



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

Insights into Parshat Yitro and Matan Torah

Calev Kahn and Daniel Kahn

In Parshat Yitro, after the exodus from Egypt, Bnei Yisrael head towards Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

The Little Midrash Says (2010) asks the following question. Why did Hashem decide to give the Torah now? Why did he not give it earlier, to Adam or Noah or Avraham?

One answer is that the Torah had to be given to a complete whole nation - not to a single individual. Even Avraham, who had a cadre of followers, was really just a single unit. Only after Yitzchak and Yaakov were born, matured, and followed in Avraham's footsteps, only after the 12 tribes entered Egypt with 70 people – only then did the nucleus of a nation begin to form. The presence of that nation made the public revelation on Mount Sinai meaningful. Other religions, like Christianity and Islam, formed with no public revelation but rather through an individual who reported having experienced a vision and being commanded to proselytize.

In addition, living through enslavement and the Exodus, witnessing the 10 plagues and the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds, meant the newly formed Jewish nation would forever pledge allegiance to Hashem and accept his law. The Gemara describes the revelation on Mount Sinai by saying Hashem held the mountain over the heads of the Jewish nation and forced them to accept the Torah – which is to say that the fledgling nation had little choice but to accept Hashem's Torah after experiencing His many miracles both in Egypt and the desert, and with with the promise of imminent entry into their own home land.

There is another point to consider with reference to the giving of the Torah. With numerous laws to study, often we get so involved in reviewing and learning the Torah's details that we lose sight of the forest for the trees.

As Rabbi Fohrman from AlephBeta.org says, if someone from another country were to ask an American what the United States of America stands for, it would be ridiculous to respond that "we are a country of laws, including obeying traffic laws and paying taxes." Those laws are a

manifestation of the country's larger values, which are expressed in the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution. The laws are not inherently what makes the United States the country that it is; rather, we are a unique country because of our founding principles, and our laws directly result from those ideals.

Similarly, Rabbi Fohrman demonstrates how the Ten Commandments given at Sinai are the core laws from which all other laws can be derived. In fact, there is an even more concise formulation of the principles behind our commandments, as told in a famous Talmudic story. Hillel, the sage, is asked by a potential convert to teach him the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel responds, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others; that is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary" (Shabbat 31a).

The commentators are confused, however: How does Hillel's statement cover the laws involving the relationship between Hashem and man?

In the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam suggests an even more concise and yet expansive perspective. He states that the purpose for the Torah's laws is to achieve "*tikkun hanefesh*" and "*tikkun haguf*": improving the body politic and social fabric of society, as a means to the primary goal, that the soul should acquire knowledge and love of Hashem. Some laws, like saying *Kri'at Shema*, allow us to directly affirm and describe fundamental truths about Hashem (i.e. He is singular and unique, fundamentally different from all other entities and indivisible), and other laws help enforce an appropriate social order (e.g. tort law). Unlike other legal systems that focus primarily on the social order, Jewish law is focused on both perfection of the society and of the intellect. The Rambam reviews the all the categories of Torah law in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, explaining how the laws are relevant and lead to creation of a proper social order. These laws thereby allow us the space to contemplate the eternal truth of monotheism and love of Hashem – which is the ultimate goal of the Torah.

HaShem's Love

Brenda Altose

Attributions: Thoughts in this essay were influenced by Rabbi Aryeh Nivim, Rav Shimshon Pincus, Rabbi Tatz, Rabbi Lord Sacks, and Mrs. Zipporah Zelasko.

The COVID-19 crisis and our approaching celebration of Shavuot together compel us to examine our relationship with HaShem, to strengthen our belief in His boundless love for us, and to use this special opportunity to increase our connection with HaShem.

How do we know HaShem loves us, when life seems overwhelming? We can learn about the possibility of high connection with HaShem as in Gan Eden. We can teach ourselves examples of His love for us and our people for generations. We can strengthen our certainty by looking for Him when He's hard to find. We can understand that HaShem wants our connection because we are humans with free choice and mistakes, and

it is the human condition alone that makes us worthy to strive towards a closer relationship.

When we know how much Hashem loves us, it's easier to use difficult situations as an opportunity to get closer to Him.

Initially, Adam and Chava experienced a blissful connection with HaShem, a relationship of total dependence and complete trust. When they were misled by the *nachash* (*serpent*), they chose to disobey the command of their loving HaShem by eating from the *Eitz Hadaas Tov V'ra* (Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad). This *chet* was a result of their first attempt at exercising human free choice, and it introduced confusion and doubt into the world. Good and bad, belief and uncertainty, clarity

and doubt, each mixed for the first time. Adam and Chava dramatically altered their relationship with HaShem and had to leave the Garden, not as a punishment, but because once they were “choosers” they needed a world of free choice. This is *Olam Hazeih*, the world of choice. Here, we use free choice to direct our effort.

How do we gain clarity about Hashem’s unwavering love for us? Most of us model some aspect of our connection with HaShem on our relationships with other humans.

Hopefully, our needs in infancy were met by a beneficent, seemingly all-powerful caregiver. We were helpless and unable to achieve anything on our own. We internalized that because this awesome provider expends energy and love for us, we must be worthy of his or her care. We developed self-esteem because we were loved. Of course, HaShem is more beneficent, more powerful, and more wise than any human parent. If HaShem loves us, then we must be worthy beings!

As toddlers, we try to emulate the adults around us and we strive for independence. If we fail often enough, we might feel so frustrated that we would give up trying entirely. But when a caring adult helps us recover, we try again. Just like a parent rejoices in the attempts of his little child, HaShem rejoices in us. We don’t expect little children to succeed in big tasks, but we applaud and encourage them when they try.

As adults, we often strive to control things, and we often fail. If we realize that our effort was misdirected, we feel shame. We might feel deserving of punishment for our striving. “If You preserve iniquities, my G-d, O my HaShem, who could survive?” (Tehillim 130) But when we feel HaShem’s love for us - when we remember that He loves us at every stage of effort - we are able to try again.

HaShem loves us, His people. He wants to give to us, and He desires connection with us. When Avraham opened his eyes to look for HaShem, He offered Avraham’s descendants everything. He rescued us from the evil and slavery of Mitzrayim when we were broken. He took us to Him despite our doubt; He took us to Him when we had nothing to offer Him except our cries. His love was too great for Him to hold back any longer. He loves us like a doting parent, ready to rescue and welcome an errant child back with just the smallest sign from the child.

Later, when we behaved as if we didn’t appreciate His gift, He didn’t take it back or try to find another nation. Instead, He gave to us even more: He gave us *nevi'im* and then a Beis Hamikdash to help us try again to connect (*Chofetz Chaim: A Daily Companion*, Day 1). In the perilous time of Esther and Mordechai, at the end, we see that HaShem had never abandoned us even though He seemed absent. It is revealed that all of His designs were out of love and desire for us to reconnect with Him. Here is love of a parent for adolescents; steadfast and encouraging while

they stray, waiting desperately for them to return, and ready to welcome them to a mature relationship.

Children suffer, sometimes terribly, as they grow. A parent will do everything possible to lessen their child’s pain, to ensure the child knows he is there throughout the entire ordeal. We can experience HaShem like this child, sending messages of His presence to comfort us. Even as He designs our challenges, He is with us.

We have a history full of examples where HaShem sent a message of love and support within troubling events. When HaShem pushed Adam and Chava out of the Garden to *Olam Hazeih*, He clothed them first; He loved them. Clothing was a reminder to them of HaShem’s love even as they were banished. When Yosef went down to Mitzrayim, midrash teaches that He sent him in a transport of good-smelling spices (instead of the usual malodorous merchandise). Yosef was comforted by the message. He was not all alone.

How can we see a message of HaShem’s presence even during our current difficulties?

- 1) COVID-19 came to our attention during Adar and Purim, a time of “light and gladness” (Esther 8:27). If COVID had appeared in our communities during Av, we would already have been mourning our banishment from HaShem’s home. In Av, the Divine attribute of *din*, justice, is stronger than that of *rachamim*, mercy. It would have been more natural in Av to feel this challenge as punishment; it would have been even harder to feel HaShem’s love.
- 2) Even the nature of a *magefa* (plague) itself hints to *rachamim*. Many people have suggested that the war to herald Maschiach may be a nuclear war. Rabbi Wallerstein suggests that perhaps the invisible small weapon might not be an atom, but a virus. My oldest child, a senior at Yavne High School, excellently observed that HaShem sent a *magefa* (plague) during the life of Dovid HaMelech, too. Forced to choose between several dire punishments, Dovid chose *magefa* instead of a war or being chased by an enemy. Dovid Hamelech reasoned: during a *magefa*, HaShem can exercise mercy, whereas the people fighting a war may not. Our *magefa*, too, carries potential for HaShem to exercise *rachamim*.

At this special time of Shavuot, HaShem is coming from Har Sinai to meet His bride, the Jewish people (midrash). He is eagerly waiting for us at the chuppah; He just wants us to show up! Rabbi Aryeh Nivon explains, in the name of the Leshem, that at this time of year there is an “upper awakening,” just waiting for us to signal our engagement with Him. HaShem loves us not in spite of our mistakes, but *because of our efforts*. Because He may seem more hidden during the challenge of COVID-19, right now, this year, we have a unique opportunity to show Him we are directing our efforts to greater connection with Him.

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Herman Levinson

הירש צבי בן ניסן

Lesley and Jeff Schwersenski

Rabbi Moshe Berger

Scholar in Residence
(216) 533-5233
moshe@mmberger.com

Sarah Rudolph

Editor
(216) 291-8918
schrudolph@gmail.com

Ronnie Shulman

Sponsorships
(614) 507-3855
rshulman1@gmail.com

YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREATER CLEVELAND

Rabbi Naphtali Burnstein, *Rabbi*
Rabbi Aharon Lebovics, *Associate Rabbi (Hebrew Academy)*
Jeffrey Belkin, *President*

Beachwood Branch
2463 S. Green Road
Beachwood, Ohio 44122

Hebrew Academy Branch
1860 S. Taylor Road
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118

