

JANUARY 21, 2008

Parashat Yitro

Two-Way Street

Vayeitzei Moshe “*Moshe went out*” (Exodus 18:7)

As Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, comes to join the Israelites, we might be surprised at Moshe’s eagerness. Ibn Ezra explains that it was not the custom of important people such as Moshe to go out and greet their family. As a great leader, Moshe would have been expected to wait in his tent until his family came to him. Now, we know that Moshe’s humility might have played a part in his actions in this *pasuk*. But Ibn Ezra tells us that Moshe’s reason for going out was to honor his father-in-law, Yitro.

As we know, Yitro was very good to Moshe. He sheltered him and allowed him to marry his daughter. Later in this parashah, he acts as Moshe’s teacher. Moshe had much for which to be grateful. Clearly, though, Yitro benefits from joining his fate to that of the Jewish people – indeed, the relationship is a two-way street.

During last week’s visit to Israel, President Bush and the over two thousand American officials accompanying him were treated to a tremendous display of friendship and honor. Every street of Jerusalem was draped in American flags and Prime Minister Olmert mentioned numerous times Israel’s gratitude for America’s friendship. For his part, President Bush was equally grateful for the warm welcome and for Israel’s steadfast commitment to partnering with the U.S.

For sixty years, no matter which administration resided in the White House or which party controlled Capitol Hill, the United States and Israel have enjoyed a unique and special relationship. It is an alliance based on mutual interests and common values, but also on the warmth of two countries that truly care for and appreciate each other. ■

A Helping Hand

Vayishmah Yitro “*And Yitro heard*” (Exodus 18:1)

At the beginning of this week’s *parashah*, news of his son-in-law’s experiences leaving Egypt reaches Yitro. What did Moshe’s father-in-law hear that made him leave his home and the comforts of Midyan to join B’nei Yisrael in the wilderness? Talmud (Zevachim 116a) records Chazal’s various answers: R. Yehoshua says Yitro heard about the war with Amalek, R. Elazar HaModi’i says he heard about the giving of Torah, and R. Eliezer says he heard about the parting of the sea.

According to some of our sages, Yitro came to join with B’nei Yisrael in joy – the giving of Torah, the parting of the sea. But R. Yehoshua says that he came in solidarity because of the war with Amalek. We need friends most in times of darkness, even if those friends come from unexpected places.

We all remember that, on December 26, 2004, an earthquake triggered a series of devastating tsunamis along the coasts of most landmasses bordering the Indian Ocean. Three years have passed since the Asian tsunamis left over 250,000 dead, 125,000 injured and almost two million homeless.

"When the stage of the immediate disaster relief is over, the media, the celebrities and even most of the donors are gone," Dr. Yehudah Paz, chairman of the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (NISPD), said recently. But several Israeli aid groups, working with international and American Jewish organizations, have worked together to make a difference for residents of the island nation of Sri Lanka. Over the past three years, the groups have worked with the cooperative movement in Sri Lanka, training 1,500 business managers of agricultural, tourist and retail cooperatives that were damaged in the tsunami. These business managers reach out to thousands of small businesses and merchants in southern Sri Lanka.

"The purpose was not to rebuild what was ruined, but to use this disaster as an opportunity to promote these cooperatives and the local economy," said Rafi Goldman, director of the International Center for Cooperative Studies, a division of the NISPD.

Israel has always been a world leader in responding to natural disasters. Whether helping put out Greek wildfires last summer or offering rescue assistance to Iran after the Bam earthquake of late 2003, Israeli aid workers have been willing to go anywhere and help anyone. Like Yitro coming to Israel's side, Israel is a good citizen of the world in good and bad times alike. ■

It's Time

U'sh'martem et b'riti "You shall keep my covenant" (Exodus 19:5)

In describing the special relationship between Am Yisrael and HaShem, the Torah uses the word, *b'rit*. *B'rit* can mean several things: a contract, an agreement, or a covenant. Indeed, the *mefarshim* debate which *b'rit* is spoken about in this *pasuk*. Chizkuni believed that this is a blood *b'rit* while Rashi and S'forno teach us that this *b'rit* "will be executed with you after you accept the Torah."

An agreement isn't worth the handshake or the paper it is written on (or the stone into which it is carved) unless it is put into action. For example, Judaism teaches us that the ultimate goal of study is doing. Study for study's sake only has efficacy if it paves the way to behavior.

Israel has kept its *b'rit* by making painful concessions to allow for "two states for two peoples." The Palestinians must now match Israel's desire for peace with concrete actions of their own. The PA must end official incitement against Israel, recognize Israel as a Jewish state, and finally take steps to destroy the terror infrastructure. Moreover, they must not have any rapprochement with the terrorists of Hamas. Egypt, which has a *b'rit shalom* with Israel, must do more to stop the smuggling of weapons into Gaza and must cooperate with their neighbors to ensure that Israel remains safe and secured. The Arab States must support President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, economically and morally, and prepare their people for normalization with the Jewish State.

In our *parashah*, B'nei Yisrael accepted the *b'rit*, *yachdav* – as one. They knew it was not enough to accept a *b'rit*, they had to take action. In the case of B'nei Yisrael, that action was *kabbalat hamitzvot*. In the case of Israel today, it is making painful compromises for the ultimate goal of peace. For the Palestinians and others, it is now time to act. ■