

Commitment and Joy

Parshat Yitro 5784

Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation

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When I was in college, I remember a few very clear experiences when my religious identity was formed and forged. One experience, which would repeat itself many times, was that while there was always a big group at Hillel for Shabbat dinner, I often walked to Kabbalat Shabbat and dinner alone. It wasn't because I didn't have friends - but my friends would drive, or just show up for dinner, and also head out to a party after. On those walks, I would often ask myself, "why am I doing this? Why am I showing up for shul or at Hillel even when my friends are not?"

At a certain point, I decided that I didn't want my Shabbat to end at Friday night at 9pm. While this began as a moment of religious challenge, it ultimately became an active choice. Over time, I sought out other Friday night plans that would help fill and fulfill my vision for Shabbat on campus.

My mother jokes that I rebelled in college and got a little more religious but I think it's more accurate to say that I was exploring my identity like so many of us do in our early adulthood. I had always kept Shabbat so that was a starting point for me, but over time, this became an active choice and ultimately, a cornerstone of my religious identity. Sometimes in life we experience a flash of revelation but other times, it is more like a slow and steady drip.

Rabbinic literature offers us many conjurings of Bnei Yisrael in the moments before the revelation at Sinai. Perhaps they were overwhelmed, like the midrash which imagines the Jewish people running away from Sinai and creeping back three days in a row. Alternatively, maybe they were transfixed and inspired, experiencing prophecy on a level greater than Isaiah or Jeremiah as the Gemara suggests.

There is a more basic question however that we must ask: what did the Jewish people want? Did they choose to receive the Torah and more broadly, what role does choice play in our own religious lives?

Our tradition offers two contradictory answers to this question. The rabbis read Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law as the archetypal *ger*, the convert that chooses Judaism. The Torah tells us (Exodus 18:8):

Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything that God had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how God had delivered them.

וַיִּחַד יִתְרוֹ עַל כָּל־הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה ה' לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֹצִילֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם:

And Jethro rejoiced over all the kindness that God had shown Israel when delivering them from the Egyptians.

The word used for rejoice, “וַיִּחַד” is what's known as a *hapax legomenon*, a word that only appears once in Tanakh.

The Midrash Tanchuma notes this odd word choice and comments:

וַיִּחַד יִתְרוֹ. אֶל תִּקְרִי וַיִּחַד אֶלָּא וַיְהִי, שֶׁנֶּעֱשָׂה יְהוּדִי.

And Jethro rejoiced (Exod. 18:9). Do not read this word as *vayi'chad* (“and he rejoiced”) but rather *vayihad* (“and he became a yehudi [a Jew]”). Why did Jethro say: *Blessed be the Lord (Exod. 18:10)? Jethro said: I have not neglected to worship any idol in this world, but I have found no god like the God of Israel.*

Yitro, according to the Midrash was a theological connoisseur. He had dabbled in all forms of spirituality and faith. “I haven't neglected a single idol!” And yet, he has found no God like the God of Israel. Whether it was the Exodus from Egypt or *kriat yam suf*, Yitro has had his own personal revelation that the God of Israel is the real deal. And thus, he makes the choice - a very active choice - to come and be with *Bnei Yisrael* as they travel through the desert and receive the Torah.

If we take this midrash a logical step further, we might say that the revelation at Sinai could only happen with Yitro present. Choice is a prerequisite for revelation. The Torah is given to those who choose it, or grasp it. (*Eitz chayim he'lemachazikim bah*, as we just sung.)

There is a very different read of Sinai, appearing in a famous Talmudic passage in Avodah Zarah (2b) commenting on the description of the Jewish people's physical position at Sinai (19:17):

וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְּצוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הָהָר:

Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

דכתיב (שמות יט, יז) ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר ואמר רב דימי בר חמא מלמד שכפה הקב"ה
הר כגיגית על ישראל ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלין את התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא
קבורתכם!

Rav Dimi bar Hama says: The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain, i.e., Mount Sinai, above the Jews like a basin, and He said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there, under the mountain, will be your burial. The nations of the world will claim that they too could have been coerced to accept the Torah.

In this rendering, Sinai was a terrifying experience. According to Rav Dimi, God made the Jewish people an offer they couldn't refuse: Accept the Torah or die. Not much of a choice. So they accepted the Torah, without volition.

So which was it, was Sinai a moment of decision or coercion?

Rather than see this as a dichotomy, perhaps we can think of this question along a spectrum or even a matrix of sorts:

James Marcia was a Canadian Developmental psychologist whose work explored how adolescents explored their own identities and commitments. Marcia named four realms of "identity status." A "foreclosed identity" is someone who has made a choice to do something but hasn't thought much about what or why they are doing it. "I keep Shabbos because I've always done Shabbos."

A second category is the "diffused identity," which is sort of like an adolescent shrug: "I don't know what I'm supposed to do and I don't really care." There is also a stage called "moratorium," in which a person is actively thinking about what to do or why they do something, but they haven't made any commitments yet.

Finally, there was what Marcia called, "an achieved identity," where a person makes a choice, knows what they are doing and why they are doing it. We might call this the Yitro stage, where someone has thought about who they are, what they believe and made certain commitments.

According to our tradition, even if the Jewish people were coerced into receiving the Torah, they do ultimately accept it, generations later. At the end of Megilat Esther, we read

קִיְּמוּ (וּקְבַל) [וְקִבְּלוּ] הַיְּהוּדִים אֶל עֲלֵיהֶם וְעַל-זִרְעָם וְעַל כָּל-הַנָּלִיִּים עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר לְהַיּוֹת
עוֹשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכַזְּמָנָם בְּכָל-שָׁנָה וּשְׁנָה:

the Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner notes that in the aftermath of the Purim story, the Jewish people weren't just taking on the traditions of Purim but rather, in this moment they were ratifying the covenant that had been forced upon them generations ago at Sinai.

As we think about the Jewish people standing at Sinai, it is an opportunity for us also to think about where we are in our own religious journey and sense of commitment. Where exactly do we stand? Are we in a state of confusion or clarity? Are we exploring or feeling apathetic? What would it take to get us to Yitro's level of commitment and joy, to be able to say as I heard someone say on a Zoom earlier this week, "I just love being Jewish."

I would add one final observation regarding Yitro's example to us. Yitro does not just make a commitment, he talks about his commitment and why he is making the choice that he does.

We should do the same. Each one of us made a choice this morning to come here and be in this space. It's not enough to choose to do something; we must share the reasoning and values behind our decisions with others in our lives. If we have kids then this might mean explaining to them why we are a part of a community or celebrate Shabbat. This could mean taking a few minutes to explain to a coworker why we can't make it to an after-work event on Friday night. This act of telling, *sipur*, is an important component of any decision for it concretizes it for ourselves and others.

Some of us might have grown up coming to shul every week while others may have come to more traditional observance later in life. Regardless, Yitro and the Jewish people arrive at the same place: ultimately embracing the Torah and its vision for a life and world where God's presence is made manifest.

Like Yitro and the Jewish people, may we continue to fulfill the verse which we just sang and which we sing every Shabbat together:

עֵץ-חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתִמְכֶּיהָ מְאֻשֶּׁר: (פ)

*It is a tree of life to those who grasp it,
and [may] all those who embrace it, be filled with joy.*

Shabbat Shalom.