

The Path To Follow

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Yitro

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Jethro's Soul-Searching

I have always wondered why this week's *parsha* is named Yitro, rather than being named after the account of the giving of the Torah, which it contains, or why it is not called Moshe, who devoted himself completely to the Torah, having climbed Mount Sinai and remained there for 40 days and 40 nights. If we say that the Torah wanted to honor Jethro (Yitro) because he converted and left his land and honors behind, the passage *ve'ata techeze* (*Shemot* 18:21) alone should have carried his name, not the entire *parsha*!

The Sages teach, "This world is like a corridor before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the corridor so that you may enter the banquet hall" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:16). This means that every person has the duty to constantly search his soul by thinking about his fate in the World to Come. If a person fails to do this, he will never achieve a fear of G-d, which is the objective of this world, as it is written: "The fear of Hashem is the beginning of wisdom" (*Tehillim* 111:10).

What Did Jethro Hear?

When someone finalizes a business transaction, he usually counts his money and calculates how much he has spent and how much he has earned. He then records these numbers in a balance sheet. Has anyone ever heard of a businessman who fails to record his numbers? It won't take long for such a person to lose everything, for without records he has nothing. Just as this concept applies to the fleeting life of this world, it applies even more to the affairs of the World to Come. As long as a person has not searched his soul to consider the reward of a *mitzvah* in comparison to what it costs, he will never attain the goal of this world, which is why we descended into the world. Everyone knows that all men must die, and that we bring nothing with us when we go. Therefore why not make a precise accounting of all our deeds?

Jethro, who was the priest of Midian – an idolatrous priest – left all his possessions and honors behind in order to venture into the desert to study Torah. Why? Because he did some profound soul-searching. What led him to this self-examination? It was because he heard that the sea had split and that Amalek had attacked Israel. What was there in this news that led him to search his soul, to accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and to renounce idolatry? We cannot say that it was because he heard about the splitting of the sea, for all the peoples had heard about it, since all the waters throughout the world had also split. If we say that it was because he heard about Amalek's attack, what was there about this event that made him think about repenting so deeply that he accepted the yoke of the Torah?

Hashem Does Not Perform Miracles Needlessly

With regards to the splitting of the sea, we read: "Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea, and Hashem moved the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and He turned the sea to dry land and the water split" (*Shemot* 14:21). We must explain how the splitting of

the sea differed from all the previous plagues, which had occurred in an instant, as it is written: "Moshe and Aaron did so, as Hashem had commanded. He lifted up the staff and struck the water that was in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, and all the water that was in the river turned to blood" (*ibid.* 7:20). Similarly, the plague of frogs occurred in an instant, as it is written: "Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt" (*ibid.* 8:2), and likewise for all the plagues.

The answer is that the Children of Israel were praying to Hashem throughout the night to perform a miracle for them. This is because He does not perform miracles needlessly, as the Sages have said: "Does the All-Merciful perform miracles for liars?" (*Berachot* 58a). Hence the Children of Israel prayed to Him for the entire night, asking that He perform a miracle and save them from the Egyptians, who were pursuing them.

This is what Jethro heard, but which the nations did not. "Jethro heard...everything that G-d did for Moshe and for Israel" (*Shemot* 18:1). Why say "for Moshe and for Israel," given that Moshe was part of Israel? This tells us, however, that Jethro heard what the Children of Israel had done to be worthy of a miracle. What had he heard? That they prayed to Hashem throughout the night until the sea split, for they had not merited a miracle, given that accusers were saying: "Both these and those were uncircumcised...those wore *shatnez* and these wore *shatnez*" (*Vayikra Rabba* 23:2). The Sages have also said, "The ministering angels were astonished and said, 'People who worship idols are walking on dry land in the midst of the sea!' " (*Mechilta, Beshalach* 6). How do we know that even the sea was filled with anger against them? Because it is said, "The waters were a wall [*choma*] to them" (*Shemot* 14:22) – do not read *choma*, but *chema* (anger).

When were the Children of Israel delivered from the hand of the Egyptians? It was when they began to pray to Hashem. As soon as they prayed, they immediately became worthy of a miracle, for they took upon themselves the yoke of the Torah, as the Midrash states. What caused them to be saved both right and left? On the right was the merit of the Torah, which they would receive on the right, as it is written: "From His right went a fiery Torah for them" (*Devarim* 33:2), and on the left was prayer.

Why did G-d wait for the prayer of the Children of Israel on that night more than during all the plagues that He had inflicted in Egypt? He wanted to show the Children of Israel that a great deal of effort and prayer are required to obtain the Torah. They were then in the midst of the sea, and we know that "words of Torah are like water" (*Taanith* 7a). We also know that right and left allude to the Torah and prayer, as we have said. This means that a person who wants to understand words of Torah must work for it and pour out his soul before Hashem, that He may open his eyes to the light of the Torah.

A Life of Torah

We know what the Midrash says about the customs of King David in regards to learning Torah at every possible moment: "A harp hung over David's bed. When midnight arrived, a northerly wind blew upon it, and it played by itself. At that point David would arise with all his disciples, for they used to occupy themselves with Torah, toiling and driving sleep from their eyes, studying Torah until dawn. This is why David said, 'Urah [Awake], my glory; awake, O lyre and harp. I shall awaken the dawn' [Tehillim 57:9]. ... What is the meaning of 'Urah [literally 'empty'] my glory'? It means [that my glory is empty] in comparison to the worship of my Creator. His evil inclination would say to him, 'David, are you not a king, and is it not the practice of kings to sleep until the third hour of the day? Yet you are accustomed to rising at midnight!' David would respond, 'Empty is my glory' – my glory is of no account whatsoever in the presence of the glory of my Creator" (Bereshith Rabba 15:16).

The Wagon Driver Does Not Tire!

From the time of his youth, the Rebbe of Viznitz, Rabbi Yisroel Hager *Zatzal*, would diligently learn Torah both day and night. During one stormy winter night, as he studied with his younger brother Rabbi Chaim, a torrential downpour and fierce wind blew outside, disrupting the calm of the night. All this did nothing to prevent the brothers from learning.

Towards the morning, Rabbi Chaim felt tired and wanted to rest a little. His brother Rabbi Yisroel said to him, "Imagine, dear brother, that Moshe the wagon driver is in the middle of a journey at night, with a torrential rain coming down on his head. The wagon veers off the road and the wheels begin to sink in the thick mud. The wagon loses speed, and Moshe strains with all his might to get it back on the road. In such a situation, will he say that he's tired and wants to sleep by the roadside? Clearly not! Therefore will we, sitting in a protected and heated room, interrupt our study to go sleep? Come, my brother, let us return for a moment to study the Torah of Hashem, which restores the soul."

In fact Rabbi Yisroel's words restored the strength of Rabbi Chaim, and they both continued to learn until morning.

It once happened that as the two brothers were immersed in learning, their grandfather the *tzaddik* Menachem Mendel Hager *Zatzal* paid them a visit. Their grandfather remained behind the window for a time, delighting in the diligence and depth of their Torah learning. After waiting for a moment, he opened the door and came in. His grandsons were afraid, for they felt caught and were afraid that he was angry. However Rabbi Menachem Mendel reassured them, saying: "It is written in *Mishlei*, 'She perceives that her enterprise is profitable; her lamp does not go out at night' [Mishlei 31:18]. 'She perceives that her enterprise is profitable' – when we see that the Torah is good and delightful, then 'her lamp does not go out at night' – we do not turn out the lamp at night."

I Can No Longer Sleep

Whenever Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky *Zatzal*, from the Sha'arei Chesed district of Jerusalem, would wake up at night, even if he had gone to bed just an hour earlier, he would leap out of bed and study Torah until the morning.

One day he was asked about the significance of this practice. He simply said that there was nothing surprising about it. Yet at the same time, he recounted that he had been struck by a very grave illness in his youth, being on the verge of death. The doctors had already given up hope that he would recover, but Hashem decided otherwise. He therefore got better and made a complete recovery.

The Lesson Drawn by Rabbi Mordechai

In reality he should have died, but Heaven had compassion on him and the decree was rescinded. He compared the situation to the Generation of the

Desert, who sinned through the spies: "After that incident, every year on the night of Tisha B'Av they would dig their own graves so they could be buried according to Halachah. They would then lie in them and wait for the Holy One, blessed be He, to take their souls. We may assume that many of them slept in their graves, and when they awoke in the middle of the night and discovered that they were still alive, they knew that they would live for the remainder of the year. At that point, when they woke up, did they demonstrate any laziness and continue lying in their graves until morning? Certainly not! Instead they immediately leaped out and ran home."

"The same feeling," said Rabbi Mordechai, "takes hold of me every night when I wake up and discover that I'm still alive. I can no longer go back to sleep, and instead I immediately leap out of bed to study Torah until morning!"

I'm a Soldier!

Leaping out of bed in the middle of the night began a day that was filled with Torah classes, a day which Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky was accustomed to from the time of his youth till old age. With a precision that stemmed from the depths of his soul, he described his daily activities by saying that he rejoiced for every additional day that he was given. "I am bathing in honey" is how he described it, and that was how he felt. Joy surrounded him because he had been granted the merit of learning Torah for another day.

Nevertheless, his private life was not at all rosy. He experienced tremendous tragedy, and only one of his 13 children survived. Yet joy constantly shined from his face. He was once asked where this joy came from, to which he replied: "What can I tell you? The essence of my life is the holy Torah, and if I have the merit to study it, how much joy do I get from it!"

During the time of the British Mandate, there were nights when gunfire went off and bombs were exploding. Yet Rabbi Mordechai continued going to the Beit HaMidrash, as he had always done. When people asked him, "Rabbi Mordechai, aren't you afraid of going into the streets on such nights?" he replied: "I'm a soldier! Does a soldier fear the sound of gunfire? It's precisely under such conditions that he must go to the front!"

Rabbi Chaim Nathan Gallick recounted that during one of the many nights when electricity and water were cut off in the neighborhood because of the fighting, he suddenly noticed a small ray of light cutting through the darkness, a light coming from the Sha'arei Chesed synagogue. He went inside and came upon a stunning sight: Coming down from the ceiling was a chandelier containing oil lamps, and beneath it was an old Jew who had climbed upon a table and was leaning on an old *shtender*, studying Torah by the light of these lamps!

Naturally, this individual was none other than Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky, who had reached his 80s many years earlier. However he could not live without learning Torah until morning, which is why he had climbed upon a table and was studying while standing.

Guard Your Tongue!

A Known Transgressor

Everything that we have said up to now concerns a simple Jew. However if the situation consists of someone who is a known transgressor, since he has confirmed on several occasions that he has calmly transgressed prohibitions that are familiar to all Jews, such as forbidden relations or similar things, then it is permissible to believe *Lashon Harah* about such a person.

– Chafetz Chaim

Until

It is written, "Vayichad Yitro [And Jethro rejoiced]" (*Shemot* 18:9).

The Gemara recounts a discussion between Rav and Shemuel over the meaning of this verse: "Rav said, 'He caused a sharp knife to pass over his flesh.' Samuel said, 'His flesh cringed.' Rav noted: 'Thus people say, "Before a proselyte, until the tenth generation, insult not an Aramean" ' " (*Sanhedrin* 94a).

The commentators are surprised by this exchange: How can we reconcile the fact that Rav, who was arguing with Shemuel, could bring a proof that Shemuel was correct?

In his book *Likutei Shoshanim*, Rabbi Meir Halevi *Zatzal* explains that in informal language, when we say "until," it means "until and not including," whereas in the language of the Torah it means "until and including."

Therefore when people would say, "Before a proselyte, until the tenth generation, insult not an Aramean," it meant that the tenth generation is no longer affected by what people say about their origins. Rabbeinu Bechaye *Zatzal* wrote that Jethro was the tenth generation from Mitzraim the son of Ham. Therefore Rav said that the term *vayichad* designates a sharp knife, for Jethro was the tenth generation and was not affected by what people were saying about his origins. It was therefore impossible to explain that "his flesh cringed."

From a Third Party

It is written, "They shall judge the people at all times" (*Shemot* 18:22).

The book *Toldot Yitzchak* states that this verse raises a question: Had Moshe himself not thought of the idea that Jethro was proposing?

The answer is that there are things which are not fitting for the affected person himself to say. It is better for such things to come from a third party. If Moshe had suggested this idea, it would have seemed that he wanted others to carry the burden of judging the people. It would have also demonstrated pride, for others were to judge the easy cases, but they were to bring the difficult cases to Moshe.

If the Children of Israel had suggested this idea, it would have seemed that they did not want Moshe to judge them. It would have also seemed that they lacked respect for him, with each person wanting an impartial judge to come from his own tribe. That is why a third party had to suggest the idea, so that no such suspicious would arise.

Understanding Your Place

It is written, "This entire people shall also arrive at its place in peace" (*Shemot* 18:23).

When a dispute arises, Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshutz *Zatzal* once said with a degree of cynicism, nobody remains in their place. When there are disputes and disagreements, everyone jumps to the head, and it is precisely the lowest and least important people who clear a path to the head of the table and become the main speakers wherever they go.

When will "this entire people...arrive at its place"? It is when they live "in peace."

It is only then, during moments of peace, that everyone will understand their place.

No Specific Day

It is written, "On that day they arrived at the desert of Sinai" (*Shemot* 19:1).

The reason why the Torah does not specify when the Torah was given, states the Kli Yakar, is that Hashem did not want to limit the giving of the Torah to a specific

day. Every day of the year, a person must believe that he received it on Mount Sinai on that very day.

As the Sages have said, the Torah is compared to a woman's breast. Just as a baby sucks the breast of its mother and discovers new flavors, likewise whoever studies Torah discovers new flavors in it.

It is therefore normal for a person to view each day as being the day on which he received the Torah on Mount Sinai. For those who study it, each day is therefore like the one on which the Torah was given. Hence it was not fitting to limit it to a specific day.

Shabbat

It is written, "Six days shall you work, and do all your work" (*Shemot* 20:9).

In regards to this verse, Rabbeinu Bechaye states that he heard in the name of the Rambam that for six days, a person may serve Hashem through his work. This is what the Patriarchs did, for they served Hashem as they raised herds and engaged in other material endeavors. However the seventh day, Shabbat, belongs entirely to Hashem his G-d, and he shall do no work whatsoever.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Shechinah is Present Wherever We Study Torah

Concerning the verse, "When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall ascend the mountain" (*Shemot* 19:13), the Sages say in the Midrash: "Rabbi Yossi says: It is not the place that honors the man, but the man who honors the place. As long as the *Shechinah* dwelled upon the mountain, whoever touched it was liable to death. When the *Shechinah* departed, all the people were allowed to ascend the mountain."

This requires an explanation. Why did holiness not remain on Mount Sinai, where the Torah was given to Israel?

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I let holiness remain on Mount Sinai, the Children of Israel will say, "How can we study Torah anywhere else? It was given on Sinai, so let us return to Sinai and study it!" This is why He did not allow holiness to remain on Mount Sinai, in order to tell us that the *Shechinah* is found wherever a person studies Torah.

Thus the Sages say, "How do you know that even if one man sits and studies Torah, the *Shechinah* is with him? For it is said, 'In every place where I cause My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you' [*Shemot* 20:21]" (*Berachot* 6a). They also say, "The Beit HaMidrash of Rabbi Eliezer was shaped like an arena, and in it was a stone that was reserved for him to sit on. Rabbi Yehoshua once came in and began kissing the stone and saying, 'This stone is like Mount Sinai, and he who sits on it is like the Ark of the Covenant' " (*Shir HaShirim Rabba* 1:20).

Be that as it may, G-d forbid them from touching Mount Sinai, which teaches us that a person is forbidden to add to or subtract from the words of Torah, as it is written: "You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor shall you subtract from it" (*Devarim* 4:2). Is it possible that just because the *Shechinah* is found wherever a person studies Torah, he may add to or subtract from it? The people were not to ascend the mountain or touch its extremities, meaning that we have no right to change even the tip of a *yud*.

The Snuffbox and the Stolen Objects

It is written, "When they have a matter, one comes to me and I judge between a man and his fellow" (*Shemot* 18:16).

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Meizel *Zatzal*, the Rav of Lodz, was in his office immersed in a difficult issue raised by the Gemara that was before him. His assistant came knocking at the door, opened it half-way, and said: "There's a Jew from Lomza who wants to see you." He then added, as if to explain his interruption, "He says it's urgent."

"Let him come in," replied the Rav.

The Jew who entered looked stunned, as if his entire world had just crumbled. With a broken heart, he began to recount his story to the Rav.

He was a merchant who earned a living buying and selling garments and fabric. For his business, he would travel to the surrounding towns and purchase merchandise at a good price, and then return to Lomza to sell it. That morning, he was supposed to leave Lodz after a stay of several days. Yet he didn't have any luck this time, meaning that he didn't find the merchandise he was looking for.

He left an inn where he had stopped on his way to the train station, not far from there. When he heard the whistle of the approaching train, he put his hand in his coat pocket to take out his wallet and get his ticket ready, but his pocket was empty!

A cold sweat began to cover his body. All of a sudden, he realized that his expensive watch was not on his wrist either. This discovery calmed him down somewhat, for he now remembered that on the night before, he had placed his wallet and watch under the pillow in his room at the inn, and he had apparently forgot them there. He therefore ran at breakneck speed to the inn, for his entire financial future was in that wallet!

"Why did you return?" the innkeeper asked him.

He felt a slight chill in this question, which immediately aroused his suspicions. He said that he had apparently forgotten his wallet and watch in his room. "As luck would have it," the innkeeper said, "there hasn't been another client in that room. Everything's stayed the way it was," he added with a bitter smile on his face.

When he opened the door to the room, the merchant immediately realized that someone had already been there and was looking for something. In fact his suspicions were confirmed: His wallet and watch were not under the pillow.

"You can be certain that they were lost, or that you were robbed during one of your visits to the market," the innkeeper told him, as if he was sharing his pain. He then added, as if revealing a great secret to him, "You have to be careful in Lodz!"

However the merchant was sure that he had left his wallet and watch in that room at the inn, meaning that the innkeeper had to be the one who took it. His actions and words only reinforced that sentiment.

This was the story that Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim heard from the merchant, who appeared weak and on the verge of complete despair. "I know that I don't have any proof that will help me get my things back," he said with a trembling voice, "but maybe the Rav's well-known wisdom will help me recover them."

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was indeed known throughout the region for his righteousness, and especially for his great wisdom. Even the non-Jews of the region would sometimes come to him in order to settle their disputes.

The Rav looked pensive, and after a moment or two a smile appeared on his face. He asked his assistant to summon the innkeeper, and he told the merchant to wait in the next room.

"I have asked you here in regards to an accusation that so-and-so raised against you," said Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim to the innkeeper upon his arrival. The Rav was referring to an old accusation, one for which he had already rendered a decision in the presence of the parties involved. Upon hearing this, the innkeeper asked for a moment to reflect about the incident. Apparently, the innkeeper had not succeeded in finding additional factors to prove his innocence, and so he began to repeat his version of the story from the beginning, as if it were the first time the case was being presented to the Rav.

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim patiently listened to what the innkeeper was saying, asking him a few questions and for some clarifications as well. The innkeeper nodded his head, as if he had all the time in the world.

"Do you have any tobacco on you?" the Rav asked as they were discussing things.

The innkeeper quickly took a silver-plated snuff-box out of his pocket and happily handed it to the Rav. The Rav took the box, got up from his seat, and began to pace back and forth as he listened to the innkeeper's explanation. Every now and then, he would reach into the box for some tobacco.

Suddenly the Rav said, "Please wait a moment," and he left the room. He summoned his assistant and whispered some instructions to him: He was to go to the inn and ask the innkeeper's wife to show him the wallet and watch that their guest had left in his room. As proof, he told his assistant to show her the silver-plated snuff-box of her husband, which the Rav now handed to him. "Only hurry!" he said. The Rav then went back into his office and resumed his conversation with the innkeeper.

Not long afterwards, his assistant returned with the prize. The Rav went out of his office to meet him, and he took the snuff-box from him. He continued to listen to what the innkeeper was telling him for a time, and then he handed him his snuff-box and sent him home.

The merchant, who was waiting in the next room, was racking his brain trying to find the connection between his problem and the old accusation that the Rav and innkeeper were discussing. When the merchant was summoned back into the Rav's office, he was speechless. In fact he thought that his eyes were deceiving him, for on the table before him were his wallet and watch!

"Take your things," Rav Eliyahu Chaim said to him with a smile. "If you want to know how they got here, ask my assistant. He'll tell you."