

## Yitro 5779

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Congregation Shaare Tefilla

This week, Jessica had Monday off and she brought Shevy to my office for a visit. Just before they left, I was seized by a brilliant idea for a posed photo. I went to my bookshelf and took out my copy of the classic Chassidic work *Kedushas Levi*, the Torah commentary of Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. I put it in Shevy's tiny hands while she lay in the stroller; she seemed excited to be holding it, and I took a picture, which I labelled "Drove the Shevy to the Levi..." Yes, I hear many of you of a certain age groaning; I know that this is a uniquely Jewish and highly specific version of a literal Dad joke. Please understand, though, that in an effort not to cause Eli Lebowicz, our visiting comedian, any performance anxiety this evening, I'm not using my *really* good material... After this photographic triumph, I began to experience a guilty conscience. How could I use a *sefer* for a sight gag? So I opened the *Kedushas Levi* to this week's Parsha. Providentially, Rav Levi Yitzchak develops an idea in an essay that articulates an issue I've been thinking about for quite some time.

This week, we read the Torah's account of God's revelation at Mt. Sinai, an account that is repeated later on in the book of Devarim. There are a number of differences between these two accounts, but perhaps the best

known is found in the Torah's commandment to observe Shabbos. In our Parshah, the Torah tells us (Exodus 20:8)

זְכוֹר אֶת־יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.

In Parshas Va'eschanan, however, the Torah tells us

שְׁמֹר אֶת־יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.

Whenever the Torah employs repetition, or whenever it uses different words to describe the same thing, we have to analyze what shade of meaning it serves to highlight. Our sages, in Maseches Rosh Hashanah, offer a unique and perplexing description of the event of revelation:

זכור ושומר בדיבור אחד נאמרו מה שאין הפה יכולה לדבר ואין האוזן יכולה לשמוע

The two versions of the fifth of the Ten Commandments, “**Remember** the Shabbat day” ([Exodus 20:8](#)) and “**Keep** the Shabbat day” ([Deuteronomy 5:12](#)), were spoken by God simultaneously in a single utterance, something that the human mouth cannot speak and the human ear cannot hear.

We are familiar with this passage even if we've never heard it in its original Talmudic form. It is paraphrased by Rav Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz in the first line of *Lecha Dodi*:

שמור וזכור בדבור אחד

השמיענו א-ל המיוחד

The aural phenomenon described in this account is difficult to imagine, as the Talmud itself admits, because we cannot utter multiple words at once. The closest we can get might be the Mongolian throat singers, each of whom can produce a baseline pitch and one or more pitches above that simultaneously. So extraordinary is this ability that Mongolian Throat singing was listed in 2009 on the [Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#) of [UNESCO](#) (although maybe not that unique; there are tutorial videos on YouTube explaining how you, too, can appropriate this bit of Mongolian culture).

The Talmud's description of multiple words being uttered by God at once is an intriguing explanation for *how* these words were said, but it fails to explain *why* they were said and what they mean.

Rav Levi Yitzchak explains that for every mitzvah in the Torah, there is the actual mitzvah and its rules, and then the *taam*- the awareness of the underlying Divine intention behind the performance of that mitzvah. The

primary difference between these two aspects is that only one of them is essential- the actual performance of the commandment. The underlying intention behind the commandment is secondary- with one exception: Shabbos. The Torah states clearly the intention behind the commandment to observe Shabbos, as a testimonial to God's creation of the universe- that is the *zachor*, the spirit of Shabbos. It also commands us to observe the laws of the Shabbos as a way of maintaining its sanctity- that is *Shamor*.

Observing the laws of Shabbos while failing to contemplate the spirit of Shabbos means you have not properly observed Shabbos. In fact, the Rambam (Laws of Shabbos 24:13) writes that certain creative labors are prohibited on Shabbos so that a person who is always idle, lazily whiling away his days, will still be compelled to observe Shabbos in a way that makes it evident that it is different.

ועוד מפני שמקצת העם אינם בעלי אומניות אלא בטלין כל ימיהן כגון הטיילין ויושבי קרנות שכל ימיהן הן שובתים ממלאכה ואם יהיה מותר להלך ולדבר ולטלטל כשאר הימים נמצא שלא שבת שביתה הניכרת.

Indeed, an entire category of prohibited labor was promulgated called *Shevus*, or actions that are prohibited because they run counter to the spirit of Shabbos. Shabbos, according to Rav Levi Yitzchak, is not just about *Shamor*- the performance of various actions and avoidance of others; It is about the *zachor*, the experience, which is just as essential to the observance of Shabbos as the technical laws that govern it. In fact, this is enshrined in

the reverse alphabetical text of the central paragraph of mussaf we will recite shortly:

תכנת שבת רצית קרבנותיה

You have instituted the Sabbath, and desired its sacrifices

צוית פירושיה עם סדורי נסכיה

You commanded the meaning, the spirit of the commandment alongside the order of its libations, because we are commanded in that as much as we are in the observances of Shabbos themselves. Properly observed, Shabbos trains a person to develop an instinctive feeling for what it is about...and what it is not. I think that this instinctive awareness of Shabbos is a real challenge for us in the Modern Orthodox community. We are a community that prides ourselves on our intellectual sophistication and our book learning, so it is what is in books, rather than instinctive feelings, that decides whether we should do something or not. When a question arises for a Modern Orthodox Shomer Shabbos person about the permissibility of a particular action on Shabbos, they will formulate their question (and, in rare cases, their own investigation) as a quest for whether something a particular action is explicitly prohibited. If there isn't a source that prohibits it, we embrace it wholeheartedly regardless of its impact on the overall *gestalt* of Shabbos. There is a word I rarely hear in our community, but often in other communities more to the right of us- that word is "*Shabbosdik*." In our community, that is what crazy fanatical right wing ayatollahs say when they

want to add insane restrictions to Shabbos but have no textual support for them. What an unfortunate attitude; If we properly observe and *understand* Shabbos, our observance and appreciation will assume an added dimension as we develop an instinctive sense of what is *Shabbosdik*. Let's say, for argument's sake, there is no explicit prohibition against slipping out of your Shabbos clothes the moment you come home from Shul and spending the rest of the day at home in shorts and a T Shirt. I'm not certain there is no prohibition in this, but beyond that, is it *Shabbosdik*? And let's say that there were no technical prohibitions involved in setting your TV to show a pivotal game at a particular time on Shabbos (though there are). Is *that Shabbosdik*? I could give you a host of other examples that are ubiquitous in Modern Orthodox communities everywhere, ours included, but I'm sure you could fill in the blanks yourselves. The challenge of an educated community and an outlook that focuses just on text is that we don't have a culture in which such an innate awareness is fostered. In an essay in 2000 in the journal *Tradition* titled *Yiddishkeit without Ideology*<sup>1</sup>, Professor Moshe Koppel of Bar Ilan University described this culture, this innate feeling, as *heimishkeit*, and cautions that a tradition solely based on text runs the risk of losing this essential ingredient. Koppel describes his journey from a modern Chareidi Yeshiva to a more Modern Orthodox institution.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2036/No.%202/Yiddishkeit%20Without.pdf>

I didn't go far. In the modern Orthodox world, to which I eventually migrated, the underlying principle was openness. Openness to art and music, to science and literature. Not to mention sports and movies and television. My new friends really were more articulate, more knowledgeable in most areas and often more naturally ethical than many of my friends in the yeshiva world. Of course, I had to get used to the idea of guys with names like Jerry and Stuie who wore jeans and had girlfriends. Apparently, I was hopelessly square but at least I had

There were some problems. The version of Yiddishkeit that was upheld there as an ideal was different in disturbing ways from that to which I had been accustomed. The place suffered from a Litvish coldness that had adapted neatly to the American technocratic mindset to produce a somewhat formal and not very *heimish* version of cookbook Yiddishkeit. You asked somebody there if it was okay to daven in your *gatkes*, they started pulling books off the shelf. Lacking a sense of the *heimish* and hankering above all for middle-class American respectability, they tended to undervalue the little hard-to-pin-down gestures and manners that give substance to Jewish distinctiveness.

Moreover, the yeshivish rule that “if it’s not Jewish, we don’t like it” was flipped in the modern Orthodox world to read “if we like it, it’s Jewish.” These two formulations are equivalent in logic books but not

In an insightful series of recent tweets addressing labels in the frum world<sup>2</sup>, former Dallas educator Rabbi Elli Fischer extolled the virtues of a *heimish* surrounding culture:

*Sometimes you get MO heimish. Especially among children and grandchildren of survivors. But usually MO is embarrassed by heimishkeit and so heimishe MO folks try to hide it instead of embracing it.*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/Adderabbi/status/1082880567992037376?s=19>

*Culture is the soil you are planted in. Heimishkeit is a kind of rich soil, or many kinds of soil (Sefardim are very heimish; even if they use a different word and it's a completely different cultural configuration, it's just as rich an enveloping).*

*The issue with MO, IMHO, is that the soil is too thin. Too easy to uproot from it. Or that the Jewish part of the soil is easy to ignore. You can draw nutrients from other sources. ...it goes without saying that the soil in Eretz Yisrael today is very rich.*

Rabbi Fischer is right. I think we instinctively realize that our community lacks this ingredient, but we know when we see it, and yearn for it. I think that's why, over the past couple of weeks, so many of you have told me that you love and have binge-watched the Israeli TV Series *Shtisel* since it came on Netflix. I love *Shtisel* too; it humanizes a community that is often misunderstood and frequently demonized. On a personal note, it reminds me of many of my relatives, who actually speak like the characters in the show and say things like "*Chasdei Hashem!*" when you ask how they're doing. I think one of the reasons so many of us find *Shtisel* so compelling is that it is an accurate portrayal of a *heimishe* life, a life in which there is an enveloping, surrounding culture that is pervasively, authentically and unapologetically Jewish.

I would not want you to leave this speech thinking that I am speaking *against* amassing greater Torah knowledge, and a broader and deeper familiarity with Jewish law and Jewish texts. Nothing could be further from the truth. But our challenge is to develop this stronger overall culture that will help us navigate life's ideological, material, spiritual and interpersonal



challenges even if a text is not readily available. We can do this through creating more experiential Jewish opportunities for our children, through exposure of our children and ourselves to people who live an honest, sincerely spiritual life, and through a more concerted effort at creating transcendent Jewish memories in our homes for our families and for ourselves- around *yamim tovim*, lifecycle events and the rhythm of Jewish life. Once we do, it will be instinctively obvious to us that we can't do something on Shabbos because it isn't *Shabbosdik*- and we will understand innately what that means. Our engagement with text and with spiritual leaders will not be just to search for leniencies, but to experience the word of God. Our understanding of the world will lead us to realize that something is prohibited not because it is written as such in a text, but because it is *pas nisht*- it's just instinctually inappropriate.

Let us live a life of *Shamor* and *Zachor*- a committed life of observance and an instinctive experience of understanding. Let us bring *heimishkeit* into our community, so we will connect not just to what Shabbos is about, but to the spirit of Judaism and Torah on a deep, visceral level.