

Yitro/Sinai: Preserving the Memory

I am sure all of you have had this same experience --- a week after you get back from a trip, it is as if you never went away. Just last Saturday I reported to you on my trip to Israel, from which I had just returned the previous day. And now, a week later, life moves on. Back into my regular routine, it is as if I never went away. This is one reason why photographs are so important to help preserve memories and moments.

In last week's torah portion, we read of the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds by the Israelites. So now Moses and God face the challenge of how to preserve the memory of what happened to them. Since they did not have cameras to record the event, we are told a number of times in last week's parasha – to tell your child, and your children's children what we experienced at the Sea of Reeds. In this manner, the memory would be preserved and the significance of the redemption would be perpetuated.

As a result, to this day, we observe the commandment through the Passover seder, as well as by including in our regular worship passages, such as the Mee Camocha and Shirat haYam which are meant to remind us of our being brought out of Egypt.

It was a great idea, in that many of these practices are widely observed among Jews to this very day. Yet there was a sense that something more tangible was needed to capture the moment and preserve the memory.

Thus we read in today's torah reading, just a week after reading of the redemption from Egypt of the experience at Mt. Sinai --- the giving of the Torah and the Ten Commandments.

This was meant to be by far the most tangible representation of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. It represents what is to be the content, essence and nature of the relationship. Much more than memories, or words or stories, the Jewish people are bound to each other, to our past, and to God through our actions. Ultimately, our deeds are of paramount significance.

On a theological plane, if we pay close attention to the fact that the people receive the law just some 50 days after leaving Egypt, by doing this the torah is making an important statement. It is linking the concepts of morality to God.

While this approach may seem obvious to us, it was not the case in the ancient world, nor is it even universally true today. This link between God and morality is why the first commandment, which is not really a commandment, is included in the Aseret haDibrot. Even though it is more of a preface or preamble to the Ten Commandments, it forms the pretext and justification for the commandments which follow. In fact, in many Christian versions of the Ten Commandments, the opening words, Anochee adonai elohecha, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt are not included in the rendering of what constitutes the Ten Commandments.

But for Jews, the notion of moral responsibility is intricately linked to our experience of having been slaves in the land of Egypt, and in God's taking us out of there. So the opening words serve an important function.

It is as if we are being told: The means to create a moral person is predicated upon the narrative of suffering.

These were some of the very concepts I studied last week in Jerusalem with my teachers and the other rabbis in my program at the Hartman Institute. Among the issues considered were – what is our responsibility to those who were not redeemed with us from Egypt? In other words, how do we treat the outsider, the person who is not part of our people? What is the role of the ethical in religious life? So much of religion is hung up on rituals, and on doing them correctly --- what is the connection between how we treat others, and our concern for doing right in the eyes of God. What is the difference between basing the requirement for our actions towards others on the experience of Sinai, as opposed to some places where it is the act of creation which is emphasized?

Our intensive studies of these and other matters from the perspective of the Torah, the Talmud, and later Jewish commentators revealed a complex tradition which is not monolithic and which struggles to interpret God's word and to apply it to situations which are as contemporary today as they were when they were first discussed thousands of years ago.

What then is the purpose of study, and what is the purpose of the mitzvot?

We see from this week's torah portion that the two are associated with one another and are linked together. It is not enough to merely blindly follow the commandments without any regard to their purpose and to the ethical demands which are made of us. If that were true, they never would have been linked to our experience in Egypt.

Similarly, study should not be an esoteric act, detached from reality and the world in which we live. This is why it must be an ongoing, life-long endeavor to probe what it is that is demanded of us, and to derive insights which we then must integrate into our persona.

The two – study and performance of mitzvot are companions. Taken together, the performance of the mitzvot – and the study of the teachings of our heritage are designed to create morally responsible individuals.

A beautiful story in the Talmud cites the Jewish law that if a plot of land is about to be sold, the owners of the neighboring plots have the first right of refusal. The story says that based on this principle, the angels appealed to God when He was about to give the Ten Commandments. They said that they wanted to be the recipients of the law, since they were, in this fanciful description, "God's neighbors." God overruled them, however. In so doing, the story is telling us that God did not want the Torah to remain in Heaven. To be meaningful, it had to be placed on earth and entrusted to human beings. Moreover,

to insure that it would be a living, vibrant document, it was necessary to place it in the hands of people who would care for its contents and who would take its message seriously.

While the angels may be God's neighbors, the people of Israel are God's partners.

Let us never forget then, our unique responsibility as God's partners – to live, to study, and to perpetuate the Torah and all its ways.

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