



Parshas Yisro

A LEGENDARY RELATIONSHIP

Midrashim are cryptic, and often misunderstood. They are metaphors, literary devices that encode how Chazal understood stories in the Torah.

There is a Midrash that teaches that before Creation, God went to all the nations that would one day be and offered them the Torah. Each time the offer was made, all the nations inquired what they would be bound to do. All the nations, except the Jews, who accepted without knowing what it entailed.

What is this Midrash about?

The Midrash does not say the Jews would not care what was in it. If they had been asked, perhaps the response would have been about gossip, and the Torah would be declined! The Midrash does not mean that the Jews do not care about the pitfalls. R' Chaim Brown explains that the Midrash is about something else entirely – relationship. R' Binyamin Finkel gives a simple analogy.

If a broker you do not know calls, and gives a half hour window to make a large investment that he assures you would give large returns, there would be a lot of questions to ask. It is perfectly reasonable to want to know what you're getting yourself into – the Midrash is not speaking of a deficiency in the nations for their questions. The questions are fair. "What would this agreement require from me?"

Instead, consider that your parents, or in-laws, were the ones on the phone, offering a half hour window in which to join a venture of theirs. Undoubtedly there are risks, but with the love and trust of the relationship, there needn't be any questions.

This is what the Midrash is about. Whatever duties the Torah requires are worth taking on, because it is our Father offering the package.

EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT

One of the mitzvos recited daily is the duty to love God:

וְיָרֵאתָ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֵדֶךָ – Love Hashem your God, with all your heart, soul, and things... (6: 5)

The question commonly asked is how exactly can emotion be commanded? Emotions are responses; they are there or they aren't. How is the feeling of love demanded of us?

The Sfas Emes explains that the existence of the instruction can only mean that the emotion is not borne in a vacuum. The ability to love God is imbued in everyone, and is only dormant. The instruction is to find it.

The same is true of most (all..?) things. The Gemara says to believe someone who claims to discover something after hard work. Curiously, it says “discovers”, not “earns”. The word “discover” means dis-cover, or uncover. Electricity was discovered, not invented.

It is said that an angel teaches a child the entire spectrum of knowledge to a baby in the womb, but at birth, it is tapped on the face and forgets it all. This serves to illustrate that knowledge alone is not the goal. The curse of Adam is to toil and work hard. The Vilna Gaon points out that the knowledge is always there, but birth and life are a gift to enable the ability to earn it. Perhaps the curse of Adam isn't really a curse at all then. The achievement has accrued value due to the effort put into its acquisition.

Perhaps then, the initial question is fundamentally flawed. Something has slipped under the radar. One of the Ten Commandments is לא תחמד – Do not covet. Jealousy is an emotion too, yet there are no questions about commanding emotion.

The Ibn Ezra explains that emotions can actually be worked on – that is the subtext of the mitzva. The way to not be jealous of someone's property is to view it as out of your league. Most normal people aren't jealous that a billionaire owns a fleet of yachts or a private island in the Caribbean. The way to not be jealous is to understand that some people have yachts and islands, your friends have a house or car, and you have what you have. Jealousy is completely suppressed in this way – mitzva accomplished.

Working on this is deeply significant beyond the applications of jealousy. Simply put, is jealousy really one of the top ten laws of Judaism this top ten in Judaism? Consider then, that it appears in the Ten Commandments.

Perhaps the instruction is that emotional development is required of us. It starts with not being jealous, and can develop into אַתָּה אֵלֹהֵינוּ, אֵת הַאֱלֹהִים

MOSHE AS A REPRESENTATIVE

The Maharal explains that the reason Avraham, Yitzchak and Yakov did not and could not have received the Torah is because they had no “nation”. They were individuals, and individuals pass on. The Torah is eternal and cannot fade into obscurity; it must therefore be given to a nation.

Chazal understand that after the Golden Calf, Moshe argued in defence of the Jews that אַתָּה אֵלֹהֵינוּ was only said to Moshe, in the second person singular, so technically, the Jews had not violated אַתָּה אֵלֹהֵינוּ by engaging in idol worship.

But if the Torah is given to a nation, not an individual, how could Moshe, claim he received it alone?

The answer lies in understanding Moshe's role.

After departing Egypt and being saved at the Red Sea, the Torah emphasises what Yisro heard had happened, to “Moshe and his people”. Rashi deduces that the Torah implies that Moshe was equal to the whole nation.

Much later, in the final stages of the journey through the desert, Moshe sent emissaries to Edom, requesting permission for the Jews to pass through on their way to Canaan, which was declined. Throughout the episode, the Torah alternates between Moshe and the Jews as having sent them, from which Rashi deduces that the Torah illustrates that a national leader acts in the capacity as a proxy for the entire people.

The Maharal points out that these seem mutually exclusive. If Moshe was equal to the Jews, he achieved something greater than any other leader. How then, would his actions shed light on the authority of other leaders, that they act as agents of the people they represent?

R’ Yehoshua Hartman explains that Moshe being equal to the Jewish people isn’t necessarily literal. If he were to pray, it’s not as though that would count as their prayer too.

A leader is an agent or representative of his people. Moshe was more than that; the “equality” meant his actions carried the same weight as the nation itself. Regular activity, such as diplomacy like sending emissaries, is an act of any leader as a representative, and it is from this aspect that we can extrapolate from Moshe to other leaders.

Moshe was a microcosm of Yisrael. There were the 600,000 people at Sinai, plus Moshe. Whatever made them into Yisrael at Sinai, Moshe already was. He could claim that only he heard אֶלֶּהֶיךָ הָאֱלֹהִים because the qualities of Yisrael at Sinai that he represented were not guilty of the Golden Calf. This is the intent behind labelling him equal to the nation.

Moshe was the pinnacle of Yisrael and humanity. He represented all that was good in the people. The people he represented could not be the people who were guilty of the Golden Calf, and thus, the people arguably ought not to be held guilty at all.

A LITTLE ARROGANT...

Humility is acknowledged to be one of the foremost identifying features of a Jew. The Gemara in Sota cryptically recommends that the appropriate measure of humility is as an eighth of an eighth (or 1/64) of arrogance.

What does this cryptic figure mean, and how does it indicate a suitable degree of humility?

The Koheles Yitzchak explains that the 64th correlates to the Gemara in Megila that tells how all the mountains competed for the right to have the Torah delivered on them, and Mt. Sinai “won” the right by not competing. The mightiest mountain was called Tabor, which was 32,000 cubits tall. Sinai was 1/64th, and was deemed worthy.

But how do we practice this measurement? What does it look like to us?

The Vilna Gaon explains that the 8th pasuk in the 8th parsha (Vayishlach) has Yakov doubting his merit’s ability to deliver him from danger:

קָטַנְתִּי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל הָאֲמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֵת עַבְדְּךָ – I have become small from all the kindnesses and from all the truth that You have rendered Your servant.

That is to say, our perspective should be that our merits are small, and that we don't deserve that much at all.

The Maharsha notes that the word for arrogance in Hebrew – **אָרְוַח** – has the numerical value of 63. Seeing oneself as part of something greater (1/64th), and not an individual contextualises things, and a person will be humble.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the Gemara specified an eighth of an eighth, and not one sixty-fourth, for a reason.

The number 8 connotes the confluence of natural and supernatural. It is a repetition of a cycle, an octave higher. It is a rededication of the connection from God. This is what the Bris of circumcision and Yovel indicate – an eighth unit. The second eighth is necessary, because a person may recognise that their talents and achievements are from God — but why did God give them to him?

The second eighth offsets that. The path to humility is recognition that everything is from God. The gift is itself a gift, and not because you deserve it.

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