that this week's parsha is called Yitro, rather than a name that deals with the giving of the Torah, which the parsha describes. Nor is it named after Moses, who devoted himself entirely to the giving of the Torah, having ascended Mount Sinai and spent 40 days and 40 nights on it. We may be inclined to say that the Torah intended to honor Jethro in this way, since he converted and left his country and status behind, as the Sages have said: "Why is he called Jethro [Yitro]? Because he added [yiter] a parsha to the Torah, as it is written: 'Ve'ata te'chezeh [And you, you shall choose] from among the entire people' [Exodus 18:21]" (Sifrei Beha'alotcha 10:29). In that case, however, the entire parsha should not have been called by his name, only the passage ve'ata te'chezeh. Actually, Jethro was an idolatrous priest in Midian, and he left all his wealth and honor behind in order to venture into the desert and learn Torah (Shemot Rabba 1:32), for he had reflected upon his life. What led him to this was what he heard concerning the Children of Israel at the sea and their war with Amalek. In fact because the text states "Jethro heard" before "Jethro came," we learn what led him into the desert, namely the things that he heard.

We may ask exactly what he heard, such that it motivated him to search his soul, to accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and to give up idolatry. We cannot say that he heard only that the sea split, for all the nations were aware of it, since all the waters in the world split. Nor can we say that he heard only about the war with Amalek, for what was there about this war that could have pushed him to repent and accept the Torah?

We must say that Jethro heard of both things: He heard about the sea splitting, which motivated him to search his soul and believe in Hashem, for it taught him the power of the Children of Israel's prayer. He also heard about the war with Amalek, meaning the evil inclination that is called Amalek, which entices a person to run after the vanities of this world, to the point that it makes him forget his final destination and the World to Come. Since Jethro heard both things, he understood that it was not enough for a person to witness miracles and wonders, for he must reflect upon and internalize their significance. Hence Jethro immediately began to weigh the great honors that he enjoyed in Midian - honors that were but ephemeral - against the eternal life of Torah, prayer, the service of Hashem, and the fight against the evil inclination. After comparing them, he quickly abandoned the honors of Midian and idolatry in order to go into the desert and receive the Torah from the mouth of Moses. This happened because a person only merits the words of Torah by separating himself from a life of pleasure and honor.

We may therefore say that it is impossible to receive the Torah without first searching our souls. There can be neither regret nor repentance without a prior reflection upon one's life and deeds. Hence this week's parsha, describing the giving of the Torah, is named after Jethro. As such the Torah is teaching us that no person takes the yoke of the Torah and the yoke of mitzvot upon himself without having first done some soul-searching. If Jethro, who enjoyed great honors - being one of Pharaoh's advisors (Sotah 11a) and an idolatrous priest of Midian - left all this behind so he could take upon himself the yoke of the Torah, and all because he searched his soul, then how much more should we - the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose feet stood on Mount Sinai when the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "I am the L-RD your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt" - start searching our souls and repent! How much more should we put an effort into obtaining the life of the World to Come, just as we put an effort into the fleeting life of

this world! The Torah does not recount stories for no good reason, and as the Zohar points out, we must learn from all the stories and events it describes. In fact the entire Torah is a compilation of good advice that is meant for our good. We learn many fundamental laws from the story of Abraham's servant Eliezer, from the dispute of Korach, and from other accounts. We also learn from Jethro that a person can only permanently acquire the Torah by killing himself for it, just as he forsook his honor in order to venture into the desert and receive the Torah.

Although the Sages have said that converts are like a plague to the Children of Israel (Yebamot 47b), they also said that the Holy One, blessed be He, only exiled the Children of Israel among the nations in order for converts to join them (Pesachim 87b). How can these two statements be reconciled? A foreigner who converts and takes upon himself the yoke of the Torah and the yoke of mitzvot arouses a great accusation in Heaven against the Children of Israel. Accusers can say, "Look at this idolater, who converted and now meticulously performs mitzvot, whereas those who are already Jewish pay no attention to them!" Hence they constitute a plague for the Children of Israel. This does not prevent the Holy One, blessed be He, from wanting Jews to learn from them. Therefore He exiled them so that they could learn from these converts to perform each mitzvah with great attention and care. We must learn to be meticulous with regards to mitzvot and to put an effort into the Torah in order to silence our accusers.

We can learn from the first two converts, Jethro and Ruth the Moabitess, who lived royal lives that were replete with honor. Jethro was the high priest of Midian and Ruth was a descendant of Eglon, the king of Moab (Nazir 23b). Nevertheless, they forsook their lofty status and wealth in order to take upon themselves the yoke of Torah and mitzvot. Although they lacked nothing in this world, they believed that it was right to abandon everything in order to accept the Torah's yoke. The Holy One, blessed be He, obviously brought this about only so the Children of Israel would learn from them. Since Hashem does not deprive any creature of his rightful reward (Bava Kama 38b), He provided them with theirs: Jethro elevated himself in Torah and a parsha carries his name, without mentioning the fact that Hashem participated in the mitzvah meal that was made in his honor, as it is written: "Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, took a burnt-offering and feast-offerings for G-d, and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with the father-in-law of Moses before G-d" (Exodus 18:12). As for Ruth, she merited to become the ancestress of King David and his royal line, including Mashiach. Why all these honors? So the Jewish people would learn from them! It is not without reason that this week's parsha is named after Jethro. In fact he had seven names (Mechilta, Yitro 1), and this week's parsha, which describes the giving of the Torah, is called "Yitro" rather than another name precisely because just one letter separates "Yitro" from "Ruth," the letter yud. This tells us that Jethro and Ruth both committed themselves to the Ten Commandments by renouncing the life of this world. The Torah wanted the Children of Israel to learn that the parsha is named after Jethro - an idolater who searched his soul and abandoned idolatry in order to venture into the desert to receive the Torah - meaning that a person cannot receive the Torah unless he examines his ways.

Hashem wanted the Children of Israel to draw a lesson from these converts, who abandoned everything they had in this world in order to take upon themselves the yoke of Torah, setting an example for us by killing themselves for it.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

There is Nothing But Him

It is written, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3).

The name Elokim designates that which is “vigorous and strong, and which masters all forces.” Therefore when a person places his trust in natural causes and his hope lies in finding sustenance, healing, and other such things in this way, he is really invoking other gods. He is relying on worldly, natural causes in order to acquire these things. True, we must act in a normal way with regards to the natural world. However there is no reason to place our trust in nature, but only in the One Who is vigorous and empowers nature by His providence. By His will, He can bring about our sustenance in a way that seems good to Him. As mentioned by the author of Chovot HaLevavot, we must believe that it is the Creator Who decides. He will make it happen through circumstances that He brings about, and circumstances will not be brought about for that which He has decided will not happen. The Ramban states, “The Divine decree is true and man’s industry is worthless” (Ramban on Genesis 37:15). Even when a person uses one of his physical abilities, such as the ability to see, hear, or walk, he must still acknowledge that Hashem is the One Who gave him this ability. By acknowledging this, he is fulfilling the mitzvah, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” the term “gods” designating power and capability. In other words, you shall have no other power or capability but Hashem. (See Derech Mitzvotecha and Tziddkat HaTzaddik.)

In reality, this is a great thing and a marvelous segula that distances a person from all evil decrees and foreign influences, annulling them so they make no impression on him whatsoever. When a person decides in his heart to say: “It is Hashem who is the true G-d; there is none but Him, no power in any of the worlds, for everything is fulfilled through His fundamental Oneness alone” – when he pays absolutely no attention to any force or influence, but instead subjugates and attaches the purity of his thoughts to the One G-d and Master of the universe – then Hashem will enable him to obtain what he needs, and automatically all the forces and influences of the world will have no effect on him.

A Pearl From the Rav:

Everything is in the Hands of Heaven Except...

It is written, “Moses brought the people out from the camp towards G-d” (Exodus 19:17), which teaches us that Moses had to bring them out despite themselves. In the Midrash the Sages say, “Israel slept all that night, because the sleep of Pentecost is pleasant and the night is short. ... G-d came and found them sleeping.... Moses roused Israel and brought them out to meet the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says: ‘Moses brought the people out from the camp towards G-d’ ” (Shir HaShirim Rabba 1:57).

This is quite surprising, for how could the Children of Israel have prepared themselves for 49 days to receive the Torah, only to sleep in on that day?! This alludes to the fact that as long as a person does not put an effort into something, the Holy One, blessed be He, will not help him. As long as the Children of Israel did not tire themselves in preparing to receive the Torah – but instead were, so to speak, “asleep” – Hashem did nothing. When Moses awakened them and brought them out, they immediately merited to receive the Torah, for “If one comes to purify himself, he is helped” (Shabbat 104a). However if a person is asleep,

Hashem does not help him, for “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” (Berachot 33b).

In Praise of Jethro

It is written, “Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, took a burnt-offering and feast-offerings for G-d” (Exodus 18:12).

The fact that Jethro took it upon himself to follow the Children of Israel into the desert, rejecting his revered status in Midian, represented a burnt-offering, the greatest of offerings for Hashem.

– Chut Shel Chesed, from the Author of Shevet Mussar

The Role of the Leader of the Generation

It is written, “The people come to me to seek G-d. When they have an issue, one comes to me and I judge between a man and his fellow, and I make known the decrees of G-d and His teachings” (Exodus 18:15-16).

The Ramban states that the leader of the generation should be active in three areas: He must pray for each Jew in distress, he must be an upright and honest judge to resolve conflicts, and he must teach Torah to the Children of Israel.

Moses therefore fulfilled his role to perfection, as we read: “The people come to me to seek G-d” – I pray for those who need Hashem’s help; “I judge between a man and his fellow” – I give true judgments; “And I make known the decrees of G-d and His teachings” – I teach them Torah. Because he fulfilled these three roles, the people gathered around him from morning till night.

Afterwards

It is written, “The people come to me to seek G-d. When they have an issue, one comes to me” (Exodus 18:15-16).

Unfortunately, many individuals who pay great attention on keeping the smallest details regarding the mitzvot between man and G-d are much more relaxed when it comes to relationships regarding their fellowman. Such people will consult their rabbis over the slightest suspicion of something being treif, but they will not raise any questions regarding a suspicion of theft or Lashon Harah. It is only when a conflict erupts among them that they turn to a din Torah. However if every Jew were to pay as much attention to mitzvot between man and his fellowman, just as they do concerning mitzvot between man and G-d, they would consult with their rabbis so he could clarify the regulations regarding the issue at hand, and they would avoid a great deal of conflicts and litigation.

When Jethro asked Moses why there were so many conflicts and litigation in Israel, he said that with regards to issues regarding Heaven, they immediately went to see him: “The people come to me to seek G-d.” Yet when it came to issues between individuals, they would wait until “they have an issue,” and when that issue erupted into a conflict, “one comes to me.” They would then turn to a din Torah, which is why there was so much litigation among them.

– HaDrash VeHaIyun

A Fair Ruling

It is written, “Ki yihyeh lahem [When they have] an issue, one comes to me” (Exodus 18:16).

Since it is written, Ki yihyeh lahem (“when they have”), in the plural, the rest of the verse should have also been in the plural (“they come to me”), rather than in the singular, as it actually reads – “one comes to me.” The reason for this apparent discrepancy is that the phrase “one come to me” is describing the term “issue.” Thus Moses dealt solely with the issue at hand, the one that put individuals at odds, without taking into

account the individuals themselves. Such a ruling was fair, for it took the side of no one party.

– Meshech Chochma

Likewise it is said that the author of Marot HaTzovot, the Rav of Bialystok, would usually close his eyes during a din Torah. In this way he would not see the litigants, for he was afraid that he might be biased towards one side or another. Thus in order to render a fair ruling, he listened to each side with his eyes closed.

The Giving of the Torah

The Gemara states, “He who desires to become wise should turn to the south, and he who desires to become rich should turn to the north. The symbol [by which to remember this] is that the Shulchan was to the north of the altar and the Menorah to the south” (Bava Batra 25b). This means that the Menorah alludes to man’s wisdom, which makes his face shine, and the Shulchan alludes to his sustenance. Hence the Menorah stood to the right within the Sanctuary (“the heart of the wise is to the right” [Ecclesiastes 10:2]), for wisdom is called “right,” while the Shulchan was to the left. That was the arrangement from the point of view of the Sanctuary. However when a person entered it, the Menorah was to his left and the Shulchan was to his right, since the entrance was by the altar, and north was to a person’s right. This means that when a person first enters the service of Hashem by studying Torah, he is allowed to study even for selfish reasons, such as for achieving honor or other such things, all so he can eventually study for unselfish reasons. However if a person occupies himself with earning a living, he must have pure intentions from the start, doing so for the sake of Heaven in order to have the strength to study Torah and fulfill mitzvot. If he occupies himself with the affairs of this world because that is where his heart is, he will never reach the level of acting “for the sake of Heaven,” and he will remain attached to the desires of this world. It is solely with regards to the Torah that he is promised that selfish motives will lead to unselfish motives. Someone who is occupied with earning a living must therefore be careful from the very start to do so with good intentions. Hence a person entering the Sanctuary had the Menorah on his left, telling him that with regards to the wisdom of Torah, he many start off by having selfish motives. Such motives are described by the left, the right referring to unselfishness, as the Sages have said: “Wealth and honor to those who proceed to the left.” The Shulchan is to his right, for he must have good intentions in material pursuits from the very start.

– Beit HaLevi

He Overturned the Mountain

It is written, “They stood at the bottom of the mountain” (Exodus 19:17).

The Sages say that this teaches us that Hashem overturned the mountain upon them like a vat, saying to them: “If you accept My Torah, it will be good. If not, there shall be your burial” (Shabbat 88a). This means that since the world cannot endure without the Torah, and since the laws of nature exist only for the sake of Hashem’s covenant, the world would have been brought to ruin had the Children of Israel refused to accept the Torah. This applied not only to those who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai – for it does not say “here,” but rather “there shall be your burial” – meaning that it applied to all places. However by the Children of Israel’s acceptance of the Torah, the entire world was able to endure.

– The Chafetz Chaim

Overview of the Parsha

In Parsha Yitro the Children of Israel have already completely left Egypt and are encamped by the mountain of G-d, where they become

G-d’s chosen people by accepting His Torah. Jethro arrives after having heard of all that G-d did for Moses and the Children of Israel. When Jethro sees Moses judging the people by himself from morning till night, he gives him some advice. The Children of Israel then journey from Rephidim to the desert of Sinai, where they encamp before Mount Sinai in order to sanctify themselves for hearing G-d’s words in the Ten Commandments. Following the giving of the Torah (during which time they see no image, for G-d speaks to them “from Heaven”), they are warned not to use overly tangible symbols in serving Hashem, and instead they must only use the altar.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Honoring One’s Father and Mother

Honoring one’s father and mother is the essential condition for the resilience of the Jewish people. Through father and mother, G-d gives the child not only physical existence; they are the actual bond that joins the child to the Jewish past, that allow it to be a Jew or a Jewess, and they are those who are to hand over to them the Jewish mission in knowledge, morals, and education. The child is to receive history and the law from their hands so that ultimately he can transmit both of these to his children. In the same way that it looks up to his parents, its children are some day to look up to it. The exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah – these two basic facts in the history of the Jewish people, which constitute the basis for our submission to G-d as the Guide and Director of our history and our lives – these facts are actual historical truths. However the knowledge and acknowledgement of historical facts depends solely on tradition, and tradition depends solely on the faithful transmission by parents to children, and on the willing acceptance by children from the hands of their parents.

Thus the continuance of G-d’s whole great institution of Judaism rests entirely on the theoretical and practical obedience of children to parents, and honoring father and mother is the basic condition for the eternal existence of the Jewish nation. In the same way that it looks up to its parents, its children are some day to look up to it. Without this bond, the chain of generations is broken, the Jewish past is lost for the future, and the Jewish nation ceases to exist. That it is worthy to have its place in the Ten Commandments indicates this importance of parents and allows the Torah to say, “Honor your father and mother.”

– Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Exodus 20:12

ESHET HAYIL

Saving the Children

The Torah underlines the kindness of the midwives towards the Jewish people, for they could have discharged their moral duty both to G-d and to Pharaoh by resigning from their positions. They were concerned, however, that their replacements might, out of fear, carry out Pharaoh’s designs. Hence they acted charitably towards the daughters of Israel and endangered their own lives for the sake of those women. Furthermore, they would provide food and water for the poor women in confinement.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Yitzchak Friedman – The First Rebbe of Boyan

Rabbi Yitzchak Friedman, known as the Pahad Yitzchak of Boyan, was the son of Rabbi Avraham Yaakov of Sadigora and the son-in-law of Rabbi Yochanan of Rachmastrivka. In 5646 he settled in a small town near Boyan, where he established his Chassidic court. It became a foundation and beacon for tens of thousands of Jews.

The gaon Rabbi Israel Zeev Mintzberg Zatzal, the Rosh Ave Beit Din of Jerusalem's Chassidic community, once stated: "What can we say? Even if the Rebbe of Boyan and author of Pahad Yitzchak Zatzukal had lived in previous generations, he would have been among the great. I once wanted to pay him a visit when I was in Boyan. The custom in Boyan was that when he went to pray, he proceeded from his home to the Beit Midrash by a corridor linking both ends, along which a crowd of chassidim stood. Although he did not accept greetings before prayer, they stood there to look upon the sanctity of his face. I also stood there as he passed by, and the Rebbe looked around to see who was there. When his eyes fell upon me, I was seized with great trembling and an enormous awakening, to the point that I could no longer stand. I was forced to return, complete shaken. I wept greatly, my tears flowing for more than an hour and a half without stop."

He finished by saying, "I am not one of the chassidim of Boyan, and by nature I am not very sensitive. Nevertheless I was moved to the depths of my soul when I saw the sanctity of his eyes looking upon me. It showed me just how much holiness and purity he brings around him."

– Toldot HaDorot

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

Sanctifying His Name

It is written, "One called to another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy is the L-RD of hosts; the whole earth is filled with His glory'" (Isaiah 6:3).

In the book Sha'ar HaKavanot, Rabbi Chaim Vital cites the Arizal in stating that before reciting Kedusha, we must prepare ourselves to perform a positive mitzvah that we received in the verse, "I will be sanctified among the Children of Israel." They must sanctify Him, and He will be sanctified with them in their midst. This is what is meant by the verse, "Sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy." We will receive the sanctity of His sanctity, which will be drawn to us. We receive this sanctify when we say, "The whole earth is filled with His glory," having in mind that we belong to His kingdom and that we are receiving His sanctity. Hence we must prepare ourselves to receive the sanctity that will be drawn to us, and this is by saying, "The whole earth is filled with His glory." It would therefore seem that we are fulfilling a Torah mitzvah by reciting Kedusha, which is what the gaon Rabbeinu Yehonatan writes in an article published at the end of the book Ahavat Israel. He states that we must be very careful to respond to Kedusha, which the Zohar tells us is a positive Torah mitzvah. Concerning Berachot ch. 7, par. 20, the Rosh states that it is written, "I shall be sanctified in the midst of the Children of Israel," which means that it is a positive mitzvah to sanctify His Name in public (i.e., with a minyan). Even with regards to rabbinic ordinances, such as listening to Kedusha and Barechu (which are not mentioned in the Torah), even as such it is more important than a positive mitzvah that pertains only to the individual. The author of Tiferet Shemuel states that it is a positive mitzvah to sanctify His Name in public, not alone, although Kedusha itself is of rabbinic origin.

It follows that even something that is of rabbinic origin, when done with a minyan, constitutes a positive fulfillment of the Torah mitzvah, "I will be sanctified among the Children of Israel."

– Rabbi Shemuel Huminer

A TRUE STORY

Devotion to the Truth

It is written, "Men of truth, hating unjust gain" (Exodus 18:21).

A Jew came to see Rabbi Yosef, the father of Rabbi Yitzchak of Drohowitz, carrying a package in his hand. "Rabbi," said the man with a hushed and urgent voice, "this package contains precious goods that the police are after. I'm sure that they won't look for it here, since everyone knows that you're an upright man. Therefore please do me a great favor and keep this package in your home, at least until the danger is past and the police stop looking for it. Please, Rabbi Yosef, I beg of you!"

Rabbi Yosef shook his head from side to side: "I cannot," he replied.

However this Jew would not give up. "Rabbi Yosef," he begged, "you're going to bring disaster upon me by refusing. The police are looking for me, and if they find this package in my home, they'll definitely throw me into prison!" Rabbi Yosef asked, "What's the value of these goods?" He replied, "Fifty rubles." Rabbi Yosef then asked, "Perhaps you will agree to sell them to me?" The man jumped at the opportunity: "Of course I will!"

Fifty rubles was a small fortune at the time, and Rabbi Yosef didn't even have half that amount. Nevertheless, he addressed his neighbors and friends, borrowing a great deal of money from them until he was able to collect the fifty rubles he needed. He gave the man this amount, and in exchange he received the precious goods. Needless to say, the man left the Rav very content, for not only had he managed to rid himself of his package, he was able to sell it at a hefty profit!

Rabbi Yosef then took this package, which he had bought at such a high price, and proceeded to burn it! He was afraid that the police would come to his house looking for it, which would have forced him to lie, to claim that he had nothing like it.

It took Rabbi Yosef many years to reimburse the money he had borrowed to pay for that package, which had gone up in smokes. Therefore it is not surprising that he was called "Rabbi Yosef, faithful to the truth." In fact truth was the light that illuminated his path, and during his entire life he was careful never to veer from it by even a step.

– Ma'asechem Shel Tzaddikim

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

A Good and Vast Land

One of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's numerous disciples traveled outside the land of Israel. He engaged in commerce and earned a great deal of money, returning a very wealthy man. When his friends saw him, those who were also disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, they became jealous of his wealth. They also wanted to travel abroad and become wealthy. In that case, they said, they could study all day long without having to worry about earning a living.

Rabbi Shimon could sense the mood that his disciples were in, and therefore he assembled them and brought them to a valley near Meron.

He prayed, "Valley, valley, become filled with gold dinarim." At that point the valley began to fill with gold dinarim by the thousands. Rabbi Shimon turned to his disciples and said, "If it's gold that you want, why travel abroad and give yourself such a hard time? You can take this entire valley of gold dinarim, enough for a lifetime! Let him who wants come and take! Yet remember that everything you take will come from your share in the World to Come, for we receive no reward for the study of Torah in this world, only in the World to Come."

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's disciples understood what he meant, and they no longer wanted to leave Israel to become rich.

– Adapted from Shemot Rabba 52:3