

From 'My God' to 'Our God'

Parashat Yitro



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This Shabbat we read and learn from Parashat Yitro. This is an important Torah portion because it gives the account in which God gave the Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel, which of course, are the heart of the Torah.

In addition, in Parashat Yitro we bear witness to a big change in the Torah. There is a shift from a focus on individuals to a focus on the group. This is a huge change in how we perceive God. The importance of this point is where our focus lies. I think the focus must be on our nation, and on a smaller scale, our faith requires that we relate to those around us.

The question is serious: is my main focus on my personal connection with God, or on my connection to my nation and then on our connection as a nation with God?

The Ten Commandments and the Individual

Many of the Ten Commandments refer to how we relate with others in a group.

Let's start with the Ten Commandments, the heart of the Torah, the very foundation of the Torah, the essence of the divine law for human beings. Eight of the Ten Commandments serve as the basis for a healthy and proper human society.

Our society could be safe, healthy, and strong if people would keep the commandments of “do not steal”, “do not murder”, and “do not envy”. And if we would all honor and care for our parents, instead of thinking only about ourselves. Even the day of rest is important for humanity. If we truly kept one day in which everyone was free, everyone was equal, there would be no work, no manager, no laborer, no slave, and no master – everyone would be equal, and everyone would rest once a week.

Indeed, the Ten Commandments are the main principles of the Torah.

The first commandment is much more personal:

You shall have no other gods before me. – Exodus 20:3 [NIV]

We live in a binary world. Yes or no, plus or minus, for or against. Our world is managed by ingenious computers and machines that operate on this simple principle. There is or there isn't, true or false. Every coin has two sides and so does everything in life. If you support something then you oppose what is opposed to it. Every “yes” also defines a “no”.

God begins the Ten Commandments by telling us what is truth, what is right, and who is the Creator of the universe. “You shall have no other gods before me.” To the same extent that we believe in God, we must oppose idols, other gods, other doctrines. And no, Allah is not God, at least he is not the one who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt. So yes, we have to oppose Allah and every other idol.

A Shift in the Narrative

Our parasha stands out in that it has a turning point in the way in which the individual and the group are treated.

Before the Exodus from Egypt, we have a detailed description of the creation of the world, and we have a focus on the private lives of our forefathers. We enter into the most private aspects of Abraham's life. We

hear about the troubles with Hagar, we hear about the father who loves Esau and Mother who loves Jacob. We go deep into the details of Jacob's life – there's hate, love and jealousy, it's a biblical soap opera.

All this happens before the Exodus from Egypt. After the Exodus from Egypt there is a change. This Shabbat we discover very interesting details about the private life of Moses:

Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel... After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her... Jethro had sent word to him, 'I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons.' – Exodus 18:1,2,6 [NIV]

Only now, and in passing, do we learn about an important event in Moses' life, his leaving of his wife Zipporah and his two sons... And we have a thousand questions, when did this happen? Why did this happen? Is this a commandment from God? Or Moses' personal decision? What happened with Zipporah after this encounter? All these questions remain unanswered.

If this dramatic event happened before the Exodus, it is reasonable to assume that the Torah would provide us with many details. This silence is not coincidental. The Torah does not relate to this because we are talking about the private life of Moses and his family. From now on, what happens in Moses' family is not our business.

From now on we are a nation – we are no longer a family. We used to be a family, metaphorically, we would sit by the fire at night and talk about what happens in the family, about our problems. Those days are over, we have grown and developed into a nation.

The giving of the Torah is also a national matter. It's possible that the patriarchs did not need the Torah. Within the family unit, everything is determined by dialogue, and the patriarchs of the nation spoke directly to God, there was no need for an organized system of laws.

Now, after the Exodus from Egypt and the birth of a new nation, there is a need for an organized system of laws – the "Torah".

We are Part of a People

If we return to the Ten Commandments, the opening statement of the foundation of divine law for man, God, who created the entire world and humanity, chooses to present himself not as the Creator of the world, but as God who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt. Note that God also does not present Himself as the God of our forefathers, or as the fulfiller of the promises to Abraham or Jacob. Instead, He presents Himself as the God who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, and in doing so created the nation of Israel.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. – Exodus 20:2,3 [NIV]

This is a most important point. It's actually a key point for us and for our children. God requires of us to remember the Exodus from Egypt, in many instances, like Passover, the Shabbat, and all of the feasts. Many verses command us to remember this day:

...so that all the days of your life you may remember the time of your departure from Egypt. – Deuteronomy 16:3 [NIV]

We, as believers in the Land of Israel, are a part of this people, whom God redeemed and brought out of Egypt. We are not detached from history, and we do not stand before God merely as individuals. Our right is under the right of the people, the people of Israel.

With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm God brought us out of Egypt, and into the Promised Land. The Torah requires of us that we remember this for our entire lives. God is the God of the people, of the group – God is not my own individual God, at least not as He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob.

From now on – God dwells within the people, God dwells within the group and I am part of the whole.

Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of

Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God. – Exodus 29:45,46 [NIV]

The Importance of the Group

We started the conversation today with the understanding that there are several “key” passages in the Torah, such as Parashat Bereshit and Parashat Yitro. In Parashat Bereshit, we witness the creation of man and the fact that man is not meant to be alone:

...It is not good for the man to be alone. – Genesis 2:18b [NIV]

And in Parashat Yitro we see that a nation is born, the group, and once again man is not meant to be alone – even in connection with God.

What is the significance of the minyan in Judaism? The obligation to pray (certain prayers) with at least ten people. Nine people as righteous as they may be, do not create a minyan. The minyan was created by ten, and when they are together, according to Jewish understanding, the Divine Presence dwells among them. This means that this does not depend on the identity of the worshipers, but on their joining the general public.

I think Yeshua also guides us in this way:

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. – Matthew 18:20 [NIV]

Yeshua teaches us that it is not me and my God. Instead, I am part of a society, I am part of a family, I am part of a community, I am part of a nation – and God dwells in us, not only in me.

The biblical expression of the most severe punishment one could receive is:

...[He] will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. – Genesis 17:14b [NIV] (amended)

...for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel. – Exodus 12:15b [NIV]

Without going into a deep interpretation of the punishment, we can learn that the most severe punishment is excommunication, to exclude the person from the group.

It is not for nothing that we are called “the Body of Messiah”, the Apostle Paul calls us hands, feet, ears, and eyes (1 Corinthians 12:12).

We are one body, every person is different, each have different gifts, but we are all one body in the end.

In the Passover Haggadah, the wicked son is depicted as one who takes himself out of the community and asks, “What is this service to you?” He refers to “you” and not “us”.

Yeshua, on the other hand, shows us the heavy responsibility we have to find those who have left the group:

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. – Matthew 18:10-14 [NIV]

Yeshua tells us about a person who left the group, left the community, left the straight path, a person who was lost. Yeshua teaches us about our duty to go and help that person. There is a deep message here about the social responsibility that a person has towards his fellow man. Yeshua’s teaching here expresses the full intent of the saying, “All of Israel are responsible for one another.”

This matter can also include the property of the group, and the way in which we treat the property of the group, and I believe we should be more watchful. At home we do not leave a drinking glass on the floor, someone could accidentally knock it over and cause the drink to spill. At home we do not let leftover food fall on the floor and stay there. We also do not leave the

plate we ate from on the chair for someone else to clean up. We care for our private matters more than for those of the community.

It is good for us to understand that God is not just inside me. Rather, He is found inside of us as a group, and we must be more careful in our attitude towards those around us.

In closing

After the Exodus from Egypt, we witness a change in perception, from the individual to the group and the presence of God is found in numbers.

We have a genuine need for society and social life, and in our faith there is a genuine need for friends in the faith, for friends in prayer. The main prayers of the Bible are in plural, and are meant for the group: and faith also has a real need for friends of faith, and members of prayer, the main prayers from the Bible and the New Testament are plural and intended for all:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one...” “Our God” – the God of the people of Israel and of the entire world.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done...” Again our Father is the Father of all of us and not just mine.

We have a collective responsibility, one towards the other, we have rights, but we also have obligations. §

There is the need – let’s make that the duty – to volunteer and serve the group.

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