

# PARSHAS YISRO

תשפ"ג

In these parshiyos, the Torah lays down the foundation of who we are as a nation and who we are as a people. Klal Yisroel had been free from slavery for a year. Until then, with the exception of Shevet Levi, they were trying to be accepted by the Egyptians and be integrated into Egyptian culture. At the same time, they still had their connection to the old mesorah and identity from the Ovos.

Hashem spent a year doing open miracles to show them that avodo zoro is sheker and that He is in total control over everything in the world. The goal is not to leave slavery and be free. They are only leaving now to become slaves to Hashem.

For 80% of Klal Yisroel, this jump was too hard to make. They felt they were Egyptians to their core. So they died during makkas choshech along with the Egyptians. Hashem would not allow them to be living a contradiction. As a condition for leaving Egypt, Klal Yisroel had to reject their previous Egyptian identity and connections to avodo zoro. They slaughtered the sheep which was worshipped by the Egyptians and put its blood on their doorposts. But being an Egyptian penetrated deeply within them. They needed to undergo a long learning process to take Egypt out of them.

Then they come to Yam Suf and Hashem pushed them so that they are growing and growing in their identity as Jews and reaching higher levels of gilui Shechinoh. They saw Pharaoh charging at them and they cried to Hashem to be saved. But Hashem wants to test their bitochon first. He says you have to show your trust in Me by walking into the sea – trusting that you will survive without knowing how you will be saved. So, three million people march into the sea until it split. There are various midrashim describing how it split. One opinion says the entire sea split all at once. Another opinion says it split incrementally as they walked through it. They didn't get total relief from their fears of drowning from the first instant. They had to keep trusting in Hashem's care with every step they took.

They saw an incredible nevuoh like those of the greatest nevi'im. But immediately afterwards, they travel to Moroh and they are given mitzvos to learn about. They instituted not to go three consecutive days without public kriyas haTorah. Why? Because after such an uplifting spiritual experience – from Yetzias Mitzrayim to kriyas Yam Suf – the only way to keep it from fading away, the only way to make permanent growth, is by limud Torah.

They came to Refidim and Amoleik came to attack them. How could this happen? In addition, Chazal ask: why is the place Refidim so important that the Torah mentions it when they arrived and mentions it again when they left for Har Sinai?

Let us go back to the parshiyos of Vayeitzei and Vayishlach. When Yaakov left for Choron to live with Lovon, he stopped to sleep at Har Habayis and saw the incredible nevuoh – where the entire span of Jewish history was revealed to him. How did Yaakov Ovinu merit such a deep insight into the future? The Baal HaTurim explains that it was because Yaakov was immersed in Torah learning all this time. This is what elevated him to the level where he could have such a nevuoh. When Yaakov lived with Lovon, Hashem helped him retain his righteousness. When he confronted Eisov, Hashem helped and he emerged without serious damage. But then things start to go terribly wrong. The incident with Dinoh happened. When they left Shechem after slaughtering the population, Yaakov is upset at his sons for exposing his family to mortal danger. Yaakov is afraid, because he

senses that he is now vulnerable to being attacked by the surrounding nations. Yaakov commands his family to eliminate any avodo zoro that they may have picked up among the spoils from Shechem.

Yaakov was right. There were avodo zoro items that were discovered – and he buried them. Then Yaakov was able to travel to Beis-El in safety and all the surrounding nations became afraid to attack him. How did Yaakov know all this?

Yaakov Ovinu knew that if Dinoh could be violated and they became vulnerable to attack, it means their level went down and they have lost the protection that a higher level should have protected them from.

So too here, weren't Klal Yisroel supposed to be on such a high level after such an experience as kriyas Yam Suf? How can they be vulnerable to being attacked by Amoleik? It must be because they didn't yet solidify their level by learning Torah. The solution is for Moshe Rabbeinu to lift his hands in tefilloh. The mishna in Rosh Hashono asks: how could Moshe's raised hand win the battle against Amoleik? The answer is that by Moshe lifting his hands, he inspired Klal Yisroel to turn their hearts to shomayim and realize that Hashem is their only source of victory. Then they win the battle. If his hands go down and they start to rely on their own military might and skill and strategy instead of Hashem, they will be defeated. When you understand that it is Hashem Who is in charge, you will succeed.

Why does the Torah emphasize the location was called Refidim? Because it told Klal Yisroel the reason Amoleik was able to attack – because they didn't solidify their lofty level after kriyas Yam Suf and they were weak in Torah learning.

Then Klal Yisroel left Refidim and came to Har Sinai. The posuk emphasizes their unity. When Klal Yisroel are committed to limud Torah together, this is the biggest unity there can be.

Hashem told Moshe to deliver a special message to introduce the maamad of kabbolas haTorah to Klal Yisroel. Rashi explains: If you will be mekabel the Torah, it will be good and pleasant for you. It may seem at the beginning that this entire set of mitzvos and halochos are an incredible burden. With every mundane activity, you have to check and worry if it is muttar or ossur. Everything you put in your mouth, every garment you wear, etc. It is very hard to accept at the beginning. But once you make that commitment, and you appreciate how important it is and how it uplifts a person, it will eventually become a pleasant and enjoyable lifestyle. But all beginnings are difficult. But the benefits at the end justify all the hardships.

What happens after you accept it? It defines you as a Jew.

What makes a person Jewish? The posuk says being Jewish is about making a bris with Hashem. Rashi says it means being mekabel Torah and mitzvos. Nothing else. What will be the result of accepting Torah and mitzvos? Out of all the billions of non-Jews all over the globe, these people – this small little section of mankind – will be the center of everything. The world revolves around us.

Our Jewish identity is not just a label or a box on an identity form that we just check off. It is how we define ourselves. It is who we are down to the core. It used to be that people defined themselves by their occupation – how they earn a living. Some people define themselves where they come from – where they grew up. Now, in the 21st century they have come up with a new way of defining a person – by what particular kind of deviant taivos they have. This has never existed in

the history of humanity.

Yonah HaNovi tells the sailors of the boat that he defines himself, not by his profession, not by his country of origin, but by his being Jewish – by his connection to Hashem. That is who we are.

What is mesiras nefesh? Being moser nefesh means there is something that is more important than anything else. So important, that you are willing to give up everything you have – including your own life – for the thing that has the most value to you. Without this valuable thing, life isn't worth living. For the Ukrainians fighting the war with Russia, the most important thing is to free Ukraine from the Russian invasion. It is worth giving up their lives for their country – that is their highest value.

Each and every one of us has to ask ourselves: What makes my life worth living? What value am I willing to be moser nefesh for? Everyone has one thing that they feel is worth living for and dying for. For a Jew, the only thing worth being moser nefesh for is his relationship with Hashem. We say this every time we say Krias Shema – our love for Hashem is worth more than even our lives, and even our money – which for some people is worth more than their lives.

For the businessmen who lost all their money in the stock market crash in 1929, they lost their reason to live. They committed suicide – because their money defined their meaning in life.

In the beginning of the Zionist movement, there was a famous battle of Tel Chai where the Jewish leader died saying it was all worth it to die in Eretz Yisroel fighting for independence. This is what gave his life meaning and he was proud to give his life for that goal.

For a Jew, the goal of life is to be a mamleches kohanim and a goy kodosh. Not to win the most Nobel prizes or have the strongest military in the region. This isn't what makes us special. We are Hashem's representatives in this world. We are His ambassadors – we bear His name. This is our privilege and our honor and our national identity. This makes us Hashem's treasured nation.

This was the message Moshe conveyed to the people and they responded with na'aseh.

Then we begin kabbolas haTorah. But it isn't enough that Moshe receives it and then communicates it to the people. The Rambam says Klal Yisroel are lifted to an unbelievable level of nevuah – one level beneath Moshe Rabbeinu's level. And on that level, they overheard everything Hashem was telling Moshe and how he is being chosen to convey the Torah. This experience penetrated deep into the neshomas of every Jew. We discussed this in different contexts. If you want to belong to Klal Yisroel, you have an underlying desire to obey halacha – underneath all the taivos and the various pressures that cover it up. This is the core desire of every Jew.

The maamad was overwhelming – the thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and the sound of the shofar. Klal Yisroel saw the truth of the universe with such clarity that they couldn't take it anymore and they asked Moshe to tell them the rest of it. Hashem responded that it was worth it to have such an overwhelming experience so that yiras shomayim will penetrate to the core and it will be passed on through all the generations. The gemara says if a Jew does certain bad things, you should suspect that his ancestors did not stand at Har Sinai. Because if they did, this Jew living thousands of years later should not be capable of doing what he did.

We have just gone through this incredible experience and Hashem explains what it means to be Jewish. They heard Hashem speaking to Moshe. Now Hashem adds certain afterthoughts to kabbolas haTorah. Don't get confused and distracted by gold and silver. True, the Mishkon is filled with such exquisite vessels of gold like the Shulchan, Menorah and Aron. But when you bring korbonos, bring them on a simple mizbeach of Earth.

Another thing that distracts people is arayos. It is a weak spot that Klal Yisroel have which Bilaam exploited to get them to worship the most disgusting idol of Baal Peor. When you approach the mizbeach, make sure that there is no hint of arayos.

This story of kabbolas HaTorah should resonate in the hearts of all of us. We aren't just another nation. We aren't a special nation just because we are a member of the United Nations. The U.N. is the weakest, most useless, most powerless international body that exists. Its only purpose when it was created in 1945 was to give recognition to the State of Israel in 1947-8. After that, it is meaningless to us.

We live in times where people get confused about who they are and what is important to them. I meet all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds. I spoke to an unfortunate woman whose daughter went off to college like all good Jewish Orthodox American girls are supposed to do. But lo and behold, she met a non-Jew in college and felt she had more in common with him than Jewish men. Her Jewish identity was not in the core of her being. Being a successful American was at her core and this non-Jewish fellow shared that core identity. If her Jewish identity was at her core as it should have been instead of being just another side aspect of her lifestyle, then she would have nothing to do with this non-Jewish man. If you go to a place where you feel you are a part of the group at your core and the majority of the single men there are non-Jews, then the result is very predictable.

We were taken out of Egypt only to become Hashem's people – a mamleches kohanim and goy kodosh. The whole world revolves around us. This is what kabbolas haTorah is all about. It defines what it means to be a Jew and a part of Klal Yisroel, and to have a bris with Hashem. This is what makes us special.