



Parashat Yitro



English version

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THE ARAB NEXT DOOR

There were three advisers to Pharaoh in the plot against the Jews. Bilaam, Iyob, and Yitro. Bilaam advised to enslave the Jews. Iyob kept quiet. Yitro ran away. Bilaam was punished; he was killed by the sword by the Jews. Iyob suffered for not protesting. And Yitro was rewarded that his grandchildren would be part of the Sanhedrin. (Sanhedrin 106a)

Years later, when Bilaam came to curse the Jews, וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הַקִּינִי וַיֵּשֶׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵיִתָּן מוֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן לְבָסְלֵעַ קִנְיָהּ: (Bamidbar 24; 21) And he saw the Keni, (Yitro) and he came up with his Parable and he said, You settle with a stronghold, and you put your nest in the rock. What do these words mean?

Bilaam asked Yitro, Hey! You were with us in the plot! You were one of the boys! How did you merit to sit and be involved with such great people, with Moshe and Aharon? The Midrash answers with a parable. There was once a hunter that caught a bird. But the bird escaped and flew from the hands of the hunter. The hunter chased the bird, and the bird found a brilliant haven. It landed in the hands of the sculpture of the king. The hunter praised the wisdom of this bird on finding such a safe place; now the hunter could not capture the bird, for it was next to the bust of the king. And anyone who would try to catch it, could possibly damage the king's statue. Bilaam said

that Yitro was saved from the fate of his two counterparts by associating with G-dly people. (Shemot Rabbah 27/ 3)

Why is that so important? Why does it make such a difference in your life who you associate with?

There was once a young boy who asked his father what is the value of his life. Instead of answering, the father gave his son a rock and told him to go and sell it in the marketplace. He told him that if anybody asked the price, he was to raise two fingers and not say anything. The boy then went to the market, and a woman asked how much the rock costs. She said, "I want to put it in my garden!" The boy did not say anything. He raised up two fingers. The woman said, Two dollars? I'll take it!

The boy went home and told his father that a woman wanted to buy the rock for two dollars. The father then said, "Son, I want you to take this rock to a museum. If anybody wants to buy it, don't say a word. Just put up two fingers." The boy then went to the museum, and a man wanted to buy the rock. The boy did not say a word and just put up two fingers. The man said, \$200? I'll take it!" The boy was shocked and went running home. "Father, a man wants to buy this rock for 200 dollars!" His father then said, "Son, the last place I want you to take this rock is to a precious stone



store. Show it to the owner and don't say a word. If he asks the price, just put up 2 fingers. The son then went to a precious stone store; he showed the rock to the owner, "Where did you find this stone? It is one of the most rarest stones in the world! I must have it! How much would you sell it for?" The boy put up two fingers, and the man said, "I'll take it for 200,000 dollars!" Not knowing what to say, the boy ran home to his father. "Father, there is a man who wants to buy the stone for 200,000 dollars!!"

His father then said, "Son! Do you know the value of your life now?" The value of your life does not matter how much money you were born into, your past, your mistakes. It matters where you decide to place yourself. The people you surround yourself with. You may have lived your whole life thinking that you were a 2 dollar stone. You may have lived your whole life surrounded by people who saw your worth as being only 2 dollars. Everybody has a diamond inside of them. And we can choose to surround ourselves with people that see our value and the diamond inside of us. We can choose to put ourselves in a market or put ourselves in a precious stone store. Choose the people you surround yourself with wisely.

So many times we are not worthy, in our own right, to be saved. But because we are connected to people who are great, their greatness, to a certain extent, rubs off on us.

A Jew and an Arab lived next door to each other, in a duplex. One day, the Jew decided he was going to sell his house. He started

renovations. Everything grade A. Designers, workers, materials. The Arab neighbor also decided to sell, so he also started renovations. But the Arab did it all Grade B. Designers, workers, materials. They both finished about the same time. And they both put up 'For Sale' signs.

One day, the Jew enters his house, just as the Arab is going out. The Jew tells the Arab that he just sold his house. The Arab says, Wallah, I also just sold mine! How much did you sell it for? The Jew said, 600,000 dollars. How much did you sell yours for? The Arab says, I sold mine for 750,000. The Jew says , WHAT? How could that be? I renovated with Grade A; you renovated grade B, and you sold for more than I did?

The Arab smiled and said, "Its simple! When you sold your house, you sold a house with a neighbor who is an Arab. So you got 600k. I sold mine, and the neighbor is a Jew. So I got 750 k!

You do not even realize how the people you surround yourself with affect your life. They affect how you value yourself, your self perception, which is probably the most important factor in your psychology. They affect how you value your life. And they affect your choices.

וישמע יתרו כהן מדין - מה שמועה שמע וברא ונתגייר
What news did Yitro hear and come and convert?.... It is not enough to just hear a good piece of Mussar and try to change by yourself. The main idea is to **come**, to join people who are the people you want to be like.

WHY NOT LIE?

In his book *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty*, Dan Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University, scientifically tested in great detail how and why humans lie, and what makes it easier or harder for

them to keep to the truth. His research was done on college students. The students were offered to step into a classroom, where they were handed a paper of ten math exercises. They were given ten minutes, and for each one of the questions they got

right, they were to receive one dollar. After they finished the test paper, though, they were given an answer sheet and told to mark their own papers, and then put their papers through the shredder machine in the back wall of the classroom. They would then inform the tester what their mark was, and they would be rewarded one dollar for each question answered correctly.

How did Dan learn whether or not they lied? The shredder was not a shredder. On the other side of the wall, all the papers went into a basket, so that Dan could see exactly how many students were dishonest and exactly by how much. They were led to think that they were in an honor system, that no one would ever know if they lied or not. And it is interesting to note that many of them lied, but not by a lot. The most common was the small lie, falsifying the results by reporting two questions more than the real score. If they got 4 right, they wrote 6. From this, Ariely disproves the belief of SMORC, Simple Model of Rational Crime. SMORC is the belief that dishonesty is generally rational and the result of a balance between three factors; A- the benefit of the dishonesty, versus B- the likelihood of getting caught and C- the severity of punishment. Here, the people that were tested thought they could have lied and not gotten caught (no B or C factor), and they could have reported ten and gotten ten dollars (high A factor). Ariely played around with these factors, by giving more or less money for each question. He played with the B or C factors, but the factors of SMORC did not bring about more or less dishonesty. Rather, Ariely found that even people who are, on the whole, honest, lie just a little bit, no matter which factors are involved.

Small lies account for the major part of the sum total of all dishonesty in the world. Small theft accounts for most cases of stealing. The majority of stealing is from people who do not steal big. Locksmiths will tell you that your lock is not there to protect you from the professional thief; a professional thief can break any lock. The lock is there to protect you from the people who are, on the whole, honest, but who might be tempted to try your door if it has no lock.

Ariely concluded that when people lie or cheat, it is a compromise. Every person has in him a drive for pleasure. In great contrast, every person has a sense of morality. (In Judaism, this may be referred to as the conflict between Neshama and Nefesh.) When a person is being tested for honesty, he finds himself in a dilemma: which voice should he listen to? Which voice should he obey? His morality, or his materialistic drive? The reason why people lie and cheat, and mostly in small proportions, or in small sums, is because that is something that one's sense of ethics will find it easy to ignore or excuse. It's easier to compromise one's ethical values when there is just a "small" matter involved; the bigger the gamble, the harder it gets to compromise.

Then, Ariely did something that made me fall off my chair when I read it. He made students recall the Ten Commandments before taking the test. Then, there was no cheating whatsoever, despite the fact that no one was able to recall all ten!! Even atheists, who swore on a Bible, lied less on their tests! Ariely realized that the way to keep people from lying is by reminding them of moral behavior, by recalling G-d and His Word and by being reminded of G-d's word on a daily basis. (Ariely himself is not religious.)

It seems that we compromise less on our morality when we are reminded of G-d. Our morality is not a rational cost/benefit analysis, like the claim of SMORC. It is dependent on how much we remind ourselves of G-d in our lives. And, on how much we *connect* to the Torah.

One of the reasons to be religious, to be a Torah observant Jew, is exactly this. If you are not Torah observant, and your child asks you why he/she should be honest and moral, you can't tell him, "because that is the right thing to do", or "that is the way he will be more successful in life", because he will tell you that even the presidents and government officials lie. Most liars and cheats don't get caught. Who decides what is considered moral? And what if we catch those people, themselves, being immoral?

The only answer we have as parents to our children is that G-d decided what is moral in His Torah.



And only if we live with Torah in our lives can we explain to our children that Torah is our moral code, and that we obey the Torah because G-d is real, and G-d is everything. And the only thing that will bring morality into our lives is Torah. Not self-help books, not books on etiquette, and not stories of the honesty of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

I have a friend who can't get over an incident that happened in his Yeshiva many years ago. It was a dormitory yeshiva, and a wave of robberies was being reported. My friend, together with another dorm member who was robbed of 300 dollars, decided to put an end to it. They set up a trap in the dorm. They left a wallet with 20 dollars on a desk, and they took turns of endless hours (a sum total of three days, to be precise) standing in the closet, peeping through a tiny hole, to see which student was the thief. It felt like endless hours, and then, they caught him. They reported him to the Rosh Yeshiva, and the Rabbi had certain proof that this boy was the thief, because of the ink powder that was put on the 20 dollar bill. After seeking the counsel of a Gadol, the Rosh Yeshiva decided not to expel the boy. "Nobody is learning from this boy to be a thief. A Yeshiva is a rehabilitation center, because Torah cures people and gives them morality. Everyone just needs to be more careful to safeguard their money."

All of the Ten Commandments were given with a G-dly Fire, thunder and lightning. Even the Commandments לא תרצח לא תנאף לא תגנב לא תענה לא תשקר Do not kill, Do not have improper relations, Do not steal, Do not lie as witness, which are all mitzvot that are dictated by common sense, needed all the pizzazz of Har Sinai. Why? Doesn't the Talmud teach us, אמר רבי יוחנן: אילמלא לא ניתנה תורה היינו למידין צניעות מחתול, וגזל מנמלה, ועריות מיונה. Said R Yochanan, If not for the Torah, we would learn the way of modest conduct from the cat, not to steal from the ant, and not to be in inappropriate relationships from the dove. (Eiruvim 100b). We could learn from Abe Lincoln not to lie! We could learn from George Washington! Why did we need the great sound-and-light show at Har Sinai for these four Commandments?

The answer is that in order for us to become really moral, it does not suffice to work on becoming a gentleman. The only way to really become moral is by recharging our G-dliness through Torah. All the "special effects" of Har Sinai at the giving of these commandments were aimed at infusing our morals with G-dliness in these commandments, as well.

If only we would connect to Torah, if only we would remind ourselves daily of the G-dliness inside each and every one of us, we would merit to be G-d's light to the world.

- Does learning or reading cause you fatigue?
- Do you wish you could triple your learning speed, and cover 3 books in the time it presently takes you to finish one?
- Is your time in the Beit Midrash important to you?
- Do you wish you could remember your learning better?
- Do you wish you could improve your listening in class, and improve your listening in conversations?
- Does your mind wander too often while praying?
- Do you hate tests?
- Do you wish you were more focused while reading a book or sefer, especially Gemarra and text books?

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