

## **This Week In torah *Yitro***

Rabbi Lilly Kowalski and I were studying Torah this week and she pointed out something interesting in this week's portion. First, she noted that Moses went up the mountain **three** times! The second time and the third time Moses came back with the stone tablets. But the first time, he went up and spoke to God who told him what to tell the Israelites: "God called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel." God also told Moses: "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes..." But when Moses spoke to the people, he added something "don't go near a woman after you purify yourself."

Rabbi Kowalski noted that Adam did the same thing to Eve; he added "don't touch" the fruit. God just warned Adam not to eat it. Jonah did the same thing in Ninevah. This pattern, she noted, was echoed in the Talmud when we are told to build a fence around the Torah. She explained that when people come into contact with God's words, they act with more intensity and are more cautious, not willing to run the risk of violating *mitzvot* from the mouth of the *Mitzaveh* [the Commander/God].

That strictness has been a challenge for us as Jews living in a modern world. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Chasid, known as the *Netivot Shalom*, believes that strictness causes us to bond within the community and strengthens the character of each individual. He saw Moses' editorial comments created an internal boundary as well as an external one. People were conscious of who they were in relation to God's words. They gave themselves some "wiggle room" so to speak for them to transgress without violating the real axiom of Torah.

Yet Reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw such a perspective as distancing us from the greater society where Jews did not [nor could they] interact with the non-Jewish world. Reformers like the German Rabbi Abraham Geiger thought that removing those human

interactions imposed extra protections, yet hindered the Jewish presence on the world stage. His friend Leopold Zunz used literary techniques and academic discourse to develop a better understanding of what God expected and how Jews over the ages added to it to create a xenophobic existence. Geiger wrote that rabbis added levels of prohibitions to develop clear separation between Jews and Gentiles as well as a unique prescription of holiness. Zunz believed that a rational approach to tradition created an authenticity to Jewish living in a non-Jewish world. Jews can intellectually embrace their faith and know how to navigate in a non-Jewish world, all the while remaining authentic to Judaism mapped out in Torah.

For us, this is the dance we do! We respect and cherish the teachings of our sages but all the while remain conscious of layers added to our tradition that we can strip away as we strive to be authentic in our faithfulness.

Moses added to God's words. And so did the rabbis. Now—lets be authentic as we define who we are in relation to our faith.