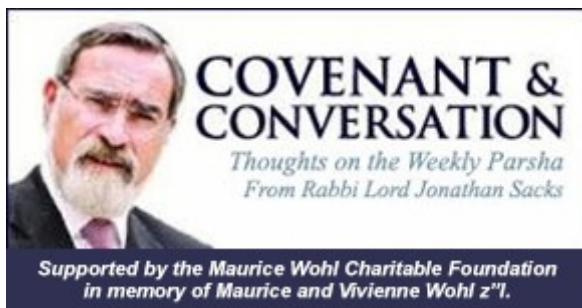


In This Issue

- **Covenant and Conversation** by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
- **The Guiding Light** by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen
- **Outlooks and Insights** by Rabbi Zev Leff
- **Between the Lines** by Rabbi Abba Wagensberg



On Leadership: A Nation of Leaders

This week's parsha consists of two episodes that seem to be a study in contrasts. In the first, in chapter 18, Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, a Midianite priest, gives Moses his first lesson in leadership. In the second, the prime mover is God himself who, at Mount Sinai, makes a covenant with the Israelites in an unprecedented and unrepeated epiphany. For the first and only time in history God appears to an entire people, making a covenant with them and giving them the world's most famous brief code of ethics, the Ten Commandments.

What can there be in common between the practical advice of a Midianite and the timeless words of revelation itself? There is an intended contrast and it is an important one. The forms and structures of governance are not specifically

Jewish. They are part of *chokhmah*, the universal wisdom of humankind. Jews have known many forms of leadership: by prophet, elders, judges and kings; by the Nasi in Israel under Roman rule and the Resh Galuta in Babylon; by town councils (*shiva tuvei ha-ir*) and various forms of oligarchy; and by other structures up to and including the democratically elected Knesset. *The forms of government are not eternal truths, nor are they exclusive to Israel.* In fact the Torah says about monarchy that a time will come when the people say, "Let us set a king over us *like all the nations around us*," - the only case in the entire Torah in which Israel are commanded (or permitted) to imitate other nations. There is nothing specifically Jewish about political structures.

What is specifically Jewish is the principle of the covenant at Sinai, that Israel is the only nation whose sole ultimate king and legislator is God himself. "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws, *Halleluyah*" (Psalm 147: 19-20). What the covenant at Sinai established for the first time was *the moral limits of power*. All human authority is delegated authority, subject to the overarching moral imperatives of the Torah itself. This side of heaven there is no absolute power. That is what has always set Judaism apart from the empires of the ancient world and the secular nationalisms of the West. So Israel can learn practical politics from a Midianite but it must learn the limits of politics from God himself.

Despite the contrast, however, there is one theme in common to Yitro and the revelation at Sinai, namely the *delegation, distribution and*

democratization of leadership. Only God can rule alone.

The theme is introduced by Yitro. He arrives to visit his son in law and finds him leading alone. He says, "What you are doing is not good" (Ex. 18:17). This is one of only two instances in the whole Torah in which the words *lo tov*, "not good," appear. The other is in Genesis 2, where God says, "It is not good [*lo tov*] for man to be alone." We cannot lead alone. We cannot live alone. To be alone is not good.

Yitro proposes delegation:

You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. (Ex. 18: 19-22)

This is a significant devolution. It means that among every thousand Israelites, there are 131 leaders (one head of a thousand, ten heads of a hundred, twenty heads of fifty and a hundred head of tens). One in every eight adult male Israelites was expected to undertake some form of leadership role.

In the next chapter, prior to the revelation at Mount Sinai, God commands Moses to propose

a covenant with the Israelites. In the course of this, God articulates what is in effect the mission statement of the Jewish people:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*' (Ex. 19:4-6)

This is a very striking statement. Every nation had its priests. In the book of Genesis, we encounter Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, described as "a priest of the most high God" (Gen. 14: 18). The story of Joseph mentions the Egyptian priests, whose land was not nationalised (Gen. 47: 22). Yitro was a Midianite priest. In the ancient world there was nothing distinctive about priesthood. Every nation had its priests and holy men. What was distinctive about Israel was that it was to become *a nation every one of whose members was to be a priest; each of whose citizens was called on to be holy.*

I vividly recall standing with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in the General Assembly of the United Nations in August 2000 at a unique gathering of two thousand religious leaders representing all the major faiths in the world. I pointed out that even in that distinguished company we were different. We were almost the only religious leaders wearing suits. All the others wore robes of office. It is an almost universal phenomenon that priests and holy people wear distinctive garments to indicate that they are set apart (the core meaning of the word

kadosh, "holy"). In post-biblical Judaism there were no robes of office because everyone was expected to be holy¹ (Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, called Jews "a nation of philosophers," reflecting the same idea).

Yet in what sense were Jews ever a kingdom of priests? The *cohanim* were an elite within the nation, members of the tribe of Levi, descendants of Aaron the first high priest. There never was a full democratisation of *keter kehunah*, the crown of priesthood.

Faced with this problem, the commentators offer two solutions. The word *cohanim*, "priests," may mean "princes" or "leaders" (Rashi, Rashbam). Or it may mean "servants" (Ibn Ezra, Ramban). But this is precisely the point. The Israelites were called on to be a *nation of servant-leaders*. They were the people called on, by virtue of the covenant, to accept responsibility not only for themselves and their families, but for the moral-spiritual state of the nation as a whole. This is the principle that later became known as the idea that *kol Yisrael arevin zeh ba-zeh*, "All Israelites are responsible for one another." Jews were the people who did not leave leadership to a single individual, however holy or exalted, or to an elite. They were the people every one of whom was expected to be both a prince and a servant, that is to say, every one of whom was called on to be a leader. Never was leadership more profoundly democratized.

That is what made Jews historically hard to lead. As Chaim Weitzmann, first president of Israel, famously said, "I head a nation of a million presidents." The Lord may be our shepherd, but no Jew was ever a sheep. At the same time it is what led Jews to have an impact

on the world out of all proportion to their numbers. Jews constitute only the tiniest fragment - one fifth of one per cent - of the population of the world, but an extraordinarily high percentage of leaders in any given field of human endeavour.

To be a Jew is to be called on to lead.²

1. This idea re-appeared in Protestant Christianity in the age of the Puritans, the Christians who took most seriously the principles of what they called the "Old Testament," in the phrase "the priesthood of all believers."
2. On the role of the follower in Judaism, see the future Covenant and Conversation on Kedoshim.



The 10th Commandment

Shemos, 20:14: "Do not covet your fellow's house. Do not covet your fellow's wife, his manservant, his maid servant, his ox, his donkey, not anything that belongs to your fellow."

Devarim, 5:18: "Do not covet your fellow's wife. **Do not desire** your fellow's house, his field, his slave, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to your fellow."

In the last of the Ten Commandments in this week's Torah portion, the Torah forbids coveting one's fellow's belongings – the Torah uses the language of *'loh tachmod* which literally means 'do not covet'. When the Ten

Commandments are repeated in the Torah portion of Vaetchanan, the Torah seemingly adds another prohibition with the words '*loh titaveh*', which literally means 'do not desire'.

The Ibn Ezra seems to understand that included in the prohibition of do not covet is merely desiring one's fellow's items, even if one does not perform any action in order to acquire the item.¹ Based on this understanding, he asks a fundamental question on the mitzvah. How can the Torah forbid a person from having feelings? It is very natural, for example, for a person with an old, cheap car, to be jealous of his fellow who has a brand new, expensive car.

The Ibn Ezra answers with an analogy of a peasant and a princess. No commoner in his right mind will think he has a chance of marrying a princess because. He knows that she is out of his league. He is not exercising great self-control, rather it is human nature that one only has desires for things that are attainable and he can relate to. So too, the Ibn Ezra says that an intelligent person must realize that people do not acquire spouses or possessions based on their wisdom or cleverness, but only based on God's desire to grant him such.

If a person has a beautiful house or car or wife, it is because the because God knows that is best for him, and if another person does not have the same thing, then that is also God's will because it is not best for him. Accordingly, the way a person must employ to avoid coveting, is through working on his Emunah that everything he has is from God and he that which his fellow has, is designated solely for him. With that attitude, a person can avoid coveting his friend's belongings without having to work on curbing his natural desires.

Another approach to answering the question of the Ibn Ezra is based on a Midrash². The Midrash teaches that the Ten Commandments are repeated in a certain manner in the Torah portion of Kedoshim. For example, Kedoshim contains "I am the Lord your God"³ corresponding to the first of the ten Commandments. "Graven images you shall not make for yourselves"⁴ corresponds to the second of the ten, and so on. The parallel in Kedoshim to the tenth commandment of do not covet is the famous verse: "And you shall love your fellow as yourself."⁵ What is the significance of this connection?

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Brodie explains as follows, as quoted by Rabbi Yissachar Frand:

"When I see that someone has a better car than I do or a better house than I do and I want that car or house, the human emotion behind this desire is not driven strictly by desire for the car or house or wife but by the fact that I am better than him and why should he have something that I do not have. Really, I know that I can easily live with my old jalopy, but I can not live with the fact that my neighbor has a better car than I do! It is not lusting for money or women; it is the ability to come to terms with the fact that someone else has something that I do not have."

If I truly love that person as I do myself, then I would have no problem with the fact that he has a great car. The proof of this idea is found in the Talmud's teaching that one is jealous of everyone else except for his children and his students. We rarely see parents who are jealous

of their children. Why is that? It is because one loves his children dearly and wants them to be even more successful in life than he himself was. If one really loves his fellow man, he will not be jealous of him. Thus, the way to overcome jealousy is to love one's neighbor as much as he loves himself.

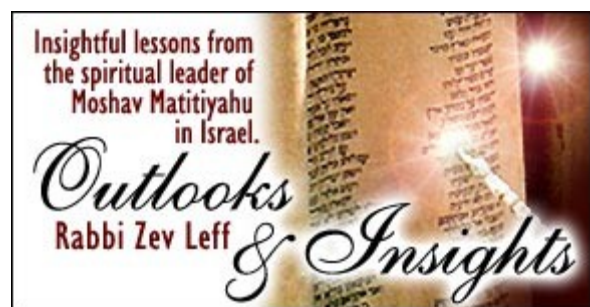
We have seen two explanations as to why it is conceivable for a person to control his desire for other people's items. While coveting a person's things is a common test, a person may think that the actual prohibition to actively pressure someone to sell an item is not so relevant to his life. Most of the time, people do not try to buy other peoples' belongings. However, in truth, this mitzvah is not limited to pressuring a person to sell an item. Many Authorities rule that it is also forbidden to pressure a person to lend him or to give him something.⁶ This ruling greatly expands the scope of the mitzvah, in particular with regards to children. It is an almost daily occurrence that a child pressures another child to give them some food, or lend them their toy. While it is permitted to ask for something one or two times, the Authorities rule that asking three times or more is forbidden. It is incumbent on a parent of any child above the age of understanding⁷ to educate their children that this is a Torah prohibition.

We have learned how the prohibition of 'do not covet' teaches us vital lessons about our attitude towards the material world and to our fellow Jew. May we merit to observe this difficult mitzvah in its entirety.

1. It is evident from the Rambam that the prohibition of 'do not covet' is limited to actually trying to acquire the item. The additional Commandment of 'do not desire' is also not to merely desire one's fellow's belongings, rather it is to think about how to go about acquiring his belongings. Seemingly, the Ibn Ezra's question does not start according to the

Rambam because it is conceivable that a person cannot control his desires, but he can control whether he thinks of ways to acquire it. The halacha follows the Rambam, (See Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, Simun 359, Sif 10).

2. Vayikra Rabbah, 25:5.
3. Vayikra, 19:3.
4. Vayikra, 19:4.
5. Vayikra, 19:18.
6. Rav Yitzchak Berkovits shlit'a rules this way.
7. The age of chinuch varies between children and different Mitzvos, but the general principle is that once the child is old enough to understand the prohibition, he has reached the age of chinuch. In general, this is around the age of six or seven.



The Art of Listening

"Moses' father-in-law Jethro, sheik of Midian, heard about all that God had done for Moses and His people Israel when He brought Israel out of Egypt." (Exodus 18:1)

What did Jethro hear about that made him come? The Splitting of the Sea and the war with Amalek (Rashi).

Considering that the giving of the Torah is the foundation of the entire world – both spiritual and physical – would it not have been proper for the Sages to designate a full Torah portion to this occurrence alone? Why was the episode with Jethro not included in Parshas Beshalach? After all, the Splitting of the Sea and the war with Amalek that Jethro heard about are both contained in that portion.

Even more difficult to understand is Rashi's opinion that Jethro in fact did not join the

Jewish people until *after* the giving of the Torah. Why, then, did the Torah preface the giving of the Torah with Jethro's arrival?

"And Jethro heard." (Exodus 18:1)

The Zohar asks: "Did only Jethro hear and the whole world did *not* hear?! Is it not written, '*the nations heard and shuddered*'? The answer is that the whole world heard and were not humbled, while Jethro heard and was humbled and was drawn close to fear God."

Many hear, but few really take to heart what they hear. As the Midrash (Tanchuma Yitro 2) puts it, "There are those who hear and lose, and those who hear and profit." Hearing and listening properly are the key to one's success in this world. The Midrash (Shmot Rabbah 27:9) offers the following allegory on the verse, *"Incline your ear and come to Me; hear and your soul shall live"* (Isaiah 55:3):

So precious are the Jewish people to God that He entices them. He said to them, "If one falls from a roof and his whole body is injured, and the doctor visits him and puts a bandage on his head, arms and legs, and all his body, he becomes totally enveloped in bandages. I am not like that. Man has 248 organs and one of them is the ear. If the whole body is sullied with sin, but the ear hears and listens, then the whole body receives life.

Before the Torah tells us, *"And God spoke,"* we must first learn what it means to listen. Unless there is an ear to hear, even the most powerful message from the mouth of God Himself is lost. For that reason, *"Jethro heard,"* precedes the giving of the Torah. Let us now investigate what proper hearing entails.

The Mechilta relates that prior to the giving of

the Torah, the kings of the nations heard the thunderous sounds and gathered together to seek advice from Bilaam. They were concerned that God was bringing another cataclysm – if not of water, then perhaps of fire – to destroy the world. Bilaam quieted their fears by telling them that God was giving His people the Torah. The kings replied, "God should bless his people with peace."

Jethro heard the same thunderous noises and came to join the Jewish people and accept the Torah personally. In fact, the Mechilta relates, Jethro was the first person to exclaim, *"Baruch Hashem!"*

The word *baruch* (blessed) connotes increase and strengthening. Moses and the Jews were so deeply inspired by the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea that they could not imagine the effect wearing off or dissipating. Although they profusely praised and thanked God, they did not see the need to use the word *"baruch"*; they felt no need to ask God to strengthen the effect of these miracles.

Jethro, however, realized that the effect of miracles can soon be dissipated if those effects are not somehow incorporated into one's actions. He realized Amalek also heard of the Splitting of the Sea, yet the impression quickly wore off and Amalek attacked the Jews. Therefore Jethro appreciated the necessity to address God with a *bracha*, an entreaty to intensify and increase the effect of the miracles already performed.

In contrast to Jethro, the kings of the nations were concerned personally only when they thought that the awesome sounds were harbingers of their doom. Once they were told that the sounds were the sounds of Torah, they

immediately distanced themselves. They directed God's blessings to His people, but did not act as if they were personally implicated. There was nothing they felt that they could gain from these sounds. Only Jethro took these sounds as a personal message and directed his blessings to God so that he might personally benefit from Torah.

"The entire nation saw the sounds."
(Exodus 20:15)

Hearing alone is indiscriminate; sound is received by the ear from all directions without the need to focus or turn. Vision, on the other hand, is dependent on opening one's eyes and focusing on that which one wants to see. God's words had to be heard with the same intense focus employed in sight. The Israelites physically saw the sounds in order to aid their ability to listen properly.

Many sounds and sights reach our ears and eyes, but only one with the capacity to really focus can absorb their message. The Gemara relates that the turning point in the life of Rabbi Akiva was when he witnessed the erosion of a stone by water. Many observed the same thing, but only he derived the message: if water can erode stone, then Torah can change the heart. The whole world summons one with an attuned and attentive ear to the service of God:

"The heavens declare the glory of God." (Psalms 19:2)

Look at the sky, listen to the ocean and acquire awe of God:

*"My heart says to me in your name,
'Seek out my face.'"* (Psalms 27:8)

If someone begins the Shema by repeating the word "*Shema*" twice, we silence him out of a concern that he seems to be addressing two deities (Talmud – Brachot 33b). This is difficult to understand, for Shema refers to the one who is listening and not to God. How then does it imply two deities? The answer is that the entire creation cries out the unity of God. There is no multiplicity, only the one, unified voice of God that calls out to man from all quarters. Any double-hearing smacks of idolatry and duality.

Everyday a voice emanates from Mount Chorev (Sinai) and declares, "Woe to them, to the people, because of their insult to the Torah" (Avos 6:2). The commentaries explain that the giving of the Torah did not stop, as it says, "*A great sound that did not cease*" (Deut. 5:19). One with an attuned ear hears the voice of God giving the Torah continually, as the basis of all of creation. When the voice is not heard, then the voice goes out proclaiming the disgrace to Torah.

The Mechilata (see also Talmud – Kiddushin 22b) describes the piercing of the earlobe of the Jewish servant as a punishment for his failure to hear and heed the ongoing commandment, "*Do not steal*." It might be asked, however, why we pierce the earlobe, a mere piece of cartilage, and not the eardrum which failed to hear.

The Sages tell us that the outer ear serves as a funnel to collect the sound waves and direct them to the inner ear. The problem of the servant was not that he did not hear on Sinai that we are all to subjugate ourselves to God alone. But he failed to hear the command as if it were directed to him and him alone. His outer ear failed to funnel those words to him, and thus bears the blemish. He heard God's voice, but did

not experience it as if God was speaking to him.

"Cain spoke with his brother Abel, and when they were in the field, Cain arose and smote Abel, his brother." (Genesis 4:8)

Many Midrashim discuss what exactly Cain said to Abel. Ibn Ezra notes that according to the simple understanding of the verse, Cain repeated to Abel the admonition he had just heard from God:

"If you will improve, then you will be forgiven, and if not, the sin crouches by the entrance, and it desires you, but you can dominate it." (Genesis 4:7)

How can these words of rebuke to Abel have led to murder? They should have prevented the murder!

Like most people, Cain heard the rebuke as directed at everybody but him. Since Abel was the only person around, he assumed it was intended for him. So Cain "said over" the rebuke to Abel rather than mulling over its implications for him. Not only did it fail to prevent the murder, but by suggesting to Cain that Abel was in need of rebuke, it may have even aroused his animosity.

When I was younger and more naive, I assumed that my Shabbos sermon would be an effective medium to reach members of my congregation in need of reproof. Inevitably, the targeted individual(s) would approach me after davening and tell me, "Rabbi, you really gave it to them. I hope the ones who needed to hear got the message." "Obviously," I thought to myself, "they did not."

Rebuke is only effective if one takes it personally. Even if one hears it directly from God Himself, as Cain did, unless one recognizes that it is directed at him, the rebuke is useless.

A truly sensitive person will always hear any reproof as directed at him or her. I once addressed a group of 350 complete strangers in Johannesburg and spoke about modesty and the problems of certain forms of dress. After the lecture, I received the following note:

*Dear Rabbi Leff,
I want to apologize for the manner in which I dressed for the lecture. I don't usually wear this type of clothing, but in my rush to the lecture, I grabbed what was available. I know you were referring to me, and I promise not to repeat this error.*

I was astounded that there could be a soul so pure, to hear reproof directed to an audience of strangers as personal rebuke.

The Sages attribute another function to the earlobe. The Talmud (Kesubos 5b) comments that earlobes are soft and flexible, so that if one is in a situation where someone is speaking *Loshon Hara* (negative speech), he can bend his earlobe in as an earplug to avoid listening to the prohibited speech.

Since the Sages also say that the fingers are tapered to serve the same function of plugging up the ears to avoid hearing *Loshon Hara*, one wonders why both earlobes and tapered fingers are needed for the same function. Furthermore, why shouldn't one just walk away and in that way avoid listening to *Loshon Hara*?

There are in fact three different types of speakers of *Loshon Hara*, and each one requires a different response. There are those who speak *Loshon Hara* constantly, the professional gossips. One should have nothing to do with such people, and walking in the other direction when one sees them coming is indeed the preferred response.

The second type of *Loshon Hara* is that spoken by a basically good person, who from time to time slips into the trap of gossiping. He need not be avoided entirely. The preferred response is simply to prevent oneself from hearing the *Loshon Hara*. Tapered fingers distance the *Loshon Hara* but not the speaker.

There is yet a third type of *Loshon Hara*. Someone is asked concerning the honesty of a certain individual by someone else who is contemplating entering into a business relationship with him. Jewish law is clear that if the individual being questioned knows the man to be dishonest, he must respond and relate exactly what he knows. (Of course, he must not exaggerate, or add information that was not solicited, or speak out of personal animus.) If a third party is present, who does not need to know this information, it is *Loshon Hara* with respect to him, and he must not listen. Putting his fingers in his ears would seem to imply that the information is intrinsically *Loshon Hara* and might wrongly discourage the one relating the information from continuing. By turning his earlobe, however, he signifies that this information is only *Loshon Hara* with respect to being funneled into his ears.

As we once again experience the giving of the Torah, with the reading of the Parshat Yitro, let us learn from Jethro to attune our ears to hear

the uninterrupted voice of God, directed personally to each and every one of us, from every quarter of creation.



One Step At a Time

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah Portion, Yitro, begins with the verse:

"Yitro, the priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law, heard all that God did for Moses and for Israel his people."
(Exodus 18:1).

Although it says that Yitro heard all that God had done, nonetheless the Talmud (Zevachim 116a) says that there were three specific things that Yitro heard which inspired him to come running across the desert to join the Jewish people.

1. Splitting of the Red Sea.
2. War against Amalek.
3. Giving of the Torah.

We need to understand why it was specifically these three events which inspired him to come to the camp of Israel.

Furthermore we must examine this verse, which describes Yitro as "the priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law." The first description is a disgrace, referring to his idolatrous past. The

second description is one of praise, noting that he is Moses's father-in-law. Why do we label Yitro with these two diametrically opposed titles?

Let us share an idea based on the "Tiferet Shmuel" (volume 2). Even if a person achieves the highest of spiritual levels, it is possible for that person to fall to the lowest of places. This is more likely when a person quickly "jumps levels" and takes on too much at one time. When one takes on more than he can handle in terms of spiritual growth, this can backfire. The person can become frustrated and tense to the point where he cracks and falls back down again.

This is exactly what happened to the Jewish people after they crossed the Red Sea. The "Yalkut Reuveni" says that before the Splitting of the Sea, the angels testified to God that the Egyptians are idolaters and the Jews are idolaters as well (Exodus 14:28). "Why should the Jews be saved and the Egyptians destroyed?" they asked. "Let's destroy them both."

We find that before the Splitting of the Red Sea the Jews were just as involved in idolatry as the Egyptians. They had reached the lowest of the lowest levels. However, immediately after the splitting of the Red Sea, they proclaimed: "This is my God and I will glorify him" (Exodus 15:2). The Midrash (Mechoth) says that even the simplest of Jews saw a vision of God which was even *greater* than that which the prophet Ezekiel saw. It did not take very long to cross the sea, and in that short span of time the Jewish people went from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high. They jumped from the spiritual depths all the way to the top.

Therefore we find toward the end of last week's portion that during the war against Amalek, the Jewish people ask, "Is God with us or not?" (Exodus 17:7) How could this be? A moment ago they all pointed and said "this is my God." How can these very same people doubt that God is among them and performing all these miracles? How can the Jews, who were such great prophets, also be borderline heretics?

Perhaps this happened because they jumped from the lowest to the highest in such a short span of time - something which is not healthy in spiritual growth and can cause a person to fall all the way back down.

LEVELS OF HEARING

There are different levels of hearing. The commentator Ohr Gedaliyahu explains the greatness in the Jewish people's statement, "We will do and we will hear," by noting that the word "we will do" (*na'aseh*) comes first (see also Shabbat 88a). By saying "we will do," the Jewish people expressed their ability to do the will of God even before they were specifically commanded in the mitzvot. They could intuitively "hear" God's desires. According to the Ohr Gedaliyahu, this very high level of hearing demonstrated the Jewish people's great love for God, in which they were able to anticipate His wishes.

In the second, slightly lower level of hearing, we are unable to perceive God's desires before He expresses them. Nevertheless, once He articulates His will, we are able to discern the deeper message of the mitzvot. In other words, through each mitzvah itself, we can understand what God wants from us.

Through this idea, we can understand why the

Jewish people use two different expressions - "we will do" (*na'aseh*) and "we will do and we will hear" (*na'aseh v'nishma*). The first expression (*na'aseh*) corresponds to the highest level of hearing. Without hearing explicit instructions, how did the Jews know what to do? It must be that they were able to intuit God's will even without physically hearing them articulated.

The second expression (*na'aseh v'nishma*) corresponds to the second level of hearing, in which we are able to hear, through the mitzvot, what God really wants from us. After acting on what we have been told, we can hear God's will.

The Slonimer Rebbe adds that this second level of hearing applies not only to mitzvot, but also to every situation we encounter in life. Each circumstance in which we find ourselves contains custom-tailored lessons for us to learn, if only we are able to hear them. For example, if a mentally unstable person on the street starts yelling at us for no apparent reason, instead of getting angry at him, we can assume that, for some reason, we are intended to hear his words. Perhaps there is some kernel of truth in what he is saying that can teach us a lesson.

CLIMBING THE LADDER

The giving of the Ten Commandments in this week's parsha teaches us that growth has to be slow and deliberate. God did not give us one huge commandment, but rather gave us ten individual commandments. This teaches us that growth comes one step at a time. As the Talmud says (Makkot 23b), "Rebbi Chananyah ben Akashia says that God wanted to give the Jewish people merit and therefore he increased the Torah and its Commandments."

Torah has to be absorbed one step and one mitzvah at a time. The Ten Commandments reflects this by stating each mitzvah one after the other. This is the meaning of Rebbi Chananyah ben Akashia's statement. God increased Torah and mitzvot because each is a rung on our spiritual ladder, and the more rungs we have, the safer and easier it is to ascend.

PERMANENT JOURNEY

This helps us understand the significance of the three things that inspired Yitro to come running across the desert. First came the splitting of the sea, where Yitro saw people at the very bottom jumping all the way to the top. Then he heard of the war against Amalek, where the Jewish people questioned God's existence. They plunged right back down to being heretics. This was because their process of *teshuva* moved too fast. Yitro knew that he was also a repentant and he worried that perhaps he too had moved too fast.

It therefore says that he heard of the giving of the Torah, which was a gradual process. First God gave the Ten Commandments and then he gave the rest of the laws. He gave the Torah one step at a time, one mitzvah a time. When he saw this, Yitro said "I need to learn how to grow at a slow and steady pace, as opposed to taking everything on all at once and causing myself to rebel."

That is why these three events are singled out. This also helps us understand the answer to the second question of why the Torah refers to Yitro in the opening verse as "the priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law." This shows that even though he became the father-in-law of the great Moses, Yitro recognized that deep down inside

him remained a piece of idolatrous Midian. He already tasted that, and needed to make sure that his journey from being a priest of Midian to Moses's father-in-law was going to be a permanent and meaningful one.

God wants us to grow at a pace which is healthy for us and not to take on too much at once and wind up turning our backs on the entire Torah. That is certainly not the will of God. Rather, do it with caution, one step at a time, at a rate which is healthy and productive. That way we can become all we can possibly be.

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