

פרשת יתרו

OVERVIEW

Yithro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe, visits with him and brings Moshe's wife and two sons with him. He observes that Moshe is inundated with legal proceedings. He advises him to appoint qualified assistants from among the people.

On the first day of the third month Israel arrives at the foot of Mount Sinai. After three days of intensive preparation the people experience the Revelation of the Word of G-d and hear the proclamation of the "Ten Commandments". In the midst of thunder and lightning the voice of G-d overwhelms the people, who plead with Moshe to serve as mediator.

COMMENTARY

Yithro and the Family of Moshe

It appears that Moshe entrusted his wife and sons to the care of his father-in-law in order to devote his full attention to his task in the wake of Israel's liberation. It need not be assumed that this separation was caused by any domestic discord. Yithro's visit accompanied by the family is motivated by his desire to learn more about the miraculous event at the sea and in the desert. He marvels at the scope of the divine judgment in which he recognizes the almighty hand of G-d.

Moshe's Administration of Justice

In the eyes of the historian Moshe is considered to be a Hebrew Solon, a brilliant lawgiver and a true national leader. We hope we will not be misunderstood if we voice then view that Moshe was neither a true statesman nor an efficient organizer. This is borne out by his failure to solve the problem of organizing the administration of justice in the desert. The elementary idea of appointing advisors and assistants simply did not occur to him. His conscience and acute sense of responsibility urged him to handle even the most minute detail. Through his lack of experience he could not conceive of the impossibility of shouldering this superhuman burden on his own.

A non-Jew, barely conversant with Jewish customs, comes to help solve the problem. His simple proposition is met by Moshe's immediate approval. If not an organizer and statesman, what is Moshe? "G-d's servant", a faithful servant, totally loyal to the word of his Master, fully familiar with the divine plan, close to G-d as no one before him and no one after him - this was Moshe, the faithful shepherd.

The Deputies

"Appoint over them princes out of thousands, princes out of hundreds, of fifty, of ten". An ever more careful scrutiny made it possible to entrust the administration of justice to the most capable men in the nation. Initially, a person was chosen from groups of a

thousand men each (totaling six hundred men), followed by the selection of one person from groups of one hundred men each (totaling six thousand), then one person from groups of fifty men each (twelve thousand) and finally one person from groups of ten men each (sixty thousand). The selections were made by the groups themselves and confirmed by Moshe.

Thus there are four categories of deputy judges, each more efficient than the next. The same arrangement will continue in the holy land with four levels in the judicial system: courts of arbitration (three judges jointly designated by the parties), provincial courts (twenty-three established judges), the two courts in Jerusalem (with twenty-three judges each) and the High Court (Sanhedrin) with seventy-one judges who met in the outer court of the temple.

During the stay in the desert there were eighty-seven thousand six hundred judges, one judge for seven or eight men. This conveys an idea of the ease and speed with which justice could be obtained in the desert.

Arrival at the Mount

The massif of the Sinai was the primary goal of Israel's wandering. Here it was to receive its ultimate sanctification and instructions for the entry into the land. The people were given three days to prepare for the decisive event by purifying themselves not only physically but in a spiritual cleaning in anticipation of the unique act of Revelation.

The Decalogue

"*I am your G-d...*" This formulation is not a statement or declaration but a commandment; not "I am your G-d" but "I, Hashem, shall be your G-d". In this manner it postulates as the basis for our relationship to G-d that demand that which our sages describe as "accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of G-d". Judaism is not content with the emphasis on the existence of G-d but stipulates our individual relationship with the Only G-d Who has created each of us, Who is our personal G-d, Who preserves and guides us. We are aware that every moment of our lives is a gift of the A-lmighty Who shapes our fate, our suffering, our hopes.

G-d's proximity to man. His direct involvement in the life of every individual as well as of the nations of the world is manifested in Israel's liberation from the "house of slaves". It was our readiness to become the people of G-d that laid the foundation of our nationhood and will be an inseparable part of our future as a nation of G-d.

"*Do not make for yourself a form of an image*" Judaism cannot tolerate a physical or spiritual rapprochement to a polytheistic or even pantheistic cult. G-d cannot be represented by any form, image or symbol. For He "demands His exclusive right and remembers the

sin of parents for children, for the third and fourth generation..."

א קנא does not denote a "jealous" G-d. This translation, source of numerous errors, is owed to non-Jewish "experts" whose scientific aptitude gives cause to serious doubts. The etymological origin of the term is "to demand an exclusive right". We cannot allow ourselves to respond to G-d's guidance in a thoughtless or superficial manner. We cannot treat the obligations lightly, which our total devotion to divine rule implies. G-d's covenant with Israel does not tolerate a single breach regardless of the circumstances.

"... Who remembers the sin of parents ..."
Our critics and enemies are quick to describe these words as a threat by "the Jewish G-d in his blind fury". Others, less maliciously, are wondering: how can a G-d who is supposed to be just and benevolent punish children for sins committed by their fathers? Here again a faulty translation is the cause for such misrepresentation. פוקד never denotes "to punish" or "revenge". It means "to retain its memory", "to remember" (comp. "and G-d remembered Sarah", Gen. 21:1). In judging the sins of the individuals G-d takes into account his lack of proper education and moral values which may have caused his misconduct.

"Do not pronounce the name of G-d in vain"
does not refer to a false oath but to one that is unnecessary and senseless. For instance: an oath to the effect that a stone is made of gold (senseless); that two multiplied by two is four (unnecessary); that he will not eat or drink for seven full days (practically impossible); that he will not put on Tefillin or work on Shabbat (superfluous). In all these cases the oath becomes a caricature, a frivolous game that threatens to undermine the Jew's respect for the authority and sanctity of the law.

"Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it".
During six days man is given the means to perform "all his work", i.e. to live up to his duties honestly, wholly. At the approach of the seventh day he must complete his work. ("Six days shall you serve - and you shall have completed all your work"). The Shabbat is the ideal institution to extract the Jew from the unwholesome atmosphere which is often associated with the struggle of "making a living".

"Honor your father and your mother". Our entire Jewish tradition lies in the hands of the educators. The two highlights in the center of Judaism - the exodus from Egypt and the Revelation at Sinai - are both historical truths. Our profound involvement with both events, as expressed in our daily prayers, is solely due to an uninterrupted, unbroken, ironclad tradition. The very survival of the Jewish ideal demands its being handed down from father to son. Respect for parents (which they

must earn by their dignity and competence) is the indispensable condition.

"You shall not kill". Murder is the most heinous crime, both from the social and religious point of view. To take a life means total disdain for human values and the denial of the body's (and life's) divine origin. How could one do harm to a divine creation if the fear of G-d guides one every step?

"You shall not commit adultery". This prohibition not only aims at the act of adultery itself but also includes all immoral thoughts and acts that are in direct violation of the concept of purity that is to sanctify and ennoble the Jewish family.

"You shall not steal". Every prohibition contained in the Decalogue is punishable by death. This includes the theft of a human being, by kidnapping a person, child or adult.

"You shall not testify as a false witness against your neighbor". The oral law differentiates between subjective and objective witnesses. In the first case it is evident that the witness could not have been present at the scene of the crime when it occurred. In the second case it is accepted that the witness saw the crime as it was committed but misrepresents and falsifies the facts and circumstances.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house". Every lawgiver can issue a decree outlawing murders, theft, even adultery. Only G-d can scrutinize man's true thoughts and feelings. Thus society's moral fiber will never be perfect unless it is shaped and guided by the will of G-d.

It is important to stress that the commandments carry no special weight over the other laws in the Torah nor are they a summary. "I am coming to you", says G-d, "so that the people may hear when I speak with you and then they will also trust you forever" (19:9). The Revelation at Sinai and the proclamation of the Ten Commandments aimed at preparing the people for further announcements.

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