Dedicated in memory of Rachel Leah bat R' Chaim Tzvi

תורת אמך WOMEN'S TORAH WEEKLY

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Chassidut: Parshat Yitro-The Origin of Yitro's Soul

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hershel Reichman

Our Sages say that Yitro had seven names. The Shem MiShmuel takes an in-depth look at the names Yeter and Yitro. Yeter was Yitro's gentile name before he converted, and Yitro is the name he chose upon converting. Rashi explains that the name Yeter connotes that he increased the Torah with one parsha when he advised Moshe to set up a judicial system. The Shem MiShmuel asks two questions. How does Yitro's non-Jewish name Yeter indicate that he added a parsha when he only advised Moshe after he converted? Additionally, why did Yitro keep his original gentile name Yeter, adding just the letter vav, instead of taking a completely new Jewish name?

The midrash contrasts Esav and Yitro, who were polar opposites, in five ways. The five qualities correspond to the five senses. 1) Esav's descendants, the Romans, committed adultery (related to the sense of touch) when they conquered Jerusalem, while Yitro gave his daughter to Moshe in marriage. 2) Esav devoured Israel like bread, representing taste, while Yitro shared a meal of bread with Moshe. 3) Esav did not fear Hashem. This is related to vision, because when one sees Hashem, one fears Him. Yitro recognized Hashem. 4) Esav gave up the bechora and the privilege of bringing korbanot. This corresponds to smell, as korbanot are referred to as "rei'ach necho'ach," a good fragrance. Yitro brought sacrifices to Hashem. 5) When Amalek, Esav's descendants, heard about the exodus of Egypt, they declared war against the Jews. Yitro, however, came to join them.

The midrash actually contrasts them in a sixth way as well. This sixth trait utilizes the collective of all senses together. Esav represented sinat Yisrael while Yitro signified ahavat Yisrael.

The gemara says that Esav was wicked from the beginning until the end of his life. We know that Hashem gave man the gift of bechira, free will. Didn't Esav have free choice? Bechira begins with man's unsullied innate personality, which can be used for good or evil. Once choices are made, certain characteristics form. These characteristics then become habitual and harder to change.

Kayin was the first murderer mentioned in the Torah. He was given gevura, strength, which he could have used for the good. Instead, he perverted his personality, chose wickedness by violating the three cardinal sins, and is considered the progenitor of all evil.

Although Hashem gives us free choice, He is saddened when we sin. In spite of this, Hashem doesn't abandon man's original potential for good and wants to redeem it. This happens through reincarnation. Kayin died an evil man. One of Yitro's seven names was Keni, the identical letters that spell Kayin. Kayin's soul was reincarnated in Yitro, who inherited his good traits.

Yitro had enormous inner strength. He discovered monotheism, stood up as one man alone against an entire nation, and was shunned and blacklisted by his people. Esav received Kayin's evil middot. He too transgressed the three cardinal sins, was an egoist, and was jealous of his brother Yaakov. Esav was given amazing powers to rectify the evil of Kayin, but he chose not to do so and died an evil man.

Hevel embodied the trait of humbleness to an extreme. He too needed to be reincarnated because he did not live up to his potential. His humility was smothered by the evil of Kayin. Hevel was reincarnated in Moshe, who was the humblest of all men. Moshe's anava did not prevent him from action; it brought him closer to Hashem.

Yitro and Moshe were none other than Kayin and Hevel reincarnated. Yeter means something more. It is the power of extraordinary courage, which brought Yitro to go against the world and join the Jews in the desert. Moshe told Yitro to keep the name Yeter, signifying admirable strength. However, he advised him to add the letter vav, which refers to Hashem, to make it Jewish.

Every one of us has a Kayin and Hevel within us. We struggle with self-centeredness and weakness. Our true personality is enslaved to bad passions and habits. However, we can redeem ourselves by tapping into the powers of Yitro and Moshe. By summoning the courage to do what's right and taking strength from Hashem, we can defeat the evil side within us.

Parshat Yitro: The Experience of Sinai

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

There is a perplexing Gemara in Shabbat that recounts Hashem's threat to the Jewish people at Sinai. He said if they would not accept the Torah, they would be buried beneath the mountain. It seems as if Klal Yisrael were forced to accept the mitzvot. In addition, most of the Torah was not even given at Sinai. It was received in Arvot Moav before the Jews crossed into the land of Israel. Why then is the experience at Sinai considered such a pivotal event in Jewish history?

The Ramban points out that the whole focus of the giving of the Torah at Sinai was for the Jews to attain awe of Hashem. The Meshech Chochma further explains that Hashem appeared to them in such a wondrous way that it was as if He placed the mountain over their head. They were so overwhelmed that they had no choice but to accept the Torah. The Gra finds the entire Torah in the word Bereishit, which contains two words: yarei, to be afraid, and boshet, a sense of humbleness. Yirat ha'aretz signifies fear of punishment, but there's a higher fear of yirat shamayim, which is standing in awe of the One Above. It says that the Jews stood at Sinai with busha—a feeling of puniness in contrast to Hashem's grandeur.

A brazen person is one who is unwilling to accept advice from others. In contrast, a boshet panim (one who is humble) has the ability to constrict his desires and seek guidance from others who will help him grow.

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The experience at maamad Har Sinai instilled within the Jews an intense feeling of humility, of wanting to learn and grow and continuously ascend.

Our actions are a reflection of who we are. The Rema writes that if we would keep in mind at every moment of our life that we are standing in Hashem's presence, then our actions would be entirely different. One should think, "What are the small things I can do to remind myself of the Higher presence in my world?" That's taking the Sinai experience, the busha and reverence, and bringing it into your life.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe teaches that most human anxiety comes from fear of annihilation. When one views the material world as the only world that exists, one is bound to feel fear. If one's life is built on a temporary foundation, one cannot expect to feel secure. In truth, we have nothing to fear but Hashem. Nothing is as real as Him. When a person feels despondent or afraid, he should think, "What does Hashem want from me at this moment?" The az panim (arrogant person) says what matters is what others think of me. The boshet panim says, "What matters is how I grow as an individual in the world Hashem has placed me and in the challenges that He gave me." Busha doesn't mean fear of punishment but rather a deeper level of understanding.

The Ramchal says that at Sinai, Hashem instilled within us the ability and the natural inclination to want to carry out His will. Rav Tatz notes that mitzvah comes from the root word zavta, to join. The Sefat Emet further explains that when we make Hashem's will our will, we become closer with Him. Mount Sinai gave us the strength to take the material world, imbue it with sanctity, and create spiritual worlds with it. Rav Aviner points out that the imagery of the mountain over their head wasn't coercion; it was Hashem explaining to them a reality. Now that they'd experienced Sinai, they would have that spiritual aspect of closeness to Hashem and the ability to effect tremendous cosmic changes.

Rav Gifter asks why Hashem told the Jews, if they would not accept the Torah, "Sham tehei k'vuratchem," there will be your burial place. Should it not have said here? He answers that Hashem meant to say that in that place where you failed to teach your children, there you will bury them. When we transmit the experience of Sinai to our children, we have to convey both the voice and the fire. But before one can teach the voice of Sinai, one must teach the fire of Sinai. The voice is "V'halachata b'drachav," the Torah approach to life. The fire is consistency, a sense of divine mission, and an abundance of passion and love.

Being consistent means modeling what one teaches in all aspects of life. Teachers and parents must consider themselves messengers of Hashem. They must impart a love for the material they teach and a love for their students. May we merit to transmit to our children the warmth, the meaning, and the beauty of Torah.

Ruach Hakodesh and the Human Soul

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

Humans are a composite of two forces: earth and soul, passivity and continual dynamism. The nefesh is the great spiritual conductor, the aspect of self that will issue commands to the brain. All of this life force creates instinctive emotion and intellect. Each animal has its own sort of nefesh. A beaver knows how to make dams; an owl doesn't. Even instinctive human intellect is still nefesh.

Our ability to imagine and envision, which is where creativity comes from, our ability to remember and figure things out, and our primitive will all come from the powers of the soul. Each of these powers has its own limitations. Your imagination, memory, intellect, and even will are limited. But there is something in you that's very exalted and wants connection and meaning. It also wants you to do deeds that have meaning. This is the neshama, and it is very delicate. We aren't always sensitive to its presence, yet it affects the nefesh and the body.

One's ability to experience the nefesh and neshama varies from era to era. A baby is born completely physical with no desire to look for meaning. A six-year-old can begin to sense his neshama. Your ability to experience your neshama depends on how much connection you make with it and how much you use it.

Man has two souls, the higher and the lower soul. The neshama comes down to the body through the nefesh. Although the neshama is very high, it is stuck within the body and cannot have contact with other spiritual forces because it is limited by its existence within the person. You can experience the neshama by letting it move you to use your body to make a connection with Hashem. Conversely, in your search for meaning, you can also turn aside from the neshama and find yourself seeking attachment through the power of defilement. It all depends on where you're looking for perfection.

The neshama leads the lower soul, the nefesh, and uses the imagination and the mind to generate thoughts. But here too it will depend on what you choose. Are you taking it to Hashem, or are you taking it elsewhere?

When we talk about neshama, we speak about it being one thing. Picture a necklace made up of many beads strung on one string. The nefesh is like a chain, a string of various beads. It has many aspects, but there's one thing that holds it together. The neshama has many aspects, and each one of them has to be understood. Each one is like a link, and they are all aware of each other. If I raise part of my necklace, the first links are higher than the lower links, although they still remain one thing. So too, the highest links of the neshama are very exalted. The lowest links have to do with the nefesh, yet it is still one entity.

As you change, the neshama can be expressed in different ways. Yet one can sense it when one chooses right over wrong. One can feel the relationship one has to one's higher self to the degree one is worthy of it.

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