

The Path To Follow

Yitro

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The Torah and Israel Existed before Creation

The Sages say, “The Holy One looked into the Torah and created the world” (Zohar II:161b). This means that He established a building plan before the creation of the world, as is usually done for large construction projects. That is, we first prepare a detailed plan, and then we starting building according to that plan. Likewise G-d established a detailed plan before the creation of the world, and He looked into that plan at the time of Creation to create the world according to its specifications. What was that plan? It was the Torah.

Furthermore, the concept of Israel already existed at the time of Creation, as the Sages have said: “The intention to create Israel preceded everything else” (Bereshith Rabba 1:4). This is alluded to in the Torah, for Sefer Devarim (the last book of the Torah) ends with the words “in the eyes of all Israel,” and Sefer Bereshith (the first book of the Torah) begins with the words, “In the beginning.” This hints that even before the creation of heaven and earth, it was already “in the eyes of all Israel.”

This allows us to understand something else. When the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Torah to the Children of Israel, they immediately said: “All that Hashem has said, we will do and we will hear” (Shemot 24:7). This is surprising, for when people purchase something, they usually examine it thoroughly and verify its quality before buying, and here the Children of Israel were certainly about to enter into a permanent agreement by accepting the Torah. As a result, how could they have been bold and strong enough to immediately say “we will do and we will hear”?

According what we have said, however, this is completely understandable. In fact the Torah constituted the plan of the world’s creation, and it predated the world. Therefore already at that point, before the creation of the world, the Jewish people had seen the Torah and knew it so well that they could say immediately say, “We will do and we will hear” at the giving of the Torah.

We may add that if the Children of Israel had not been part of Hashem’s original plan, what purpose would have been served by Him looking into the Torah to create the world? Who would have studied and observed the Torah to ensure the world’s existence? Furthermore, the Children of Israel come under the same concept as the Torah, for the 248 limbs and 365 sinews which they possess correspond to the positive and negative commandments of the Torah. This may be why the Holy One, blessed be He, looked at man, who is called “Torah,” in order to create the world. In this way, the world could endure through the merit of the man who studies Torah.

Along the same lines, we may add that when the sea split, the Children of Israel said: “This is my G-d, and I will praise Him” (Shemot 15:2). This prompted the Sages (Sotah 11b, 30b) to say that the Shechinah rested upon them and they could point with their finger and say, “This is my G-d, and I will praise Him.” It is like a person who meets his friend of many years, recognizes him, and says: “This is my longtime friend.” Likewise the Children of Israel pointed with their finger and said: “This is my G-d, and I will praise Him.”

Yet where did they merit seeing G-d before the sea split, such that they were able to say: “This is my G-d”? How did they know that this was G-d?

Since we stated that the Children of Israel were with the Holy One, blessed be He, before the creation of the World, before the Divine light was withdrawn and veiled beneath the mask of this world – which hides G-d from the eyes of men – they were truly able to see Him before the creation of the world. Hence when the sea split, they remembered, recognized Him, and said: “This is my G-d, and I will praise Him.”

If we are correct about this, however, a difficulty still remains. The Gemara states that when the Children of Israel declared, “We will do and we will hear,” the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “Who revealed to My children this secret, which is used by the ministering angels?” (Shabbat 88a). In other words, when G-d tells the angels to do something, they do it immediately, even before hearing it, meaning that they act according to the principle of “we will do and we will hear.” We need to understand why this was so surprising, such that G-d said: “Who revealed to My children this secret?” Since the Children of Israel existed at the creation of the world, and since they saw the Torah at that time, it was normal for them to have immediately accepted it and said, “We will do and we will hear.”

According to what we said early, we can fully understand this as well. In fact it is alluded to in G-d’s own words, when He said: “Who revealed to My children this secret?” The term *mi* (“who”) is formed by the same letters as *yam* (“sea”), meaning that it was the sea that revealed this secret to the Children of Israel. In fact when the sea split, they saw the Holy One, blessed be He, over the sea and they remembered what had existed prior to the creation of the world. Therefore they also remembered the Torah that they saw at that time. Hence immediately after the giving of the Torah, they instantly accepted it and declared, “We will do and we will hear.” This is what G-d said: “The *yam* [sea] revealed this secret to My children.”

As a result, in our days as well, the Jewish people are one. In every situation where we find a Jew, if he is shown the Torah and reminded of the Creator of the world, he too will immediately say, “We will do and we will hear.” This is because his soul will remember that it saw the Torah even before the creation of the world. His soul will also remember that at the time of the giving of the Torah, it stood beneath Mount Sinai and said: “We will do and we will hear.” As a result, every Jew is a guarantor for another.

Every Jew is also obligated to draw closer to a Jew who has not yet studied Torah and fulfilled mitzvot, for he also witnessed the truth. He also has a pure soul, and there is no reason to distance oneself from him. Rather, one must gently bring him closer and remind him of the truth that he himself saw, and to which he cleaved before the creation of the world and at the giving of the Torah on Sinai.

Statues and Images in the Light of the Halachah

Craftsmen who fashion statues and images in relief have always been in the service of royal courts and powerful individuals. Every royal event taking place somewhere justifies the special minting of an impressive coin or a medal representing the silhouette of a sovereign ruler. Nations identify with images of animals, and some peoples see idolatrous imagery in the hosts of heaven.

The realm of children constantly sees renewed interest in dolls and figurines meant simply for play and amusement. Some of these have Jewish features, such as speaking robots that recite passages from prayer or the Shema. Responsa literature deals with the issue of whether or not it is permitted to make or keep these small figurines at home for decoration or amusement. The scope of this subject is too vast to cover in this column, and as such we will only present a small glimpse into the subject, leaving it for interested readers to learn more on their own.

In regards to idolatry, the Rambam details the main laws that result from the Torah prohibition: “You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness” (Shemot 20:4). He writes, “It is prohibited to make images for decorative purposes, even though they do not represent false gods, as [implied by]: ‘Do not make with Me [gods of silver and gods of gold].’ This refers even to images of gold and silver which are intended only for decorative purposes, lest others err and view them as deities. It is forbidden to make decorative images of the human form alone. Therefore, it is forbidden to make human images with wood, cement, or stone. This [prohibition] applies when the image is in relief, such as images and sculptures made in a hallway and the like. A person who makes such an image is [liable to] lashes. In contrast, it is permitted to make human images that are engraved or painted – for example, portraits, whether on wood or on stone – or which are part of a tapestry” (Hilchot Avodah Kochavim 3:10). We find the Halachot dealing with this issue in the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 141.

From another point of view, the gaon Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshutz in his book *Yaarot Devash* raises a concern against having statues and figures in the home: “We must be very careful not to have a figure or image in relief, and we must be even more careful not to have an image drawn on a wall, for there is no figure upon which a spirit of impurity does not rest. Because of our numerous sins, there are now many people, especially in Germany, who have learned the ways of the surrounding peoples, and whose homes are filled with images, statues, and masks, most of which are images in relief that represent humans, birds, and animals. This is forbidden, especially human images in relief. Now most of what is made in copper or silver takes on human form, which non-Jewish artists fashion for decoration and adornment. For them, there is no harm in doing this. However for us, we who are a holy people consecrated to G-d, doing this brings disease and forces of impurity upon the home, and if the eye could see, we would be terrified and not know what to do, so great would be our fear.”

In His Image and Likeness

The following account is taken from Responsa Ya'avetz: “This [story] happened in our time, when Rabbi Elazar of Brody was appointed as the Rosh Av Beit Din of Amsterdam. There was a man who issued medals, coins with his image on it, and they were shown to me. When I looked at them, I was very surprised, indeed shocked, that this could have been done with the knowledge and consent of the Rav, for he was known as one of the most pious men of the generation. I looked, and there was the shape of a head, all the way to the chest, with a complete face in relief. In my opinion, this is something totally and completely forbidden, whether a person does it himself or someone does it for him, especially when it is a Jew, as I had been told.”

In regards to knowing whether it is permitted to keep a human form (or image) that is not in relief, the Gaon Ya'avetz recounts another incident that occurred to his father: “I will tell you a story that happened to my father [the Chacham Tzvi] – this truly pious man, our great Rav, may G-d always help him – when he was called upon by the Sephardic community of London to help them benefit from his greatness, and to give it the merit of rendering homage to him with great affection. In fact he was very well-known among them, and they yearned to see him, to benefit from the light of his countenance, to taste the sweetness of his words, and to welcome the Shechinah through his blessing. They showed him unparalleled honor, welcoming him and bringing him aboard a royal ship amid great rejoicing. Young and old alike were in attendance, and none were absent, may Hashem give them their rightful reward and repay them in kind throughout their lives.

“Now because of their great desire, they wanted to keep an image of him. With love and respect, they asked him for permission to leave them with some representation of himself. However he would not hear of it, even if it consisted of a painting, against which most poskim believe there is no prohibition. Furthermore, all they wanted was half an image, meaning a painting of his face only. Nevertheless, nobody could convince him to change his mind, so pious and holy that he was. His admirers paid no heed to this, and so they continued to act until they obtained what they wanted through trickery. A very gifted artist diligently drew his face in his absence. There was nothing missing to his likeness other than life. For those who personally knew him, it was considered a masterpiece, and copies of it were made and sold at great price. May it be consigned to the generations to come.”

Guard Your Tongue!

By a Love for Truth

When we speak to someone about a relative, our intention is probably not to speak ill of him. Rather, we are motivated only by a love for truth, since we believe that he has acted improperly. Nevertheless, we must realize that this is also considered Lashon Harah.

– Chafetz Chaim

Sending a Note

It is written, “He said to Moshe, ‘I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you’ ” (Shemot 18:6).

How did Jethro transmit this message to Moshe before meeting him? Jethro heard of what had happened, and he took Moshe’s wife and children with him. While they were on route, he saw a cloud encircling the camp of the Children of Israel, meaning that he could not approach Moshe.

What did he do? He wrote a tiny note, placed it at the end of an arrow, and launched it with a bow. The arrow flew off and miraculously landed before Moshe, who picked it up and read the note: “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you.”

According to another opinion, Jethro sent this note by means of a homing pigeon.

– Midrash Leviat Chen

Peace

It is written, “They asked each other about their welfare” (Shemot 18:7).

Peace is so important that it precedes the account of the glory of Hashem. In fact we see that Moshe did not first tell Jethro about the exodus from Egypt, the Ten Commandments, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the manna, or the quail. Rather, he first inquired as to his welfare, as we read: “They asked each other about their welfare.” It was only afterwards that “Moshe told his father-in-law all that Hashem had done,” for it is peace that allows one to lend an ear to the words of another.

– Mechilta D’Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai

With and Without Compromise

It is written, “I judge between a man and his fellow” (Shemot 18:16).

What is the meaning of “a man” in this verse, as well as “his fellow”?

“I judge between a man” refers to a decision without compromise; “and his fellow” refers to a decision with compromise, after which both parties will leave as friends [re’ehu (“his fellow”) signifies “his friend”].

– Mechilta

Months of Waiting

It is written, “In the third month from the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt, they arrived at the desert of Sinai” (Shemot 19:1).

“In the third month” – why did G-d give the Torah in the third month, rather than the second, seventh, or any other month? Our Sages cite Rabbi Oshaya as saying, “Rabbi Chaya Hagadol taught me: A female convert who has been taken captive and then freed is not to be married or even engaged until three months have passed.”

Israel, too, are called gerim (“foreigners”), as it is written: “For you were gerim in the land of Egypt” (Shemot 22:20); shevuyim (“captives”), as it is written: “They shall be shovim of their captors” (Isaiah 14:2); and freedmen, as it is written: “I am Hashem your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from being their slaves” (Vayikra 26:13). Hashem therefore said, “I will wait three months before giving them the Torah.”

– Midrash Tanchuma HaKadum

Under the Sign of Gemini

Another explanation for why the Torah was given in the third month:

It was in order to prevent the nations of the world from saying, “If You had given us the Torah, we would have fulfilled it.” Hashem said, “See in which month I gave the Torah: The third month, which is under the sign of Gemini. Thus if the wicked Esav wishes to repent, convert, and study Torah, let him come and study, for I will accept him.” The Torah

was therefore given in this month, placed under the sign of Gemini, in order to teach Esav that he too can merit it, just as Jacob did.

– Pesikta D’Rav Kahana

The World and All it Contains

It is written, “They will also believe in you le’olam [forever]” (Shemot 19:9).

Except for two instances, every place where the term le’olam appears in the Torah, it is missing the letter vav (and may therefore be read as le’alam [“to disappear”]). One of these two instances is the above verse: “They will also believe in you le’olam.”

This teaches us that even if the whole world and all it contains were to disappear, when it comes to the Torah given by Moshe, nothing from it can disappear.

– Midrash Chaser Veyatir

Proclaim it Loud and Clear

It is written, “Lo [Do not] take the Name of Hashem” (Shemot 20:7).

A woman once asked Rabbi Yosef ben Halaftha, “Why is the letter lamed taller than all the other letters?”

He replied, “Because it is a letter that ‘proclaims,’ like a person given the responsibility of making public announcements, and who must therefore stand above others.”

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, “Why do the letters aleph and lamed serve to proclaim [since they form the term lo (“do not”)]. In what way are they special?”

One who proclaims issues warnings by saying lemad eizo (literally, “learn what is”). In other words: “Learn so as not to transgress by authorizing what the Torah prohibits, or by prohibiting what the Torah authorizes.” In fact, whoever is not an expert in learning cannot conduct himself properly, according to its rules. (Pesikta Rabbati)

I Am Prayer

Let Him Pour Out His Heart Like Water

All the suffering that assails us only comes and persists as a result of a deficiency in our prayers to Hashem. If only we would pour out our hearts to Him, these prayers would certainly not go unanswered.

We should not be content on simply reciting the Amidah three times a day. On the contrary, we should regularly express ourselves in personal prayer, prayer that comes from the depths of the heart. We recite the three regular prayers out of habit, and they instantly spring from our mouths, something that is difficult to do with fervor.

Such is not the case when we search our souls and take an accounting of our state and condition, when we reflect upon our poverty and the numerous obstacles that confront us, so that we may live on dry bread and water. If we do this kind of soul-searching, we will pour out our hearts like running water before Hashem. Our prayers will spring forth from the depths of our soul, stemming from a broken and contrite heart, prayers that will certainly not go unanswered.

Thus if the mediocrity of our situation is troubling, we should increase our supplications to G-d. We must understand that Hashem also suffers, and that He too has no rest when we express ourselves in this way, for He will be unable to bear our suffering and will be hurt by our faults. We must pray for the Shechinah, which is now in exile, to return to its palace. We must pray that we may participate in the revelation of G-d in this world, and for the fulfillment of the verse: “The heavens and the earth will rejoice, and we will proclaim among the nations that Hashem is King.”

– Likutei Amarim

For many years, the gaon Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky was imprisoned in the plains of Siberia. Immediately upon his arrival, as part of his “initiation,” he and numerous other prisoners, condemned to forced labor like himself, had their shoes taken away and forced to run barefoot in the snow for several miles.

The Rav recounts that during this run on the ice, he spoke to G-d like a son speaks to his father, as he usually did in making requests during prayer. This was his prayer: “Aba [Papa], You wrote in Your Torah: ‘Everything is in the hands of Heaven except cold and heat,’ which means that we must be careful in these areas. If we do not seek shelter from the cold and avoid danger, our good deeds will not help us. Yet here in glacial Siberia, where it is colder than anyone can imagine, You know that I have no way to protect myself. Therefore, Sovereign of the universe, it’s Your job to protect me! I beg You, save me! Help me to bear the cold in this land!”

The Rav concluded his account by saying, “I was imprisoned for several years in Siberia, but I was never sick. People fell ill and died, but I never even suffered from a cold during all that time, since I had asked Aba about it from the start!”

No Sneezing During the Brit Milah

Rabbi Chaim Todros Hirschler was the pride of the Sha’arei Chesed neighborhood of Jerusalem, the splendor of his face reflecting the holiness and purity of his service of Hashem. Each of his deeds and gestures was preceded by a prayer: Be it for the washing of hands (“Sovereign of the universe, I am preparing myself to wash the hands. Help me, please, to carry out this deed to perfection”), for eating (“may my food be suitable”) or for sleeping (“may I sleep well and wake up on time”).

His son recounts, “My father would usually pray for every single thing. He would always say, ‘Hashem rejoices in the prayer of every Jew, and He even has confidence in the impious.’ As such, he accustomed his own family members to increase their prayers, even for the most ordinary things.”

One of his students also recounted, “I once accompanied him to a Brit Milah where he had the honor of being the Sandak. He had a cold at the time, and he prayed all the way there that he would not sneeze during the circumcision, so as not to harm the baby as it rested upon his sick legs.”

Only from a Siddur

In the biography of the gaon Rabbi Yosef Kadish (Yosef Kadisha) Krishevsky, a student of the Chafetz Chaim, it is said:

The slightest movement of the Rav reflected his attachment to the Creator. Still today, the elders of Jerusalem recount that even during Mincha on an ordinary day, anyone watching him would feel an urge to repent, comparable to what people experience during Mincha on the eve of Yom Kippur. The tzaddik Rabbi Shemuel Moed quite rightly advised people, “Look and listen to Rav Yosef Kadish when he prays or recites a blessing, and the fear of G-d will arise in your heart!” Rabbi Shemuel obviously applied this advice to himself, since on more than one occasion he made an effort to come and listen to the morning blessings voiced by the Rav’s pure mouth.

Even if we are perfectly familiar with the prayers, and they flow from our minds to our tongues, we can still learn a great lesson from

the Rav. He lived the words of the prayers, as the verse states: “All my bones shall declare...” (Tehillim 35:10). Obviously, he understood the profound meaning of these words and did not need the help of a Siddur. Nevertheless, he always made sure to pray only from a Siddur, and to properly enunciate each word. He did not let a prayer go by without taking some time to reflect, as the early pious ones used to do.

Even during the repetition of the Amidah, he intensely followed each word being recited by the chazan. How moving was the sight of this mature scholar, who had already mastered all the treasures of Torah, with a Siddur in hand and following the text with his finger!

More than once, his relatives asked him to pray for the sick, since they knew that in his prayers he would implore Hashem as a son implores his father. As soon as he was given the name of a person who was suffering, he would enclose himself in a room and recite tehillim with great passion, unleashing a torrent of tears. Sometimes, he would recite the entire book of Tehillim for someone who was sick.

In the Light of the Parsha

With Pure Intentions

It is written, “Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard everything that G-d did to Moshe and to Israel” (Shemot 18:1).

Rashi explains: “What news did he hear that ouva [he came]? What news had he heard [which inspired him] to come? The splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the war against Amalek.”

The term ouva has a numerical value (including the word itself) of ten, corresponding to the Ten Commandments. This means that Jethro did not come to convert in the hope of receiving honor because he was the father-in-law of the “king,” but because he truly wanted to accept the yoke of the Torah. Thus we read in the Midrash:

“The verse, ‘The wise inherit honor’ [Mishlei 3:35] refers to Jethro: What honor he inherited when he visited Moshe! He said to Moshe, ‘I, your father-in-law Jethro, have come to you’ [Shemot 18:6]. ... Rabbi Eleazar said: G-d told Moshe: ‘... I am He Who commanded the world to come into existence,’ as it says, ‘Almighty G-d, Hashem, has spoken and called the earth’ [Tehillim 50:1]. ‘I am He Who brings near and Who removes far away,’ as it says: ‘Am I a G-d from nearby – says Hashem – and not a G-d from afar?’ [Jeremiah 23:23]. ‘I am He Who brought Jethro near and did not thrust him afar, for this man who is coming to Me is coming for a good purpose – to become a proselyte. Bring him near as well, and do not cast him off.’ Thus we immediately read, ‘Moshe went out to meet his father-in-law’ [Shemot 18:7]” (Shemot Rabba 27:2).

This is why the passage at first states, “Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard.” If the Torah had only stated “the father-in-law of Moshe,” we could have said that he only left Midian to take advantage of the honor of being his son-in-law. Here the Torah testifies that he was the “priest of Midian,” meaning that he did not come in search of glory, since in that case he would not have left Midian and forsaken idolatry, for at the time he was their priest and enjoyed great respect. Since he renounced idolatry and ventured into the desert, we must admit that he did not come seeking honor. He acted without self-interest, his only intention being to accept the yoke of Torah and to attain a true fear of G-d.

Our Sages explain that Jethro was called by this name because he added an additional [yiter] parsha in the Torah (Mechilta Yitro, Amalek 1). This explanation constitutes an additional proof of his sincerity and unselfish behavior. It is clear that he came to be converted because of his fear of G-d and to learn Torah, not for reward or personal honor.