

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Yitro
February 11, 2023 ***20 Shevat, 5783

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

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Yitro in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/36271/jewish/Yitro-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles which G-d performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the Israelite camp, bringing with him Moses' wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people.

The children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah. G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend.

G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah discusses Isaiah's vision of the Heavenly Chariot (the merkavah), a revelation that was experienced by all the Israelites when G-d spoke the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai—an event recounted in this week's Torah reading.

Isaiah perceives G-d sitting on a throne surrounded by angels. Isaiah vividly describes the angels and their behavior (in anthropomorphic terms). During the course of this vision, Isaiah volunteers to be G-d's emissary to transmit His message to the Israelites. He is immediately given a depressing prophecy regarding the exile the nation will suffer as punishment for their many sins—and the Land of Israel will be left empty and desolate, though there will be left a “trunk” of the Jewish people that eventually will regrow.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

To Thank Before We Think: Yitro by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/yitro/to-thank-before-we-think/>

The Ten Commandments are the most famous religious and moral code in history. Until recently they adorned American courtrooms. They still adorn most synagogue arks. Rembrandt gave them their classic artistic expression in his portrait of Moses, about to break the tablets on seeing the Golden Calf. John Rogers Herbert's massive painting of Moses bringing down the tablets of law dominates the main committee room of the House of Lords. The twin tablets with their ten commands are the enduring symbol of eternal law under the sovereignty of God.

It is worth remembering, of course, that the “ten commandments” are not Ten Commandments. The Torah calls them *asseret hadevarim* (Ex. 34:28), and tradition terms them *asseret hadibrot*, meaning the “ten words” or “ten utterances.” We can understand this better in the light of documentary discoveries in the twentieth century, especially Hittite covenants or “suzerainty treaties” dating back to 1400–1200 BCE, that is, around the time of Moses and the Exodus. These treaties often contained a twofold statement of the laws laid down in the treaty, first in general outline, then in specific detail. That is precisely the relationship between the “ten utterances” and the detailed commands of *parshat Mishpatim* (Ex. 22–23). The former are the general outline, the basic principles of the law.

Usually they are portrayed, graphically and substantively, as two sets of five, the first dealing with relationships between us and God (including honouring our parents since they, like God, brought us into being), the second with the relations between us and our fellow humans.

However, it also makes sense to see them as three groups of three. The first three (one God, no other God, do not take God's name in vain) are about God, the Author and Authority of the laws. The second set (keep Shabbat, honour parents, do not murder) are about createdness. Shabbat reminds us of the birth of the universe. Our parents brought us into being. Murder is forbidden because we are all created in God's image ([Gen. 9:6](#)). The third three (don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness) are about the basic institutions of society: the sanctity of marriage, the integrity of private property, and the administration of justice. Lose any of these and freedom begins to crumble.

This structure serves to emphasise what a strange command the tenth is: "Do not be envious of your neighbour's house. Do not be envious of your neighbour's wife, his slave, his maid, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that is your neighbour's." At least on the surface this is different from all the other rules, which involve speech or action.^[1]

Envy, covetousness, desiring what someone else has, is an emotion, not a thought, a word, or a deed. And surely we can't help our emotions. They used to be called the "passions," precisely because we are passive in relation to them. So how can envy be forbidden at all? Surely it only makes sense to command or forbid matters that are within our control. In any case, why should the occasional spasm of envy matter if it does not lead to anything harmful to other people? Here, it seems to me, the Torah is conveying a series of fundamental truths we forget at our peril. First, as we have been reminded by cognitive behavioural therapy, what we believe affects what we feel.^[2] Narcissists, for instance, are quick to take offence because they think other people are talking about or "dissing" (disrespecting) them, whereas often other people aren't interested in us at all. Their belief is false, but that does not stop them feeling angry and resentful. Second, envy is one of the prime drivers of violence in society. It is what led Iago to mislead Othello with tragic consequences. Closer to home, it is what led Cain to murder Abel. It is what led Abraham and then Isaac to fear for their lives when famine forced them temporarily to leave home. They believed that, married as they were to attractive women, the local rulers would kill them so that they could take their wives into their harem.

Most poignantly, envy lay at the heart of the hatred of the brothers for Joseph. They resented his special treatment at the hands of their father, the richly embroidered cloak he wore, and his dreams of becoming the ruler of them all. That is what led them to contemplate killing him and eventually to sell him as a slave.

Rene Girard, in his classic *Violence and the Sacred*,^[3] says that the most basic cause of violence is mimetic desire, that is, the desire to have what someone else

has, which is ultimately the desire to be what someone else is. Envy can lead to breaking many of the other commands: it can move people to adultery, theft, false testimony, and even murder.^[4]

Jews have especial reason to fear envy. It surely played a part in the existence of antisemitism throughout the centuries. Non-Jews envied Jews their ability to prosper in adversity – the strange phenomenon we noted in [parshat Shemot](#) that “the more they afflicted them the more they grew and the more they spread.” They also and especially envied them their sense of chosenness (despite the fact that virtually every other nation in history has seen itself as chosen).^[5] It is absolutely essential that we, as Jews, should conduct ourselves with an extra measure of humility and modesty.

So the prohibition of envy is not odd at all. It is the most basic force undermining the social harmony and order that are the aim of the Ten Commandments as a whole. Not only though do they forbid it; they also help us rise above it. It is precisely the first three commands, reminding us of God’s presence in history and our lives, and the second three, reminding us of our createdness, that help us rise above envy.

We are here because God wanted us to be. We have what God wanted us to have. Why then should we seek what others have? If what matters most in our lives is how we appear in the eyes of God, why should we want anything else merely because someone else has it? It is when we stop defining ourselves in relation to God and start defining ourselves in relation to other people that competition, strife, covetousness, and envy enter our minds, and they lead only to unhappiness.

If your new car makes me envious, I may be motivated to buy a more expensive model that I never needed in the first place, which will give me satisfaction for a few days until I discover another neighbour who has an even more costly vehicle, and so it goes. Should I succeed in satisfying my own envy, I will do so only at the cost of provoking yours, in a cycle of conspicuous consumption that has no natural end. Hence the bumper sticker: “He who has the most toys when he dies, wins.” The operative word here is “toys”, for this is the ethic of the kindergarten, and it should have no place in a mature life.

The antidote to envy is gratitude. “Who is rich?” asked Ben Zoma, and replied, “One who rejoices in what he has.” [There is a beautiful Jewish practice that, performed daily, is life-transforming.](#) The first words we say on waking are Modeh ani lefanecha, “I thank You, living and eternal King.” We thank before we think.

Judaism is gratitude with attitude. Cured of letting other people’s happiness diminish our own, we release a wave of positive energy allowing us to celebrate what we have instead of thinking about what other people have, and to be what

we are instead of wanting to be what we are not. [1] To be sure, Maimonides held that the first command is to believe in God. Halachot Gedolot as understood by Nachmanides, however, disagreed and maintained that the verse “I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt” is not a command but a prelude to the commands. [2] This has long been part of Jewish thought. It is at the heart of Chabad philosophy as set out in Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi’s masterpiece, Tanya. Likewise, Ibn Ezra in his commentary to this verse says that we only covet what we feel to be within our reach. We do not envy those we know we could never become. [3] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979). [4] See Helmut Schoeck’s classic, *Envy: a Theory of Social Behaviour* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969). See also Joseph Epstein, *Envy* (New York: New York Public Library, 2003). [5] See Anthony Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[Finding the Roots of Our Neighbor's Home by Rabbi Ariana Silverman](https://truah.org/resources/ariana-silverman-parshat-yitro-moraltorah2023/)

<https://truah.org/resources/ariana-silverman-parshat-yitro-moraltorah2023/>

Standing on a roof in the village of al-Walaja in East Jerusalem, my colleagues and I peered out over the valley and it was hard to choose where to look. There were the gorgeous trees on the hills, the waning light of the impending sunset, the shiny apartment buildings of the nearby settlements, the homes of this Arab neighborhood, and there, just visible, was the olive tree.

The al-Walaja olive tree is one of the oldest trees in the world. Preceding the beginnings of Islam, Christianity, or even the revelation at Sinai, this olive tree is between 4,000-5,000 years old. Tu BiShvat elevates a biblical command (**Leviticus 19:23-25**) that dictates a fruit tree must be five years old before one can eat its fruit, thus necessitating keeping track of trees’ ages. This tree is older than the command itself.

Rooted in a land that has been cultivated, inhabited, and fought over for millenia, in the past century alone this tree has survived two wars on its soil and has been under the rule of multiple authorities. Today, as it bears fruit for this generation of residents, it also bears witness to the State of Israel demolishing the homes of some of those residents.

I saw both this tree and the wreckage of demolished homes last month while on a tour of the al-Walaja village with T’ruah. I was accompanied by rabbinic colleagues from across the denominational spectrum who are also fellows in the Shalom Hartman Institute’s Rabbinic Leadership Initiative. T’ruah enabled us to branch out to a very different part of Jerusalem.

Our tour was led by a local resident who recounted the narratives of families whose homes were demolished and related that his family’s home is also under a demolition order. As we ate nuts and drank juice in their home, our group kept wrestling with why it might be destroyed.

The answer is, in part, a matter of secular law. Israel has refused to allow a zoning plan for parts of al-Walaja and simultaneously insists that homes built without a zoning plan are illegal and therefore can be demolished. T'ruah is urging Israel to allow a zoning plan and is among organizations, professionals, and volunteers trying to help the village develop one. And beneath the heartbreak and injustice of children being forcibly evicted from their homes must lie the question of Israel's motivation. It seems Israel wants to use land in al-Walaja for other purposes. It has suggested building a national park and it has also expanded settlements in the area.

But we are also a people rooted in Jewish law. As we read in Parshat Yitro this week, at Mount Sinai God spoke aloud the commandment *lo tachmod beit rei'echa*—you shall not covet your neighbor's house (**Exodus 20:14**). Ibn Ezra, a 12th century commentator, **asks the central question** that has echoed from Mount Sinai to a beautiful valley in Jerusalem: "How is it possible for a person not to covet in his heart all beautiful things that appear

But Ibn Ezra also reminds us that coveting is based on the hubris of believing that we should be able to get whatever we want. He points out that we don't covet the things we deem impossible to acquire — like sprouting wings and flying, or marrying the king's daughter. So what if God is saying that regardless of our power or politics, we are commanded to treat our neighbor's home as something impossible to acquire? Perhaps there are limits to what we are permitted to even desire.

The village of al-Walaja exists in a place that has also been called Jerusalem, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the occupied territories, and Judea and Samaria. This week, I keep thinking about the name that a single tree has called it for over 4,000 years: home.

(Rabbi Ariana Silverman is the rabbi of the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue in Detroit. She's a Harvard-educated, HUC-JIR-ordained, Wexner Graduate Fellowship-trained justice-pursuer, and a grateful spouse and parent.)

"What? Why?" by Rabbi Jonathan Crane

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/what-why>

Yitro is frequently praised in Jewish sources for inspiring his prophet son-in-law, Moses, to set up a judicial system and delegate his many responsibilities so that the Israelites could continue building their civilization. We might understand Yitro as the first cross-cultural consultant. A Midianite, he visited the Israelites' camp, where he studied the situation, asked a few questions, expressed evaluations, offered a proposal, observed its implementation, and promptly left (Exodus 18:1-27). Yitro's significance cannot be overstated: he revolutionized the community's judicial systems into hierarchical tiers. It's curious, therefore, that his questions

that enabled him to provide such profound guidance haven't received more scrutiny in either classic or modern commentaries.

When Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you alone sit while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" (Exodus 18:14)

About a decade ago, Nicholas Carr argued that the internet further undermines our capacity for deep reflection by giving us quick, superficial impressions and summaries. In today's age of shallow thinking (added to implicit biases that are human nature), people fixate primarily on the what: "what's your job," "what do you stand for," or "what's your opinion on this?" Knowing another person's what allows us to categorize them. We assume that by knowing what someone's job or position is, we can easily figure out everything else that's important to know about them.

Anyone near the Israelites can see what Moses is doing: sitting as a judge while everyone else mills around waiting their turn to be heard. Understanding his why requires thoughtful questions. A **midrash** describes the scene Yitro observed:

'And Moses' father-in-law saw': What did he see? He saw him sitting like a king on his throne and all paying attendance upon him, whereupon he said to him: 'What is this that you are doing to the people? Why do you alone sit?' (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael on Exodus 18:14).

One might conclude that Moses relishes in his authority at the expense of those he serves. But such shallow impressions leave Yitro unsatisfied. He pushes deeper; he asks Moses why he does what he does. He wants to know the rationale behind Moses' practice. Yitro is curious and wants to understand how Moses views himself and leadership.

Moses explains to his father-in-law that he does three things:

- 1. When people come to him, he inquires of God (Exodus 18:15), which Rabbeynu Bahya understands to mean that he prays for their health or implores God to find their lost items.**
- 2. When people have a dispute, he judges between them (Exodus 18:16a).**
- 3. He informs the people of God's statutes and teachings (Exodus 18:16b).**

Moses clarifies his three roles to Yitro: he is simultaneously prophet, judge, and teacher. In his view, he is as indispensable to the people as he is to God. They—the people and God—need him to do all of this.

Yitro, however, replies, "the thing you do is not good." He explains that it's exhausting for everyone involved. Specifically, Moses is acting as judge when people bring a dispute (*davar*) to him. According to the 14th Century Provençal scholar Levi ben Gershon, when Moses is so immersed in the role of

being a judge, prophecy will not come to him when God wishes. Moses' fixation on doing so much compromises his ability to perform each of these roles. He prioritizes busy-ness over being.

Something needs to change; the issue is not only what should change, but why. Yitro encourages Moses to continue in his roles as prophet and teacher but advises him to delegate his judicial responsibilities to other qualified individuals, which will benefit everyone (Exodus 18:21-23). This appears to be a kind of consequentialist argument: so that benefits will ensue, delegate. But this is not how Yitro framed his proposal. He said, "Now listen to me, I will give you counsel: God be with you (v'yih Elohim 'imach)" (Exodus 18:19).

Yitro reminds Moses that being with God is a core value that should guide him in aligning his life and labors with divine concerns. He emphasizes the importance of being value-driven (the "why") instead of only goal-oriented (the "what"). Yitro assures Moses that were he to live by his core value, he "[could] stand and all the people [could] go to their homes whole" (Exodus 18:23). Yitro's genius lies not only in his judicial innovations but also in his focus on values. The challenge he presents is counter-cultural and very personal. It's as if Yitro says to Moses (and to us):

"Do not be satisfied with the shallowness of what. Rather, pursue your convictions and let your why guide you. You may find your inner prophet waiting to arise." *(Jonathan K. Crane, PhD, Rabbi (he/him/his), serves as the Raymond F. Schinazi Scholar in Bioethics and Jewish Thought at Emory's Center for Ethics. A Professor of Medicine, Crane is a past president of the Society of Jewish Ethics, founder and co-editor of the Journal of Jewish Ethics, and author or editor of Narratives and Jewish Bioethics, The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality, Beastly Morality: Animals as Ethical Agents, Eating Ethically: Religion and Science for a Better Diet, and Judaism, Race, and Ethics: Conversations and Questions.)*

[Parshat Yitro: Love of G-d and Material Desire by Rabbi Yonathan Neril](https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/19-parshat-yitro-love-of-g-d-and-material-desire)

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Aseret HaDibrot given in this week's parsha, Parshat Yitro, culminate with the commandment not to covet: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or whatever belongs to your neighbor." [1]

The Torah emphasizes not coveting what your neighbor has. The Torah does not say "do not covet a home," but "do not covet your neighbor's home." Jealousy is being upset with a perceived lack, based on what others have.

It would seem easy to avoid coveting what others have, especially when we are grateful for what we do have. Yet many find themselves struggling with this commandment—wanting what others have, even though we know we shouldn't.

Why do people become jealous?

Rabbi Daniel Kohn, a contemporary teacher in Yerushalayim, notes that wanting what another has arises when a person loses sight of their actual needs. Given our path in life, there may be certain things we need and certain things we do not. Accordingly, the person then begins to desire things for the wrong reasons: because others have it, or because having 'it' will give him pleasure or a feeling of power or importance. Due to an occasional poor sense of what we need, some may compare themselves to others, and even judge their own value by how much they have.

The Ketav Vehakabalah, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg from the 19th century[2] relates the commandment not to covet to a mitzvat asei, "You shall love the Eternal One your Hashem with all your heart." [3] He explains that the Torah emphasizes loving Hashem with all of one's heart to teach that a person should be fully committed to Divine service, and not split between love of the Eternal and love of physical pleasures.

In other words, what the heart yearns for is intimacy for Hashem: a connection with a higher reality. When it does not get that, it covets things from the material world. These things cannot nourish the soul's true hunger; it's like drinking soda when the body needs a full, healthy meal. Accordingly, when we covet physical objects, each time we get one, we are not satisfied—we need another thing not long after buying the first one.

The Torah instructs us that to address an unhealthy materialistic lifestyle we should increase our spiritual connection to Hashem. In this way, spiritual satisfaction serves as a check against runaway consumerism.

The Ketav Vehakabalah's teaching is relevant for someone who strives to be close to Hashem while enjoying a range of modern consumer products. His teachings do not seem to say that a Divine-aware life demands living like an ascetic or in poverty. Rather, a Jew should consume as a means to serve Hashem. Such a person might work to be a conscious consumer while still living comfortably and meeting their basic material needs. The Ketav Vehakabalah faults consumption as an end in itself, or as a means to self-gratification, which inevitably replaces space for Hashem's presence. When people use the physical world as a means to serve Hashem, Rabbi Mecklenberg argues that they will almost certainly consume less because they will realize what their true needs are.

When The Ketav Vehakabalah speaks about coveting, he is addressing Jews living in a pre-industrial, pre-modern, pre-consumer society. To Jews living in the first 3000 years of Jewish history, one might covet their neighbor's two-room house, donkey or field—examples the Torah itself uses. Yet we live in a radically different

time: modern, consumer-oriented and highly technological. We live in a materialistic world where coveting has become second nature to some. And in this material world, instead of coveting a donkey or a field, today we may covet technology and cars, vacations and second homes.

Our community's and country's consumption affects the environment. The United States' biocapacity—the productivity of its biological assets, including croplands, fishing grounds, forests and more—is much lower than its subsequent ecological footprint—the measurement of how fast we consume resources and generate waste. The last data from the Global Footprint Network is from 2017, where the US's biocapacity was 3.45 hectares, as opposed to its ecological footprint, at 8.04 hectares, data on par with the past decade of US consumption.[4] The average American's ecological footprint requires more than 3 earths to sustain. You can calculate your own personal ecological footprint at www.footprintcalculator.org. Though we are able to enjoy material wealth and the privileges it brings, we can also work to be conscious of what impact our material lifestyle has on the environment.

The Midrash states that Hashem “caused [Israel] to hear the Ten Commandments since they are the core of the Torah and essence of the mitzvot, and they end with the commandment ‘Do not covet,’ since all of them depend on [this commandment], to hint that for anyone who fulfills this commandment, it is as if they fulfill the entire Torah.”[5] Through fulfilling the tenth commandment we work on being satisfied with what we already have, thus aiding in reducing our ecological impact.

“Do not covet” is not a little addendum tacked on to the end of the Ten Commandments, but one of the central messages of Divine revelation. Finding spiritual satisfaction in the service of the Divine is an important means of weaning oneself from a life of physicality. The commandments “Love Hashem with all your heart” and “Do not covet” offer an alternative to a high consumption and an unsustainable future. We can begin to repair the world by seeing our ecological consumption through the lens of the Hashem's Torah. (*Yonatan Neril (born September 30, 1980) is an interfaith environmental advocate, NGO director, and rabbi. He founded and directs the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development (ICSD), based in Jerusalem. Neril engages in international speaking tours on religion and ecology, throughout Morocco, Italy, Turkey, Canada, the United States, Israel, and Spain.*)

[1] Shemot 20:14, translation by Judaica Press, available here. [2] Rabbi Mecklenberg discusses this in his book *HaKetav VahaKabala on Parshat Yitro*, written in 19th century Prussia. Translation by the author. [3] Devarim 6:5 [4] <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/our-offerings/> [5] “Midrash Melech Moshich,” in *Beit HaMidrash*, ed. Jellenik, quoted in *Torah Shelema* p. 124, Parshat Yitro #405. Translation by the author.

[How Do We Meet At Sinai? By Amelia Wolf](#)

The human experience of Divine Revelation is marked with boundaries: boundaries built and boundaries breached, boundaries in time and boundaries in space. Psychological boundaries are eroded by the force of Divine presence and spiritual boundaries are thrown hastily up to make space for a brand new relationship with God.

At the moment God initiates a new covenant with the People of Israel, they must learn to demarcate the spaces of their new relationship. Some of these boundaries are lines drawn by God. Others are fences maintained by human beings. How can humanity and the Divine exist in the same space and time? And what can we learn about how humans can exist in relationship with each other from that encounter?

Parashat Yitro contains within it an impulse of rushing the mountain, of yearning to be in relationship with God, to experience the unlimited. This is the impulse that requires God to warn Moshe three times in thirteen verses not to allow the people up onto the mountain ([Exod. 19:12](#), 21, 24). The Israelites are eager and ready for an encounter with God. While verse 12 instructs them to not only not to ascend the mountain but to not even touch the outskirts of it, verse 24 is ready for the people to attempt to break through to God Godself, ignoring all boundaries.

Rashi describes the people here as having a longing for God that will drive them to cross those boundaries, which may sound like a beautiful thing. But the word chosen is תַּאֲוָה, ta'avah, whose meaning implies not only longing but an intense, often destructive, bodily craving. The Israelites here are a people who hunger for God with such an appetite that they are willing to ignore God's own instructions in order to catch a glimpse of the Divine Presence.

It is a romantic vision. The people want to be close to God, to merge themselves with the Divine. But like in any other relationship, the urge to breach one's own boundaries and subsume oneself in the other is ultimately destructive, as is the urge to breach the boundaries of another and subsume the other into oneself. Yet Parashat Yitro also contains within it a very cautious attitude toward Divinity, in which the people themselves are afraid of drawing too near or perhaps are physically incapable of that nearness. As Moshe responds to God in 19:21, the people not only won't but can't invade God's mountain because they had successfully erected boundaries around it. These are the people who both quake and remain still: וינעו ויעמדו מרחק ([Exod. 20:15](#)). They staggered back and stood still from afar, responding to the moment of Revelation both in movement and in shock but, and this is key, by putting distance between them and God.

This is the impulse that drives the people to beg Moshe to stand between them and God as interpreter, to hear God's words from Moshe's human lips. Already they have felt their consciousness pushed and pulled, twisted and wrung out. Already they have undergone a synesthetic trial, seeing the thundering sounds and voices of revelation. "You speak to us!" they demand, because God's speech will break the boundaries of their minds the way humanity can break the boundaries of the sacred mountain (20:16).

The people are at risk of refusing God entirely, of holding themselves at so far a remove that they would not be in a relationship at all. It can feel safer to retreat behind psychological (and literal) walls than to risk the integration that comes with welcoming in someone else. Easier to buy into the myth of self-sufficiency than to open one's life to others, to build something new upon a shared dream. With relationships come disappointments.

These warring push-forward-pull-back instincts at the moment of Divine encounter underpin the parallelism of 19:24:

יֹאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי ה' לְךָ־יֵרֵד וְעָלִיתָ אִתָּהּ וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהָעָם אֶל־יְהוָה לְעֹלֹת אֶל־יְהוָה פֶּן־יִפְרָצוּ בָּם:

And Adonai said to [Moshe], descend and ascend, you and Aharon with you, so that the priests and the people will not break through to ascend to God, lest God burst forth against them.

Exodus 19:24

This verse paints a picture of a people and a God desperate to encounter one another but also in dire need of boundaries between them. A people and a God cognizant of some danger they might pose to each other. The people might break through destructively, יהרסו, break down the boundaries that have been built. God might burst forth as from an enclosure, יפרץ, breaching all limitations as only Divinity can.

It brings to mind the Kabbalistic understanding of Divine contraction, of God who makes Godself small in order to leave room for the rest of the world to exist. Here we have a God who has existed in smallness, perhaps even near isolation, and who is now ready to rejoin creation. Maybe only for the moment of revelation. Perhaps for eternity via a relationship with the Jewish people.

This is a dangerous time. The Talmud in [Avoda Zara \(3a\)](#) teaches that God only created all of creation conditionally—if the people of Israel accept the Torah at the foot of Mount of Sinai, creation will continue to exist. If they refuse, all of creation will be voided, the universe returning to a state of *tohu vavohu*, of formless mass, unbound, indistinct. So now creation is poised at the edge of destruction, all of time is ready to be unmade, and the people of Israel must make a choice not unlike anyone might make when faced with a new relationship.

Unsure if it's safe, unsure if it will be worth it. Or, on the contrary, already so entranced, already so full of love and hope that it is difficult to think clearly. A choice with high stakes.

On the one hand, we can distance ourselves so far from Sinai that we never hear the Torah from the voice of God or the mouth of Moshe and in doing so nullify all of creation. On the other hand we can throw ourselves at God and climb the mountain and in doing so nullify ourselves.

Or we can step between the extremes and accept a relationship with God wherein the boundaries of God and humanity are respected. Even if it means staying at the foot of the mountain. Even if it means seeing sounds and suffering terror. Even if it means risking that some of the Divine might be mistranslated through human error throughout the generations so that we're always left questioning what it is that God demands from and for us so that our relationship might continue.

Standing at the foot of a new relationship can be frightening. But, Moshe says in response to that fear, "don't be afraid," even as he follows it up with, "the fear of God will always be with you" (20:17). In other words, muster the courage to reach out, especially when someone (or Someone) else is already holding out a hand. And live in relationship with the understanding that boundaries must be honored, and awe of the other always found.

As long as we neither run away from the mountain nor seek to ascend it—neither shy away from the boundaries nor attempt to breach them—we may just find ourselves in the middle of something new and sacred. And that is revelatory.

(Amelia Wolf is a Rabbinical Student at the Rabbinical School of JTS – Class of 2023)

Yahrtzeits

Elaine Berkenwald remembers Stanley's father Charles Klughaupt on Mon. Feb. 13.