**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT YITRO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Yitro of how Moshe accepted the suggestion made by his father-in-law, Yitro, to appoint a network of judges to help him arbitrate and resolve the people’s conflicts. Yitro observed Moshe spending his entire day judging the people, and urged Moshe to find qualified individuals with whom he could share this burden of responsibility, rather than trying to shoulder it alone. Moshe heeded his father-in-law’s advice, and set up a network of judges.

Many writers raised the question as to the significance of the fact that this seemingly obvious measure was introduced specifically by Yitro. Moshe, the greatest prophet who ever lived, who beheld a clearer vision of God than that beheld by any human being who ever lived, seems not to have considered this option, of appointing a team of judges to work alongside him. This idea was proposed by Yitro, an outsider and former idolater, who had only recently decided to join *Benei Yisrael*. What might be the message being conveyed by this seemingly peculiar incident?

The *Or Ha-chayim*, in a fascinating passage (to 18:21), writes that the Torah wanted *Benei Yisrael* to recognize that there is great wisdom to be found among the other nations. We were chosen to receive the Almighty’s Torah and live under His special providence, the *Or Ha-chayim* explains, not because we are intrinsically wiser or greater, but out of His great kindness and because of His promise to the patriarchs. And therefore right at the time when *Benei Yisrael* received the Torah at Sinai, forging an eternal covenant with the Almighty, a foreigner comes along and introduces a system that Moshe embraces and chooses to implement – to remind us that our stature as God’s special nation does not reflect any inherent superiority within our makeup and composition.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his [*Darkhei Chayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=19923&st=&pgnum=142), cites the *Or Ha-chayim*’s comments, and then (after questioning the *Or Ha-chayim*’s theory)proposes a different approach. He writes that this story of Moshe and Yitro should serve as a humbling reminder that nobody ever achieves perfection or thoroughly comprehensive knowledge. Just as Moshe Rabbenu had what to learn and gain from Yitro, a newcomer to the Jewish Nation, so do we, and all people, including the brightest and most accomplished among us, have what to learn and gain from others. As the Mishna (4:1) famously teaches, “Who is wise? He who learns from all people.” The process of growth and learning never ends, as long as a person is alive. We all have more to learn and plenty of room for improvement, and the knowledge, insight and wisdom we seek can be found in many different places, and among many different people. If Moshe Rabbenu gained knowledge from Yitro, then we, too, can certainly learn and gain from the people around us, regardless of their background and stature.

Sunday

We read towards the beginning of Parashat Yitro of the names Moshe gave to his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. The name “Gershom” is rooted in the word *ger* (“foreigner”), and was chosen to express the fact that Moshe lived as a foreigner in Midyan, having been forced to flee from Egypt (18:3). “Eliezer” is a combination of the words *Kel* (“God”) and *ezer* (“help”), and celebrates God’s assisting Moshe when Pharaoh sought to have him executed for killing an Egyptian taskmaster (18:4).

The *Ba’al Ha-turim* notes a subtle distinction between these two verses. In mentioning the name “Gershom,” the Torah explains that this name was given “because he [Moshe] said, ‘I was a foreigner in a strange land’.” When it comes to Eliezer, however, the Torah says simply, “And the name of the [other] one was Eliezer, because ‘The God of my father assisted me…’” The Torah here omits the words, “He said,” and instead quotes Moshe’s proclamation that led him to name his son “Eliezer,” without saying that these words were spoken by Moshe.

The *Ba’al Ha-turim* suggests that the omission of the phrase “Moshe said” indicates that Moshe did not actually verbalize these words. Although this remark is the background to the name “Eliezer,” they were not actually spoken, because Moshe did not wish to publicize the fact that he killed an Egyptian and thus needed God’s special protection. He thought this in his mind, without expressing these sentiments or the memory of that experience publicly.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his [*Darkhei Chayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=19923&st=&pgnum=144), finds it significant that, according to the *Ba’al Ha-turim*, Moshe chose to keep his heroic act, of rescuing a beaten Israelite slave, silent. There was certainly no shame in intervening to kill a violent Egyptian taskmaster whipping an oppressed slave. This act, undoubtedly, was noble, courageous and heroic, for which Moshe deserved to feel proud. Nevertheless, he felt it necessary to conceal this noble deed and not speak about it. Rav Elazary explains that not every worthwhile and noble act should be openly discussed. Even in regard to life-saving situations, when killing is justified and even constitutes a *mitzva*, it is not appropriate to speak openly about what happened. Taking human life is sometimes necessary for the sake of protecting human life, but it is improper for such deeds to become the stuff of casual conversation and public discourse. We need to exercise careful discretion in deciding which subjects should be brought out into the open for public consumption, and which should be kept quiet. Just as Moshe chose not to speak about his violent encounter with the taskmaster, we, too, must carefully choose which information we disclose and which to keep discreet.

Monday

In the Torah’s account of Yitro’s experiences upon his arrival at *Benei Yisrael*’s camp at Mount Sinai, he is occasionally referred to simply by his name, Yitro; at other times as “Moshe’s father-in-law” (“*chotein Moshe*”); and in some instances, as both – “Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law.” Rav Leib Baron, in his [*Yishrei Leiv* (p. 131)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48283&st=&pgnum=131&hilite=), makes this observation, and suggests connecting each reference to Yitro with the particular context. When Yitro is referred to as “Moshe’s father-in-law,” he acts solely in that capacity, as a family member of Moshe Rabbenu. By contrast, in contexts when he is called only by his name, he acts independent of his relationship with Moshe. And when he is called “Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law,” he acts both in the capacity of his relationship to Moshe, and independently of this relationship.

Rav Baron goes through each reference to Yitro in this section to show the application of this theory. Here, we will note just one example – the story of Yitro’s advising Moshe to appoint a network of judges to assist him in handling the nation’s disputes. The Torah tells that “Moshe’s father-in-law” observed how Moshe spent the entire day answering the people’s questions and resolving their conflicts (18:14), and Moshe explained “to his father-in-law” what he was doing (18:15). Then, “Moshe’s father-in-law” criticized this system, and urged him to appoint a team of judges to help him. Moshe accepted “his father-in-law’s” advice (18:24), and established a judicial network. Throughout this narrative, Yitro is not named, and is referred to solely as Moshe’s father-in-law. The reason, Rav Baron explained, is that Yitro criticized Moshe’s system and offered advice solely in the capacity of Moshe’s father-in-law, and not as just “Yitro.” He was motivated purely out of genuine and real concern for Moshe’s wellbeing (“*navol tibol*” – 18:18), and not for his own self-aggrandizement. He was not looking out for his own prestige, seeking the satisfaction of imposing his will, or trying to make a name for himself. Rather, Yitro intervened because Moshe was his son-in-law and he sincerely cared for him.

Whenever we feel the need to offer criticism or unsolicited advice, we would do well to first carefully determine whether we are motivated to intervene in the capacity of “Yitro” or in the capacity of “*chotein Moshe*.” Do we offer the criticism out of genuine concern for the person’s wellbeing, or are we motivated mainly by our own interests, such as a desire to boost our ego by putting somebody else down? The Torah’s repeated emphasis on Yitro’s relationship to Moshe in this context should perhaps remind us to ensure that we are driven by pure and genuine motives when offering criticism, and to avoid using criticism and unsolicited advice as a way of feeling good about ourselves.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Yitro tells of the Revelation at Sinai, when *Benei Yisrael* heard the Ten Commandments, the final of which is the prohibition of “*lo tachmod*” – “coveting” an item belonging to one’s fellow. The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Gezeila* (1:9), writes that one transgresses this prohibition when he applies pressure upon somebody to sell him the possession that he desires to the point where the owner agrees to sell it. Even though the buyer paid full price for the item in question, he nevertheless has violated “*lo tachmod*.”

The Ra’avad, in his critique of the Rambam’s halakhic code, disputes two points made by the Rambam regarding this prohibition. First, the Ra’avad comments that one violates this prohibition only if the owner did not ultimately consent to sell the possession. If the owner verbalizes consent, then the buyer is not in violation of “*lo tachmod*,” even though the seller consented only due to the pressure applied. This is in contrast to the Rambam’s implication that the buyer transgresses this prohibition by applying pressure even if the seller finally voices his consent.

The second point of debate between the Rambam and Ra’avad in regard to “*lo tachmod*” relates to the reason why violators of this command are not liable to corporal punishment. The Rambam writes that one does not receive *malkot* (lashes) for violating this prohibition because it falls under the category of “*lav she-ein bo ma’aseh*” – a prohibition that one transgresses without a concrete action. A well-established halakhic rule limits court-administered punishment to transgressions that are violated by committing a concrete action, and the Rambam points to this rule as the reason why “*lo tachmod*” is not punishable by *Beit Din*. The Ra’avad, however, argues, asking, “Where do we see an action greater than seizing the object?!” In his view, pressuring an object’s owner to sell it certainly qualifies as an “action” that would warrant court-administered punishment. The Ra’avad therefore points to a different reason for why *Beit Din* does not punish violators of “*lo tachmod*,” namely, the fact that they are obligated to return the object. *Halakha* exempts from corporal punishment violators of transgressions which impose a financial liability upon them. A thief, for example, does not receive *malkot* because he is required to return what he stole. According to the Ra’avad, one who violates “*lo tachmod*” is akin to a thief, and bears an obligation to return what he unlawfully obtained. As such, he is not liable to *malkot*.

The Steipler Gaon, in *Birkat Peretz*, notes that the Rambam and Ra’avad’s different rulings reflect two fundamentally different perspectives on the prohibition of “*lo tachmod*.” The Ra’avad quite clearly viewed this violation as an offense resembling theft. According to his perspective, “*lo tachmod*” essentially forbids a variation of theft – stealing with paying compensation. Therefore, one violates this prohibition only if the owner never agrees to the transaction, and he is required to return the item just as a thief must return the stolen goods. And, in the Ra’avad’s view, this transgression involves a concrete action, as one violates the command by seizing the object, just as in the case of standard theft. The Rambam, however, understood “*lo tachmod*” much differently. In his view, the prohibition of “*lo tachmod*,” as the Torah’s formulation would suggest, is, at its core, a prohibition against desiring the property belonging to another person. While it is true that one does not transgress “*lo tachmod*” unless he actually obtains the item he desires, this provision is a condition to which the prohibition is subject, not the essence and definition of the prohibition. In other words, “*lo tachmod*” forbids coveting another person’s property, but only if one covets to the point of successfully pressuring the individual to sell it. For this reason, in the Rambam’s view, one violates “*lo tachmod*” even if the owner ultimately agrees to the sale, since the violator satisfied the condition of successfully working to obtain the object. And, for the same reason, the object does not have to be returned. Since the owner eventually agreed to sell the object, the sale is legally binding, and the buyer – though he transgressed a Torah violation – is not required to return it. This also explains why the Rambam classifies “*lo tachmod*” as a “*lav she-ein bo ma’aseh*.” Since “*lo tachmod*” is defined as a prohibition against the desire for another person’s object, as opposed to the act of seizing the object, it qualifies as a “*lav she-ein bo ma’aseh*” despite the fact that the object must be taken for the violation to have been committed.

Wednesday

The Chafetz Chayim, in two contexts (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot Ha-katzar*, *lo ta’aseh* 40; *Shemirat Ha-lashon*, appendix, chapter 4), addresses the case of a groom or parents of a groom who pressure the bride’s parents to increase the dowry amount beyond the sum to which they had committed. In the view of the Chafetz Chayim, such pressuring violates the prohibition of “*lo tachmod*” (“Do not covet”), the final of the Ten Commandments. Since the groom asks for money that was not offered to him, he transgresses this prohibition, which forbids pressuring somebody to sell something in their possession which they do not wish to sell.

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%9C%D7%90-%D7%AA%D7%97%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%93-%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%A2%D7%95/), while conceding that such conduct is improper, questions the application of “*lo tachmod*” to this context. The prohibition of “*lo tachmod*” is presented in the Ten Commandments as forbidding the coveting of another person’s actual possessions, not his money. The desire to legally obtain money is something perfectly natural and lies at the foundation of economic life. Of course, the Torah discourages obsessively preoccupying oneself with money and urges us to exercise moderation in our material pursuits. However, this ideal of materialistic moderation in no way precludes reasonable negotiation. Buyers and sellers are perfectly entitled to negotiate prices, and this applies to other financial arrangements, as well, including marriage (in societies where financial considerations are a major component of a couple’s agreement to marry). Certainly, trying to raise a price after an agreement has been reached is improper, but this does not transgress “*lo tachmod*,” which refers to the effort to obtain a particular object which another person owns. This prohibition, seemingly, applies only when one desires somebody else’s item, but not if he wants to extract money from that person and thus initiates a process of negotiations in an effort to reach a profitable agreement.

By the same token, Rav Weiss notes, the prohibition of “*lo tachmod*” does not apply to applying pressure on somebody to sell something which is readily available elsewhere. If a person does not desire a particular object, but rather a certain kind of object, and he pressures somebody who owns the item in question to sell it for a cheap price, this does not transgress the violation of “*lo tachmod*.” In this case, too, the individual seeks not a particular object which is under another person’s possession, but rather to save money on his purchase, which is a perfectly valid desire. As such, this does not entail a violation of “*lo tachmod*.”

Thursday

We read in Parashat Yitro that after God summoned Moshe to the top of Mount Sinai and instructed him to prepare *Benei Yisrael* for the Revelation, “Moshe descended from the mountain to the people; he sanctified the people, and they washed their garments” (19:14). Rashi, citing the *Mechilta*, comments, “This teaches that Moshe did not tend to his own affairs, but rather [proceeded] from the mountain to the people.”

It has been suggested (see, for example, Rav Baruch Yitzchak Yissakhar Leventhal’s [*Birkat Yitzchak*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=5594&st=&pgnum=139&hilite=))that Rashi refers not only to Moshe’s giving precedence to his responsibilities of leadership over his personal affairs, but also to his willingness and ability to reach and work with the people at their level. In the days preceding *Matan Torah*, we might have expected Moshe Rabbenu to focus on his own spiritual preparations, ensuring he was ready to receive God’s word and behold the Revelation. But instead of tending to his own “affairs,” his own preparations for this event, he “descended from the mountain,” he came down from the heights of his lofty spiritual stature, and went to the people to help them prepare on their level. He understood that his role required him to focus his time and attention during this period on the people, and to work with them at their level, which meant understanding them, relating to them, and helping to prepare them. He knew he could not remain at this time figuratively atop the mountain, in his lofty spiritual heights, but needed instead to come down and relate to the people, guiding and communicating to them in a manner that was suitable for them.

One of the great challenges of Torah life is knowing how to divide our time between the “mountain,” the lifelong pursuit of greatness and unending efforts to grow and achieve greater heights, and the “people,” our obligation to try to make an impact upon others. Sometimes we need to turn away from our “own affairs,” from our own efforts to grow, for the sake of helping to inspire and uplift others. While we must, on the one hand, constantly climb and strive to reach higher levels of knowledge and piety, we must also, at times, come down to the people and do what we can to help them on whichever level they currently find themselves. This is the example set for us by Moshe Rabbenu in the days preceding *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, and this is the dual obligation that we must bear throughout our lives as we work to fulfill the commitments made by our ancestors at the time they accepted the Torah and forged an eternal covenant with the Almighty.

Friday

In the final verse of Parashat Yitro, the Torah commands, “You shall not ascend to My altar on steps, lest you reveal your nakedness upon it.” Walking up a set of stairs requires spreading one’s legs in a manner that would be inappropriate when ascending the altar to perform the service. The Torah therefore requires constructing a ramp, rather than a staircase, upon which to ascend to the altar.

Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, famously comments that this law reminds us of the extent to which we must ensure to avoid disrespecting other people: “If for these stones [of the altar], which do not have the knowledge to be disturbed by disrespect, the Torah says, ‘Since they serve a need, do not treat them in a disrespectful manner,’ then your fellow, who has the image of your Creator and is disturbed by disrespect – all the more so!”

It is worth noting that this comparison, between respect for the altar and treating others with dignity, is made specifically in the context of the means of ascending to the altar for the service. The height of the altar, which requires rising along a ramp, likely symbolizes the theme of self-growth, elevating oneself in the service of the Almighty. When we approach the “altar,” as we look to serve our Creator, we must make an effort to “ascend,” to become greater than we are currently. Possibly, the comparison drawn by *Chazal* between the altar and our fellow human being should be viewed in this light. Our Sages here urge us to regard our fellow as an altar, as offering us an opportunity for growth and ascent. Within virtually all people we can find a positive quality from which we can learn and which we can apply to our own lives and our own conduct. As the Mishna (Avot 4:1) famously teaches, a wise person learns from all other people. While we might occasionally be inclined to look down on others, feeling – perhaps justifiably – that we excel in areas in which they do not, the truth is that we have what to learn from all. *Chazal* urge us to search for the positive and admirable qualities of others that we can emulate, such that every encounter with another person can resemble the experience of serving God on the altar – an experience of ascent and self-improvement. When we approach other people with this mindset, then we will naturally respect the people around us, treat them with dignity, affection and concern, and find and seize countless opportunities for growth each day of our lives.

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