



אמת דבורה



A WEEKLY BRANDEIS ORTHODOX ORGANIZATION PUBLICATION
17 SHEVAT 5772 / 10 FEBRUARY 2012 VOL. XIII ISSUE 13

PARASHAT YITRO

Candle Lighting:	4:52 pm
Tzeit haKochavim:	5:53 pm
Hillel Dinner:	6:30 pm
Shacharit:	9:00 am
Sof Zman Kriat Shema:	9:23 am
Sof Zman Tefilla:	10:15 am
Chatzot:	11:59 am
Mincha:	4:35 pm
Shkia:	5:11 pm
Motzei Shabbat:	5:46 pm

Relating to the Broader World

By Rabbi Kaplowitz '02

Parshat Yitro opens with Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law coming to visit Moshe and B'nei Yisrael. Upon seeing how Moshe conducts his daily affairs in leading the people, Yitro criticizes Moshe's style of leadership and helps to establish a new and more efficient court system. While Yitro's contributions are significant, it still seems curious that the Torah would interrupt the narrative to tell us of Moshe's dealings with his father-in-law. B'nei Yisrael have just experienced the miracle of the splitting of the Yam Suf and victory over Amalek. After the battle with Amalek they go straight to Mt. Sinai and are primed to receive the Torah. Why now does the Torah feel compelled to tell us about Yitro? This question is even stronger for the Ibn Ezra who maintains that Yitro actually came to visit a year after Matan Torah – once the Mishkan had been constructed. He points to a number of textual difficulties to prove his point. So what is the story of Yitro doing here? Surely the Torah did not need to delay its

Morality in the Second Commandment

By Avi Snyder '13

About two months ago, Christopher Hitchens, arguably the world's most articulate and notorious atheist, passed away. Despite my own faith, I admired Hitchens a great deal, and generally felt that his arguments against organized religion were far stronger than most of the other so-called "new atheist's" polemics. One particularly strong argument of his was his reply to those who would boast about the inherent morality present in the Ten Commandments. "Which commandment do you find so offensive?" Hitchens was often asked. He would then proceed to list, at minimum, commandments one through four, all of which lack clearly apparent moral content. Perhaps the easiest commandment to pick on is number two "Lo yihiyeh lecha elohim acheirim al panai," "You shall have no other gods besides me." Not only does this commandment seem unconcerned with what most of us typically think of as moral issues, it also portrays G-d as rather petty and, dare I say, immoral. After all, it is this commandment that speaks of G-d as an "El kanah," a "jealous G-d" who metes out intergenerational punishment. After

Parasha in a Box

- Yitro comes to visit Moshe and gives him some sage advice
- Hashem tells us to keep His covenant and we will be a treasure for Him, well now that's pretty cool
- Hashem tells us to get ready for the big day when....
- We get the Torah!
- The Aseret HaDibrot (Ten "Commandments"):
- Hashem is our Gd
- No other gods allowed
- Don't misuse Gd's name
- Respect your parents
- Don't kill
- Don't steal
- Don't commit adultery
- Don't kidnap
- Don't lie in testimony
- Don't be jealous of what others have
- Bnei Yisrael cannot handle Hashem speaking to them directly
- Moshe comforts the people
- Laws having to do with the Mizbeach, the Alter

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recounting of receiving the Torah in order to tell us about Yitro, especially if he came AFTER the giving of the Torah?

The Ibn Ezra provides a powerful answer to this question: “Since the Torah recounted the evil that Amalek perpetuated against B’nei Yisrael, it mentioned the good that Yitro did for Israel.” Lest we think that the entire world is like Amalek, and out to get us, the Torah found it necessary to tell us of Yitro – a righteous gentile who was a friend to B’nei Yisrael and who was deeply affected religiously and spiritually by Hashem’s interactions with us. The Torah had to teach us about Yitro at this point – before we receive the Torah in order to entrench in our hearts and our minds the fact that there are many well-intentioned, sincere non-Jews who are genuinely curious and open to the message the Torah has to offer.

Rabbi Berel Wein adds to this train of thought. He explains that there is a danger in receiving the Torah – that it may lead to us becoming insular and closed off from the rest of the world. The Torah thus had to emphasize for us the contributions that Yitro made in helping Moshe to set up a better and more efficient court system. The message for us is that we must value and respect the perspective and insights of the “outsider”— those who are not a part of our community but who have positive contributions to make. Similarly, when outsiders become members of our community – either through the process of conversion or of becoming a ba’al Teshuvah– we must resist the temptation to make them exactly like us. Not every insider needs to be exactly the same and have the exact same perspective and understanding of things. Such a perspective is counterproductive to the best interest of both groups.

The message of Yitro – and its location in the Torah immediately before the receiving of the Torah – is one that should resonate loudly with us. The world is not necessarily out to get us. There is the opportunity for meaningful interaction and much to be gained from having an open and respectful attitude to everyone. We must celebrate the unique contributions and perspective that every individual brings to the table.

Rabbi Kaplowitz practices Suzuli while listening to Michelle Branch

making this rather reasonable, and to my mind obvious, argument, most of the religious people with whom Hitchens argued would end up muttering something about the importance of honoring one’s parents and not killing, but would, conspicuously, ignore the core of Hitchens’ argument that a good many commandments have nothing whatever to do with morality.

Well, I want to offer my reply, however late in coming, to Hitchens. I don’t think that the second commandment is amoral or immoral. I think that by prohibiting the worship of the pagan deities who were revered throughout the rest of the world, and by proscribing the creation of “graven images” of the divine, the second commandment wrought not only a theological, but also a moral, revolution.

In order to understand the moral import of the second commandment, it is first necessary to disabuse ourselves of a mistaken notion many of us have about the theological premises of Biblical religion. I would assume that most of us, as traditional Jews, do not believe that G-d has physical body. It is likely that many of us believe, as the Rambam did, that G-d also doesn’t literally feel emotions, change his mind, or undergo any type of personal growth. I believe most of those things also. But, as many modern scholars, from Yochanan Muffs to Benjamin Sommer, have shown, the idea of an invisible, unfeeling, static and perfect G-d is a decidedly post-Biblical view of G-d. The concept of G-d most of us have is Medieval in origin and stems from the effort of Medieval Jewish rationalists to reconcile Biblical religion with Aristotelian thought.

The Bible’s theological revolution did not involve a shift from physical deities to a non-physical deity (nor, I would argue, a shift from polytheism to pure monotheism). The theological innovation of the Bible was of a wholly different nature.

As one of Brandeis’ own great Biblical scholars, Nahum Sarna, notes “The concept of the immanence of the gods in nature was one of the basic convictions of the religions of the pagan world.” In other words, in ancient Near Eastern (and many other pagan) religions, the gods were seen as being inextricably bound up with nature. They were deities whose powers embodied the powers of the natural world. Moreover, they were subject to the external forces of the natural world. As Sarna writes, they possessed “neither freedom nor omnipotence.”

The Biblical conception of the G-d of the Hebrews differs markedly from these pagan notions about their own deities. The innovation of Biblical theology was that it made Gd supranatural, above nature and, therefore, unbound by it. G-d’s uniqueness was in his transcendence above the natural world.

This theological shift has profound moral implications. As Dennis Prager writes in his essay about “ethical monotheism,” nature is amoral. One cannot speak of morality being embedded within the natural world. In contrast, within the natural world the only laws are strength, cunning and survival. Consequently, it is fundamentally illogical to believe that a god who is bound by nature, who is fundamentally a part of the natural world, can be a moral god. Only through its elevation of G-d above and beyond the forces of nature, was the Bible able to craft an image of a just and moral G-d.

We can now see the moral meaning behind the second commandment. The commandment doesn’t simply demand allegiance to the one egotistical and jealous G-d. Rather, it demands allegiance to the one just and moral G-d. The Israelites were commanded to pledge their allegiance to the one Deity in the ancient world who, by transcending nature, transcended its amorality. This G-d’s chief demand would be goodness. Reward and punishment would be meted out not for capricious or selfish reasons, but in accordance with the dictates of G-d’s moral law.

That is what Hitchens and, unfortunately, the religious people against whom he debated failed to recognize. That far from being unrelated to morality, the second commandment lies at the core of the Torah’s vision for creating a moral society through allegiance to a moral G-d.

Yen yen needs to start double checking the time for Shabbos mincha

Honey Comes From Humble Trees

By Alison Uliss ‘14

In preparation for receiving the Torah at Har Sinai, “the Israelites encamped there near the mountain” (Exodus 19:2). The Hebrew word for “encamped” is “vayichan.” In this pasuk, the word “encamped” is

written in its singular form, even though the grammatically correct form is “vayachanu.” What can we learn from this?

According to Rashi, the word “vayichan” was written in its singular form, because Bnei Yisroel encamped “as one person with one heart.” From this, we see that loving our fellow man is a prerequisite for accepting the Torah and its commandments. In addition to meaning “encamped,” the word vayichan also comes from the Hebrew word chein, which means “finding favor.” Bnei Yisroel found favor in the eyes of one another and, therefore, found favor in the eyes of G-d.

It is easy to just see the faults and shortcomings of others, but this causes distance between us; however, when you see the good and positive traits in others, you become closer to them. This unity is a fundamental requirement for accepting and following the Torah. But how do we become close to our fellow man? If it were that simple, all the girls competing in beauty pageants wouldn’t have to wish for world peace, right? Closeness between people is possible only when there is humility. When you are humble, you do not feel a need to gain power over others or feel above them by focusing on their faults. When you have the trait of humility, you can allow yourself to see the good in others. The traits of loving others, seeing the good in them, and having humility go hand in hand. By growing in these traits, you make yourself into a more elevated person who is worthy of receiving the Torah.

Based on this idea, it is very fitting that we celebrated Tu B’Shvat this past week. Throughout the Torah, man is compared to a tree. Just as trees need soil, water, air, and warmth (sun) in order to survive, human beings also require these same basic elements.

In particular, the absorption of energy from sunlight activates the process of photosynthesis, a chemical reaction that is essential for the growth and health of the tree. Although humans do not undergo photosynthesis, we also need warmth to survive. The warmth that helps people survive is the warmth of friendship and community; however, we will only be able to absorb the energy of our peers, friends, and family members, and channel that warmth into our own growth, when we are humble and focus on the good in others.

Alison’s life philosophy: Rabbits

None Before Me

By Debra Friedmann '13

Towards the end of this week's parsha, after the reading of the Ten Commandments, we come across an additional commandment that would seem fairly repetitive. Hashem declares that "with me, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold" (20:20). Given that we have just received the command not to have any other gods other than Hashem, and that we should not worship idols, it is odd that we would need this idea to resurface so soon. Additionally, even if we were to accept the need for this command to be repeated, the wording of this statement is different than what we are accustomed to. Hashem says, "with me," one should not make any idols. One should then wonder if the Torah is trying to tell us something of significance through the strange syntax of the pasuk above. If we are to understand that there is a reason for this unconventional wording, what can we deduce from the text?

Many commentaries on the Torah find that these questions actually build on each other. Yes it is true that this statement is seemingly repetitive, but in truth, there is a fundamental idea that we must learn in this instance. We know that there is something new here exactly because of the strange wording. According to the Mechilta, when Hashem says "with me," it is a reference to the fact that one must not make idols to represent G-d, but also that one may not make idols that represent the angels and creations that are in the heavens that reside closer to G-d.

Other commentaries such as the Netziv, Seforno, and the Ibn Ezra explain that there is actually a very unique concept that is brought to light here aside from the previous commandments that we have previously read. Here we are not only referring to making idols that represent G-d, but also to idols that would represent an intermediary. People may feel that they are not able to relate to G-d on their own and need a middleman. According to the Rambam, in earlier history, the reason why people came to worshiping idols to begin with is because of this line of thought. The people started to make idols that served as intermediaries as to create a

stronger relationship with G-d. This did not last however, because the people began to forget the true purpose of these intermediaries and instead worshiped the idols themselves. Given that history has a strong tendency of repeating itself, this is something that should be warned against. We even see that later on when the nation is creating the golden calf, the purpose of the calf is not to replace G-d, but rather to replace Moshe who they feared was not to return. They assigned this intermediary position to Moshe, who could handle it, and when he was gone, they needed a new one in the form of an idol.

Hashem addresses this issue head on. In the pesukim beforehand, Hashem reviews the fact that he spoke with the people themselves. According to the commentaries, Hashem is trying to tell us that we have already experienced the relation.

Is a true Brandeisian - she gets the best nerdy presents ever

Mitzvah of the Week: Truth, Even Unto Its Innermost Parts?

By Daniel Kasdan '13

Despite the Torah's charge to "distance yourself from falsehood" (Shemot 23:7), there are times when—from a Torah perspective—we are not only permitted to lie, but even encouraged to do so. As we pointed out last week, lying to save someone's life (even when the extent of the danger is unclear) is the obvious example. But there are also other cases in which the Torah allows one to utter false words.

In Sefer Bereishit, the Torah records an interesting exchange between Hashem and Avraham Avinu. After overhearing three men claim that she would bear a child in a year's time, Sarah laughs in disbelief: "After I have withered, shall I again have delicate skin? And my husband is old!" (Bereishit 18:12; translation follows Artscroll). Yet, in the very next pasuk, Hashem relates Sarah's comment to Avraham somewhat differently: "Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying: 'Shall I in truth bear a child, though'?"

"I have aged?" (Ibid., 18:13). Whereas Sarah's actual remark mentioned both husband and wife as being elderly, Hashem's recounting of it only mentioned Sarah's old-age. And, as we noted two weeks ago, omission of key information is considered lying according to Torah standards.

Why did Hashem feel the need to omit part of Sarah's statement? The reason is blatantly obvious: relaying the "full truth" of Sarah's remark would have unnecessarily caused Avraham emotional pain. In the words of the gemara, "Great is peace, for even HaKadosh Baruch Hu changed [the truth] for it [peace]" (Yevamot 65b). Thus, lying for the sake of peace is commendable.

This concept resonates in our lives. All too often do we feel compelled to relay a story exactly as it had transpired—with no sensitivity to the personal feelings of our listeners. Yet, as this story beautifully illustrates, oftentimes a person's self-esteem trumps the mitzvah of honesty.

In a similar vein, the gemara (Ketubot 17a) discusses what we should say while dancing before a bride at her wedding. According to Beit Shammai, we are obligated to "call it like it is"—i.e., show no restraint in describing the actual beauty of the kallah (Rashi). Beit Hillel disagree, claiming that we are always obligated to say: "a beautiful and charming bride!" Thus, the machloket is as follows: Beit Shammai argue that we must remain steadfast to the truth, even when the truth is not particularly flattering; Beit Hillel, on the other hand, argue that it is more important to "sugarcoat" the situation, extolling the bride for her beauty even when such beauty is not so readily apparent.

Despite the fact that Beit Shammai cite the verse "distance yourself from falsehood" (Shemot 23:7) as the source for their honesty policy, the halacha follows Beit Hillel. Indeed, Jewish weddings almost always include a song with the words "a beautiful and charming bride!"

While we may suggest here too that one's personal feelings trumps the mitzvah of honesty, Rabbi Irwin Kula offers a somewhat

different approach to this gemara. The problem in analyzing a bride's beauty is that there is not always an objective truth—as the old adage goes, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Whereas a particular guest at the wedding may not find the bride especially attractive, the groom—more likely than not—does consider his wife beautiful. Thus, Beit Shammai's suggestion of "calling it like it is" is not entirely truthful either.

Regardless, it is clear from this gemara that we are encouraged to refrain from such brutal honesty. Why? Because this model of truth is indeed brutal. To put it simply, honesty to the point of disparagement is simply in bad taste—it is not the way a yid should be speaking (for an explanation as to how Beit Shammai could possibly advocate such a tactless opinion, see Tosfot). As G-d's representatives to the world, Jews should carry themselves as the nesi'im (leaders) of humanity, and it is therefore incumbent upon each and every one of us to behave in a refined manner. Unnecessarily bashing a bride's physical appearance is the antithesis of this role.

As we enter our final week of school before February break, it would do us well to keep this in mind. We are nesi'im. All of our actions should reflect our all-important role as Divine emissaries. Let's make each and every action a true kiddush Hashem. Have a good shabbos!

(DK would like to thank Rav Joseph Telushkin, whose Book of Jewish Values provided all of the sources in this article)

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