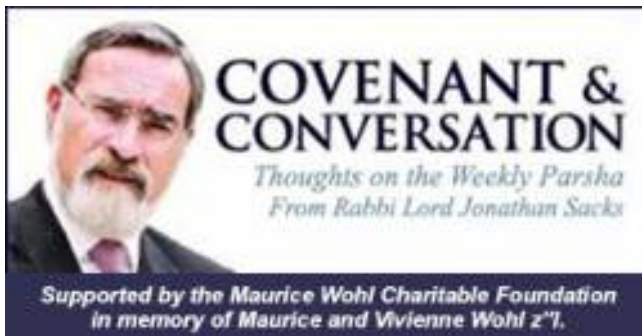


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A Nation of Leaders

This week's parsha consists of two episodes that seem to constitute a study in contrasts. The first is in chapter 18. Yitro, Moses' father-in-law and a Midianite Priest, gives Moses his first lesson in leadership. In the second episode, 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 here and it is an important one. The forms and structures of governance are not specifically Jewish. They are part of *chochmah*, the universal wisdom of humankind. Jews have known many forms of leadership: by Prophets, 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, however, is the principle of the covenant at Sinai, that Israel is the chosen people, 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.*¹ 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 both episodes, to Yitro and to the revelation at Sinai, namely the *delegation, distribution and democratisation* 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 (2:18), 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 holy² (Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, called Jews “a nation of philosophers,” reflecting the same idea.³).

Yet in what sense were Jews ever a Kingdom of Priests? The *Kohanim* 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 *Kohanim*, “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.” (Shavuot 39a) Jews

were the people who did not leave leadership to a single individual, however holy or exalted, or to an elite. Instead, every one of them 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 democratised.

That is what made Jews historically hard to lead. As Chaim Weizmann, 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, this 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 they make up an extraordinarily high percentage of leaders in any given field of human endeavour.

To be a Jew is to be called on to lead.⁴

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. How can we be both followers and leaders?
2. Do you think that, as a people, we need to prioritise being better followers or greater leaders?
3. How will you answer the call to lead?

NOTES

1. For the original illustration of this idea, please see Rabbi Sacks’ comments on Shifrah and Puah in “Women as Leaders (Shemot 5781)”.
2. This idea reappeared in Protestant Christianity in the phrase “the priesthood of all believers,” during the age of the Puritans, the Christians who took most seriously the principles of what they called the Old Testament.

3. See Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:22.
4. In the upcoming chapter for parshat Kedoshim, we will delve further into the role of the follower in Judaism.



A Holy Detour

We may say that the Exodus had two inter-related purposes. The first was to bring hundreds of years of slavery and suffering to an end. The second was to return the Jews to their ancestral homeland, to the land promised to their forefathers.

From the outset, these two objectives were intertwined in the vision and communication which Avraham had received, and which forged a covenant between him, his descendants, and God (Bereishit 15:13-21). The covenant stated that after years of hardship, the Land of Israel would be ours. However, the stop-over at Mount Sinai was mentioned only generations later, to Moshe:

"... And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." (Shmot 3:12)

The nature of this lay-over at Sinai was never explained; we cannot help but wonder if the Jews even knew that it was on their itinerary.

During the various exchanges with Pharaoh, Moshe spoke of serving God and of celebrating a festival in the desert, but readers of the text might be tempted to think that this was a mere pretext, aimed at convincing Pharaoh to grant the Jews a three-day furlough. Moshe argued that it would be impossible for the Jews to worship God in Egypt; in fact, that is precisely what they did, in the final scene before the Exodus: On Passover Eve, the Israelites sacrificed to God and celebrated the first Jewish festival - in Egypt. Was it really necessary to go out into the desert to commune with God? Alternatively, couldn't the emancipated slaves have proceeded directly to their final destination, and received the Torah there? Was there some intrinsic reason to visit Mount Sinai?

Moshe was familiar with the place. He had experienced a personal revelation there; it was the place where he had received his "marching orders" - and more: It was a place where he had witnessed something wondrous, something that was beyond the laws of nature. He had been informed that this particular place is "holy ground" (Shmot 3:5).

The Jews, too, would experience a revelation there. They, too, would receive their "marching orders," and they, too, would become familiar with holiness, specifically at Mount Sinai.

While we cannot imagine Judaism without law, the stop at Sinai was far more than merely the location where the law was handed down to us. The choice of venue for the Revelation of the Law was very specific; the holiness of Sinai was an integral element of the Law they would receive, because this was not merely a set of laws

that aimed at regulating society's proper functioning. If the Jewish people had illusions that they would be a nation like every other nation, that belief was dispelled as soon as they received their instructions for the preparation to receive the Law.

Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy **nation**.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."
 (Shmot 19:5-6)

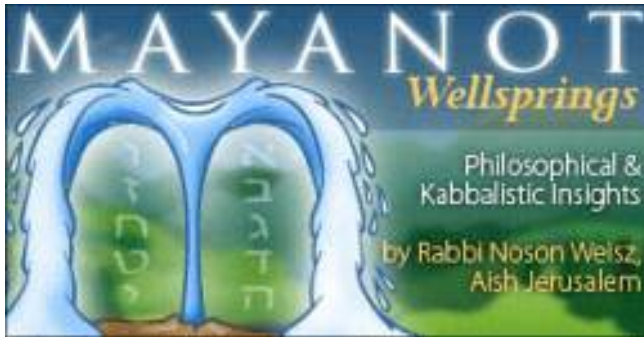
Something new would become the center of this new community: Holiness, the relationship to holiness, the awareness of the holy. The preparations to receive the Torah centered on holiness, because the nation had to become holy in order to achieve the awareness of holiness. They would become not just a nation, but a holy nation, a kingdom of kohanim.

The commandments they subsequently received were not exclusively concerned with serving God in the classic sense of ritual, prayer, or sacrifice. It is true that some of the Ten Commandments centered on service of God, including belief in one God, and a prohibition against idolatry. But becoming holy included emulating God by observing the Shabbat. It included unexpected things, such as honoring one's parents. And it included laws that deal with creating a just society. In a radical departure from other belief systems, the Law they would receive at Sinai described murder, theft, and coveting others'

possessions as transgressions not only against one's fellow man, but as transgressions that concern God. The Torah proscribes these acts because we are holy - just as holy as the potential victims of these sins - and because the God who has designated us as priests demands this standard of behavior.

The experience of slavery made us sensitive to the plight of the weak and disenfranchised. As former slaves, the Jews might have anticipated that the laws they would receive would be designed to promote a long-term educational plan of sensitivity to others, particularly the disadvantaged, disenfranchised, weaker members of society. But the stop at Sinai did much more than that: It introduced the consciousness of holiness to the entire community. This unique consciousness imparts a completely new, radical approach to human society. The Torah was given to us at Sinai, at a place of holiness, and not anywhere else, in order to teach us that treating one another with decency is part of serving God. That is the how and the why of being a nation of *kohanim*, a holy nation.

The key to Judaism, then, is not secular humanism. Quite the opposite: Judaism, in a nutshell, is a commitment to holiness. This includes seeing the holiness in others, and dedicating ourselves to respecting the holiness of others. It includes dedication to creating and sustaining a vibrant, holy society. This is the concept that had to be internalized before we entered the Land of Israel, so that we could live as a holy People in a holy Land.



Tablets for Living

The Torah contains 613 commandments. But, on Mount Sinai – the only occasion in history when the entire Jewish people had a face-to-face meeting with God – God chose to emphasize ten.

The first two of the Ten Commandments we heard from the mouth of God directly without Moses as an intermediary, whereas the other eight we heard through Moses.

According to many commentators the first one isn't really a commandment at all, but more in the nature of an introductory statement to all the commandments. But there is a special common denominator that unifies these ten and sets them apart from all the others; they are the only commandments that appear on the "Tablets of the Law."

The significance of being inscribed on the tablets is explained thus by Moses:

"He (God) told you His covenant that He commanded you to observe, the ten declarations, and he inscribed them on two stone tablets." (Deut. 4:13)

These ten declarations have a dual aspect. Aside from being commandments in their own right like the rest of the 613, they constitute a special covenant between God and Israel. We refer to them in the Passover Haggadah as the "Two Tablets of the Covenant." It is this covenantal aspect that we propose to explore in this essay.

THE COVENANT

A covenant is not some spooky mystical bond, but merely a fancy term for a contract. Every contract is a negotiated agreement between two parties. Generally speaking, when such an agreement is reached, it is recorded and each of the parties gets a notarized copy so that they have a record of their contractual rights and obligations. By describing the Ten Commandments as a covenant, the Torah informs us that the tablets represent a copy of the contractual agreement between God and ourselves. The tablets we received at Sinai constitute Israel's notarized copy.

But this seems like a startling idea. In what sense can commandments, which are basically orders issued by God, be described as negotiated agreements?

To better understand the contractual aspect of these commandments, let us review the process of negotiations that led to their culmination.

THE OFFER

When Moses ascended the mount for the first time after the Jewish people encamped at its feet, God sent him back to the Jews with the following message:

*You have seen what I did to Egypt,
and that I have borne you on the*

wings of eagles and brought you to Me. And now, if you hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all peoples, for Mine is the entire world. You shall be to Me a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:4-6).

This speech contains God's offer.

Nachmanides explains what is being offered: The entire world belongs to God but He placed the other nations under the rule of angels. A beloved treasure is something that one never allows to escape from one's own careful vigilance. God offered the Jewish people His personal attention. He would attend to the affairs of the Jewish people Himself, instead of handing them over to the jurisdiction of angels as He does with other nations.

But this offer of personal Divine jurisdiction actually contains two parts. Aside from the promise of care in this world, it also offers an entry to the next world. For a treasured object never loses its value and remains permanently precious. Someone precious to God, Who is eternal, will remain with God for eternity. If Israel takes up God's offer and becomes His treasured object, that automatically extends the deal into the realms of forever.

These two ideas are contained in the two phrases "a kingdom of priests," a reference to this world, and "a holy nation," which is a reference to the next. Note that the word "holy" in Hebrew always implies separation from physicality. Thus a "holy

nation" is a nation in a non-physical sense, an other-worldly nation.

THE ACCEPTANCE

Moses came and summoned the elders of the people, and put before them all these words that God had commanded him. The entire people responded together and said, "Everything that God has spoken we shall do!" (Exodus 19:7-8)

This verse describes the Jewish people's acceptance of God's offer.

Moses presented the proposition to the elders so that they might circulate among the people, obtain their reactions and deliberate their response, but the people pre-empted this deliberation process by enthusiastically declaring their immediate unanimous acceptance with a single voice.

Obviously the Jews thought this was a great offer. They immediately accepted it without prior deliberation. But there must be some heavy strings attached.

Indeed there are – the strings are the commandments themselves.

To enter the covenant you must accept the Ten Commandments. But what is so difficult about these commandments? A surface reading shows nothing controversial or difficult to observe.

Logic directs us to take a closer look at these commandments for the answer.

It is immediately apparent that they are divided into two parts. Indeed Jewish tradition teaches that there are two tablets: 1) one corresponding to

obligations toward God, and 2) the other consisting of obligations towards one's fellow man. But if we examine them closely we can see that they are related.

Let us refer to the two tablets for the sake of simplicity as God's tablet and as man's tablet, and look at them in pairs.

I AM THE LORD / DON'T MURDER

The first commandment on God's tablet is the acceptance of God as our ruler. He took us out of the bondage of Egypt so that we might become His servants instead of the servants of Pharaoh. Parallel to this commandment on man's tablet we find the injunction against murder. The implication is clear. The act of murder represents a violation in spirit of the first commandment on the God's tablet as well.

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God He made man.
(Genesis 9:6)

The prohibition against murder is based on the fact that man is God's image. When you take a human life you are destroying God's image.

If a man shall have committed a sin whose judgment is death, he shall be put to death and you shall hang him on a gallows. His body shall not remain for the night on the gallows, rather you shall surely bury him on that day, for a hanging person is a curse of God... (Deut. 21: 22-23)

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 46b) says that to murder a human being is akin to murdering God's twin. No

greater violation of the spirit of the first commandment on God's tablet is imaginable.

HAVE NO OTHER GODS / DON'T COMMIT ADULTERY

The second commandment on the God tablet is the injunction against idolatry. On man's tablet we find the injunction against adultery in second place.

The injunction against idols is a prohibition against obtaining God's bounty contrary to His will, by getting it second hand. The idolater wants to obtain a portion of Divine bounty not according to God's policy. As part of the grant of free will to man, God makes this possible.

The institution of marriage, whose sanctity the sin of adultery violates, is God's bounty against loneliness. The human symbol of the love that extinguishes this loneliness is the female. God explained the creation of woman thus:

It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper corresponding to him. (Genesis 2:18)

God did so by splitting the human being in two, thus curing the existential angst of solitude. Both the male and female share in this bounty equally, but she is the symbol of the Divine cure. In God's scheme every marriage is designed with the idea that the partners serve as each other's complement.

Adultery is the taking of this Divine bounty against God's policy and will. This cure for the human angst was intended for a different recipient. Thus adultery parallels idolatry.

DON'T SWEAR FALSELY / DON'T STEAL

The third commandment on God's tablet is the prohibition against false oaths, which parallels the prohibition against theft on man's tablet.

God is the source of all reality. Substituting a false reality for the one that God established is a perversion of God's work. The false oath is an affirmation that God is associated with a reality that He did not intend.

Just as God is the source of all reality, He is the source of all bounty. Something intended for Reuben cannot help to sustain Shimon. If God intended it for Reuben, Shimon's appropriation of it is also a perversion of true reality.

If not for the fact that God's connection with reality is concealed by nature to allow man free choice, no one could possibly reach out his hand to take what belongs to someone else. The hand would wither as it stretched and the stolen object would disappear as soon as it landed in the wrong hand.

KEEP SHABBAT / DON'T TESTIFY FALSELY

The fourth commandment on God's tablet is Shabbat observance. Paralleling it on man's tablet is the prohibition against testifying falsely.

Sabbath observance is a testimony to God's creation. If God is the creator He is also the source of all creative power in the world. Everything that man creates and accomplishes is in reality a channeling of God's creative power. If the world were not designed to conceal God's presence so as to allow man free will, the laws of Shabbat would be an accurate depiction of

creation as it really appears. Only God creates, man merely enjoys the bounty of God's creative power.

The failure to observe the Sabbath is an act of false testimony. This false testimony claims that there is an uncreated, purposeless world with no final destination.

Bearing false witness against a fellow human being places one's fellow in a world that was not created by the channeling of God's creative power. The false witness created this alternative universe in his testimony. Thus the lack of Shabbat observance and the bearing of false witness are exact parallels.

HONOR YOUR PARENTS / DON'T COVET

The final commandment on God's tablet is the commandment to respect one's parents. Paralleling this commandment on man's tablet is the prohibition to covet your neighbor's wife or anything belonging to your neighbor.

Instead of beginning with God's tablet and switching over to man's, let's take the opposite approach on this one.

Ibn Ezra asks a provocative question about the prohibition to covet: How is it possible to command a person not to desire something that is inherently desirable?

We can easily comprehend the prohibition against actualizing illicit desires in real life, but these prohibitions concerning actualization are already stated in the first four prohibitions on man's tablet. How can we relate to a prohibition against desire itself?

He answers with a metaphor. By the rules of human nature, the peasant covets his fellow peasant's wife and not the king's daughter. When he sees the princess passing by in her carriage, even if he finds her beautiful, he does not covet her. She is beyond his reach. Any thoughts he may have about her are in the nature of pure fantasies rather than actualizable desires.

If a person is properly oriented in the world, everything that belongs to someone else is in the same relationship to him as the unobtainable princess is to the peasant. God gives everyone the things they need to have in order to successfully conduct their lives. It is not circumstance that determines what each person has; rather this is determined by Divine decisions, which are based on rational considerations of what is beneficial.

If the things that I desire are within my permitted reach, then I am entitled to assume that God placed them there deliberately, because I really can use them to achieve the goals that He set for me. If they are not within my permitted reach, I should conclude that they are not good for me to have and my only link to them is in the harmless fantasy world of my imagination.

Coveting things that belong to other people is the clearest danger signal that life is out of focus. In the world according to the Ten Commandments, every person is unique in the eyes of God, every person is a covenantal partner. Each such partner lives in his own world surrounded by the things that he specifically needs to test his commitment to the covenantal relationship and to help him grow into his full potential as God's partner.

The world is not a jungle where we all compete for the same prize, which properly belongs according to jungle law to the swiftest and the most able. In such a world whatever anyone else may have is a clear possibility for me as well, especially if I consider myself more fit. In the jungle world it is permissible to covet anything no matter who has it. As long as you go about taking it away from its present owner in ways that society doesn't outlaw, you are doing no wrong. The person who covets is living in the wrong world.

If we move back to God's tablet now, we will find the same idea expressed in the commandment to honor one's parents. This commandment has nothing to do with conventional respect and gratitude. For the vast majority of us who have had the good fortune to be raised in normal loving homes, the feelings of gratitude toward our parents are an inseparable part of our orientation to the world. There is no need to reinforce human nature through commandments. But the honor meant here is another matter altogether.

Honor is assigned on the basis of what you consider important in life, not on the basis of gratitude. Every person feels the pull of the brave new world out there. The lure of new ideas, of different lifestyles is a very powerful force within all of us. We tend to patronize the world of our parents as being outmoded and old-fashioned. We feel the urge to spread our wings and fly off in new directions.

But the world God placed us in is the world of our parents. Three partners join forces in the creation of a person: God, his father and his mother

(Talmud, Nidah 31a). God does not choose His partners at random. If He selected these particular partners, He wants the child to be subjected to their world. The values passed on by one's parents create the proper background to one's life, selected by God Himself. The parents must be honored, not merely loved.

Coveting what belongs to another and not honoring one's parents have the same common source, the belief that one is in the wrong world.

IN CONCLUSION

The predominant theme of the tablets is that it is impossible to separate one's interactions with other people from one's interactions with God. In the world of the covenant, where Israel becomes a nation of priests and a holy people, the sanctity of God spreads out to embrace all aspects of life. There is no getting away from Him.

The covenant is not about obedience to God's orders, and the adoption of certain customs and practices. The covenant is about the willingness to inhabit a common, shared world with God where every aspect and relationship in life is tinged by the fact that it takes place in His all-embracing presence. For someone who desires to live in his own space, the covenant is an intolerable burden.

It actually turns out that God's offer to make us into a nation of priests and a holy people is a double-edged sword. We must be willing to become a nation of priests and a holy people as well. This entails inhabiting a world where it is impossible to draw any distinct lines between the areas designated as sacred and those that can be considered secular and ordinary.

We become such holy priests only by allowing the two tablets of the law to converge into a single covenantal framework. The strings attached to God's offer are the chains that bind together the secular and the sacred into a single coherent life.



The Truth Seekers

Moshe and his wife Tzipporah, the daughter of Yisro, had two sons. The names of the children tell the story of his wandering before he returned to Egypt as Hashem's messenger to redeem the Jewish people (Shemos 18:3-4). "The name of the first was Gershom, because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land.' The name of the other was Eliezer, because 'the Lord of my father helped me and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword.'"

The origin of Eliezer's name is given directly, "because 'the Lord of my father helped me and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword.'" But the origin of Gershom's name - "because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land'" - features the seemingly extraneous words "he said." Why couldn't the Torah have simply stated "because 'I was a stranger in a strange land'"?

The Baal Haturim explains that these words allude to a Midrash in *Parashas Shemos*. The Midrash states that Yisro gave Moshe permission to marry Tzipporah only on the condition that he deliver his firstborn son to be trained for the priesthood of *avodah zarah*. Moshe had no choice but to comply and allow Yisro to have his firstborn son, who turned out to be Gershom. The words "because he said" allude to Yisro. Why did Moshe have to give Gershom to Yisro? Because Yisro had reminded him that he was a stranger in a strange land and was not in a position to reject his prospective father-in-law's conditions to the marriage.

The Baal Haturim further explains that Moshe believed this was the right thing to do. He wanted to bring Yisro close to Hashem and the Jewish people, and he felt he could accomplish this by marrying Tzipporah. Even though he had to agree to Yisro's terrible condition, Moshe believed his father-in-law would ultimately come around.

The truly puzzling question is: What was Yisro thinking?

According to the Midrash, Yisro was a real truth seeker. He came to the realization that the *avodah zarah* of Midian was nonsense. He then traveled all over the world to investigate the cults of different kinds of *avodah zarah*, and he rejected all of them. Then he returned to Midian, resigned his high office in the indigenous cult and renounced *avodah zarah* altogether.

Yet here is the mystery. He placed the condition on Moshe's marriage to Tzipporah after he renounced all *avodah zarah*. Why would he insist that his grandson be trained for the priesthood of

the Midianite *avodah zarah* when he had already determined it was worthless? It makes no sense!

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, *Rosh Yeshivah* of the Mirrer Yeshivah in Jerusalem, offers a penetrating insight into Yisro's mentality. Apparently, Yisro was the ancient counterpart of a 60's flower child. He believed that the best way to arrive at the truth was through a journey of discovery, just as he had done. Yisro believed that the Torah was definitely the truth. But he had learned this important information by experiencing what all other cultures had to offer and determining that the Torah was superior.

This was also how he wanted his grandson to discover the truth. He did not want him brought up in one narrow ideology, sheltered from all other cultures and ideologies. Better that he should use the inquiring mind he would inherit from his grandfather and then follow in his grandfather's footsteps, starting in the priesthood of Midian and then eliminating one false ideology after the other until he discovered the truth of the Torah. This would be intellectually fulfilling and satisfying. His grandson would know he had made his own decision, and he would be comfortable with it.

But this is not the way of the Torah. We do *mitzvot* because we are obligated to do them, because we are servants of Hashem obligated to obey Him, not because we choose to do these things because we have decided they represent the truth. If Gershom was the son of Moshe, he did not have the luxury of going on a journey of discovery, even it were somehow guaranteed that he would arrive at the appropriate destiny at the

end of his journey. Jewish children cannot nibble at the smorgasbord of the ideologies of the world. They have a duty to serve Hashem. This was something Yisro simply did not understand.

Let us take this thought a little further. The Torah introduces (Shemos 20:1) the Ten Commandments with the words, "And the Lord spoke all these things, saying." Rashi cites a Midrash that at first Hashem spoke "all these things" simultaneously, something that the human brain cannot absorb or comprehend. Only afterward did He articulate the Commandments individually.

What was Hashem's purpose in first speaking them all at once if no one could understand what He was saying anyway?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik points to the difference between the first five commandments and the second five. The first five relate to *bein adam laMakom*, the relationship between man and his Creator. Everyone understands that these decrees are of Divine origin. But the second five, the set that relates to *bein adam lachaveiro*, the relationship of man to his fellow man, may not seem to be Divine in origin. "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not lie. You shall not covet." We think we understand these Commandments on a different level. They appear to be the rational attempts of society to regulate and protect itself. Do we need a Divine decree to tell us these things? They seem self-explanatory and self-evident. After all, what kind of society would sanction murder and adultery?

Although they may seem logical to us, that logic is not the rationale for these Commandments. We do not refrain from murder and adultery only because it makes sense to us. We refrain because Hashem has forbidden these things. That is why Hashem first spoke all the Commandments at once. It was to impress upon us that they are all the same, that they are all unfathomable Divine decrees that we must obey without question because such is the will of Hashem.

In today's society we see clearly the difference between a secular prohibition of murder and a Divine one. If murder is forbidden because we consider it logical, then changing attitudes can permit abortion, euthanasia and even infanticide, which is not unheard of in certain societies. But when the prohibition is Divine, it is absolute. We do not obey because it makes sense to us. We obey because we bow to Hashem's will.

Yisro came to Judaism through rational investigation. Therefore, he made the serious error of directing his grandson toward the priesthood of the Midianite cult. He wanted him to investigate for himself, to find the system that appealed to his reason. That is not the way of the Torah. We only apply reason to recognizing Hashem. Afterwards, it is all obedience

REMINDERS OF EXILE

Both of Moshe's sons were named as reminders of the trials and tribulations he had experienced during his lifetime (Shemos 18:3-4). "The name of the first was Gershon, because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land.' The name of the other

was Eliezer, because the Lord of my father helped me and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword."

Why did Moshe choose these names?

The Pardes Yosef explains that Moshe wanted to ensure that his children grew up with a sense of reality. Growing up in the placid environment of Midian, they could easily have developed a false sense of security. What were these children lacking? They lived with their parents in comfort and peace. They had grandparents. They were respected and honored. Their lives were as near to perfect as could be, but there are no guarantees in life. Jewish children have to be prepared. They have to be aware that they are always in exile, that persecution, hunger, chaos, terror can appear suddenly out of nowhere. Everything can change in one day.

By choosing these names for his children, Moshe was reinforcing this message in their hearts. Look at me, he was saying. I used to be a prince in Pharaoh's palace. I had everything imaginable. I was a child of privilege. Then everything turned over, and I had to flee for my life, and if the Lord of my father had not rescued me, Pharaoh's executioner would have killed me.

The Pardes Yosef brings the story of the Jews of Spain as an illustration. There was a time when the lives of the Jews in Spain were close to perfect, a true golden age. They were secure, respected and prosperous. They lived in a warm and beautiful land. Their leaders, such as Rav Shmuel Hanagid, were the honored advisers of kings and sultans. The Torah flourished in their midst. And then things changed. Forces hostile to the Jewish people gained supremacy. The Jews

lost favor. Terrible pogroms broke out, and a century of turbulence ended with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 on Tishah b'Av. Could anyone living during the golden age have imagined it would come to this?

Had the Pardes Yosef lived to see the Holocaust, he could have brought an even better illustration of the tables turning on the Jewish people. Things may have been very good for Jews in Germany in the 19th century, but they were still in exile, as time would so painfully tell.

Here in America, we also live under the illusion that we are no longer in exile. This is truly a wonderful country, a merciful country, a blessed country, and may Hashem protect and watch over this country forever. My father, Mr. David Frand, of blessed memory, a true and honest Jew, would buy United States Savings Bonds when they were paying 3.5 percent. "Can't you get a better return on your money?" I once asked him when I was still a youngster. My father told me that the United States took him in when he was running away from Frankfort in 1939, and he felt obligated to acknowledge the favor by buying government bonds even at rates as low as 3.5 percent. That is how we must feel about this country. And yet, there are no guarantees.

The Talmud relates (*Bava Basra* 73b) in the name of Rabbah bar bar Channah, "We were once traveling on a boat and saw what turned out to be a fish. It was so huge that sand collected on its back, and we thought it was an island. We got off the boat and stepped onto this supposed island. We baked and cooked. But when it got too hot for the fish, he rolled over, and we fell off. Had we



not been close to the boat, we all would have drowned."

According to the Maharsha, this story is a parable. We are all adrift on the stormy sea of exile, and suddenly we see an island. We think we have found a safe haven. We cook and bake and buy houses and made weddings and bar mitzvahs. We have children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and everything is wonderful. And we say, "We are no longer in exile. We are in a land flowing with milk and honey." And then the island turns over and we realize we have been sitting on the back of a fish all along. And now we consider ourselves fortunate if only we do not drown in the sea of our exile.

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