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Why is Adultery So Bad?

Some years ago a rabbinic colleague of mine in Chicago was giving a class on the Ten Commandments to a secular audience. Not one given to apologetics, he staunchly defended the death penalty the Bible prescribes for adultery. The rabbi argued that society as a whole, even today, would be a much better place if adultery was a capital crime.

Everyone in the class vociferously disagreed, saying that the Biblical punishment was too harsh. Except for one young man who sat there silently. This fellow had suffered through horrible teen years in large part because his father had been involved in an adulterous relationship. When he spoke up, all he said was "I see nothing wrong with the Torah's penalty." His words brought the rest of the class - who

knew of his background - to immediate silence.

This week's Torah portion, Yitro, tells of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Why did God single out these ten? In analyzing the Decalogue, many commentaries note how the Ten Commandments focus primarily on relationships: between God and man, between man and man, between children and parents. Central, to any successful relationship is fidelity, loyalty. Without that, any relationship is bound to flounder.

Let's examine some classical commentaries on the commandment prohibiting adultery.

Nachmanides (13th century Spain) describes our relationships as a "ladder of love." He says that a person must first love himself before he can successfully love his spouse. Then, if he has formed a solid relationship with his spouse, this will help develop his relationship with the Almighty.

The converse, however, can also be true. A man who is disloyal to his spouse will most likely be disloyal to his God as well.

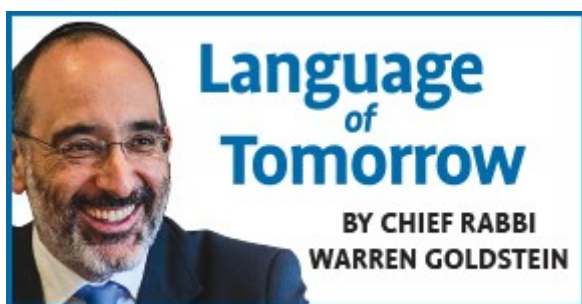
The Midrash Mechilta says this idea is alluded to by the placement of different commandments on the two tablets. The seventh commandment, the prohibition against adultery, appears opposite the second commandment, "Do not have other gods before me." Suggests the Mechilta, this positioning is not accidental. It is to hint to us that one who is disloyal to one's spouse will eventually be disloyal to God.

Another Midrash observes that the Hebrew

word for adultery, *"tinaf,"* can be split into two words, *"ten af,"* which translates as "giving anger." The Midrash explains that adultery is an action particularly abhorrent to the Almighty - which particularly invokes His anger. The hallmark of the Jewish People has historically been the stability of family life. One who commits adultery violates and ignores this hallowed tradition.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century), says that adultery also violates the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." Adultery is a grievous sin against one's neighbor - treating the neighbor in a way that one would not want oneself to be treated.

Maimonides explains adultery in powerful, eternal terms. He says that the entire purpose of creation is to establish *"Shalom Bayit"* - harmony between husband and wife. The adulterer destroys that harmony and, in the process, undermines the very purpose of creation.



Why the Giving of the Torah is a Turning Point in History

What are the key turning points in history? What are the events that changed the world beyond recognition and whose impact was felt by everyone, everywhere? You could talk about

the invention of the electric light bulb, or Gutenberg's printing press. You could mention the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, which set off World War I, and led to World War II, or the French and American Revolutions, or the fall of the Berlin Wall. More recent examples could be 9/11 or the 2008 Crash or the invention of the Internet.

But, in this week's parsha, Yitro, we encounter history's single biggest turning point, a moment that changed everything, for everyone, forever: the giving of the Torah by God to Moses and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. From this moment onwards, nothing would be the same. The Torah had entered the world.

But, what is the Torah really? And why is its impact so powerful and far-reaching? We know that the Torah comprises 613 distinct commandments - the mitzvot - but what is their meaning and purpose?

The starting point is to understand that the Torah's total focus is the human being. This is expressed most vividly in the Talmud (Shabbat 88b), which records how, when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from God, the angels vehemently protested, asking how God could consider giving away His most treasured possession - the Torah - to a creature of flesh and blood. God told Moses to answer the angels, and Moses proceeded to list the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, Who took you out of Egypt"; "Honour your father and your mother"; "Don't murder"; "Don't steal"; "Don't commit adultery". "Do you have a father and mother?" Moses asked the angels. "Have you been enslaved in Egypt? Have you passion or jealousy or greed, or any evil inclination?" In so doing, Moses clearly

demonstrated that the Torah was intended for human beings. Or, put another way, human beings are created in order to fulfil the mitzvot of the Torah.

But, how do the mitzvot work?

The Torah calls the first human being Adam, which comes from the Hebrew word adama, meaning "earth" or "ground". What is the connection between the two? The Maharal explains that humans are similar to the ground in one essential respect: they are both pure potential. Whether or not a piece of land will produce fruit depends on what is done with it. Even the most fertile piece of land will not produce fruit if it is left to lie fallow; it needs to be ploughed, fertilised and cultivated. So too, the human being is pure potential, and to live a fruitful, productive life requires great and continuous efforts. We arrive in this world as pure potential and, through the process of life, we actualise that potential. And it's up to us. We have been given free choice to turn that potential into personal growth and spiritual greatness, into becoming refined, elevated, moral and holy - but we can also choose to squander it and simply let it lie dormant.

The Maharal (Tiferet Yisrael, chapters 6-8) says the 613 mitzvot are a blueprint for us to "create ourselves" - to access and actualise our Godly potential. The mitzvot have been specifically designed by our Creator to catalyse our latent spiritual energy. At its heart, this process of self-actualisation - of converting potential into actuality through performing the mitzvot - is an act of sublime creativity.

What are the mechanics here? How exactly do the mitzvot unleash our Divine potential? The Maharal explains that the mitzvot have been

formulated by the Creator of everything, and therefore have the spiritual energy to develop the full potential of the human being. There is a natural bridge between Torah and the soul. With every new mitzvah we perform, we create a corresponding extra dimension within our soul. In essence, by living in tune with Torah, we live in tune with our soul; by living a true Torah life, we nurture and expand our spiritual selves.

Living in harmony with the soul brings with it a deep sense of spiritual connection and tranquillity of spirit. Indeed, the Midrash says the union between body and soul is fraught with tension. These two constituent parts of the human being come from different worlds, and have different needs. The Midrash illustrates this with the analogy of a marriage between a farmer and a princess; the farmer brings the princess all of the produce from the field that is so precious to him, but which is meaningless to her. So too, the body brings the soul all of the physical pleasures of this world, but the soul remains empty and unsatisfied. The soul originates from the palace of God and requires the goods of the spiritual world to feel satisfied and fulfilled. It requires a life of meaning and good deeds, and a connection to God, which the Torah provides. This is what gives us satisfaction and pleasure at a deep level.

There are many ways to demonstrate this. For example, we've all experienced the warm glow of satisfaction that comes from giving to others. A recent research project conducted by Michael Norton of Harvard Business School found that, regardless of income level, those people who spent money on others reported greater happiness, while those who spent more on themselves did not.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is the feeling of guilt - the deep sense of spiritual unease we experience - when we do things that are not in harmony with the soul.

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, known as the Ramban, explores another way the mitzvot are catalysts to unleash the full potential of a person. He emphasises that the mitzvot are not for God's benefit, even though He commanded us to perform them. He says God gave us the mitzvot for our own sakes - to mould us into better people. According to the Ramban, each mitzvah refines us in a particular way. He gives the example of the mitzvah to send away the mother bird before taking the chicks or the eggs from the nest, and how this helps us cultivate the quality of compassion. He also refers to the mitzvot of commemorating the great miracles of Jewish history. These are not, he says, for glorifying God, but rather for our own sake, so we should understand and appreciate these formative moments of our people, and so we can reinforce our faith and clarify our worldview.

According to this, the mitzvot are a comprehensive programme of thought and action designed by God to help us become wise, compassionate, refined, loving, idealistic, giving, courageous, spiritual, ethical and holy. To help us become better people in every conceivable way.

So, from the moment in history when we received the Torah, life would never be the same. From that moment on, we had a blueprint for how to live life, how to love life, and how to fulfil our awesome potential.



Life's Blessings

The giving of the Torah is considered to be one of the most far-reaching episodes known to humanity. Whilst God Himself utters the first two commandments,¹ the magnitude of God's voice is so great that the Jewish people beg for Moses to speak in place of God, lest they die.² This is the first and only recorded time that God reveals Himself to an entire nation - a pinnacle of human history - and yet, rather than giving this episode a grandiose name or even referencing the Ten Commandments, it is named after a relatively minor character from the story, who happens to be a convert - Yitro. Why? What is so great about Yitro that he merits to have this extraordinary section named after him?

The whole world sees the amazing miracle of the splitting of the Reed Sea. The Midrash says that every other body of water in the world was also separated at that time.³ The impact of witnessing this supernatural event, however, dulled, and eventually people began to forget. This unfortunate phenomenon occurs on a micro-level almost daily. We are constantly surrounded by everyday miracles; from the birth of a baby to the blossoming of a flower. Yet we walk around as if everything is normal, carrying out day to day activities, blind to the miracles taking place all around us.

The key to living an enriched life can be found in the character of Yitro. In contrast to the generation around him, Yitro internalizes and appreciates the greatness of the miracles he has witnessed. His exposure to the spiritual fosters within him an increased sensitivity and awareness of similar experiences. So when the Jewish people are victorious in their battle against Amalek, he immediately understands that this was not simply due to the might of the Jewish army and he acknowledges that this must be the work of God.

This unique section of the Torah is always read around the time of the festival of *Tu bishvat*, the new year or 'birthday' for the trees.⁴ Just as on a person's birthday, we celebrate their existence, reminisce about their younger years and share blessings for their future, similarly the Jewish calendar has identified an appropriate date for celebrating the existence of trees. On *Tu bishvat* we celebrate the beauties of nature, we take wonder in the new blossoms flowering after a dormant winter season and we marvel at the magic of a bee pollinating a flower. In acknowledging the way that a tiny seed can grow into a magnificent tree, we acknowledge the simple everyday natural miracles that underpin the world.

It is therefore no coincidence that the miraculous and supernatural story of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai is read precisely around the time of *Tu bishvat*. The wonder and inspiration felt in that moment of revelation should be the same wonder and inspiration we experience when witnessing the everyday miracles of life and the world around us. And perhaps it is for this very reason that this portion of the Torah is called Yitro.

Having witnessed the miracle of the splitting of the sea, and the Jewish people's miraculous victory over Amalek, Yitro begins to realize that his whole existence is one majestic miracle. It is relatively easy to marvel at supernatural phenomena, but to take that wonder and superimpose it into everyday life, to notice the miracles hidden beneath the surface of nature, and to appreciate God's role in our everyday world, brings gratitude to an altogether different level.

From this viewpoint of wonder, this moment of gratitude for all that is around him, Yitro converts to Judaism. He journeys forward with his family and joins the Jewish nation. His decision reflects the underlying tenet that a prerequisite for receiving the Torah and living a life of Judaism is to be grateful for everything one has, to acknowledge daily miracles and to integrate their meaning into the fabric of our lives. Yitro's attitude towards the wonders of the world, and his subsequent conversion to Judaism, is a blueprint for the mindset required by the Jewish People as they stand and prepare to receive the Torah.

The sages encourage every Jew, every morning to begin the day with the *Mode ani* prayer: *Mode ani lefanecha melech hai vekhayam*, which literally means 'grateful I am before you, living and Eternal King.' The order of the wording is strange as grammatically it should read *ani modeh lefanecha* i.e. 'I am grateful before you'. So why is the order reversed? The answer reveals a fundamental tenet in Judaism. How can one begin their entire day with the word *ani*, 'I', implying a focus on one's self? Even if grammatically inappropriate, it is a far greater value to begin our day with *mode* reflecting gratitude, in order to predicate the day

on appreciation, rather than focusing on self-centredness.

The message of Yitro and perhaps the reason this portion is named after him, is that the grandiose morality and groundbreaking content of the Ten Commandments is predicated upon a basic level of appreciation. Practicing as a Jew involves allowing gratitude and appreciation to infuse every facet of our life. This finds expression in daily blessings over food, sights, smells and actions. In this way we affirm the ideal that acknowledging and making blessings over life is the greatest way to transform life into the ultimate blessing.

SUMMARY:

Standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Children of Israel are on the brink of receiving the Torah. One would expect this momentous unparalleled event in history, to be highlighted as special, with a majestic name relating to its historical and significant meaning. Yet our sages choose to name this section of the Torah, Yitro. This puzzling choice presents profound insights into the type of mindset that the Jewish Nation needs to develop as a prerequisite for receiving Torah and embarking on a relationship with God.

1. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Makkot* 24a.
2. *Exodus*, 20:15-18.
3. *Exodus Rabba* 21:6.
4. Mishna, Tractate *Rosh Hashana* 1:1.



Being, Being, Being

It often comes as a surprise to people to find out that Shabbat is one of the Ten Commandments. People understand that to murder, theft, adultery and idol worship are all anathemas to Judaism. But to keep Shabbat? Why is it so important as to merit a place in the big ten?

I have heard it said that, throughout the ages, more than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews. I think it is very true. On Shabbat, one is prohibited from even thinking of business, let alone talking or doing. One cannot use a car. One cannot use a phone. One cannot use a computer. One cannot cook. One cannot go shopping. It is a day completely free from distractions. A day in which one steps completely out of the rat race of modern society. Instead of doing, doing, doing, a person starts being, being, being.

So what can a person do to fill a day if there are no Blackberries, cars, computers, shops, or business?

Well, for a start, you can spend a lot of time with your family. And you can do it without any distraction. Since you can't just watch TV or go out shopping with them, you are forced to spend the time doing what we often avoid at all costs - talking! Relating to them. Or how about spending some time enjoying this gorgeous world we are all fortunate enough to be a part

of. Go for a walk, smell the fresh air, look at the trees and the flowers. Feel at one with your environment.

But the greatest thing of all that Shabbat forces one to do is to stop and think, to reflect, to self-examine. What am I living for? What am I doing it all for? Am I focused, or am I running on an auto-pilot that long ago diverted from the course I set it on? Am I running somewhere, or am I just distracted by the experience of running?

Shabbat is a time to think. It is a time to remind ourselves of what we are living for. Without a day that forces you to stop and think, you will never do it. You will get caught up and very busy with life - so busy that you completely forget what life is all about. People often think of Shabbat as restrictive. Obviously, they have never experienced it properly. I know of nothing more liberating. Yes, restrict your actions - but. In order that you can liberate your mind, your heart and your soul.

And in a curious way, this applies on a national level as well. Shabbat is one of the Ten Commandments. Because without it, the Jewish people would have long ago forgotten who we really are.

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