

Tze U'Imad—Go and Learn

Weekly Talmud Learning with Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz, director of admissions, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

קו, ב משנה ישב האחד על הפתח ולא מילאהו ישב השני ומילאהו השני
חייב ישב הראשון על הפתח ומילאהו ובא השני וישב בצידו אף על פי
שעמד הראשון והלך לו הראשון חייב והשני פטור הא למה זה דומה
לנועל את ביתו לשומרו ונמצא צבי שמור בתוכו

Talmud Bavli 106a-

Mishnah

If one sits in a doorway, but does not block it, and a second person sits next to the first, blocking it, [so that an animal is trapped inside]-the second one is liable [for a Shabbat violation.]

If the first sat and blocked the doorway, and the second came along and sat next to him, even if the first stands and walks away, he is liable and the second is clear [of liability.] What is this case like? Like one who locks his house to protect it, and a deer turns out to have been trapped inside.

Among the thirty-nine Torah-prohibited labors of Shabbat is trapping an animal. One violates this prohibition whether one captures the animal with one's hands and body, or with a net or corral. Here the Mishnah describes a case in which an animal has gone into a doorway and one blocks the door with one's body to keep the animal trapped. In such a case, one is accounted as having violated Shabbat—he has trapped the animal using his body. However, if one merely sat in the doorway to rest, partially blocking the animal's way out, one has not violated the prohibition. Only a second person, sitting and thereby fully blocking the door would be liable.

So far so good, but now intent enters into our Mishnah's calculus: if the first blocked the door, and the second was merely resting next to him, even though when the first goes, the second continues to block the door, he is nonetheless free of violation. As the Mishnah puts it, it is as if he locked the door to protect the house, without reference or thought given to the animal inside. He did not intend to trap the animal, he merely intended to rest in the doorway. Since the animal was already trapped inside, and he did not intend to keep it trapped, he has not violated Shabbat.

Questions

1. Should we be held accountable only for our intentions or our actions as well? In all circumstances? Only in some?
2. Does Shabbat teach us to be mindful of our intentions? How?

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Yitro

Exodus 18:1-20:23

February 14, 2009

20 Shevat 5769

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School, JTS

Parashat Yitro is a play in three acts, starting with Act I, a backstory in Exodus 18. Moses reunites with his family, notably his wise father-in-law, Yitro (Jethro), who rejoices at the miraculous reunion and then mentors his inexperienced son-in-law in the art of religious leadership. Yitro teaches Moses how to bless God, offer sacrifice, and administer justice among his restive and distressed people.

Act II, chapter 19, describes a dramatic development in which the disorganized refugees assemble into a nation united at the base of a flaming mountain, ready to receive the explosive revelation directly from God. Act III, chapter 20, is the climactic moment of not only the Torah, but all of Jewish life. Indeed, the Decalogue has shaped human culture across time and space in ways that we cannot fathom. The coda of this final act is a call to worship—God instructs Moses to teach the people how to construct the Lord's altar. What other response is possible after what they have heard and seen?

Given this parashah's literary structure of background, development, and climax, it is tempting to skim the opening sections and cut to the great theophany of chapter 20. But doing so would diminish the power of the parashah to address us today. Sinai is not the beginning of our relationship with God, nor is it the end. It is the defining moment, yet the preparation for revelation is a more relevant model for our own meetings with the divine.

One of the preeminent teachers of Torah today is Michael Fishbane, the Nathan Cummings Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Chicago, and a frequent lecturer at JTS. In his new book, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*, Fishbane addresses the process of awakening from the dullness of "habitude" into awareness of the "mysterious vitality of divine effectivity." This emergence is the point of the Torah's prologue—of the narratives of Genesis and of the early life of Moses. In all of these passages, we chart the stirring soul, and perhaps begin to kindle such a stirring within ourselves.

Fishbane writes, "Many lives must be lived before Sinai is possible; and many teachers have to stand in the vastness before God's infinite 'Shall-Be,' pondering its

truth and its implications for human life, before Sinai becomes a reality.” He notes that one must “sift the deposits of living,” registering both the achievements and failings of other people, in order for Sinai to become possible. This sifting is manifest in the passage of Moses from pampered child to zealous youth and then on to resolute and sagacious leader. This transition to leadership culminates in the first act of our parashah.

In chapter 18, Yitro observes with alarm how Moses sits before the people from dawn until dark, instructing them in the ways of God. “You will surely be worn out” by this practice, and do no favors for yourself or your people, he warns Moses. Moses frets that he has no choice—the people want divine instruction, and he is the only qualified judge. But Yitro persists—train a cadre of teachers, and God will be with you. In this way alone will the people “come to its place in peace.”

Yitro’s counsel is sensible, yet it is also counterintuitive. If the role of Moses is to bring people close to God, and if he is the most qualified teacher, then why shouldn’t he do it himself? Yitro’s insight is that this monopolization of spiritual leadership actually distances the people from God, since it makes Moses their exclusive mediator. This passage demonstrates the necessity of training a generation of religious leaders—no individual teacher, not even Moses, can suffice to teach the ways of God. It is this basic task of education—of learning from his mentor and creating structures of justice for his people—that sets the stage for revelation. The task of Moses is to help the people “sift the deposits of living” so that they will be ready for Sinai.

Fishbane asserts that it is not only culture and family history that prepares the people for revelation. Act II of our parashah, chapter 19, exposes Moses and the people of Israel to a shocking array of sights and sounds that break the heavy lid of habit and allow access to the hidden treasure that permeates all of reality. The pretext of revelation is also revelation—not of words or wisdom but of the vastness and power of God in nature. Fishbane describes the effect of this physical turbulence upon the soul of Moses as the “violent vastness passing through the self as an awesome divine truth.” Once Moses and the people have experienced the fire, the smoke, the shofar blasts, the bright light, and the ionized air of revelation—only then can they discern the Voice. “The great vastness of world-being is shaped into a sphere of religious instruction and duty for communal life.”

Perhaps this is ancient history, a stage through which we need to pass on our way to revelation, but of no further significance? I don’t think so, and neither did the ancient Rabbis. Playing on verse 19:2, “on *this* day they came to the Sinai desert,” the Rabbis said that “the words of Torah should be new to you as if they were given on this very day” (Midrash *Tanchuma* and Rashi). I would go a step further: prepare yourself well on this day, and on this day you may again receive the Torah.

How to prepare for revelation? Reading Parashat Yitro with the help of Fishbane, it appears that we must prepare for the Voice in two ways—through *culture* and through *nature*. Culture—our experience of learning wisdom from teachers, parents, and ancestors—cultivates the soul. It prepares us with intellectual and moral insights to approach the vastness of divine Truth. Yet nature is also necessary for our encounter with God. We are material beings, embodied and aware of the pleasures and vulnerabilities of our physical state. When we explore places of natural grandeur, unleashing our suppressed sense of awe, then we open ourselves to the vastness of God.

Another way to say this is that the person who wishes to approach God must use the best tools available—studying ancient wisdom, and seeking out wonder in the natural world. These two acts, corresponding to chapters 18 and 19 of Yitro, allow a person to take formless feeling and shape it into a set of principles and practices that make

communal life possible.

Something surprising about this plan is the unusual order. It is common in Jewish life to proceed from awe in nature to meditation on the Torah. This is the format of Psalm 19, and it is also our liturgical model every morning and evening in the blessings before Shema’. First we find God in the universal rhythms of nature, and then we discern God’s guidance in the particular path of Torah and mitzvot.

But in Yitro, the order is reversed. First we prepare through education, and then we prepare through awe-inspiring exposure to God’s power over nature. Perhaps the discrete ideas of education—the judiciary system designed by Yitro, for example—are fused together by the electricity of awe, and it is at this point that the prophet can discern the Word.

We are not Moses, you and I, but we can study ancient wisdom, and we can experience awe in nature. Combining these experiences, we may come to a new light, a new insight, and a fresh glimpse of God’s Truth. We too can stand at Sinai, shaking and humbled by our glorious encounter with eternity.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary on Ramban by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Exodus 20:11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and God rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Ramban, “the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” The verse is stating that the Sabbath day will be blessed and hallowed because God commanded to bless it and glorify it by remembering it. Therefore, God commanded us to rest on this day so that it would become sacred and we would not do any work. And Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra wrote that God blessed this day and sanctified it by endowing it with a greater capacity to enable the soul to receive additional wisdom than on all the other days.

Parashat Yitro brings us to the foot of Mount Sinai as the Israelites are about to receive Revelation. Ten utterances are proclaimed to the nascent Israelite community—commandments by which they will form a nation, live their lives, and inspire humanity. It is the fourth of these *dibrot* that establishes Shabbat as a weekly experience. What does Ramban add to enrich our understanding of Shabbat—the day that Abraham Joshua Heschel referred to as a “palace in time”?

The act of remembering, according to Ramban, leads to sanctification. Memory has the potential to create holiness. But more than that, Ramban is astute in highlighting the wisdom of his exegetical colleague, Abraham ibn Ezra. Shabbat creates an intellectual world, the consequence of our souls becoming more receptive to learning during this spiritually sensitive time. We are commanded to separate from the daily routine and place ourselves in a space where creativity, meditation, learning, and transformation all become possible.

More than on any other day, Torah is central to the Shabbat experience. The ritual of publicly reading the parashah dovetails with the message of Ramban and Ibn Ezra. God’s word stands at the heart of Shabbat. It is our meditation on God’s word that enables our souls to absorb the sacred message. We, in turn, envision other possibilities for improving ourselves, thereby making *tikkun ‘olam* a true part of the world in which we live.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.