

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Yitro  
January 6, 2021 \*\*\* 24 Shevat, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

[Yitro in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/36271/jewish/Yitro-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles which G-d performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the Israelite camp, bringing with him Moses' wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people. The children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah . G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend.

G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

[Hatarah in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah discusses Isaiah's vision of the Heavenly Chariot (the merkavah), a revelation that was experienced by all the Israelites when G-d spoke the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai—an event recounted in this week's Torah reading. Isaiah perceives G-d sitting on a throne surrounded by angels. Isaiah vividly describes the angels and their behavior (in anthropomorphic terms). During the course of this vision, Isaiah volunteers to be G-d's emissary to transmit His message to the Israelites. He is immediately given a depressing prophecy regarding the exile the nation will suffer as punishment for their many sins—and the Land of Israel will be left empty and desolate, though there will be left a "trunk" of the Jewish people that eventually will regrow.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[A Nation of Leaders \(Yitro 5781\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/yitro-5781/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/yitro-5781/>

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 zt"l 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 holy<sup>[2]</sup> (Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, called Jews "a nation of philosophers," reflecting the same idea.<sup>[3]</sup>).

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 democratized.

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]**

[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 essay for parshat Kedoshim, we will delve further into the role of the follower in Judaism.

### Can God Prohibit an Emotion by Sarah Wolf

<http://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online?search=&genre=2046&parashah=&holiday=&theme=&series=&author=>

Part of my current research focuses on how human emotions are discussed and legislated in the Talmud and other ancient rabbinic texts, and so the last of the Ten Commandments (as counted in the Jewish tradition) raises for me some fundamental questions.

*“You shall not covet (tahmod) your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet (tahmod) your neighbor’s wife, his male or female slave, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exod. 20:14).*

How can God prohibit an emotion? And why would God even be concerned about how people feel as long as they are doing the right thing? Perhaps we should interpret the commandment as forbidding an action rather than a feeling?

The third century midrash *Mekhilta Derashbi* at first seems to go in this direction. It points out the discrepancy in language between the statement of this commandment in Exodus and its reiteration in Deuteronomy, which reads: “You shall not covet (*tahmod*) your neighbor’s wife. You shall not **crave** (*titaveh*) your neighbor’s house, his field, his male or female slave, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s” (Deut. 5:18).

Noting the use in Deuteronomy of the word “crave” in addition to the word “covet,” the *Mekhilta* interprets these verbs as referring to two different prohibitions. *To crave*, according to the early Rabbis, is to have a wish or desire, whereas *to covet* is to begin to act on those wishes by making plans to possess the object of desire. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the midrash emphasizes that both the feeling and the action are

prohibited, because of how closely they are connected: if one craves, one may then come to covet. Therefore, better not to crave at all.

This prohibition against a particular feeling, and particularly the assumption that there's not a significant distinction between emotions and actions, may strike modern readers as rather out of touch. After all, don't we now know that the real problems arise when we either repress our emotions or assume that all feelings must be immediately acted upon to make them go away? Surely any therapist would tell you that the best thing to do with a seemingly troubling emotion, such as an insatiable craving for one's neighbor's freshly-baked apple pie cooling in the window, is neither to deny the feeling nor to grab a hunk of pie when the neighbor isn't looking, but to be mindful of the feeling and tolerate it until it passes (or until the neighbor is nice enough to offer a piece of pie voluntarily).

Yet the idea that we have control over our emotional states may not be as foreign to a contemporary mindset as it would initially seem. How many of us have tried to cultivate gratitude by keeping a journal or a list at the end of the day? Or attempted to boost our own confidence by assuming a "power pose"? Our society is perhaps again realizing something that the ancient Rabbis took for granted: the boundary between our inner selves and our outer selves is not as sharp as we may have once thought, and that there is significant permeability between the two. What we do with our bodies affects how we feel, and vice versa.

As our country attempts to move forward from an emotionally turbulent year, this commandment to attend carefully to our feelings and reactions may be more useful than it seems at first glance. We may want to try to cultivate emotions like gratitude, confidence, calmness, or joy to get us through the rest of the pandemic, but we can also ask: Which emotions are helping to call us to action? Perhaps a feeling of rage summons us to work for justice, or our grief impels us to advocate for marginalized groups suffering disproportionately from COVID. There may also be emotions whose effects in our lives are less welcome: sadness that becomes paralyzing, or fear and anger that tempt us to employ hurtful rhetoric.

Perhaps this commandment is encouraging us to remember that we live righteously not only through our actions, but by leaving behind the people, situations, and social media feeds that evoke reactions that do not serve us, and by thinking about how to cultivate and attend to the emotions that help us be the people we want to be in the world.

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[Goosebumps: Yitro 5781 by Ilana Kurshan](https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Torah-Sparks.html?soid=1102506082947&aid=ivTkokrc1xg)

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Our parsha begins with a surprising change of scene. Following the dramatic showdown at the Red Sea and the exultant triumph against Amalek at Rephidim, the Torah now zooms in on Moshe's intimate reunion with his father-in-law, Yitro, who shows up with his wife Tziporah and two children. When we last encountered Yitro, Moshe was taking his

leave following the burning bush episode, in response to God's command to return to Egypt. Now he joins Moshe in the wilderness and offers sacrifices to God. Why does Yitro appear at this point in the narrative, between the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah? What is his role at this crucial point in the history of the Jewish people, in that brief window between redemption and revelation?

The Talmudic rabbis disagree about what Yitro heard that motivated him to leave Midian and come join the Israelites in the desert. Was it the story of the Exodus? Or the story of the revelation at Sinai, which according to some rabbis, who hold that the Torah is not written in chronological order, had in fact already happened? Rabbi Eliezer argues the former, and indeed, this seems to be the straightforward reading: The first verse of our parsha states, "Yitro priest of Midian, Moshe's father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out from Egypt" (18:1). And yet this answer, too, is not quite as straightforward as it might seem, because if Yitro heard all about the Exodus, why did Moshe then have to tell him about it? As the Torah goes on to relate, "Moshe then recounted to his father-in-law everything that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them" (18:8). Why did Moshe have to repeat what Yitro had already heard?

Perhaps the point is not what Yitro heard, but rather what Moshe recounted. Even if Yitro already knew about the Exodus, the story needed to be told. As God told Moshe on the very day they went forth from Egypt, "And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt'" (13:8). Twice a day Jews must recite the Shema, which identifies God as the One who took the Israelites out of Egypt, as do the Ten Commandments. The Passover Haggadah teaches that "the more one tells about the Exodus of Egypt, behold this is praiseworthy." This is a story that we are commanded to tell and to retell. And yet in order to tell the story, there needs to be someone to listen. That is why Yitro comes on the scene.

Yitro appears in the Torah between the Exodus and the revelation because he is the ideal audience. He is sympathetic to the Israelites – his daughter, after all, is married to their new leader – but he was not with them in Egypt and he did not experience the Exodus first-hand. Like all of us alive today, he was not an eyewitness, and so he relies on the stories. He hears about what he did not see with his own eyes. His arrival is the occasion for the first retelling of the narrative we are commanded to tell and retell for all subsequent generations.

Yitro's reaction serves as an important model for all of us, who struggle each year to view ourselves as if we have gone out of Egypt – as if it is all happening to us for the first time. Yitro has a genuine religious response, and he speaks words that no Jew had spoken before that point: "Baruch Hashem!" (18:10). He also rejoices—"vayichad Yitro"—a term which the Talmudic sages interpret in two ways (Sanhedrin 94a). According to Rav, Yitro passed a sword over his body, implying that he circumcised himself and converted. According to Shmuel, the news gave him goosebumps. Either way, Yitro has a physical

reaction to the news – it gets underneath his skin. This is all the more remarkable if we assume that Yitro had already heard about the Exodus, and was hearing it all for the second time.

Yitro's visceral response to the Exodus makes sense when we consider that he is a religious figure – he is a Midianite priest. He is sensitive to the spiritual dimension of experience, and perhaps he prompts Moshe to frame the Exodus in these terms. When Moshe shares the Exodus story with his father-in-law the priest, it becomes not just a story of political liberation, but also one of divine redemption. Perhaps this is why we are commanded to reference the story of the Exodus as part of our daily prayers – we recite the Shema to remember that the Exodus from Egypt was not just a historical event, but a foundational moment in our covenantal relationship with God. And so it is not just Yitro's reaction that is a model for us, but also Moshe' recounting. Moshe' encounter with Yitro teaches us that sometimes we need to step back to reflect and recount to others so as to become sensitive to the spiritual dimension – to those moments in life when we, too, might get goosebumps. *(Ilana Kurshan is an American-Israeli author who lives in Jerusalem. She is best known for her memoir of Talmud study amidst life as a single woman, a married woman, and a mother, If All the Seas Were Ink.*

### Dvar Haftarah: Self Reflection by Bex Stern Rosenblatt

<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Torah-Sparks.html?soid=1102506082947&aid=ivTkokrc1xg>

In a time when the world seems broken and in need of repair, how can we, who are also broken and in need of repair, step up to the challenge? There seems to be a need for someone whole, someone outside the system, to step in. In our Torah portion, that person is Yitro, father-in-law to Moshe and outsider to the Israelite people, who steps in and redirects Moshe. But when we don't have that outsider, we can figure out how to gain enough distance that we can act as one. Our liturgy allows us to imagine ourselves as these whole beings wholly outside of ourselves daily when we recite the kedushah during the Amidah. Approaching the holiness of God, we rise up on our tiptoes and invoke the words of the angels from Isaiah 6:3, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole world is filled with his glory." How can we imagine ourselves as these angels? What is it we are imagining when we do this?

The word used for angel in our haftarah, Isaiah 6, is *seraphim*. The root is likely *saraph*, to burn. Fire is familiar imagery in our thinking of God in the Bible. This is God who appeared to Moshe in a burning bush, led the people in a pillar of fire, and expressed anger through billowing nostrils. Fire makes sense as an image. It's all-consuming and ever changing. To imagine ourselves as angels in light of *saraph*, in light of fire, makes us one with a bigger, awe-inspiring, and perhaps angry source of power.

The word *seraphim* seems to have a specific meaning beyond its relationship to fire. It appears seven times in the Bible. In every instance besides those in Isaiah 6, the word refers to snakes. In Numbers 21, while wandering in the desert, the Israelites complain

and God sends fiery snakes, *nahashim seraphim*, to attack them. God then tells Moshe to make Nehushtan, a copper snake, to heal those who had been bitten. Likewise, in Deuteronomy 8:15, Moshe recounts to the Israelite people their origin story, telling of the wandering in the desert amidst fiery snakes, *nahashim seraphim*. Isaiah 14:29 tells the genealogy of the *seraph*, tracing it through other kinds of snakes. And Isaiah 30:6 mentions the *seraph* as a flying snake. If we are looking for an other to imagine ourselves into, something that will allow us to get outside of ourselves in order to help heal, fiery flying snakes are about as other as you can get.

Jewish commentators help us to understand these beings, these *seraphim*, as angels. Rashi notes that these beings stood “*mima’al lo*, from above him” in Isaiah 6:2, which Rashi takes to mean as in heaven. He locates these beings as with the divine. Rambam will go on to revise a whole hierarchy of divine beings, placing *seraphim* fifth of ten in the ranking of the types of angels. These beings are closer to God, part of the heavenly host. By speaking their words, we imagine ourselves moving up the heavenly hierarchy, situated closer to God.

However, in Hullin 91b we read that we need not engage in this exercise at all: “the ministering angels do not recite their song above until the Jewish people recite [their song] below.” The angels are waiting on us to recite the kedusha. They need us, with all of our brokenness and imperfection, to call them into the recitation of holiness. Perhaps we don’t need to chase after fire and snakes and angels, looking for a magic cure. When we look at the world and see our broken reflection in it, perhaps it is precisely from that place of brokenness that we can begin to heal the world. (*Bex Stern Rosenblatt teaches Hebrew Bible and bibliodrama. She’s the Mid-Atlantic Faculty-in-Residence for The Conservative Yeshiva*)

### What Happened at Sinai by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/what-happened-sinai#source-9776>

In Parashat Yitro, the Israelites reached the desert of Sinai and camped at the bottom of the mountain (Exodus 19:1-2). Later tradition and Jewish thinkers have focused on the Sinai experience as an event of receiving Revelation. The Rabbis redefined Shavuot as *z’man matan torateinu*, the time of the giving of the Torah, at Sinai. But no less important, the mountain was also the site of Israel signing on to the covenant for all time.

The focus on Revelation (or Torah miSinai / Torah from Sinai) comes directly from our *parashah*. Yitro describes the three day preparation, the whole people assembled, the stunning mix of thunder, lightning, heavy cloud, and the ever stronger blast of a *shofar* which rocked the mountain, the mountain aflame and the Voice of God speaking the Ten Commandments (19:16-19). A central teaching of Rabbinic Judaism is that at Sinai, not only the Written Scriptures were revealed, but also the Oral Torah—the initially-not-written-down Torah of interpretation, expansion, and application of the Five Books of Moses.<sup>1</sup> “...And I shall give you [Moses] the stone tablets, the Torah, and the commandment which I [God] wrote to teach them [Israel]’ (Exodus 24:12). “**Tablets**”—

these are the Ten Commandments; **“Torah”**—this is the written Scriptures; **“and the commandment”**—this is the Mishnah;<sup>2</sup> **“which I wrote”**—these refer to the Prophetic books and the Writings;<sup>3</sup> **“to teach them”**—this is the Talmud.<sup>4</sup> This [verse] teaches us that all the above were given to Moses at Sinai” (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 5a).<sup>5</sup> There is an inherent difficulty in taking a fundamentalist reading that all the later books were revealed at Sinai. Literally, this would mean that all future prophets and teachers were not adding to and renewing the Torah, they were only robots repeating words said long ago. The Talmud picks up on this anomaly and tells an ironic narrative of Moses visiting the school of Rabbi Akiva expounding the Torah (Babylonian Talmud Menahot 29b). Moses finds that he hardly understands a word of what is going on and feels faint. This is the Talmud’s acknowledgement that there is much innovation in later tradition. Then a student asks R. Akiva, “Where did this law come from?” Akiva explains: “This is a law [oral tradition] received from Moses at Sinai.” Moses brightens up. He gets the deeper point that is being made. The Rabbis are carrying on and applying Moses’ Torah and tradition in later times. The later articulated parts of Torah deserve similar authority and respect in our eyes as those which were written down in Scriptures.

The Rabbis insist that the process of Revelation at Sinai never stops. The ultimate statement of ongoing Sinaitic revelation is the Jerusalem Talmud’s comment: **“Everything** that a veteran student [of Torah] **will express** in the presence of his Rebbe (teacher) was already told to Moses at Sinai” (Peah 2:6, 17a).

Yet an exclusive focus on Revelation may miss the broader significance of what happened at Sinai. At this place, the Israelites as a people entered into the covenant of **tikkun olam**, to repair the world and fill it with life. This commitment set the character of Judaism for the ages. At Sinai, the mission of Jewry that has made it a special, chosen people in the world was defined. The birth of the national covenant is what makes Sinai so central in our tradition.

Our *parashah* signals what is to happen at the mountain in the runup to the Sinai epiphany. God says: “You saw what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to me. Now if you will hear My voice **and observe My covenant**, you will **become My treasured people** among the nations” (Exodus 19:5). What is the mission of this special covenanted people? “You shall be to Me **a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation**” (Exodus 19:6).

Among the people of Israel, the Priests connect the people to God. They teach the people a Torah of truth which enables them to distinguish between the impure and the pure, between the profane and the holy—and how to convert the realm of the profane (where the Divine is hidden or obscured because it is in the presence of death) to the realm of the holy (where the Divine is present and manifest, and this is the realm where life is dominant).<sup>6</sup> The priests, in their dedication of their whole lives to divine service—which includes having (ethically) clean hands and pure hearts<sup>7</sup>—aim to create an ideal mini-world which prefigures the future repaired earth. Similarly, in their personal physical perfection, they model and guide the people to building the universal ideal planet where

sickness and handicaps are overcome.<sup>8</sup> The Israelites becoming a kingdom of priests means that the entire nation will play the above roles for all of humanity. “A holy nation” means that as a society, the whole people will embody and model the realm of the holy where life and justice are dominant. Again, the goal is that the whole world will learn and build the model in the world at large.

Next week’s Torah portion, Mishpatim, confirms that the main activity during the rest of the time spent at Sinai was to enter into the covenant and study and plan the application of covenantal guidelines to all of life.<sup>9</sup> Moses reads the Book of the Covenant<sup>10</sup> to the entire people. In effect, Moses outlines the behaviors and way of life which the Israelites undertake if they enter into the *berit*. The Book of the Covenant makes clear that the Israelites were being asked to commit their entire life, not just to do an act or two. This was the moment of truth. The people answered as one, “That the Lord has said, **we will do and we will listen.**” (Exodus 25:16). They said “we will do” first. They offered open-ended acceptance, even before knowing all the details. The Talmud is electrified by this response.<sup>11</sup> Total acceptance represents profound trust. This is nothing less than a response of unconditional love. No matter what difficulties or problematic details may follow, it does not matter. We commit to the covenant. We will cope with whatever follows.

How could people pledge their very lives to accept the burdens of a partnership without even knowing the details? The Talmud puts this legitimate skepticism into the mouth of a heretic (Shabbat 88b). How could the Israelites commit before hearing out everything and assessing, were they up to the levels of performance and obligation in the covenant? Speaking from the perspective of living after the Holocaust, the real question is: Why did they not check out whether Jews—or anyone—could bear the isolation, the persecution, the hatred and violence, which this world has inflicted on them for being carriers of the covenant over the centuries? Should they not have asked first what were the risks and costs of taking on this partnership with God?

The answer clearly is: The Israelites committed out of recklessness, the limitless passion of unconditional love. Never mind the failures, the regressions, the small-mindedness they showed in the desert.<sup>12</sup> At that moment, at Sinai, they were madly in love and heedless of future risks. This unlimited acceptance has gone a long way with their Divine Partner in overcoming failures along the historical journey. Jeremiah referred to this total commitment when he reassured the Israelites that, notwithstanding God’s revulsion at their abuse, and notwithstanding allowing the destruction of the Temple, God would never abandon Israel or the covenant: “I remember for you the covenantal love of your youth, your love as a bride, when you followed Me in the desert, in a trackless land, not sown” (Jeremiah 2:2).

Sinai then is both the great moment of revelation and the beginning of the covenant of love. Actually, these are two sides of the same coin. Once we understand Sinai as the moment of setting out on a covenantal journey to realize *tikkun olam*, then the continuous revelation that speaks from Sinai has new meaning and realistic considerations. Applying the ethics or guiding principles along the way, adding ritual and reenactments of ancient

and new events, seeing a new meaning in traditional sources, or a better way of living by inherited models—all these literally represent the revelation at Sinai occurring again and guiding the realization of the covenant. The new development may appear to be on innovation or change, but it is actually keeping the Sinai covenant alive and carrying it out. This is the profound, paradoxical truth in the rabbinic statement that “everything that a future veteran student **innovates** was told [meaning, implicitly revealed] to Moses at Sinai.”<sup>13</sup>

Shabbat Shalom.

<sup>1</sup> In books too numerous to list, Jacob Neusner describes Rabbinic Judaism as the Judaism of the Dual Torah [=written and oral]. The Oral Torah interpretation may even override the plain meaning. Thus, the Torah’s statement of *lex talionis* is “an eye for an eye” which seems to clearly mean “knocking out another person’s eye is punished by knocking out the criminal’s eye.” The Oral Law interprets Exodus 21:24 that “an eye for an eye means money/payment,” an eye’s worth of money, and not a literal physical retaliation for harming anyone. See Mishnah Bava Kamma 8:1 and Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 84a. For Rabbinic Jews, the interpretation is the authoritative understanding at the words, and not the plain meaning. <sup>2</sup> The core document of the Talmud which gives the Rabbinic exposition/statement of the Torah’s laws and views. <sup>3</sup> The Bible (Tanakh) consists of Torah (five Books of Moses), *Nevi’im* (Prophetic books), and *Ketuvim* (Writings such as Psalms, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> The later Rabbinic interpretation, analysis, application, and expansion of the Mishnah.

<sup>5</sup> In other places, the Talmud adds the *aggadah* (non-legal parts of the Talmud), rabbinic *midrashim* etc. to the list of those revealed at Sinai. For a discussion of the variable curriculum lists of Rabbinic study, see Martin Jaffee’s *Torah in the Mouth*. <sup>6</sup> Torah of truth—see Malachi 2:6. Distinguishing between pure and impure—see Leviticus 11:47. <sup>7</sup> See Psalm 24:4. <sup>8</sup> For expansion on most of the points above, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (Anchor Bible) pp. 52-58, 42-51, 616-617, and throughout the volume. Also see Shai Held’s essay on Parashat Pekudei, “Building a Home for God,” printed in *The Heart of Torah* and available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/building-home-god>.

<sup>9</sup> See Exodus chapters 21-24, 25. <sup>10</sup> Tradition interprets this Book as the laws of the Torah outlined in chapters 21-24 (and elsewhere) which cover all aspects of life. They were all given at Sinai. I will review the covenantal way of life in next week’s *dvar Torah*. <sup>11</sup> See Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88a-b.

<sup>12</sup> See my essay on Parashat BeShallah, “Do Not Rely on a Miracle,” available here:

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/do-not-rely-miracle>. <sup>13</sup> See *Hiddushei HaRan* on Eruvin 16b.

### Yahrtzeits

Neal Fox remembers his dear friend Susan Marx on Wednesday February 10th (Shevat 28)

Lenny Levin remembers his mother Hadassah Ruth Routten Levin (Esther Rochel bat Zvi David ve-Dobrush) on Thursday February 11th (Shevat 29).