

PARSHAS YISRO

תשפ"ב

The parsha begins with the story of Yisro and Moshe Rabbeinu. It serves as an interesting introduction to kabbolas HaTorah.

Yisro has a backstory. He was one of the three advisors to Pharaoh who deliberated about throwing all the Jewish boys into the Nile. Bilaam said it was a great idea. He was punished by being killed by Moshe Rabbeinu by the sword. Yisro kept silent on the issue and he was punished with tragedy and suffering. Yisro fled in protest and he was rewarded by getting Moshe Rabbeinu as a son-in-law. Yisro was a man of truth and could not make peace with evil. He gave up all the honor, prestige and financial security of being a top advisor in Pharaoh's court, but he couldn't keep silent. Yisro suffered socially and financially as a result of his principles. His daughters had to become shepherds because he couldn't afford to hire a male shepherd. He refused to be silent in the face of Pharaoh's evil. This made him a fitting father-in-law to Moshe Rabbeinu who also couldn't stand by and do nothing when he saw people suffering.

Chazal tell us that Yisro worshipped all the avodo zoros of the world and found them empty. Then he came to accept the Torah after yetzias mitzrayim. It is puzzling that for the forty years Moshe Rabbeinu was living with him, it didn't have an impact on Yisro's beliefs. What happened all of a sudden? One shita in the midrash says Yisro came after hearing about how Hashem gave justice to the Egyptians at Yam Suf, middoh k'negged middoh. Such precision and exactitude of Hashem's hashgocho made it clear that all the other avodo zoros were sheker. Being told about Hashem in theory didn't do it. He had to see it happen in practice.

Then Yisro gives Moshe Rabbeinu advice on how to appoint judges and set up a court system.

We come to maamad Har Sinai. The Ramban in Devorim says there are two aspects to maamad Har Sinai: The fire and the voice. There is the content of the information Hashem communicated to Klal Yisroel – the aseres hadibros – and then there was the overwhelming experience of nevuah and gilui Shechinoh.

Up till now Klal Yisroel have been going through a long educational process. They just went through forty-nine days of intense growth – from kriyas Yam Suf to getting water from a rock to the mon and slov – teaching Klal Yisroel all kinds of lessons. Hashem created the world, runs the world, He is above the world, and Hashem is directing everything that happens in the world. You see hashgocho protis and reward and punishment.

Hashem tells Klal Yisroel that He is making a deal. If they make a bris with Him, He will elevate them and making them into His special people – His treasured nation. For Hashem owns the entire Earth. Why is this important? Because Hashem is telling Klal Yisroel that out of His entire creation that He could have picked, only they are being chosen. They aren't going to be just another nation. They are becoming a mamleches kohanim and goy kodosh. Rashi explains that this means they are Hashem's spiritual representatives and leaders to guide the rest of the world. We have a whole different set of values and we function totally differently than any other nation.

The verse says that Klal Yisroel camped at Sinai, facing the mountain in total unity. The Sfas Emes explained that in order to receive the Torah, Klal Yisroel had to turn their back to the rest of the world. They are now receiving a totally separate identity from the rest of the world. This Torah we are about to receive is what defines us as a nation and

as individuals.

Moshe brought Hashem's deal back to Klal Yisroel and they responded with 'naaseh'. Not 'nishma'. We are willing to become this mamleches kohanim and goy kodosh.

Now Klal Yisroel are going to be lifted to the highest level of prophecy, not experienced by any prophet other than Moshe Rabbeinu. They will personally overhear the communication between Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu. Hashem wanted 3-4 million people all hearing Hashem tell Moshe what to tell the people. They heard and they saw that the Torah is being given directly from Hashem to Moshe, and then from Moshe to Klal Yisroel. This is the permanent testimony that we have for all generations that the Torah we received from Moshe is Toras Emes.

What did Klal Yisroel hear at Har Sinai? The gemara at the end of Makkos says there are 613 mitzvos, but Klal Yisroel heard the first two of the aseres hadibros directly from Hashem. There is a machlokes between the Rambam and the Ramban if the first dibra of 'Anochi Hashem' is an actual mitzvah to believe, or simply a statement of fact. Rambam says it couldn't be a mitzvah for Klal Yisroel at that point to believe. Klal Yisroel at Har Sinai saw with such clarity the absolute reality of Hashem and the falsehood of any other power in the world, so there can't be a mitzvah commanding this belief. It was a reality right in front of their eyes, like $2+2=4$!

More than that, the Meshech Chochmoh says that this experience at Har Sinai where all Klal Yisroel directly confronted the reality of Hashem, was permanently burned into the neshomo of every Jew. There will always be a part of a Jew's neshomo that is uncorrupted. It will always remain pure and connected to ruchniyus on the deepest level. This is why you can find Jews disproportionately involved in all kinds of spiritual movements and disciplines all over the world. Even though it may be misguided, a Jewish neshomo always yearns for ruchniyus.

Together with this overwhelming experience of the reality of Hashem and the authenticity of Moshe Rabbeinu's nevuah, we get the aseres hadibros.

In the end of Parshas Mishpotim, we read that Klal Yisroel go through a form of geirus – with a korbon and teviloh. The Rambam says that every geirus is a krisas bris with Hashem – a permanent bond and relationship between two parties. Here, it is the entire nation making this bris of geirus. After this, individuals from other nations will make a similar bris between the ger and Hashem – which joins with the collective bris between Hashem and Klal Yisroel.

The verses in Mishpotim say that Moshe presents a sefer habris – it is a partial Sefer Torah with the parshiyos that occurred up to that point in time – Sefer Bereishis and half of Sefer Shmos. To this sefer, the nation declared 'naaseh venishma'. Why specifically here do they say this and not earlier in Parshas Yisro?

The idea of 'naaseh' is simple – we adjust ourselves to the Torah's demands – whatever they may be. We do not adjust the Torah to fit with our way of life. This is 'naaseh'. 'Nishma' is beyond just obeying a set of rules.

The Beis Halevi explains that when Klal Yisroel said 'naaseh' it already includes a commitment to learn an enormous amount of halacha. Because in order to obey what Hashem demands, you need to get a mastery over the rules. The Chofetz Chaim writes in his introduction

to Hilchos Shabbos, you really can't keep Shabbos properly without mastering Hilchos Shabbos – and this takes a lot of effort to learn! So when Klal Yisroel say 'nishma' after 'naaseh', they are committing to not just learning Torah. They already committed to that with 'naaseh'! So what is 'nishma'? It is the understanding of the Torah for the sake of getting to the depth of its ideas – for its own sake.

Earlier, in parshas Yisro, there was no sefer to learn – they could not say 'nishma'. Once they had a sefer with ways of analyzing it, there is a whole different dimension of learning that applies, and the geirus is now complete.

Then Hashem tells Moshe to come up to Har Sinai to get the luchos and the mitzvos.

The Rambam explains that this is referring to Torah shebaal peh. Moshe will have to come up to Har Sinai for 40 days to get Torah shebaal peh.

Chazal say the essential bris of Torah was with Torah shebaal peh. This is the second aspect of kabbolas haTorah in Parshas Mishpotim.

In Parshas Yisro, Klal Yisroel simply commit to obey everything they will be told. They didn't have any sefer – only a list of halachos. When we get the sefer then we can finish off the bris – with a commitment to learn for the sake of deeper understanding. It is a whole different dimension. This is 'naaseh venishma'.

The gemara in Shabbos says that the malochim wondered who conveyed this secret to Klal Yisroel – that the main service of Hashem will be through the deep understanding of Torah. The malochim, who appreciated this secret, gave two crowns to each Jew. One crown is for obeying and the other is for learning for its own sake. Both are on our heads – this is the bris. It is an integral part of our bris with Hashem. There can be no bris with Hashem without limud haTorah.