

## Torah Thoughts Yitro

5779:

How do we express our feeling that someone or something is important and worthy of our respect? Among other things, we stand up in their presence. If Queen Elizabeth were to visit EBJC (I am not making any promises), we would rise from our seats whenever she was present, despite the fact that our country broke away from England and its monarchy hundreds of years ago. Why? She's a queen! Even though she's not our queen, and even though the idea of the monarchy strikes some Americans, and even some among the British, as obsolete and even ridiculous, despite everything, we would stand.

Similarly, the custom of standing before the sacred in Judaism derives from our impulse to acknowledge what is most important and worthy of our respect. There are only two sections of the Torah for which we rise when they are read publicly: the Song of the Sea, in parshat B'Shalakh last week, and Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Commandments, this week in parshat Yitro. These two passages deserve our standing because they define who we are. The Song of the Sea was the moment when our ancestors were finally and definitively free from slavery in Egypt, when God's might led them out of bondage and destroyed Egypt's chariots in the Sea of Reeds. Its importance as a memory of redemption is evident from the fact of our reciting it each morning in daily prayer.

And in Yitro, we stand again, this time Aseret HaDibrot. If the Song of the Sea marks our emergence as a distinct nation, shaped by both ethnic affinity and the shared pain of slavery and the joy of redemption, then Aseret HaDibrot marks our transformation into a *Jewish* nation. What makes Jews distinctive is our acceptance of God's Torah at Mt. Sinai. Torah is the covenant that we entered into with God, the price we gladly paid (and continue to pay) for being redeemed from slavery. Those two themes, redemption and revelation, shape the Jewish character more than any other. Even when we doubt our commitment to all of the Torah's details, even when we doubt the veracity of the text itself, we recognize the momentousness of that day and, despite everything, we stand. In doing so we recall the original revelation, standing as our ancestors did at Sinai. We also reinvest ourselves in that revelation, in that relationship to God, for ourselves, as revelation was not a one time event; in every era we must discover God's will anew.