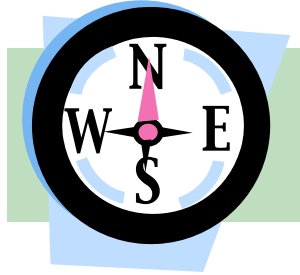


A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Yitro

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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## What Would Moses Do?

In my remarks last week I asked the question, "What would you take with you if your home were burning and all that remains behind would most likely turn to ashes?" In all honesty, I have found it easier to ask the questions of you than it is for me to answer them. When I asked my chaplaincy colleagues the same question, they turned the question on me, forcing me to respond. I commented that since it would be difficult to take my entire baseball card collection, I would probably settle on one card in particular, my 1933 Diamond Star Hank Greenberg that I purchased last summer shortly after a certain funeral that I conducted that had a profound impact on me. The card reminds me of an era in baseball when men and women dressed up to go to the game. Men wore hats with rims to define themselves as gentlemen. Hank Greenberg was very much a gentleman who paved the way for so many other young men to play the game and have a sense of security when they retired. Hank Greenberg was instrumental in establishing a pension plan for ball players. He distinguished himself as a leader both as a player on the field, and as an owner off the field. My hat off to him!

What intrigued me about the Torah reading is the actions of Moses, whom many considered to be an example of great fortitude to a nation that struggled for its independence from physical slavery and mental servitude to a tyrant who had no respect for them and what the Israelite nation could have provided him and his nation if allowed to live a more free life. There are many reminders of the significance of this moment, beginning with the Ten Commandments, and not limiting itself to just this moment in time, that the reason why we exist and God exists is to remind the world about what happens when human beings enslave another human being. No good will ever come of it. So, we stand reminded!

The question that arose in my own mind, however, as I contemplated the moment of departure from Egypt, when the Israelites were notified by Moses to prepare for their departure, is “What did Moses take with him out of Egypt?” Did he take his own advice, the words of instruction to the Israelite community – “Keep it light!”? While the Israelites were at home enjoying their last meal with their friends, we discover Moses at some place along the Nile digging up the past. A promise was made to Joseph by his relatives that when they return to the land of their father, they were to take his bones with them. So, Moses was busy wrapping Joseph’s bones in preparation for their final resting place.

Why is this such a significant moment to linger over? What does this tell us about the need to care for the dead as well as the living? Is this out of character with the rest of the Israelite story of their departure from Egypt? I have come to the conclusion that this is indeed very much in character with Moses and what he said to the Israelite community in his address to them before the tenth plague. He said to them, make sure to bring those items that will enable you to tell the story to your children about the slavery that you experienced and the subsequent freedom that resulted when God enabled them to leave their incarceration. Joseph’s bones were a powerful symbol. In a single act of compassion and gratitude, Moses demonstrates how we all must link the past to our future. Moses remembers a communal past at a time when God remembers the cries of the present generation. What gives Moses his greatness as a leader is his ability to see the symbolism and know of its ability to inspire others for generations to come.

In his comments on this scenario in the Bible, Burton Visotzsky comments, “Great is the leader who can see the end even as the journey is beginning. Greater still is the leader who can look back and see how far he has already come along the road” (The Road to Redemption, page 126)

What distinguishes Moses in this moment of leadership as the Israelites prepare to leave is his ability to reflect on his own mortality as he humbles himself to care for the bones of Joseph’s corpse. On the evening when he would have been calculating his next move, Moses takes time out for an act of *chesed*,

loving-kindness, that involves paying honor to the past. What is most important to Moses ought to be important for Israel as well. How we honor the dead is a reflection upon how we treat the living.

At the beginning of the Torah portion this week, we are given a glimpse into the familial life of Moses, much of which has been absent during the time that he has taken to address himself to Moses. The last time that we saw Tziporah and the boys was right before Moses re-entered Egypt. We recall Moses, at the insistence of Aaron, sending his wife and children back to Midian to be with her father Yitro, under his protecting care so that they would not be exposed to the harsh conditions of Israelite servitude. Although his motives may have been sincere, there are those who would criticize Moses for abandoning his family. One wonders if the Torah’s author (if not Moses himself reflecting back on this moment of reconnecting as a family) is troubled by the events of the past when it is recorded, “Tziporah and her two sons came forward to greet Moses.”

One would expect a tremendous family reunion to take place under the desert sky when husband and wife as well as father and sons come together. However, the kissing is reserved for Yitro, who is identified as Moses’ father-in-law several times. I worry about the role that Moses has assumed for himself in trying to lead the Israelite nation and honoring the legacy that Joseph has left him. Will he ever be able to restore flesh to those bones by taking them all the way to the land promised to them by God? Has the first casualty of redemption been his own family? Tziporah has become a single mom in raising two boys who have become traumatized in some way by an absentee father. The eldest is Gershom whose name we are told reflects the fact that Israel was a “stranger in a strange land.” He is also a stranger to his own father. What are we to understand when he and his brother Eliezer receive very little name recognition in the future. We all know how difficult it is for a child to live in the shadow of a respected parent. Yet, it appears as though they create no name for themselves.

They are identified as “her son’s” rather than as “his sons” which lead us to speculate quite a bit on their relationship and Moses’ ability to take care of things at home. At the same time the Torah honors Tziporah for her efforts at

mothering two sons at a critical point in the history of the Israelite nation.

This Shabbat I reflect on my own role as a rabbi in the community and all of the people whom I am expected to care for – at the nursing homes that I visit, at the hospital on whose floors I pace during the week, and at the synagogue where I spend my time meeting congregants and their children in the afternoons and evenings, as well as attending to religious matters on the weekends. What toll has it taken on my own daughters and the little time I have available to be with them, and my wife? The stress of not being at home has cost me tremendously.

Yitro comes to the rescue with some worldly wisdom to Moses. He advises him to share the burden of leadership with some qualified partners because he cannot do things alone. What does Moses do? He listens to the sage wisdom of his father-in-law and he divides up the responsibility of leading the people. Even though he may have done so with a sense of reluctance, not willing to place all of his trust in others, what he succeeds at doing is developing a system of communication that will allow the system to work.

I reflect back on my original question regarding the price that Moses has paid by being God's spokesperson. Has Moses paid a price in relation to his own family that in the end was more than it was worth? I know that Moses cares deeply for the work that has been assigned to him and he continues with his mission despite all of the difficulties that he endures. Yet, I wonder, would he much rather have had a more personal relationship with his children and his wife? It is a question that we all must ask ourselves whenever we enslave ourselves to those things that take us away from family and friends. On this Shabbat, I know that my reflections will take on greater meaning as I contemplate the role of the synagogue in my life. As I do so, I hope and pray that I will find the right partners to share the role of leadership as we look ahead at the future of Temple B'nai Abraham and how this institution has helped us to preserve Jewish life in the North Shore Community.

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### Parashat Yitro 5768 The "I"s Have It

"I am the Lord, Your God, -- who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." This is how the Ten Commandments begins, as God introduces Himself to Israel from Mount Sinai. When God speaks, there are several *midrashim* which speak to what the Israelites heard as they stood below the mountain that was covered in smoke and the light lit up with bolts of flashing. The most popular of these stories claims that the Israelites heard nothing less and nothing more than the first letter of the first word, the *alef* of "*Anochi*" which means "I". *Alef* is a letter that has no sound or voice of its own. Therefore, it represents the beginning of all letters. From it emanates all sound. This is its hidden wisdom and its mystery. Life emanates from the stillness and the silence of *alef*, whose numerical value is one. Out of the One who is God comes our spiritual awareness of the world. From this we learn that everything in the world is connected to the One who calls himself "I".

I just started reading a book called "*The Untethered Soul*" which addresses the question "Who am I?" God is clear in who He is in His introduction of Himself to the Israelite nation. God defines Himself by the things that He has done. This is how God wishes for us to know the Divine Presence that will continue to travel with the Israelite nation in their development of their own identity – in relation – in relation to themselves and their experience as slaves, in relation to one another, as well as in relation to God, the Infinite One whose voice emerges from the silence.

"Who am I?" says God when asked by Moses to identify the voice that spoke out to him from a bush that was not consumed by fire. "*Ani ehyeh eshar ehyah!*" "*I am who I am!*" is one interpretation. Another is "*I will be who I will be!*" God is a part of the present as well as a part of

the future. But the most important part of this statement is the reality that “God is” and that “God transcends time itself.” The Torah teaches us that God is present at all times. The “I,” the first word to the first statement of God’s words of instruction to Moses and to Israel pays tribute to this notion. “I” is the seed to all that germinates from it. “I” is the very soul that is the heart that feeds all of us in our efforts to emulate God. “I” is all that God needs to say, and for us to understand “who we are” in relation to one another, to ourselves, and to God.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian, stated it very simply. When we are in the midst of relating and there is no barrier between us and the object of our relating, we are involved in an “I-I” relationship. The moment we step back to analyze what we have experienced we reduce things to an “I-Thou” relationship. The same can be said of the soul of who we are in this world. According to XXXXXXX Singer, each time we consider the different aspects of who we are, we realize that there is much more to us than any of these titles or roles can define. To call myself a rabbi limits me to a certain role that carries with it various associations and expectations that do not take into consideration my role as a father, a son, or a husband, for instance. When I listen to the voices that speak to me inside of my head, telling me what to do and what not to do, here again my identity is reduced by the temptation to observe myself from those perspectives.

What I have learned through my chaplaincy work, and in my visiting with those who are suffering, not just physical ailments, but also individuals who are distressing over emotional and psychological issues, as well as socioeconomic ones, is that there is no liberating moment for any of us until we learn to be in the moment with “I” as our witness. It is in those moments that we free ourselves from what ails us and allow ourselves to flourish in just being, being who we are, being who we want to be, and not worrying about what it is that prevents us from experiencing the joy that Yitro exhibits when he meets up with Moses at Mount Sinai, in the wilderness. The Torah tells us, “*Vayichad – he rejoiced...*” (Exodus 18:9) In the commentaries that I have read I have learned that this is a rare form of the Aramaic word, related to the word “*chidudim*” meaning “prickles”, the physical manifestation that occurs when a person is overcome with emotion. Rashi, however, says that the prickles that Yitro

experiences when meeting with Moses, are caused in part because of the unease that he feels towards the Egyptians who suffered at the hands of God, despite the miracles that the Israelites experienced in return.

Despite the authority of these great sages, I have my own humble opinion about what must have transpired in this moment of exhilaration as son-in-law and father-in-law met after a long period of time in which one of them endured much hardship. “*Vayichad*” can also mean “concentrate, unite” as in “*yichud – the private meeting between man and woman*” that occurs immediately after the wedding ceremony finishes. This word suggests that a moment of intimacy takes place, not necessarily between Yitro and Moses, but more so between Yitro and the God of Moses to whom he is drawn by the stories of what happened to the Israelites. Yitro ends up blessing this God as being greater than all the other gods that he worships and admires. The Israelite God is indeed a powerful force in the universe.

It is in our deepest moments of distress that we seek such unity with God – to bring us healing of both body and soul, to take us up out of our deepest pit of despair. By embracing ourselves, the “I” of who we are, we touch upon the “I” of Anochi, the God who identifies Himself to us at the beginning of the Ten Commandments. If God can redeem 600,000 from the narrowest of places in Egypt (Mitzrayim), then surely this same God can rescue one soul from my narrow place. It is upon thinking about being in this particular place that the Psalmist David goes in Psalm 30 when he proclaims that God is the one who turns his sackcloth into robes of joy and where tears may linger at night but joy returns in the morning.

May we all find this place within ourselves on this Shabbat to find the joy that is a part of “yichud” where we discover the emotional release and the ecstasy that is to be found when we embrace our “I” with the “I” of God.