

From the Teachings of Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

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PARASHAT YITRO

UNITED BEFORE MT. SINAI

Facing the Mountain

Parshat Yitro describes the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. When the Jewish people arrived before Mt. Sinai the Torah states,¹

On the third month of their exodus from the land of Egypt, on this day, they came to the Sinai desert. They traveled from Repheedim, they entered the Sinai desert, they camped in the desert; Israel encamped there facing the mountain.

In the final phrase, “Israel encamped there facing the mountain,” the Torah uses the singular form of the verb “to camp” (וַיִּחַן) even though a few words earlier it used the more natural plural form, “they camped” (וַיִּחַנו). The sages explain that unlike all their other encampments, this time the Jewish people were united like a single individual with one heart (meaning, a singular purpose). For this reason, this phrase is always quoted as a symbol of Jewish unity.

The two-letter root of the verb “to camp” is חן, which in Hebrew means “grace” (חן). This word also means “symmetry.” In a symmetrical figure, the two sides face one another.

Egypt United

The unity that the people experienced while facing the mountain on which the Torah would be given came to rectify a similar situation in which they were facing the Egyptians on the sea. There, the Torah also uses the singular, “And behold, Egypt was chasing them...” Not “the Egyptians,” but “Egypt,” indicating that the Egyptians too, in their attempt to capture the Jewish people were united like a single individual with a single heart. In the Talmud, the sages teach us that, “the gathering (unity) of the wicked is bad for them and awful for the rest of the world, while the gathering of the righteous (*tzadikim*) is beneficial to them and a benefit for the entire world.”²

Mind and Heart

How can we tell the difference between the unity of the wicked and the unity of the righteous? Regarding the wicked, it says that their unity is, “with one heart, like

one man.” The heart precedes the man, i.e., the mind, the intellect. The wicked unite in order to follow their heart, to attain what their hearts desire. The heart is the natural dwelling place of the animal soul and all its cravings (as explained in the *Tanya*). But, about the unity of the righteous, it says that they gather, “Like one man, with one heart.” Their mind, their intellect and Divine soul, precedes and guides their heart, their natural proclivities.

Moreover, the Egyptians—representing the wicked—attained unity during their impulsive pursuit of the Jewish people. The Jewish people—representing the righteous—reached a state of unity when in a state of peaceful rest in their camp (after having returned to God in their hearts, as *Rashi* explains in his commentary on the previous verse). The encampment, which we saw before stems from the two-letter root meaning “grace” or “favor” (חן) implies that the unity of the righteous is based on their finding favor in one another’s eyes. In other words, they simply enjoy one another and each other’s company. But, the wicked cannot come together without an impulsive drive to achieve some goal. Even when they are running together, they do not feel love for one another.

From Rest to Movement

Still, once the righteous have achieved unity in their restful state of “encampment” (וַיִּחַן), they have to begin moving and pursuing a goal together. The two letters of the two-letter root of “to camp” (חן) are the initials of these two words, “encampment” (חֲנִיָּה) and “movement” (נִסְיוֹנָה). They are also the initials of the two roots of the words *chassid* (חֲסִיד) and *mitnaged* (מִתְנַגֵּד), the disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov and the Jew who still opposes (to whatever extent) the Ba’al Shem Tov’s way. Thus, these two are destined to find favor, to find grace in each other’s eyes.

Mathematical Analysis

Let us see a few *gematriot* regarding this notable last phrase.

The full phrase describing the encampment before Mt. Sinai reads, “Israel encamped there, facing the mountain” (וַיִּחַן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֹגֵד הָהָר). The *gematria* of these words is 1222, or twice 611, the *gematria* of “Torah” (תּוֹרָה), implying the

unification of the Written Torah with the Oral Torah. The phrase has 17 letters, where 17 is the value of “good” (טוב) and alluding to the verse, “there is no good but the Torah.” The letters of the word “good” (טוב) equal 9, 6, and 2 respectively. We can rearrange the words of this phrase so that they reflect this division of 17. We then get, וַיַּחַן יִשְׂרָאֵל (9 letters), then נִגַּד הָהָר (6 letters), and finally שָׁם (2 letters). This ordering of the words which in effect just moves the word שָׁם to the end of the phrase, gives us reason to look at the phrase “Israel encamped facing the mountain” (וַיַּחַן יִשְׂרָאֵל נִגַּד הָהָר). Its value is 882, or 2 times the *gematria* of “truth” (אֱמֶת), again alluding to a phrase related to Torah, “There is no truth but Torah.”³ 1222 is also the product of 26 and 47, or *Havayah* (יִהוּה) and *Havayah Ekyeh* (יִהוּה אֵיהִיה), a beautiful unification of these two Names of God.

The first two words, “encamped there” (וַיַּחַן שָׁם) equal 414 or twice the value of “light” (אור), 207. 414 is also therefore the value of “the infinite light” (אור אין סוף), since “light” (אור) equals “the infinite” (אין סוף). It is also the value of the phrase, “source of life” (מְקוֹר חַיִּים) and the

word “And you shall love” (וְאַהַבְתָּ), which begins the first paragraph of the Shema.⁴

Just the words, “facing the mountain” (נִגַּד הָהָר) equal 267, or “chariot” (מְרֻכְבָּה), alluding to the secret of the Divine Chariot.

Together 414 and 267 (וַיַּחַן שָׁם נִגַּד הָהָר) equals 681, or 3 times “blessing” (בְּרָכָה), alluding to the threefold blessing of the Torah, the Priestly Blessing. Additionally, 681 is the value of “trumpet [or *shofar*] blast” (תְּרוּעָה), inherent in which is the power of unification—the sound of the *shofar* and the trumpet causes our attachment to the material and mundane to shatter, as in the verse, “Sound the trumpet for *Havayah*, all the land.”

Finally, the *gematria* of the first, middle, and last letter of the phrase “Israel encamped there, facing the mountain” (וַיַּחַן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נִגַּד הָהָר) is 406, or 28 (read: the triangle of 28, the sum of integers from 1 to 28). 406 is also 7 times “grace” (חַן), alluding to the 7 types of *tzadikim* that will greet the Divine Presence.⁴

(based on the lecture given on 11 Shevat 5769)

Notes: 1. Exodus 19:1-2. 2. Sanhedrin 71b. 3. Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah 3:8. Tanna Debei Eliyahu Zuta 28. Tikunei Zohar 50a. 4. Deuteronomy 6:5.

THE REDEMPTION GROWS NEAR

The Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote to the Baba Sali that he should do everything he can, “to conquer the young generation with a firm hand” (לְכַבּוֹשׁ בְּיַד חֲזָקָה). This is similar to what Maimonides writes about the Mashiach, that, “He will coerce the entire Jewish people to follow the Torah and to strengthen it.” What type of coercion is Maimonides speaking of? What did the Rebbe’s advice to the Baba Sali refer to? There are different types of coercion. Notice that we ourselves, in the morning prayers, beseech the Almighty to coerce our inclination, our will, so that it submits before God (וְכַף אֶת יִצְרָנוּ לְהִשְׁתַּעֲבֹד לָךְ).

In Jewish law there are three types of coercion. The first is referred to as active coercion (literally “coercion with flog”). If there is a man whom the court has ruled must divorce his wife (because he is abusive, etc.) and he is unwilling to give his wife a get (divorce document), the court has the right to actively coerce him to do so. Even though he gives the document by coercion, the document is legal, because his innermost essence (his soul) does indeed agree to the court’s opinion.

A second type of coercion is verbal. Usually, this means communicating to the other person how much his negative conduct hurts him. Anyone in this position to coerce someone else verbally, needs to make this clear. But, there is a higher level of verbal coercion in which the sole purpose is to publicly state what should be, e.g., what is your role as a Jew, what is the role of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. This requires that one not be embarrassed of anyone, not even of those who ridicule him. We must clearly explain what the Torah says and to state openly that the Torah is the sole authority over us, as individuals and as a people.

But, there is a third type of coercion, the type that the sages note occurred at Mt. Sinai, where God “coerced the mountain over their heads.” The normal explanation is that God held Mt. Sinai as it were over the people’s heads and warned them that should they not accept the Torah they would die underneath the mountain. But, in Chassidut it is explained that the word mountain is related to Abraham (Abraham called the location of the Temple, a mountain, Mt. Moriah). Abraham is the archetypal soul of love and thus God coerced us to accept the Torah by showering love upon us. By revealing tremendous and infinite love for the Jewish people, God coerced us to accept the Torah.

Indeed, the *gematria* of “to conquer,” (לְכַבּוֹשׁ), the word used by the Rebbe, is the same as “Mashiach” (מָשִׁיחַ)!

(based on the lecture of Tevet 28, 5770)