



**Partners In Torah**

**San Diego-Los Angeles**

**Take home Dvar Torah**

**Yitro**

**תשפ"ד**

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**By: Rabbi Avi Cohen**

***Hello, Welcome!***

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

***Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.***

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.**

The Torah portions over the last few weeks have dealt with the miraculous exodus that the Jewish nation experienced after their 210 years of slavery in Egypt. We celebrate this extraordinary event on Passover, a holiday that celebrates this event and focuses us on the concept of freedom from oppression, a concept that resonates strongly within mankind.

Moshe, Hashem's faithful servant, was the leader who accomplished this great mission. One day when Moshe was tending his father-in-law's sheep, Hashem appeared to him in a burning bush and engaged Moshe as His agent to take the Jewish people out of Egypt. At that time, Hashem also revealed to Moshe the ultimate goal of the exodus (Exodus 3:12):

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי שׁוֹלְחִיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם  
תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה

*12) And He said, "For I shall be with you – this is the sign that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, **you will serve Hashem on this mountain.**"*

In the previous verse, Moshe had asked Hashem, "In what merit will the Jewish people leave Egypt?" Hashem answered, "They are about to fulfill their destiny by receiving the Torah on this mountain."

Hashem revealed to Moshe that the world was about to reach its purpose. The reason Hashem created the entire universe 2,448 years earlier, was expressly for this objective; so that the Jewish people should receive the Torah on Mount Sinai and become Hashem's nation. Then, through keeping the Torah, they would sustain a deep and vibrant relationship with Hashem in this world and reap the rewards of a life well lived, in the World to Come. As a bonus, the Jewish people would also model for the world the most moral and upstanding way of life, for all others to follow.

So says Rashi in his very first comments on the Torah:

(א) בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

1) *In the beginning of Hashem's creation of the heavens and the earth.*

Rashi comments:

רש"י על בראשית פרק א פסוק א

בראשית ברא - אין המקרא הזה אומר אלא דרשוני כמ"ש רז"ל (בי"ר) בשביל התורה שנקראת (משלי ח) ראשית דרכו ובשביל ישראל שנקראו (ירמ"ב) ראשית תבואתו

*This verse begs for an interpretation. It is to be interpreted as the Sages have rendered it in the Midrash, "for the Torah, which is called ראשית-reishit, and for Yisrael, who are called ראשית - reishit."*

This means that the Hebrew letter **ב** commencing the word **בראשית** is to be translated as **for**. Hence, since the Torah and Yisrael both carry the appellation **ראשית** - *reishit*- it comes out that in the first word of the Torah Hashem is telling us that: ***"For the Torah and for Yisrael Hashem created the heavens and the earth."***

It makes sense that Hashem tell us right from the very beginning His reason for creating the world. Otherwise, how would we know? Indeed, mankind in general is perplexed and confused as to what it should be doing with its life on this planet. The answers run the gamut, and many people have never even given the question any thought, just going through life living from moment to moment and day to day. How privileged we are to know from our Creator what His intentions were for us when creating the world. How privileged we are to know that we are the purpose for which He created this entire universe!

The first person to realize and fulfill his mission fully on this world was Avraham our Forefather. He served Hashem with all his heart and soul. Hashem put Avraham through ten grueling tests, and Avraham passed them all with flying colors. The pinnacle, though, of Avraham's dedication to Hashem was realized when he was asked to bring his perfect son Yitzchak onto an altar, ostensibly to be sacrificed to Hashem. Avraham complied without hesitation. Even his precious son, the one who was supposed to carry forward his legacy, Avraham would not hold back from Hashem if that is what Hashem wanted from him.

Yitzchak followed in his father's footsteps and continued serving Hashem with all his heart and soul. His dedication to Hashem was also realized when he willingly let his father bind him onto the altar to be the sacrifice. (He was 37 years old, and could easily have overpowered his 137-year-old father.) He never left that exalted level of holiness and continued his life in complete dedication to Hashem.

Yaakov, Yitzchak's son, also followed in the ways of his elders and had a distinct advantage over them in that all twelve of his sons followed his ways. Whereas Avraham and Yitzchak each had a wayward son, Yaakov brought all of his children up to be perfectly righteous.

As Yaakov's was about to leave this world after 147 years, he gathered his 12 sons around his bed to reveal to them the secret of the end of days. Yet Hashem hid the details from him; it was not the correct time to reveal this information. But, not realizing that, Yaakov suspected that perhaps one of his sons was not worthy of hearing the sensitive information that he was about to reveal. At that point all of his sons said in unison, "**Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad!**" *Hear our father Yisrael that just as you have only one Hashem, so too we also have only one Hashem.*

Despite that the entire Jewish nation (Yaakov's 12 sons) was then completely righteous, it was still too early to give them the Torah. Missing from the nascent Jewish nation was a critical mass of at least 600,000 males before the Torah could be given. Their descendants as well had to go through the Egyptian slavery to mold them into one nation that would support each other through all kinds of difficulties. Hashem who is One can only give His Torah to a nation that is one.

The Midrash tells us:

תנא דבי אליהו רבה - פרק כג

וכשהיו ישראל במצרים נתקבצו כולם וישבו יחד משום שהיו כלם באגודה אחת וכתרו ברית יחד שיעשו ג"ח זה עם זה וישמרו בלבם ברית אברהם יצחק ויעקב ולעבוד את אביהם שבשמים לבדו ושלא יניחו לשון בית יעקב אביהן ושלא ילמדו לשון מצרים מפני דרכי ע"א.

*When the Jewish people were in Egypt, they convened a meeting because they were completely unified in their goals. They made a pact with each other that they would do acts of kindness with each other that they would guard in their hearts the covenant of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov; serve only their Father in Heaven; and not abandon the language of their father Jacob to learn the Egyptian language so that that they would not serve the Egyptian idols.*

The Midrash continues:

כיצד כשהיו ישראל עובדין את אביהן שבשמים לבדו במצרים ולא היו משנים לשונם? היו המצריים אומרים להם, "למה לא תעבדו את אלהי מצרים ויקל עבודתו מכם?"

*When the Jews served only Hashem and did not change their language, the Egyptian taskmasters would say to them, "Why don't you serve the Egyptian gods, and we will lighten your workload from you?"*

The Midrash teaches us that if the Jews accepted the Egyptian gods, they were given less work. The more they accepted the Egyptian lifestyle,

the more they were accepted as Egyptians and did not have to work like “the Jews.” It seems that many of the Jews took this path and assimilated into Egyptian society.

The Torah tells us that only one of every five Jews left Egypt. The other four fifths “perished” during the plague of Darkness because they had so assimilated that they did not want to leave Egypt. These Jews could not resist the temptation to adopt the Egyptian lifestyle and throw off the yoke of slavery.

But this group, the remaining 20% of strong people, opted for the slavery instead of giving up the ways of their forefathers. How did they resist the pressure? They realized that there was no way that they could do it alone. The only way they could possibly survive the difficulties and the pressure was to make a pact with each other and become one unit. Each person would provide support and encouragement to the others and, together, they could weather the storm. If a person had a need, because of the covenant of kindness that they had created, the others would come to his aid, and they would find salvation from their issue. They were beaten and went through difficult times, but they wouldn’t let each other down. They had to persevere. The pact that they made with each other fortified them and gave them the support and encouragement to stand firm and resist the temptation to succumb to the Egyptian ways. This is why these Jews merited to leave.

The Midrash additionally tells us:

מדרש רבה ויקרא - פרשה לב פסקה ה

רב הונא אמר בשם בר קפרא : בשביל ד' דברים נגאלו ישראל ממצרים שלא שנו את שמם ואת לשונם ולא אמרו לשון הרע ולא נמצא ביניהן אחד מהן פרוץ בערוה

*Rabbi Huna said in the name of Bar Kapara: “The Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of four things. They did not change their*

*names, their language, they did not speak lashon hara (evil) about each other, and spouses were loyal to one another.*

*These are the people who left Egypt, the ones who made a pact of allegiance to Hashem and Hashem only, and of kindness to each other, thus creating a unit of one – “all for one, and one for all.”*

This was one of the goals of the slavery in Egypt: To cultivate a people that would be strong in their commitment to Hashem against all odds, and a people that would be one unit, strong in their commitment to each other, prepared to help each other through thick and thin.

This solid foundation of the Jewish nation and this quality of unity has enabled us to remain Hashem’s nation through countless attempts to annihilate us, and through many exiles into foreign countries that, under normal conditions, would see total assimilation to the point of extinction. Throughout Jewish history, there have always been the small group who have made the pact to remain loyal to Hashem and to each other to survive as Jews even under the most horrific conditions.

When the Jewish people arrived at Mount Sinai, they arrived as one unit. The Torah tells us (Exodus 19:2).

(ב) וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר וַיַּחַן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֹגֵד הָהָר

*2) They journeyed from Rephidim and arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness; and Israel camped there, opposite the mountain.*

The verb **ויחן** “camped” is written in the singular form - “And it camped.” Rashi comments that this means that the entire Jewish nation was like ***one man with one heart***.

From the time of Creation, there was never a moment like this, so perfectly suited for giving the Torah to the inhabitants of the physical world. There was no lack of holy and righteous people throughout the



generations. Until this point, however, they were just individuals. The rest of the world was against them. Here was a great multitude of people, men, women, and children, completely unified in their commitment to Hashem and to each other. The last time that this happened was when Yaakov's 12 sons stood around his bed, but, as noted, then was not the proper time. At last, with the multitudes at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the perfect time had arrived.

This was such a pure moment in time, that even the gentile nations of the world were inspired to want the Torah. The Midrash tells us that Hashem actually offered the Torah to the other nations, but their inspiration was short lived. When they heard what the Torah contained, they quickly saw that it was not for them.

The Jewish people, on the other hand, were unconcerned. They had no need to ask Hashem what was in it because they knew that Hashem would never give them a commandment that they could not fulfill. It was a moot issue.

The Jewish people now stood at the cusp of the most impactful, earth-shattering, life altering event in history. After this event, the Jewish nation and the world would never be the same.

The Jewish people left Egypt on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nissan and arrived at Mount Sinai on Rosh Chodesh Sivan, the first day of the month of Sivan. On that day, Hashem didn't tell the Jewish people anything, as they were recuperating from their journey, and getting settled.

The next day, however, Hashem called Moshe to ascend the mountain and gave him the message that He wanted to convey to the Jewish people (Exodus 19:4-6).

(ד) אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאָבִא אֶתְכֶם  
אֵלַי:

(ה) וַעֲתָה אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְהֵייתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל  
הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ  
(ו) וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהַנִּים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבַּר אֵל בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל

*4) You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I have borne you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me. 5) And now, if you hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me **the most beloved treasure** of all peoples, for Mine is the entire world. 6) You shall be to Me **a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation**. These are the words that you shall speak to the Children of Israel.*

From the moment that Hashem had completed His creation, the entire creation stood in the balance for just this very moment. Hashem said, "If my children accept My Torah, the world will continue to exist. But if they should refuse, the world will return to chaos and nothingness."

The first ten generations of people on the earth transgressed all of Hashem's laws, and the world was almost destroyed. But Hashem had mercy on His creations, and left one family from all of them, Noach, and began His world anew. The next generations did not fare much better. Only a few individuals remained faithful to Hashem, but for them alone it would not have paid for Hashem to keep the world alive.

Then came Avraham Avinu who turned the whole picture around. Here, finally, was someone who did not keep his relationship with Hashem to himself. Avraham started out working against an entire world of idol worshippers. He slowly but surely turned the tide in favor of Hashem, teaching the world about Hashem and showing them the erroneous ways of idol worship. By the end of his life, he was known in the world as a "Prince of Hashem," a holy and faithful servant.

The light that Avraham brought and that revealed Hashem to the world, shone brightly through his children and grandchildren; but once the slavery in Egypt began, the light was almost extinguished. The Egyptians made themselves into gods, and anyone of lower status than they, was their slave. Their whole society had become depraved, focused on indulging in pleasure. Thoughts of spirituality or that man has a soul that is capable of soaring to great spiritual heights were nonexistent. It was all about enjoying the moment, and if one could not get the kick he wanted, he would use the power of magic, of which the Egyptians were masters, to enhance his pleasure.

The society that Hashem would design through His Torah would be the total antithesis of Egyptian life. It would be a society that recognized Hashem as its loving and caring King; a King that had nothing but the best interest of His subjects in mind. It would be a society that uplifts man and gives him the respect due to a “*Tzlem Elokim*” one who was created in the image of Hashem. It would be a society that lives a moral and upstanding life by following Hashem’s rules and guidelines.

Here in a nutshell, lies the entire purpose of the Torah. We are here to be “***a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation.***” The Torah is not a bundle of rote laws of what to do and what to say. The Torah is here to elevate us as a people, to make us worthy of being Hashem’s “***most beloved treasure***” in this world.

Moshe came down from Mt. Sinai on that day and brought this message to the Jewish people, who responded in unison with one heart.

(ח) וַיַּעֲנֵנוּ כָּל הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה

8) *The entire nation responded **in unison** and said, “Everything that Hashem said, we will do!”*

The Jewish people accepted the entire package without exception. Everything that Hashem said - keeping the commandments and being Hashem’s treasured nation. The people also expressed themselves as a unit, “*We will do!*” They accepted responsibility for each other as well.

The next morning, day three, Moshe returned up the mountain to deliver the nation’s response to Hashem.

Hashem responded:

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדָוָד אֶל מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בָּא אֵלַיךָ בְּעַב הָעָנָן בְּעִבּוֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֲמֶךָ וְגַם בָּךְ יֶאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם

9) *And Hashem said to Moshe, “Behold I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear **as I speak to you**, and they will also believe in you forever.”*

At this point, the Jewish people could hear Hashem calling to Moshe and speaking to him from the cloud. Hearing Hashem’s voice from the cloud whet their appetites and made them want to hear from Hashem directly, not from behind the cloud and not through Moshe. They told Moshe. “Tell Hashem, ‘We want to hear from our King directly, not through a middleman!’”

Throughout this entire process, the Jewish people did everything as one unit. All of the responses that the nation gave to Moshe were all said in unison,” like one man with one heart.”

It is impossible to imagine the high spiritual level that the Jewish people were on at that time. They were granted their wish and merited to hear the first two commandments directly from Hashem. Yet when the

experience proved to be too intense for them – their souls left them after each commandment because they were so spiritual their bodies could not contain them – they asked Hashem to please give the remaining commandments through Moshe. Hashem complied, but nevertheless, the Jewish people had all become prophets, spoken to by Hashem.

This is how the Jewish Nation began their relationship with Hashem. The people had a burning desire to attach themselves to Hashem through His Torah. They yearned to be close to Him and were elated to receive the Torah, which would connect them to Hashem for life. All of them, “as one man with one heart.”

How beautiful and how simple. “You keep my Torah, and You will be a nation of ministers, a holy nation and My treasure in this world. In return, I will keep you healthy and happy. You will have everything that you could ever want.”

Unfortunately, man sometimes feels that he knows better than Hashem what is good for him, so he finds his own ways to make himself happy. He veers from the path that Hashem set forth for him and distances himself from his Creator.

There is another important point that need to be made here.

Hashem told the people (19:4), *4) You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I have borne you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me.*

Rashi explains: You saw this with your own eyes. You were not told it by others who supposedly saw it, or witnesses. You were present and saw it yourselves.

If I were very persuasive and descriptive, I might be able to convince you that I had lunch with President Biden last week. But there is no way in the world that I could ever convince you that you were there with me! No

one will ever be able to convince you that something happened to you when you know that it didn't.

Here, Hashem is telling the people "They saw it with their own eyes." If they hadn't, there is no way that they would have accepted the book that had a lie written in it.

Maimonides writes in his famous book the *Mishnah Torah*:

רמב"ם יד החזקה הלכות יסודי התורה פרק ח

(א) משה רבינו לא האמינו בו ישראל מפני האותות שעשה שהמאמין על פי האותות יש בלבו דופי שאפשר שיעשה האות בלט וכשוף אלא כל האותות שעשה משה במדבר לפי הצורך עשאם לא להביא ראיה על הנבואה היה צריך להשקיע את המצריים קרע את הים והצלילן בתוכו צרכנו למזון הוריד לנו את המן צמאו בקע להן את האבן כפרו בו עדת קרח בלעה אותן הארץ וכן שאר כל האותות ובמה האמינו בו במעמד הר סיני שעיינינו ראו ולא זר ואזנינו שמעו ולא אחר האש והקולות והלפידים והוא נגש אל הערפל והקול מדבר אליו ואנו שומעים משה משה לך אמור להן כך וכך וכן הוא אומר פנים בפנים דבר ה' עמכם

*The Jewish people did not believe in Moshe because of the miracles that he did, for anyone who believes because of a miracle always has a doubt in his heart that perhaps it was done through magic or sorcery. Rather, all the miracles that Moshe did in the wilderness he did out of necessity, not to prove his prophesy. He needed to drown the Egyptians, so he split the sea and drowned them in it. They needed food, so he brought the manna. When they thirsted for water, he split the stone and brought forth the water. When Korach's group rebelled, he had them swallowed up by the earth, and the same with the rest of the miracles. What then was it that made them believe in him? The Sinai event. That our eyes saw, and not the eyes of others. Our ears heard, and not the ears of others, the fire, the voices, the torches of fire and Moshe entered the thick cloud.*

*Then Hashem's voice spoke to him and we heard as Hashem said to him, "Moshe, Moshe, go and tell them ..."*

Whereas all other religions began with a single individual who convinced others that he had had a revelation, Judaism begins *when the entire nation, some 3.5 million people, simultaneously receives a revelation from Hashem*. They also hear Hashem talking to Moshe, which validates Moshe as the one and only messenger to give Torah to the Jewish people.

From the moment the Torah was given on Sinai it has been diligently studied by the greatest Jewish minds and passed on to the next generation, teacher to student, teacher to student, until today. We are still teaching our children the techniques and skills of how to learn Torah according to the way that it has been handed down generation after generation. Anybody who has the privilege and good fortune to be able to learn a page of Gemara (Talmud) cannot help but be blown away by the depth and breadth of the concepts and laws of the Torah. It could only have come from Hashem.

And here we are, 3,336 years later, studying the Torah that Moshe delivered to us on Sinai. The sound of Torah heard in this room every week echoes that momentous occasion. How lucky we should feel that we are of the select few who are able to hear it.