

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Yitro

פרשת יתרו

In this week's Parsha, the Torah speaks about G-d giving the Jews the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai with a spectacular show of miracles and awesome sights. This wondrous display solidified the validity of the Torah and its origin from G-d Himself. Although there are a total of 613 commandments, G-d chose ten commandments to illustrate the truth of the Torah. These ten are considered to be the foundation for all of the other mitzvot. With some of the commandments, it is obvious how they serve as a foundation for the rest of the Torah. For example, before beginning to study the Torah and perform the mitzvot, one must first accept the fact that G-d created the world and rules over it. Once one accepts this as fact, he/she can then accept the obligation to keep His Torah. If one does not believe in G-d, he/she will not believe that there is an obligation to keep the Torah and do the mitzvot. If one were to closely analyze these commandments, each one would reveal an idea which would aid in further service of G-d.

The tenth commandment states, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or whatever belongs to your neighbor." (Shemot, 20, 14) Although it seems important not to desire another's possessions, it is difficult to see this commandment as a basis for all other mitzvot. In order to fully understand how fundamental this commandment is, one must first have a clear understanding of what is being commanded here and how it can be achieved.

This commandment seems out of reach for most people. It is understandable to be asked to control one's desires, but the Torah appears to forbid one from having a desire in the first place. How can a person accomplish this lofty height? It seems as if this commandment must only be addressing the most righteous of people.

Rabbi Abraham Ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) explains the nature of jealousy in order to shed light on this commandment. He states that in general, a person only covets something he thinks he can one day attain. A pauper will never desire the princess's hand in marriage. Most people do not wish to be the Queen of England, as it is not something that is within their realm of ever achieving. The Ibn Ezra explains, that in reality, desiring anything that belongs to someone else should be viewed in a similar fashion. G-d, in His great kindness, carefully gives each person what they deserve. Nothing more, nothing less. Anything that G-d has given to someone else should be viewed as equally unattainable as becoming the Queen of England. If one has the



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

required faith in G-d, and he/she recognizes that everything comes from Him, this commandment will not be a challenge. With this understanding, it is easier to understand how this commandment serves as a foundation for the rest of the Torah.

Often, the motivation to sin, can be traced back to a lack of proper faith in G-d. Stealing, for example, is likely motivated by a desire to obtain money that one perceives that he/she has no other way of obtaining. However, with the true belief that G-d gives a person everything that they need, the desire to steal goes away. Even more so, if the stolen money is not intended for the thief, then no method of obtaining it would be successful, and even if one succeeded in stealing it, G-d would find a way to take it away. In truth, if one fully comprehended that reward and punishment is earned from every action, there is no way they would sin, as the ends could not possibly justify the means.

The Zohar points out that the list of things which the Torah commands against desiring are all materialistic possessions. However, there is no prohibition against being jealous of someone else's spiritual level. In fact, the Talmud (Bava Basra 21a) states that Kinat Sofrim, jealousy of Torah scholars, is a desirable trait and increases one's wisdom. As mentioned previously, anything that was not given to a person should be considered unattainable, however, when it comes to matters of spirituality, nothing is out of reach or unattainable. Therefore, jealousy of spiritual height is appropriate and encouraged. This is not a jealousy that causes pointless pursuit of things one can never have, rather it can serve as a motivation to become closer to G-d, which is the goal of all mankind. Faith does not remove this jealousy. In fact, it pushes one towards it. Through understanding and internalizing this great message of faith and proper "desire", one can further his/her service of G-d, and build the foundation to live a full Torah life.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Gavriel Rudin

3626 El Camino Real
(650) 493-5764



Palo Alto, CA 94306
www.jsn.info