

## **The Genesis of unforced abundance**

A meditation on Parasha *Yitro* or *Jethro* (“abundance”), the 17th Parasha of 5765, by Aaron Shaw

The Torah part of this weeks’ Parasha consists of Exodus chs 18, 19 & 20. In these 3 chapters, Moses tells Jethro about everything G-d did for the Israelites in Egypt. Jethro, a non-Jew, leads the Jewish community in offering sacrifices to G-d in thanksgiving for the miracles performed in Egypt. Jethro then gives Moses some very wise advice about how the Israelites are to be governed. Instead of Moses as sole dictator over 2.5 million or so passive followers, all the Hebrews are to be actively involved in and take responsibility for the running of the community.

Exactly 3 months after leaving Egypt, Israel arrives at the Sinai desert and at the mountain of G-d. Through a 3-day process mediated by Moses, G-d prepares the people for the awesome revelation of the 10 commandments. The people wash their clothes, set boundaries around Mt. Sinai, and take a short break from physical intimacy with spouses in order to focus in on another kind of intimacy. Despite the careful preparation, Israel is terrified when the 10 words are spoken amid thunder, lightning and tremors the likes of which forever fix this special revelation in the consciousness of the Jewish people. The closing verses of chapter 20 emphasize that G-d can and should be worshipped in simplicity.

The Haphtarah is from 2 sections of Isaiah. The first is chapter 6:1 to 7:6, and the second is chapter 9 verses 6 & 7. Isaiah sees a glorious vision of G-d on a lofty throne and the train of his robe fills the temple. Serafim sing to each other: “Holy, holy, holy”. Isaiah recognizes himself as a man with unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips. One of the seraphim takes a glowing hot coal from the altar and touches it to Isaiah’s lips. Isaiah’s guilt is taken away and his sin atoned for. Isaiah is then ready for a special mission to his people. Judah is later told to have courage against the tag-team of Syria and Israel who are uniting against her, despite the fact that it was Judah’s behaviour that moved G-d to bring this particular action against Judah in the first place (2 Kings 15:37).

The second section of Isaiah in chapter 9 can stand well on its own with little comment: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the Increase of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”

For the New Covenant reading, I don’t know what Lederer suggests, but Feinberg recommends Matthew 5:8-20, which covers the early part of the Sermon on the Mount: significant Beatitudes from “Blessed are the pure in heart” on, to Yeshua’s assurance that he has come not to abolish Torah but to fill the Torah to full and overflowing! Dr. Stern suggests a number of other good passages, if anyone is interested in those, feel free to see me afterwards.

I struggled in coming up with areas to focus on for a homily, until I read the verse preceding the 10 commandments: “And God spoke all these words” (Exodus 20:1). For some reason, my mind went back to a place in Scripture where G-d had spoken and the

result was things created: Genesis. The thought occurred to me that whenever G-d speaks, it is always to actively create something. It was as if Israel at mount Sinai stood witnessing the awesome spectacle of a kind of second grand creation, the creation of the inner world of holiness and righteousness being birthed among a people on a large-scale for the first time. Could you imagine actually being there at the beginning of time, watching G-d form the earth, the stars, the galaxies? This was the magnitude of the experience that Israel had, the grandeur and glory of the physical thunder & lightning experience etching in a corresponding experience the spiritual realm. In the Genesis creation account, God is active and man is passive, but at Mt Sinai, G-d and Israel become active participants together.

Remember in Genesis the way G-d spoke when He spoke the creation into being?: “Let there be light”, “Let the earth produce vegetation”, etc.? I found it helpful to consider the 10 Commandments from a “Genesis-ized” perspective. Bear with me as I share with you a hybrid version of the 10 Words:

- 1) Let God be known as first and foremost, clearly and distinctly, without any obscurity.
- 2) Let God be worshipped directly without would-be aids and enhancements.
- 3) Let God be known for who He really is & what he actually does and doesn't do, and not as one we can manipulate into carrying out our whims.
- 4) Let there be a day set apart from the rest of the week for people to re-orientate to what's really important in life.
- 5) Let mothers and fathers be honoured until blessing spills out on their children.
- 6) Let men and women thrive together & let their blood not be spilled by each other in anger.
- 7) Let husbands and wives be faithful to each other and let unfaithfulness fail to be.
- 8) Let people utilize the resources of the earth and let the rights of others to do so be respected.
- 9) Let people's talk about one another be an accurate reflection of events and circumstances.
- 10) Let people be happy with their own stuff and let them not think they need other people's stuff to be happy!

If the purpose of the commandments is to create, what is it they were meant to create? **Righteousness** and **holiness** in people, so that they can in turn contribute to the increase of the government and peace of which there is no end (Isaiah 9:7). In Genesis, G-d said “Let there be light”, “Let there be day and night”, etc., and there was. But whether the “Let there be...” aspects of the commandment create righteousness and peace in us depends on our active and continual engagement in this dialogue with G-d and each other. The 10 commandments are where thriving and growth in the kingdom of G-d stem from. But we cannot love the kingdom and love serving in it unless we first love the king.

The first verse of the Haphtarah caught my attention, where Isaiah prefixes his vision of G-d on the high throne with the words “In the year that Uzziah died”. Uzziah (also known as Azariah) was one of the righteous kings of Judah and ruled over a prosperous & militarily mighty kingdom. Judah's catapults could hurl stones about the size of Volkswagens, agriculture & commerce were bustling. Judah was finally in a position where she did not have to take any “guff” from a king of Israel, despite the fact that the king of Israel ruling at that time, Jeroboam II, was the mightiest king ever to sit on the

throne of the northern kingdom. Judah expanded significantly into Edom & Philista, and none other of Judah's kings including David and Solomon was as successful against the Ammonites. However, a time came where Uzziah got to thinking a little too highly of himself, and figured he could just waltz into the temple whenever he wanted and offer incense. The priests desperately tried to dissuade him from doing it, but without success. Uzziah was struck with a skin disease from which he never recovered (2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chronicles 26:16-21). The parallel back to the Torah section is clear, reading from Exodus 19:21-22: "...Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Even the priests who approach the LORD must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them".

We cannot force ourselves into G-d's presence or into obedience to G-d's commandments. To keep the commandments, we first have to stop wherever we are and take the time for our hearts and minds to be prepared to receive them. If we don't have a sense for what the commandments were intended to create in our lives, then we are "[hearing and not understanding, seeing but not perceiving]" (Isaiah 6:9); we are wasting our time. We have to allow the finger of G-d to write His commands on our hearts, however long that takes. I John 5:3, "[G-d's commands are NOT burdensome; this is love for G-d – obey his commands]". May our hearts cry out more and more for the Prince of Peace, for the Wonderful Counsellor, this coming week. And may we increasingly long for what He is creating in and through us.

Shabbat Shalom