

No Easy Answers

Yisro 2010

The Jewish Center

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When he was here last year, Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik told a coming-of-age story. It's about a young man from the shtetl. He's preparing to go out on his first shidduch date. And as you can imagine, he's beyond nervous. He's never spoken to a girl before. He has no idea what to do.

His father tries to reassure him: "You'll make conversation – you'll get to know each other a little. It'll be fine. And if the conversation ever lags, I'll give you a secret formula. Just remember the three f's: family, food and philosophy. If you can't think of anything else to talk about, just use one of the three f's and you'll be fine."

The young man picks up the girl. Things are going ok – but soon enough the conversation stalls. So the young man thinks back to the mnemonic. Three f's.

Family. "So tell me – do you have a brother?"

No.

Food. "So tell me – do you like kugel?"

No.

Now he's really in a rut. He's already up to the last f: Philosophy.

"So tell me – if you had a brother, you think he'd like kugel?"

Our parsha this morning features one of the most spectacular moments in all of Jewish history – the moment of revelation. What I'd like to understand is what the first half of our parsha is doing here. Why does the story of Yisro's visit and his advice to Moshe Rabbeinu serve as our introduction to מתן תורה?

It's true. Perhaps from a sequential perspective, this is when Yisro arrives. But we know the torah doesn't always feel compelled to adhere to a strict chronology. Often – for the sake of a narrative's continuity – the Torah prefers to pattern events thematically. Yisro, then, seems very much out of place. We're in the wilderness marching toward Har Sinai. Why is Yisro the preamble to revelation?

Before we can fully appreciate how Yisro fits into the greater scheme, let's first get a better handle on the greater scheme. What do we make of the Ten Commandments?

On the one hand – they're a huge deal:

- The Ten Commandments capture the moment in which Hashem reveals Himself to the Jewish people. Essentially, Hashem introduces himself through these ten commandments.
- No other mitzvos in the Torah are accompanied by thunder and lightning. No other mitzvos get so much fanfare and require so much advance preparation.
- And sociologically we accord them special significance. We place an image of the luchos above the aron kodesh; we stand for the עשרת הדברות during laining.

On the other hand – we seem quite intent on downplaying their significance:

- How often do we recite the עשרת הדברות during davening? Never.
- We don't find anywhere that the punishment for violation of these commandments is categorically more severe. Some of the ten carry harsh penalties; others do not.
- Nor do we find that someone who keeps all ten of these commandments earns a special reward over and above the normal reward accorded to a שומר מצוות.
- The Rambam even writes in one of his responsa that the congregation should refrain from rising during the reading of the aseres hadibros, lest people get the wrong idea and walk away mistakenly believing that these mitzvos are more important than others.

How do we reconcile this tension? What do we do with two schools of thought that seem to be at such odds with one another over such a fundamental issue in Judaism?

Part of the answer to this conflict is historical; part of it is philosophical.

The gemara says that at the time of the Temple, the redactors of the siddur had actually included the ten commandments in the krias shema section of the davening. But sectarianism was running rampant and certain groups were claiming that only the Ten Commandments were God-given, to the exclusion of the other 603 mitzvos in the Torah. In response, our sages expunged the עשרת הדברות from the siddur. They wanted to convey the notion that no special significance should be assigned to certain mitzvos over others. So to this day, you won't find them in the text of our tefillah.

But there's a profound philosophical explanation here, too. It's not just that people would think these mitzvos are more important than others. As Rabbi Lamm once wrote, "The Decalogue as such is too simple a formula." We are "keenly aware of the fallacies of over-simplification, of its tragically disappointing results and even heretical consequences. Life is a harsh, intricate, complicated affair, and ten rules alone are hardly sufficient so solve all its formidable problems."

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It's true that there may be ten headlines or ten categories here. And it's equally true that the moment of revelation is special. Putting up an image of the luchos is our way of immortalizing Hashem's first direct communication with us as a people. It's an extraordinary piece of our national experience and our instinct to hold onto it and celebrate it is the right one. But הו"ל wanted to be sure we wouldn't make the mistake of substituting form over substance.

The tools for living a Jewish life can't be reduced to a pithy sound bite. There are no three f's to get us out of any rut. It's not about secret formulas or neatly packaged

instruction manuals. It's about a lifetime of study and the lived experiences that accompany this learning.

This, I believe, is the message of Yisro. Lest we get caught up in the simplicity of ten relatively easy and intuitive commandments, Yisro serves as our reminder that life is in fact much more complicated. The medrash tells us that Yisro actually had seven names. We call him Yisro from the root יתר – which means additional – because he added מעשים טובים – he added righteous acts to his life when he joined our nation.

When he heard about the miraculous salvation of the Jewish people, the Torah says ויהדו יתרו. Rashi gives two explanations. On the one hand, Yisro was happy. He celebrated – like the word הדוה that appears in שבע ברכות. At the same time, though, hearing about the decimation of the Egyptians gave him goose bumps – הדודין הדודין – he was agitated by the loss of so much life.

Yisro, the life-long journeyman, reminds us that we need to develop the capacity to contain conflicting and competing ideas. The mitzvos, our values, our relationships – are intricately complex and seldom will we find simple golden rules by which to live.

This morning we're blessed to be celebrating Ethan's bar mitzvah. And on a certain level, Ethan, I wish it were simple. I wish I could stand up here and tell you three rules or ten principles that are sure to bring you success as a full-fledged member of our community. But the reality is that life is much more complex. The good news for the Jewish people is that you have a rare appreciation for this complexity – which comes as no surprise given the home in which you live.

You're confident and savvy and yet you're sensitive and full of חן at the same time. You can be uproariously funny or really quite serious. You love sea life and film making, yet you're equally passionate about your Jewishness and your mesorah. You have so many talents. We have every confidence that today will mark the beginning of your great journey toward a leadership role among our people.

In Modern Orthodoxy, and here at The Jewish Center in particular, we don't shy away from complexity. We embrace it. Let's use the עשרת הדברות as our springboard. Let's use פרשת יתר as an opening to explore the mitzvos we know less well. Seize the opportunity to enrich, deepen and complicate your relationship with the mitzvos, with the Torah and with Hashem. Next week daf yomi will be starting a new masechta. Why not join them for a month or two. As Purim approaches, we'll have numerous opportunities here at The JC to learn about the megillah and its mitzvos. Download a shiur from YUtorah.org onto your I-pod. Or find the topic that intrigues you most and explore it on your own. Ask hard question and don't be satisfied with pat answers.

The world seems to get more complicated by the day. Your internal Jewish world should do the same.