

## PARSHAT YITRO

14 - 20 Shevat 5786  
1 - 7 February 2026

*Torah:* Exodus 18:1-20:23  
*Haftorah:* Isaiah 6:1-13

PSALMS DAILY

### Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

*Psalms 117*

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.  
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

### Positive Mitzvah 1 Belief in G-d

The very first mitzvah is to believe in G-d - a primal entity that is the cause and origin of all that exists.

### Negative Mitzvah 1 Idol Worship

The very first prohibition is against ascribing G-dly powers to any entity other than G-d.

### Positive Mitzvah 2 G-d's Unity

We are commanded to believe and acknowledge that the One who provides existence to all of creation is one.

## KEEP YOUR BALANCE

What is the definition of a well-balanced individual? One who has a chip on both shoulders!

In Exodus we read the Ten Commandments. The great revelation at Sinai saw Moses come down the mountain bearing the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments engraved on them. As we know, the two tablets were divided into two columns—the mitzvahs between humankind and G-d, and the commandments governing our human relations. The one side was devoted to our responsibilities to G-d, such as faith and Shabbat, while the other side dealt with our interpersonal duties, e.g., no murder, adultery and thievery.

The message that so many seem to forget is that both these areas are sacred, both come directly from G-d, and both form the core of Torah law and what being Jewish is all about. We must be well-balanced Jews. We may not take the liberty of emphasizing one tablet over the other. A healthy, all-around Jew lives a balanced, wholesome life, and is, as the Yiddish expression goes, gut tzu G-tt un gut tzu leit—good to G-d and good to people. If you focus on one side of the tablets to the detriment of the other, you walk around like a hinke'dike, a handicapped Jew with a bad limp.

A good Jew is a well-balanced Jew. This means that it's not good enough to be frum ("religious") on the ritual side of Judaism and free and easy on the menschlichkeit side. You've got to be honest and decent and live with integrity so people will respect you, too. If you are "religious" towards G-d but not fair with people, you can become a fanatical fundamentalist blowing up people in the name of G-d! The same G-d who motivates and inspires us to be G-dly and adhere to a religious code also expects us to be a mensch. There is no doubt whatsoever that it is, in fact, a mitzvah to be a mensch.

But neither can we neglect the right side of the tablets. A good Jew cannot simply be a democrat, a humanitarian. Otherwise, why did G-d need Jews altogether? It is not enough for a Jew to be a nice guy. Everyone must be nice. All of

humankind is expected to behave honestly and honorably. To be good, moral, ethical and decent is the duty of every human being on the planet. A good Jew must be all of that and then some. He or she must be a good person—and also fulfill our specific Jewish responsibilities, the mitzvahs that are directed to Jews which are uniquely Jewish.

I recently came across an interesting statistic on the Ten Commandments. The right-hand tablet, bearing the duties to G-d, consists of 146 words. The left-hand tablet, listing our human responsibilities, has only 26 words. Yet tradition has it that both tablets were filled with writing. There were no big, blank spaces. So how did 26 words equal the space of 146 words?

Well, anybody who uses a computer or word processor knows the answer. You simply adjust the font size. You can type in 10-point size or 24-point size. Take your pick. So if we apply that same principle to the tablets, we have a simple solution. The 26 words on the left, reflecting our moral and ethical human responsibilities, were simply a bigger size than the 146 words on the right, reflecting our G-dly, religious responsibilities. So we must never underestimate the importance of the human-relations side of the Ten Commandments.

Then again, just so we don't start limping, the very same G-d who said we should be nice also said we should have faith, keep Shabbat (yes, it is one of the Big Ten), kosher, mikvah, and the rest of it. In fact, when people say to me, "Rabbi, I'm not that religious, but I do keep the Ten Commandments," I often wonder whether they are actually aware that keeping Shabbat is Commandment No. 4.

As we read the Ten Commandments this week, let us resolve to keep our Jewish balance, not to limp or become "one-armed bandits." Please G-d, we will live full, wholesome, rich and well-balanced Jewish lives. Amen.

*By Rabbi Yossy Goldman  
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## THE BREAKTHROUGH

*"And it came to pass on the third day, when morning came, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick*

*cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of the shofar exceedingly loud; and the entire people within the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with G-d, and they stood at the foot of the mountain...*

*"And G-d came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And G-d called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses ascended." Exodus 19:16-20*

The most momentous event in history took place on Shabbat, the sixth day of the month of Sivan, in the year 2448 (1313 BCE). On that day, the entire people of Israel - more than 2 million men, women and children, as well as the souls of all future generations of Jews - gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from G-d. Ever since, the event has been marked on our calendar as the festival of Shavuot, "the Time of the Giving of Our Torah."

But the Torah we received at Sinai had already been in our possession for many generations. Our ancestors had studied and fulfilled the entire Torah even before it was given, observing its every law and ordinance - including even the obligation to make an eruv tavshilin when a festival falls on the eve of Shabbat. No new document was unveiled at Sinai, and no hitherto unknown code of behavior was commanded there. What, then, was given to us at The Giving of Our Torah?

The Midrash explains the significance of the event with the following parable:

"Once there was a king who decreed: The people of Rome are forbidden to go down to Syria, and the people of Syria are forbidden to go up to Rome. Likewise, when G-d created the world He decreed and said: 'The heavens are G-d's, and the earth is given to man.' But when He wished to give the Torah to Israel, He rescinded His original decree, and declared: The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms. And I, Myself, will begin - as it is written, 'And G-d descended on Mount Sinai, and then it says, 'And to Moses He said: Go up to G-d.'" (Midrash Tanchuma, Vaeira 15; Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 12:4)



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For the first twenty-five centuries of history, there existed a *gezeirah* - a decree and schism - which split reality into two hermetic worlds: the spiritual and the physical. The spiritual could not be truly brought down to earth - its very nature defied actualization; nor could the physical be made transcendent and divine - its very nature kept it imprisoned within the finiteness and mortality of the lower realms. So Torah, the divine wisdom and will, could have no real effect upon the physical world. It was a wholly spiritual *manifesto*, pertaining to the soul of man and to the spiritual reality of the heavens. While its concepts could, and were, applied to physical life, physical life could not be elevated - it could be improved and perfected to the limits of its potential, but it could not transcend its inherent coarseness and subjectivity.

At Sinai, G-d revoked the decree which had confined matter and spirit to two distinct realms. G-d came down on Mount Sinai, bringing the spirituality of the heavens down to earth. He summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, empowering physical man to raise his physical self and world to a higher state of existence. The Torah could now sanctify physical life.

This encounter between G-d and man at Sinai introduced a new phenomenon: the *Cheftza Shel Kedushah* - the holy object. After Sinai, when physical man takes a physical coin, earned by his physical toil and talents, and gives it to charity; or when he bakes flour and water as unleavened bread (*matzah*) and eats it on the first night of Passover; or when he forms a piece of leather to a specified shape and dimensions, inserts into it parchment scrolls inscribed with specified words, and binds them to his head and arm as *Tefillin* - the object with which he has performed his *Mitzvah* (divine commandment) is transformed. A finite, physical thing becomes holy, as its substance and form come to embody the realization of a divine desire and command.

The *Mitzvot* could have been, and were, performed before the revelation at Sinai. But because they had not yet been commanded by G-d, they lacked the power to bridge the great divide between matter and spirit. Only as a command of G-d, creator and delineator of both the spiritual and the physical, could the *Mitzvah* supersede the natural definitions of these two realms. Only after Sinai could the

*Mitzvah* actualize the spiritual and sanctify the material.

### **An Absorbent World**

Therein lies the significance of a curious detail related by our sages regarding the revelation at Sinai.

The Torah tells us that G-d spoke the Ten Commandments in "a great voice, which did not cease" (Deuteronomy 5:19). The Midrash offers a number of interpretations for this description of the divine voice. One interpretation is that the divine did not confine itself to the holy tongue but reverberated in mankind's seventy languages. A second meaning is that the voice did not cease on that particular Shabbat morning some 3300 years ago: throughout the generations, all the prophets and sages who prophesied, taught and expounded upon the wisdom of the Torah are the extension of that very voice, for they added nothing that was not already inherent in the Ten Commandments. Finally, the Midrash offers a third explanation of the voice's "unceasing" nature: the divine voice at Sinai was unique in that it had no echo.

The first two interpretations obviously point to the universality and timelessness of Torah. But what is "great and unceasing" about a voice that has no echo? Why should the divine voice at Sinai have been distinguished in this manner from all other sounds?

In truth, however, the echoless nature of the divine communication conveys the very essence of what transpired at Sinai. An echo is created when a sound meets with a substance which resists it: instead of absorbing its waves, the substance repels them, bouncing them back to the void. Prior to Sinai, the voice of Torah had an echo. Belonging to the spirituality of the heavens, it could not truly penetrate the physicality of the earth. The world might hear of Torah and be affected by it; but there remained a certain degree of resistance, as the Torah and the physical world each remained defined by their respective "higher" and "lower" realms. At Sinai, however, G-d rescinded the decree which had severed the heavens from the earth. The world could now fully absorb the divine voice; a physical object could now become one with its mission and role.

### **The Empowering Precedent**

Therein lies an important lesson to us as we pursue our mission in life to implement the ethos and ideals of Torah in our world.

At Sinai we were charged to serve as "a light unto the nations" - to actualize in our own lives, and

to teach all of humanity, that no matter what the conditions of a particular time, place or society may be, there is an all-transcendent, unequivocal, divinely ordained truth and moral code of behavior to which to adhere.

At times, we might be confronted with a seemingly unresponsive and even resisting world. It may appear that one or another of the Torah's precepts does not fit in with the prevalent reality. So the Torah tells us that the voice which sounded G-d's message to the world had no echo.

The voice of the Ten Commandments permeated every object and reality in the universe. So, any resistance we may possibly meet in implementing them is superficial and temporary. For at Sinai, the essence of every created being was made consistent with, and wholly receptive to, the goodness and perfection which G-d desires of it.

*Based on teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe*

## YITRO IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Yitro," means "Jethro" and it is found in Exodus 18:1.

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles which G-d performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the Israelite camp, bringing with him Moses' wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people.

The children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan) of 2448 (1313 BCE), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah. G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend.

G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

## IN JEWISH HISTORY

**Friday, 19 Shevat 5786 - 6 February 2026**

### **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 19 Shevat 5109 (1349), in wooden huts that were especially built for the occasion. Their children, who were spared, were taken and forcibly baptized.

### **Murder of Daniel Pearl in Pakistan (2002)**

Daniel Pearl, an American-born Jewish reporter for The Wall Street Journal was kidnapped by terrorists in Karachi by a terrorist 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 5762 (2002), Pearl was beheaded on videotape. The gruesome tape has Pearl stating that, "...My father's Jewish, my mother's Jewish, I'm Jewish..."

### **Shabbat, 20 Shevat 5786 - 7 February 2026**

#### **Asher born (1562 BCE)**

Asher, the son of Jacob, was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of Shevat of the year 2199 (1562 BCE).