



The Parasha with Rabbi Dweck

Highlights for Parashat Yitro

SUMMARY

In Parashat Yitro, the Jewish people reach the monumental moment of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. We explore the transition from the ideological war with Amalek to a covenantal relationship with God. Through Yitro's outside perspective, we learn that the Torah is not merely a legal code but a framework for relationship between God and the Jewish people.

The Advice of an Outsider

Before the Torah is given, we encounter Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro. Watching Moshe judge the people from morning until evening, Yitro offers a rare critique:

לא טוב הדבר אשר אתה עושה

"The thing you are doing is not good."

(Exodus, 18:17)

This specific phrase, *lo tov*, appears only once elsewhere in the Torah: when God observes that it is *not good* for Adam to be alone. By connecting these phrases, we see that Yitro identifies a lack of healthy relationship. Moshe was operating as a technocrat, dealing with a needy people in a way that would cause both him and the nation to tire themselves out.

Relationship vs. Religion

Yitro recognized that the God of Israel was *Gadol Mikol Ha'elohim* (greater than all gods) not just because of power, but because of care. Historically, humanity created gods in their own image—exalted entities that required bribes or appeasement.

In contrast, the God of Sinai is uniquely responsive to the treatment of His people. The alternative to this is Amalek. While Israel accepts a relationship with God, Amalek accepts a world where God is there but uninvolved.

"We do not simply bring God down into the world; we rise in our humanity to meet Him."

The Architecture of Sinai

At Sinai, God offers a formal covenant: "I will be your God, and you will be My people" (Exodus, 19:4-6). This relationship is built on two pillars:

1. Boundaries (*Hagbala*): Before the Revelation, the people had to cordon off the mountain. Healthy relationships require that individuals do not lose themselves in the other. God's integrity and man's integrity must both remain intact for true relation to occur.

2. Integrity (*Mitzvot*): The Ten Commandments are training for relationship. The first commands us to recognize God as an entity distinct from our imagination (*Anochi*), while the latter commands protect the boundaries and property of our fellow man.

A Joint Endeavor

The purpose of the Torah is to facilitate a "joint endeavor" with the Divine. God speaks from the heavens to show it is possible for God to interact with humanity.

As Hillel the Elder interpreted: "If you come to My house, I will come to yours" (Sukkah 53a). We use the elements of the earth—our lives, our work, and our actions—not as idols, but as ramps to reach qualitatively toward the Heavens.



Questions for the Table

1. **The “Lo Tov” Connection:** Why do you think the Torah uses the same language for “loneliness” and “improper leadership”?
 2. **Boundaries in Faith:** Why do you think boundaries are necessary for a healthy relationship with the Divine?
 3. **Rising vs. Bringing Down:** What is the practical difference between trying to “bring God down” versus “rising up” to meet Him?
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