

In this week's *Parashah*, the Torah is given. The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 146a) teaches that when *Bnei Yisrael* stood at *Har Sinai*, their "*Zuhamah*," the contamination implanted in mankind when Adam and Chava ate from the *Etz Ha'da'at*, departed from them. What was this *Zuhamah*?

R' Avraham Yoffen z"l (1887-1970; *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Novardok Yeshiva in Bialystok, Poland; New York; and Yerushalayim) explains: Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pekudah z"l (Spain; early 11th century) writes in *Chovot Ha'levavot* (*Sha'ar Avodat Ha'Elokim* ch.5) that the Creator implanted in man's intellect the ability to recognize the virtue of truth and the disgracefulness of falsehood, the propensity to choose justice and avoid iniquity, and the desire to repay those who do good with good and with thanks. All human beings share these innate characteristics, writes R' Yoffen, and, naturally, man would never sin. However, Rabbeinu Bachya explains elsewhere (*Sha'ar Ha'perishut* ch.2), "The origin of all sins and the reason for all disgraceful behaviors is that desire overpowers the intellect." This, writes R' Yoffen, is a battle that all of mankind faces.

At *Har Sinai*, this contamination was removed from *Bnei Yisrael*, R' Yoffen writes. True, we still have to fight the *Yetzer Ha'ra*, but after the revelation of *Hashem* at *Har Sinai*, the Jewish People no longer resigned themselves to the status quo, in which the *Yetzer Ha'ra* had the upper-hand. This, writes R' Yoffen, is the source of the hidden spark that has revealed itself so many times in Jewish history even in people who seemingly had lost all connection with their roots. (*Ha'mussar Ve'ha'da'at*)

Shabbat

"Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it" (20:8)

R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (*Rambam*; 1135-1204) writes: It is a *Mitzvat Aseh*/affirmative commandment to sanctify the *Shabbat* day with words of praise and sanctification. This requires recalling *Shabbat* when it arrives and when it departs-when it arrives, with *Kiddush*, and when it departs, with *Havdalah*."

(*Hil. Shabbat* 29:1)

R' Zvi Elimelech Shapira z"l (the *Bnei Yissaschar*; died 1841) writes: The Sages established the text of *Kiddush*, just as they established the text of all *Berachot*. According to Torah law, however, one would fulfill the *Mitzvah* of *Kiddush* if he recited any praises of the sanctity of *Shabbat*. It follows that when one recites *Kiddush* over a cup of wine after praying (as we do), he is fulfilling only a Rabbinically-ordained *Mitzvah*, for he already fulfilled the Torah's *Mitzvah* of *Kiddush* by reciting the *Shabbat Shemoneh Esrei*, which speaks of the sanctity of *Shabbat*. [Note: The position presented here and its practical implications are discussed and debated by many *Halachic* authorities.]

R' Shapira continues: In the *Yom Tov Kiddush*, we say, before mentioning the Festival: "*Asher bachar banu*" / "Who has chosen us from every people." On *Shabbat*, in contrast, some versions of *Kiddush* do not mention the "chosen-ness" of the Jewish People at all, while other versions do say, "*Ki vano vacharta*" / "For You chose us and sanctified us from among all the nations," but only after *Shabbat* is mentioned. This is because *Shabbat* is sanctified from the time of Creation, before we were chosen as *Hashem's Segulah* / treasure (*Shmot* 19:5). Moreover, the *Mitzvah* of *Shabbat* was given to *Bnei Yisrael* (in last week's *Parashah*) before they were chosen (in this week's *Parashah*). The Festivals, in contrast, were sanctified only after the Jewish People became the chosen nation.

(*Derech Pikudecha: Mitzvat Aseh* 31)

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“You shall discern from among the entire people, men of *Chayil*/ accomplishment, G-d-fearing people, men of truth, people who despise money . . .” (18:21)

R' Pinchas Zalman Horowitz z"l (1832-1906; Krakow, Galicia) writes: The four traits listed here parallel the traits of the Patriarchs and Moshe himself. “Men of *Chayil*”--paralleling Avraham, who went to war (*Bereishit* 14:14). “G-d-fearing”--paralleling Yitzchak (see *Bereishit* 31:42). “Men of truth”--paralleling Yaakov (see *Michah* 7:20). “People who despise money”--paralleling Moshe (see *Bemidbar* 16:15). (*Ahavat Torah*)

“In the third month from the Exodus of *Bnei Yisrael* from Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai . . .”

“And Moshe ascended to *Elokim* . . .” (19:1, 3)

R' Moshe Teitelbaum z"l (1759–1841; rabbi and *Chassidic Rebbe* in Újhely, Hungary) writes: *Bnei Yisrael* progressed in a short time from Egypt, which was known as the place of the 49 Gates of Impurity, to *Har Sinai*, where they would receive the Torah with great honor. This was possible because a *Tzaddik*--here Moshe Rabbeinu--has the ability to elevate a person who attaches himself to that *Tzaddik*. Usually, that occurs at the expense of the *Tzaddik*'s own short-term spiritual growth. Not so here; despite Moshe Rabbeinu's dedication to elevating *Bnei Yisrael* out of their impurity, Moshe himself “ascended to *Elokim*.”

This, R' Teitelbaum adds, is a wonderful illustration of *Hashem*'s kindness. (*Yismach Moshe*)

“*Hashem* said to Moshe, ‘Behold! I am coming to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever’.” (19:9)

Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi z"l (Spain; 1320-1376) writes: *Hashem* is explaining Himself to Moshe. He elaborates:

When Moshe experienced prophecy, says the Torah (*Shmot* 33:11), “*Hashem* would speak to Moshe face to face, as a man would speak with his fellow.” But at *Har Sinai*, *Hashem* wanted to speak directly to *Bnei Yisrael*, who were not suited to such a high level of prophecy. Something was needed to block or dim some of the “bright light” that would accompany *Hashem*'s revelation. Therefore, says the Torah (*Devarim* 4:11), “The mountain was burning with fire up to the heart of heaven, [amidst] darkness, cloud, and fog.” The purpose of the “darkness, cloud, and fog,” was to obscure the bright light of *Hashem*'s revelation. And, therefore, *Hashem* explained to Moshe, “I am coming to you in the thickness of the cloud”--not because of any limitation of yours, but “so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever.” (*Derashot Ha'Ran* #11)

“Yitro, the minister of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard everything that *Elokim* did for Moshe and for *Yisrael*, His people--that *Hashem* had taken *Yisrael* out of Egypt.” (18:1)

R' Yitzchak Klein z"l *Hy"d* (rabbi of Kosice, Slovakia; killed in the Holocaust) writes: Before Yitro recognized the Creator, he believed that there were two powers in the universe--one that did good and the other bad. Now, when he saw that the Plagues that struck Egypt were themselves the vehicle for *Bnei Yisrael*'s salvation, he understood that *Elokim*--the Divine Attribute of Justice--is one and the same as *Hashem*--the Divine Attribute of Mercy. (*Birkat Avraham*)

“Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe took an *Olah*-offering and feast offerings for *Elokim*; and Aharon and all the elders of *Yisrael* came to eat bread with the father in-law of Moshe before *Elokim*.” (18:12)

R' Yehoshua Heschel Singer z"l (1848-1925; rabbi in Buffalo, NY) asks: Should not the verse have said, “Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe gave an *Olah*-offering . . .”?

He explains: The *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 7b) teaches that if one gives a gift to an “important person” and the latter accepts the gift, it is viewed by *Halachah* as if the giver received something of value. Thus, writes R' Singer, when Yitro offered sacrifices and Aharon and the elders agreed to eat from them, Yitro “took” (*i.e.*, received) something from them. (*Mishneh Zikaron*)

“Moshe said to his father-in law, ‘Because the people come to me to seek *Elokim*. When they have a matter, one comes to me, and I judge between a man and his fellow, and I make known the decrees of *Elokim* and His teachings’.” (18:15-16)

R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the *Vilna Gaon*) writes: Moshe told Yitro that people come to him with three types of questions. Some have questions about *Avodat Hashem* / service of G-d (*e.g.*, prayer) and *Mussar* / character improvement (“The people come to me to seek *Elokim*; When they have a matter, one comes to me”). Some have interpersonal issues (“I judge between a man and his fellow”). Lastly, some want to know the laws of the Torah and how to perform the *Mitzvot* (“I make known the decrees of *Elokim* and His teachings”). The first type of question, in particular, is something that only I (Moshe) can answer, for there are many correct paths and the advice I give a person is very individualized, for which I must communicate with *Hashem*, Who sees inside each person's heart.

Yitro replied with three arguments (18:18): “You will surely become worn out--you as well as this people that is with you”--*i.e.*, you cannot judge every case alone, nor can every person wait his turn. “For this matter is too hard for you”--granted that you are uniquely suited to advise each person about his specific path in serving *Hashem*, but, nevertheless, it is too much for one person to do alone. Finally, “you will not be able to do it alone”--you cannot teach everyone the Torah's laws all by yourself. (*Aderet Eliyahu*, *Devarim* 1:12)