

PARSHAT YITRO
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Dear Abby was once asked the following question: “Why do Jews always answer a question with a question?” Her response: “How should they answer?” We Jews always seem to have questions, many times even our answers are questions. In many ways to be Jewish is to ask questions. Think of the Passover Seder, think of all Jewish literature and the probing questions which allow us to think more deeply about our tradition and our heritage. It is, therefore, not surprising that at particularly important places in our Torah significant questions are asked.

We are all familiar with the first chapter of the book of Genesis. It is the story of G-d creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh. It is a narrative known to everyone, of whatever religion, background, or ethnic culture. Yet, the great Biblical commentator, Rashi, begins his commentary with a question. He quotes Rabbi Isaac, who may have been his father, who states that the Torah should not have begun with the story of creation, but should have commenced with the 12th chapter of the book of Exodus which details the Passover preparations for the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. “Why,” he asks, “is there a need for the book of Genesis and the first 11 chapters of Exodus?” He responds that the reason for the Torah’s narrative of creation is to establish that G-d is sovereign of the universe. He goes on to state that if the nations accuse Israel of banditry for seizing the lands of the seven nations of Canaan, and making it their own, Israel can respond: “The entire universe belongs to G-d. He created it and He granted it to whomever He deemed fit. It was His desire to give it to them and then it was His desire to take it from them and give it to us.” Rashi, in selecting this comment, seems to suggest that the entire story of Genesis and the first 11 chapters of Exodus is told for the sole purpose of justifying the Israelite ownership of the land of Canaan, today the land of Israel. While the question may seem somewhat puzzling, the answer is very significant as it stakes out our relationship to our homeland from the very beginnings of the Biblical narrative.

In today’s Torah reading we have one of the most important sections of the entire Biblical story, the Ten Commandments, dictated to Moses at the top of Mount Sinai and heard by the Israelites standing below. This time, I have a question. If the creation narrative is so important to us, why is it that the first commandment of the ten states that: “I, the Lord am your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.” Why doesn’t G-d identify Himself as the Creator? Why does G-d identify Himself as the Liberator?

The answers to these questions are speculative. However, they can teach us some important aspects of Biblical theology and modern Jewish ideology. G-d as Creator is an abstract principle. Philosophers throughout the ages have attempted to understand the story of creation and G-d’s role in it. Aristotle, for example, saw G-d as the Prime Mover. Some philosophers see G-d in the act of creating on a continuous basis. Others see creation as a one-time event so that G-d is no longer involved in history. We, the Jewish people, have a different understanding. Our sages felt that we could never truly understand the facts of the Creation story. The Midrash teaches us that we should appreciate the fact that the Torah began with a “bet.” This “bet” is enclosed on three sides and is only open towards the text. This suggests that

while we cannot understand what happened before the Biblical narrative on the Creation, we must be concerned with what we do in this world and how we act in it.

According to this understanding, while we appreciate G-d as Creator, we are more concerned with a G-d who acts in history, a G-d who frees the enslaved, a G-d who expects human beings to live in freedom, and a G-d who is in a continuing relationship with our people and with others.

This G-d establishes a covenant with the Israelite people and in doing so reminds them that he has taken them out of the bondage of slavery to freedom. This G-d has the expectation that they will appreciate that relationship and follow through on their responsibilities – to abide by the law, to work on behalf of freedom for all, and to recognize the special relationship that they have been granted with the G-d of the universe. It is not merely an esoteric relationship, it is a relationship which details involvement in the world. As Rabbi Gunther Plaut writes, “Israel was redeemed by G-d so that it might redeem humanity.” G-d’s authority derives from His freeing Israel from bondage and, therefore, due to the special relationship that He has with His people, He expects that they will live by certain standards and criteria.

While the concept of the Chosen People is not a popular one today, this is the basis of its ideology. We have extra responsibilities because of our relationship with G-d, not only as Creator, but as Liberator. And, not only as Liberator, but as Revealer. It is that relationship which is supposed to have an impact upon the way we live as we interact with the world.

On an individual level that means that we have a personal responsibility to live up to the demands of the covenant. The manner in which we speak, act, and live reveals a great deal about us and the relationship we have with our G-d. Over and over again, we are told to live a life based upon justice, equality, and proper behavior. In our personal relationships with others, in our business dealings, in our interaction with the world at-large, we are to maintain the highest standards of personal behavior. Next week we will read the details on how to establish a just and equitable society. Our tradition insists that not only were the great ten utterances given at Sinai, but all the details too emanate from that Divine-human encounter.

On a communal level, G-d informs the Israelites just before the great revelation: “Now then, if you will obey Me, faithfully, and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine. But, you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” All people were created by G-d, but we have a special mission. That mission is to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” living individually and communally by the highest of standards. We are to judge ourselves by those standards and we should expect that others will do so as well. We cannot evade the responsibility, nor should we want to. Being a member of the Jewish people means living a life of constant sanctification of G-d’s name.

Putting all of this together with Rashi’s first comment in the story of creation, it means the Jewish state has a great responsibility as well. On the one hand, the State of Israel is a nation state like all others. On the other hand, as a Jewish nation state it has added responsibilities of establishing a just society. Zionism was not simply about the establishment of the State, it is also

about establishing an “exemplary society,” a light to the nations in keeping with the ethical vision of the Torah of Israel. My colleague, Dr. David Breakstone, vice-chair of the World Zionist Organization has said that Herzl’s 1902 utopian novel “Alteneuland” is an important starting place because it tells us that when we talk about Zionism it is not just about the founding of Israel, but about what kind of Israel we’re building. Making a better society is at the heart of Zionism itself. Thankfully, we have our State. However, we have a way to go to create this model society.

Israeli citizens and Jews around the world can’t be totally satisfied with just having a nation state like all others. We must strive for a higher ideal. Yes, it is very difficult to live up to those ideals with enemies who surround us threatening our existence, with a new crisis occurring almost every day. But, we must never be self-satisfied. We must always strive for a more just society for all. Israel, as the land of the Jews, portrays whether we like it or not, a sense of Judaism to the entire world. Sometimes we need to be self-critical and recognize that we are not doing as well as we could. That self-examination is part of being a Jew. Think, for example, of Yom Kippur and all that pertains to it. We cannot be self-loathing or only critical of ourselves and not others, but we need to hold ourselves to a higher standard of justice, equality, and respect for all.

When Jews ask questions, they don’t always have answers. But, in the questioning itself we raise issues with which we must contend, and that is a worthwhile process. We must constantly ask ourselves whether we are living up to the high ideals established by our faith. Are we good examples not only for our children and grandchildren but also for the world at-large having assumed the responsibility of being G-d’s treasured people? Do we live up to the standards of being, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” in our daily activities, in our communal endeavors, and in our national aspirations? The questions force us to look a little more carefully into who we are, what we represent, and what we can achieve. I believe we need to challenge ourselves individually and collectively and strive to find, if not adequate answers, then, at least, opportunities for greater growth and spiritual maturity. As Rabbi Tarfon taught us in Pirkei Avot, “You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it.”

May we live up to the high ideals of our faith and our people.