

# Torah Weekly

ב"ב

February 5 - 11, 2023  
14-20 Shevat, 5783

Torah reading:  
Yitro: Exodus 18:1 - 20:23  
Haftarah:  
Isaiah 6:1-13

## PARSHAT YITRO

### Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

### Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

### Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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No One Alone,  
No One Forgotten.

## Change?

### When All Excuses Fail...

A recovering alcoholic described the catalyst to his rehabilitation and recovery. "I thought alcohol could drown my sorrows," he said, "until I realized that sorrows float."

Human tendency is to blame our problems, mistakes and failures on everyone but ourselves: "If only I had grown up with more loving parents, I would have more self-esteem..." "If my teacher hadn't embarrassed me in second grade, I would have never ended up like this..." "If I hadn't been surrounded by such bad friends, I would be different..."

The giving of the Torah at Sinai was a monumental event. It was a moment in time that radically changed the world and left its mark on every human being. G-d had revealed Himself! G-d Himself appeared to millions of people and declared, "I am the L-rd your G-d."

No room for doubts or ambiguity: it was the "If only G-d would tell me He exists..." moment we all wish for.

But the continuation of the dream we all have – "...then I would never do anything wrong!" – did not materialize. Mere days after this awesome experience, the Jews succumbed. Afraid that Moses had abandoned them, they created a golden calf and began worshipping it. Never mind the "You shall not serve any other gods" they had just heard from the A-lmighty's voice. Forget the certainty and intense belief with which they had been filled. They were the same fallible human beings with doubts and temptations as always—and they failed.

For ultimately, no one can change our lives but we. Just as alcohol can not solve one's emotional challenges, inspiration can not take the place of effort. Just as the giving of the Torah could not prevent the Jews from sinning, neither can better parents, teachers, friends or financial conditions. We, and we alone, are the creators of our destiny. We have been granted free choice.

As a child, a famous Jewish sage watched as his home went up in flames. As he stood beside his mother, watching the last remnants of their house reduced to ash, he saw that she was crying inconsolably. "The family tree!" she exclaimed

over and over. "The book that records our beautiful lineage! It is lost forever." The little boy comforted his mother, declaring, "Don't worry about that book. I will create a new family tree. I will establish a new lineage that you can be proud of."

Let us abandon the "if only I had..." and begin replacing it with "I will establish a new lineage." Let us not look past at what could have been, but rather forward at what must be. What could have been would not have changed things anyway. What will be is in our hands.

By Rabbi Mendy Wolf

## Is G-d Religious

Chaim came back from a long trip to Minsk. "Minsk is a crazy city!" he told his friends.

"Why?" they asked.

"Well, in Minsk I found a socialist, a communist, a Zionist, a Bundist, a leftist, a rightist, a devout religious man, a secular humanist, a closed-minded in-the-box person and a freethinker!"

His friends didn't understand: "But isn't that a normal community, where you have different people with different ideas?!"

"Ah," said Chaim, "you don't understand: this was all the same person!"

We are a nation who argues. A lot.

From ancient history, when Abraham and Moses argued with the divine, to the present, where the bricks and cement of synagogues and Jewish social halls vibrate from the sound of verbal battle on the widest spectrum of subjects, from how-cold-is-it-really-outside-including-the-windchill to the solution to world hunger.

Life as we know it: I say yes, you say no.

But then we hear the cries for peace: "Why must we argue?" "All problems arise from disagreement!" "If we would all agree to agree, life would be so simple and harmonious." Tell me about it.

Where did this notion that we must think alike originate from? Where in Torah or in common sense is there any hint to the notion that we must all think alike?

Yes, there are fundamental premises that are not up for debate. One may

not kill. We must believe in one G-d. Adultery is forbidden, Hamas is a terror organization, and Holocaust denial is the work of the Satan and cannot be college campus debate material. On these we all agree. (We better!)

But for almost everything else, from the role of government to the difference between a manager and a leader, and the plethora of other issues that keep our pundits, journalists and talk-show hosts' mouths and pockets loaded—these are part of a healthy society.

This week we read the story of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. In [Exodus 19:1](#) we read that after arriving at Sinai, "there Israel camped opposite the mountain."

Says Rashi: "At all their other encampments, the verse says *vayachanu* ['and they camped,' in the plural]; here it says *vayichan* ['and he camped,' in the singular]. For all other encampments were in argument and conflict, whereas here they camped as one man, with one heart."

Notice that Rashi uses the expression "one heart." No mention of "one brain." There is no evidence that for the sake of peace the Jews let go of their opinions!

Mouth-shutting due to the fear that "it's gonna cause a fight" is not, and never was, a Jewish concept.

Our history is full of rabbis and teachers debating, arguing, and defending their ideas. The Talmud is but a microcosm of hundreds of years of debate on a myriad of topics. It is a part of our psyche. Jews argue, and that is a good thing.

True, debate must remain in the realm of objective discussion, where we argue about the message, not the messenger. While we may dispute ideas and disagree with the other's opinion, we must always have respect for our opponent as a human being, as a Jew. But within the framework of fair debate—we are lifetime members.

By Rabbi Levi Avtzon

## Holiday of the 15<sup>th</sup> Shevat

Monday (1/17/2022) is *Chamisha Ossor BiShevat* ("the 15th of Shevat") which marks the beginning of a "New Year for Trees."

According to Biblical law, there is a seven year agricultural cycle, concluding with the Sabbatical year. When the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, on years one, two, four and five of this cycle, farmers were required to separate a tenth of their produce and eat it in Jerusalem. This tithe is called Maaser Sheni, the Second Tithe, because it is in addition to the (two percent which must be given to the Kohain, and the) ten percent which is given to the Levite. On the third and sixth years of the cycle, instead of the owners eating the Maaser Sheni in Jerusalem, they gave this second tithe to the poor, who were permitted to consume it wherever they wished.

[On the Sabbatical year, no tithes are separated. All produce which grows during this year is ownerless and free for anyone to take.]

It was therefore of vital importance to ascertain when the new year started for produce. Our Rabbis established that a fruit which blossomed before the 15th of Shevat is produce of the previous year. If it blossomed afterwards, it is produce of the "new year." [By comparison, grains, vegetables, and legumes have the same New Year as humans, the 1st of Tishrei.] Why is this so? In the Mediterranean region, the rainy season begins with the festival of Sukkot. It takes approximately four months (from Sukkot, the 15th of Tishrei, until the 15th of Shevat) for the rains of the new year to saturate the soil and trees, and produce fruit. All fruit which blossom beforehand are a product of the rains of the previous year, and are tithed together with the crops of the previous year.

Although this day is Rosh Hashanah for *trees*, we attach special significance to this holiday because "Man is [compared to] the tree of the field" (Deuteronomy 20:19). Through cultivating strong roots – faith and commitment to G-d – we produce many fruits—Torah and Mitzvot.

### Observances and Customs

On this day it is customary to partake of the fruit with which the Holy Land is praised (Deuteronomy 8:8): olives, dates, grapes, figs and pomegranates. If tasting any of these fruit for the first time this season, remember to recite the *Shehecheyanu* blessing. (A blessing recited on joyous occasions, thanking G-d for "sustaining us and enabling us to reach this occasion." This blessing is recited before the standard "*Ha'etz*" blessing recited on fruit.)

Due to the festive nature of the day, we omit the *Tachanun* sections (petitions for forgiveness and confession) from the prayers.

**Sunday, February 5, 2023 --- 14 Shevat, 5783**

**Penei Yehoshua (1756)**

Shevat 14 is the anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk Katz (1680-1756), author of the Talmudic work "Penei Yehoshua." He served as rabbi of Lemberg (Lvov) in 1718, Berlin in 1730, Metz in 1734 and Frankfurt in 1740.

**Monday, February 6, 2023 --- 15 Shevat, 5783**

**Birthday of R. Nechemiah of Dubrowna (1788-1852)**

R. Nechemiah was a brilliant Torah scholar who lived in Dubrowna, a town in what is now Belarus. He was a disciple of the first three Rebbes of Chabad, R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi, R. DovBer of Lubavitch, and R. Menachem Mendel Schneersohn of Lubavitch (who was also his first cousin through marriage). He kept a scholarly correspondence with R. Menachem Mendel, some of which is preserved in his book of responsa, *Divrei Nechemiah*.

R. Nechemiah was born on 15 Shevat in the year 5548 from Creation (1788), and passed away on his sixty-fourth birthday in 5612 (1852).

**Tuesday, February 7, 2023 --- 16 Shevat, 5783**

**The "Shaarei Teshuvah" (c.1823)**

Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Margolis first served as rabbi in Brestitzki, Poland, and later in Dubno, Poland/Ukraine. He is the author of a digest of halachic responsa written after the publication of the Code of Jewish Law, known as "Shaarei Teshuvah." This work can be found in the margins of most prints of the Code of Jewish Law.

**Wednesday, February 8, 2023 --- 17 Shevat, 5783**

**Purim Saragossa (1421)**

A noxious plot was brewing against the Jewish community of Saragossa, but they were completely unaware of the looming danger. They were spared, however, thanks to a handful of synagogues beadles who acted on a dream they all had. The resulting salvation on the 17th of Shevat was celebrated by Saragossan Jews, and dubbed "Purim Saragossa."

A Hebrew *Megillah* (scroll) was penned, describing the details of the miraculous story. To this day, this scroll is read in certain communities on Purim Saragossa.

**Thursday, February 9, 2023 --- 18, Shevat, 5783**

**Auto De Fe in Peru (1639)**

With the inquisition having arrived on American shores, twelve Jews were burnt in an *auto de fe* in Lima, Peru, on the 18th of Shevat 5399 (1639). Of the 63 Jews who were condemned at the time to various punishments, eleven were burnt alive at the stake, along with the body of a twelfth, who had committed suicide during the trial.

Amongst those burnt was Manuel Bautista Perez, reported to have been the richest man in Peru at the time, as well as Francisco Maldonado de Silva, a surgeon, poet, and philosopher who was seized in Chile in 1627, and remained in the dungeons of the Inquisition for nearly twelve years. His devotion to his faith never wavered; while in prison he even converted two Catholics to Judaism!

**Friday, February 10, 2023 --- 19 Shevat, 5783**

**Jews of Basel Burned Alive (1349)**

With the Black Death raging throughout Switzerland, poison was reported to have been found in the wells at Zofingen. Some Jews were put to the "Dümeln" (thumbscrews) test, whereupon they "admitted" their guilt of the charges brought against them. This discovery was then communicated to the people of Basel, Zurich, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, and even Cologne.

The Jews of Basel were burned on an island in the Rhine on January 9, 1349, in wooden huts that were especially built for the occasion. Their children, who were spared, were taken and forcibly baptized.

**R. Aryeh Leib of Shpoli Saved From Drowning (1793)**

On his way back from participating in a *brit milah* ceremony in Bohuslav (in what is now Ukraine), R. Aryeh Leib, known as the "Grandfather of Shpoli" was crossing over the frozen Ros River when the ice suddenly broke beneath his feet. Miraculously he was saved, and to this day his descendants mark this date with a joyous feast (*Ish Hapelleh*, pp. 299–301).

**Murder of Daniel Pearl by Muslim Terrorists in Pakistan (2002)**

Daniel Pearl, an American-born Jewish reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* was kidnapped by terrorists in Karachi by a militant group calling itself the National Movement for the Restoration of Pakistani Sovereignty, which claimed that Pearl was a spy.

Nine days later, on Shevat 19 (Feb 1), Pearl was beheaded on videotape. The gruesome tape has Pearl stating that, "... My father's Jewish, my mother's Jewish, I'm Jewish. ..."

**Shabbat, February 11, 2023 --- 20 Shevat, 5783**

**Asher born (1562 BCE)**

Asher, the son of Jacob, was born on the 20th of Shevat of the year 2199 from creation (1562 BCE). According to some accounts, this is also the date of his passing.