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Listening to the Messages

This week’s Torah portion is named after Yitro, Moses’s father-in-law. What made Yitro so meritorious to have a portion named after him, especially the one that contains the giving of our holy Torah?

The sages say that Yitro was unique. Although everyone in the world heard about the miracles that God performed for the Jewish people in Egypt – after all, there were national disasters every day, but they did not *internalize* the

message. They did not stop to truly “listen” to what God was telling the world.

Yitro, however, did stop to listen to what God was saying; he internalized the message and made some serious changes. He recognized that God and the Jewish people have a very special relationship of which he wanted to be part of. It was through this act of listening, that Yitro was able to transform himself from a pagan priest to the become the father-in-law of the holiest prophet that will ever exist.

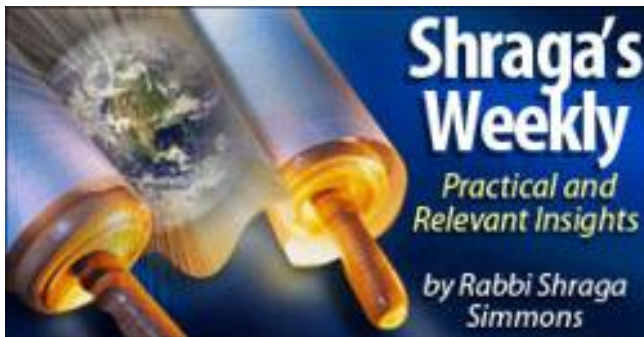
Lesson:

God sends us messages all the time. But are we attuned to stopping for a few moments of our busy lives and ask ourselves what does God want from us?

There is a story of a Rabbi’s wife who accidentally spilled milk in front of her husband. The husband asked her, “Can you think of a reason that God made the milk spill?” The wife thought for a moment and said, “Two weeks ago I forgot to pay the milk man!” While we may never know exactly what God is telling us, we need to internalize that that God is communicating with us all the time. It is incumbent upon us to try to discern the messages around us and use those messages to transform ourselves to become better people, just as Yitro did, and fulfill our highest, holiest potential.

Exercise: When something frustrating or inconvenient arises, instead of getting upset, remember that nothing is arbitrary or random – God is running the world. Ask yourself what you can learn from that situation. It could be

improvement of a particular character trait or something more specific, like in the case of the spilled milk.



Getting the Message Loud and Clear

In this week's parsha, three million Jews gather at the foot of Mount Sinai and personally witness God Almighty giving the Torah. Despite what you may remember from Hebrew School, let me assure you that Mount Sinai is the central event in Jewish history!

It is surprising, therefore, that the name of this parsha is "Yitro." Who was this man Yitro?

The Parsha begins:

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

Yitro heard about the amazing events of the Exodus and came to join the Jewish people. Rashi asks: "What was it specifically that Yitro heard that caused him to come? He heard about the

splitting of the Red Sea and about the war with Amalek."

But really the entire world heard about the splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek! So why does the Torah single out Yitro?

The answer is that Yitro was a truth seeker. He had traveled around, trying every type of spiritual path, ultimately rejecting one after another as false. He was honest with himself and committed to the truth. Did others hear about the Exodus? Of course! But only Yitro was open to its message. It was this act of greatness which brought Yitro to become part of the Jewish people – and for that the parsha of the Ten Commandments bears his name!

Knowledge Or Faith?

Certainly the Ten Commandments is the most famous part of the Torah. But what is the first of the Ten Commandments anyway?

"I am God."

What kind of commandment is that? That's not a command – that's a statement!

Explain the Sages: This is the mitzvah to know there is a God.

But to whom is this mitzvah addressed? If it's for people who already believe in God, they don't need to be told. And if it's for people who don't believe in God, they don't care what the Torah says anyway!

The answer is as follows: The Torah does not say "BELIEVE" in God. Nor does it say to wonder, feel, intuit, assume, presume, hope, or aspire that

there's a God. Rather, the Torah commands us to "KNOW" there is a God!

Western society typically associates religion with "blind faith." But the Torah commands us to use reason and logic to ascertain God's existence. This intellectual understanding is crucial; feelings alone can deceive. In the Aleynu prayer, we say "know today and place it on your heart." Rational knowledge comes first; only then are we to connect emotionally. "Know there is a God" is the first Commandment – the most central idea of Judaism.

How does one achieve this knowledge? One word: Objectivity. The Talmud (*Avot 1:8*) tells us: "Be a judge, not a lawyer." A lawyer may sometimes advance his position without regard for its truth or validity. A judge, on the other hand, weighs each side carefully. When considering a question as profound and deep as the existence of God, we must be an impartial jury!

The Torah suggests 3 tools for attaining this objectivity:

Tool #1: Listen to What Others are Saying

Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai are two famous disputants in Talmudic literature. They argued about almost everything and saw the world from nearly opposite perspectives. (For example, Beit Hillel says we should light one Chanukah candle the first night, and add one candle each subsequent night. Beit Shammai, on the other hand, says to light 8 candles the first night and then decrease one candle each night.)

Jewish law, interestingly, follows Beit Hillel. And the Talmud explains why: In any disagreement, Beit Shammai would always state his own opinion. Whereas, Beit Hillel would always first state the opinion of Beit Shammai, and only then state his own position. In this way, Beit Hillel demonstrated that he was not just concerned with being right, but was seeking the truth that lied somewhere in between. That's why Jewish law follows Beit Hillel.

We see this dynamic in our own relationships as well. We've all met someone who stubbornly defends a ridiculous position, to avoid admitting being wrong. (The irony is that ultimately there is far more embarrassment in stubborn persistence, than in admitting the truth.)

To elude this trap, we can train ourselves to take other people's ideas seriously. The cardinal rule is: stay focused and calm. Communicate and discuss, rather than yell-and-proclaim. If anxiety about needing to be right becomes the primary concern, you become entrenched in a position. Getting defensive, interrupting, and responding impetuously you've lost the battle. Hillel (and Yitro), on the other hand, was willing to listening to another's opinion, subjugate his ego and acknowledge a truth not his own.

This is particularly important in marriage. Each partner brings to the relationship different insights and strengths. The ways we differ is not a threat; it is our opportunity to grow. If God had wanted us to be free of the need for each other, He'd have created us to split like an amoeba. Marriage is a unit, and when we focus on our common goals,

we begin to view life in terms of "we," instead of the narrower "you-and-I."

This is true on a national level as well. Today, a wide gulf exists between different Jewish groups. As times, it seems the gap is unbridgeable. But in fact, there is greater area of agreement than we might think. We all agree on the need for tolerance, mutual trust, respect and understanding. We must find those areas of agreement and use them as a basis for building our relationships.

Tool #2: Seek Friends Who Challenge You

The Talmud tells the story of Rebbi Yochanan, a great scholar who had a study partner named Reish Lakish. (Before becoming a rabbi, Reish Lakish was a bandit. But that's another story...) These two men studied together for many years, until one day Reish Lakish got sick and died. Rebbe Yochanan was seen walking in the street, totally depressed. His students asked him, "What's wrong?" He said, "My study partner died and now I have none." They told him, "Don't worry Rebbi, we'll take care of it." So they went and found a brilliant young man to study with Rebbe Yochanan.

Two weeks later, Rebbi Yochanan is seen walking in the street again, totally depressed. They asked: "Rebbi, what happened? Why are you so sad? We sent you the most brilliant study partner. What's the problem?"

He told them: "My new study partner is so brilliant that whatever I say, he brings 24 proofs that I'm correct. But when I studied with Reish Lakish, he showed me 24 proofs that I was

wrong. That's what I miss. I don't want someone who will just agree with me; I want a partner who will challenge my position. In this way we will arrive at the truth together."

A good challenge – is that what friends are for? YES! The Sages say: "Better the criticism of a friend, than the kiss of an enemy." Your friend will tell you when you have spinach stuck in your teeth; your enemy will smirk and say you look great! The Torah speaks of *Dikduk Chaverim*, which literally means fine-tuning with friends. With this attitude, I see others not as adversaries, but as a welcome counterbalance to my own perspective. In choosing my friends, I want someone who will challenge me to become better in life, not just better on the tennis court.

Tool #3: Don't Be Afraid To Ask

One more story:

About 100 years ago in Europe, there was a wealthy man, named Rav Eisel Charif of Slonim. His daughter was ready to get married, so Rav Eisel sought the best young man. In those days, "the best young man" meant the top Yeshiva student. So Rav Eisel traveled to the town of Volozhin, which was brimming under the tutelage of its famous Rosh Yeshiva, the Netziv. (It is said that in the years the Netziv ran the Yeshiva, some 10,000 students passed through.) When Rav Eisel arrived, he walked into the study hall, made a loud *klop* on the table, and announced: "I have a very difficult question on a passage in the Talmud. Whoever can supply the correct answer will have my daughter's hand in marriage."

A great buzz swept through the study hall. The chance to marry Rav Eisel's daughter! Soon a long line formed, and one by one the students were given their chance to provide the answer. And one by one, Rav Eisel rejected the answers as incorrect. This went on for days. Some students even stood in line 2, 3, 4 times. But still no one came up with the correct answer. When the students had all exhausted their options, Rav Eisel packed his bags and began to head out of town.

He had just reached the edge of the city, when he heard a voice shouting after him: "Rav Eisel, Rav Eisel!" He turned around to see a young Yeshiva student running in his direction. The student explained: "Rav Eisel, I know I wasn't able to satisfy the condition for marriage, but just for my own sake, sir, could you please tell me what is the correct answer?"

"Aha!" shouted Rav Eisel. "You will be my son-in-law!"

In our lives, the pursuit of truth can sometimes be stifled if we don't have the courage to ask. Seeking another's help is an admission that I don't have all the answers myself. This may necessitate asking an uncomfortable question. Or humbly admitting I don't know. Or risking the appearance of ignorance. But all this is infinitesimal when compared to a life perpetuated in falsehood. The Yeshiva student demonstrated this courage; it is the hallmark of intellectual honesty.

The Sinai Experience

When the Jewish people stood at Sinai, they unconditionally accepted to fulfill all 613 Mitzvot. For those just beginning, 613 sounds like

an awful lot... even overwhelming! Where does one begin to tackle such massive breadth and depth? If only there was one, powerful idea we could grasp. Something that summed up all the rest.

Rebbeinu Bechaye explains that while the Torah contains 613 mitzvot, everything is ultimately contained in the very first command, "I am God." It all boils down to that one line. Why? Because it is around this point that all else revolves. Once we "know there is a God," the rest flows from there – because we recognize it as a unified, holistic system.

What was the exact encounter at Mount Sinai? The Talmud says: Every Jew experienced God's Voice. A Voice so powerful that the people not only heard, but they "saw the sound waves" emerging from God's mouth. This physiological phenomenon is called "synesthesia," whereby all the senses are intensified and fused.

Jewish tradition tells us that each and every Jewish soul – past, present and future – stood that day at Mount Sinai. When The Voice tore through all 7 Heavens, the Torah was engraved on the stone tablets... but was first engraved on the heart of every Jew. The Voice spoke and we heard.

In Shema Yisrael, (the Jewish Pledge of Allegiance), we begin with the word *Shema* – "Listen." Carefully and calmly, we listen. Just like Yitro listened.

The Sfas Emes says that to receive the Torah, one has to desire truth. Do we truly want to attain clarity in life? Be a pursuer of truth. Listen

carefully. For the mitzvah of "Know there is a God" invites us to rediscover the truth.



The Art of Listening

Revelation at Sinai, the greatest moment in the annals of mankind, is recorded in this *parashah*. Incredibly however, the portion is entitled "*Yisro*," in honor of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, who, prior to his conversion, had been a pagan priest. Logically, one would have expected that the portion be called "Moses" or "Sinai," but surely not "*Yisro*." How are we to understand this?

The *parashah* opens with the simple but piercing words, "*Vayishma Yisro – Jethro heard*." The voice of God was audible throughout the universe, but it was only Jethro who *heard*, it was only Jethro who reacted and chose to abandon his prestigious position as a priest of Midian to join the Israelites at Sinai. Our Sages teach that when the kings of the nations heard those awesome sounds, they thought that a cataclysmic event was about to occur and there would be yet another Flood. For a very brief moment, they stopped to listen, but then Bilaam, their prophet, assured them that it was "*only*" God giving His

commandments, so they returned to their old ways.

At first glance, one must feel appalled at such obtuseness: "*Only God giving His commandments*" – How could they have justified such a stance? But let us examine our own lives. How different are *we* from those pagans? Are we not guilty of the same dense callousness? Do we pay heed to the Word of God, or is it only when catastrophe strikes that we hear His voice? Yet, God's call never ceases. Every day, a *Bas Kol* (a Divine Voice) issues us a summons to our unique destiny, but in our pursuit of "the good life," the glitter, and the gold, we no longer hear God's voice. Like the pagans of old, it is only when the sinister shadow of disaster looms over our heads that we stop to listen. But how many of us truly stop to hear the Word of God?

In every generation, those who rise to their calling and fulfill their life missions are those who have mastered the art of listening, of hearing and noticing the messages implicit in the universe. The Talmud relates that Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest Sages of our people, at the age of 40 was an impoverished, illiterate shepherd, who had an awakening when he saw that water continually dripping upon a stone had eroded the rock. *If water can erode a stone, then surely Torah can alter a mind or a heart*, he reasoned. He therefore embarked upon a life of Torah study. To be sure, many others had also witnessed the same phenomenon, but only Akiva truly observed and "heard" this message. The challenge of *listening*, of becoming aware, set forth in the examples of Jethro and Rabbi Akiva, speak to us anew today. Unfortunately however, most of us hear only that

which we want to hear and see only that which we wish to see. Our challenge is to listen to the messages – and respond properly to them.

BE HAPPY FOR OTHERS: THE HALLMARK OF OUR PEOPLE

The greatness of Jethro was further evidenced when, upon arrival at the desert encampment, he was told of the wondrous events that had rescued the Jewish people. The Torah relates: "*Vayichad Yisro – Jethro rejoiced.*" Our Sages explain that the word *vayichad* is an expression of joy tempered by reservation, for even as Jethro heard the amazing events, he also felt a pang of sadness for his former friends, the Egyptians.¹ Nevertheless, Jethro proclaimed the two majestic words that have become the hallmark of our people throughout the centuries: "*Baruch Hashem – Blessed is Hashem!*" "*Baruch Hashem*" has been our response to all the challenges of life – to the joys as well as to the trials.

At first glance, it may be difficult to comprehend why this phrase, *Baruch Hashem*, should be attributed to Jethro. Surely there were others who blessed God before him. After all, didn't Moses praise God at the crossing of the Reed Sea, when he composed his glorious song? There is one fine difference, however. Moses praised God for the miracles He performs for His own people, but Jethro thanked God for the blessings that He bestows on others.

The concept of being happy for someone else is a goal toward which we must strive. When we realize that we can find our own joy in the happiness that is visited upon others, we become elevated spiritual beings. To be sure, this is a

difficult concept to accept in a culture that has conditioned us to measure our happiness by that which we acquire rather than by that which we give. To maintain our Torah values, we would do well to bear in mind that God did not command us to become rich and successful, but He *did* command us to become giving, generous people, to personify loving-kindness, and to full-heartedly proclaim, "*Baruch Hashem,*" when we behold the happiness of others.

RECEIVING THE TORAH IN EVERY GENERATION

It is written that the Jewish people entered the Sinai desert to receive the Torah "*bayom hazeh – on this day*"² rather than "*on that day.*"

This is not a grammatical error; rather, it is a profound teaching for all of us. The giving and the receiving of the Torah is an *everyday* occurrence. Every day we must see ourselves as if we were standing at Mt. Sinai, and every day we must re-commit ourselves to the covenant and attempt to muster the same fervor and enthusiasm as on the day when we first heard the voice of God at Sinai.

Even the setting, the place where the Torah was given, is instructive. God chose the desert, for the desert is empty. Similarly, if we wish to absorb this Divine Wisdom, we must become like a desert, free ourselves of all preconceived notions, and allow the Torah to shape and mold us. The Torah was given on Mt. Sinai – a lowly hill – to teach us that it is only in a humble heart that the Word of God can find a home. Once again, vital lessons for us to learn, for ours is a generation that is replete with many voices. So many voices,

so many sounds pull at us, demanding our attention. Ours is also a generation in which arrogance abounds; everyone is an "expert," convinced that he *can* "make it" – and *is* making it – on his own, without God's help. And so, the Torah was given to us on a lowly hill, Sinai, to remind us that a precondition to receiving God's Word is a humble heart.

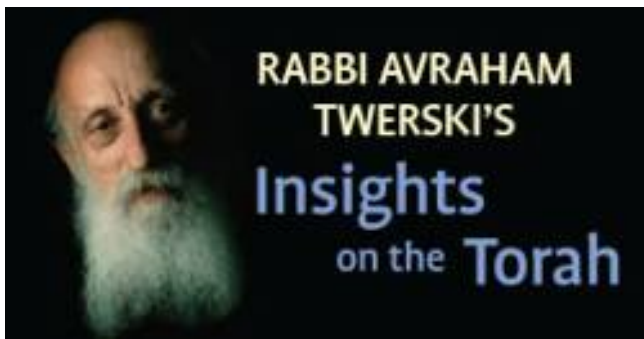
The Kotzker Rebbe once asked a child, "Tell me, where is God?"

"Everywhere," the little boy responded.

"No, my son," the Rebbe said. "He can only be found in the hearts of those who allow Him to enter. In an arrogant heart, there is no room for His presence."

Finally, let us be mindful that at Sinai God designated us as His "beloved treasure" – "a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation."³ Let us attempt to conduct ourselves accordingly.

1. Exodus 18:9.
2. Ibid. 19:1.
3. Ibid. 19:5-6.



Only United Can We Fulfill the Torah

And they encamped in the Wilderness and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain [Sinai] # (19:2)

As we have seen, the narration that precedes the giving of the Torah is more than just historical. It indicates the prerequisites of Torah.

Rashi points out that the Hebrew word for encamped is *vayichan*, he camped, rather than *vayachanu*, they camped. Furthermore, the Ten Commandments were also spoken in the singular, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, your God in the singular, rather than the plural *elokeichem*. The singular form of the verb is utilized because there was such complete unity among the Israelites that they were like one person, hence the entire nation could be addressed in the singular.

The Torah was given to each individual, and every person is required to fulfill the 613 mitzvot. It is obvious that technically this is impossible. There are some mitzvot whose performance is restricted to Kohanim (priests), which Yisrael cannot perform. A person whose firstborn child is a girl cannot fulfill the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* (redemption of the firstborn son). Mitzvot that apply to judges do not apply to lay people. How can any single person fulfill all 613 mitzvot?

Torah scholars have provided the answer. When a person puts on the tefillin (phylacteries) on his arm and head, it is not just the arm and head that have the mitzvah, but the whole person. Similarly, when people are united, they are as one, and a



Yitro (Exodus 18-20) *basic compendium*

mitzvah performed by one person is shared by those with whom one is united.

How tragic that we have allowed ourselves to be divisive. Fragmentation not only weakens our nation, but deprives a person of acquiring the merit of those mitzvot which he is unable to perform.

Every human trait may have positive applications, even something as repulsive as selfishness. We should realize that eliminating the divisiveness that reigns among us is not merely altruistic. It is of inestimable personal benefit.

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