

Parashat Yitro יתרו

Torah: Exodus 18:1–20:26

Haftarah: Isaiah 6:1–7:6; 9:6–7

God's Most Treasured Possession

General Overview

The children of Israel hardly had enough time to catch their breath from crossing the Sea when they were brought face to face with their Redeemer. In Parashat Yitro, Moshe first learns some leadership principles from his father-in-law, Yitro (Jethro), and then ascends Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord and receive the Ten Commandments. Needless to say, this parasha is one of the most important in the entire Torah.

Exposition

We would like to do something a little different in this week's commentary. The format we would like to use this week closely resembles the rabbinic midrash method. As we mentioned in the commentary last week, one definition of a midrash is, "an ancient Jewish homiletic commentary on some portion of the Hebrew Scripture, in which allegory and legendary illustration were freely used."¹ To be sure, this week's commentary — as always — will utilize the *p'shat*, or simple and plain meaning of the text. However, based on the above definition of a midrash, we will be taking liberty in explaining it. As the student will see, we will not take too much liberty because, hopefully, the points that we stress will have already been seen from the text. Nevertheless, there might be some things which are stretched — you be the judge! Our goal is not to minimize the importance of a literal interpretation, but to explain the text in the fullest way. In doing so, we hope that the student will see the text in the same light and say, "Oh, I get it! Of course, that's definitely a legitimate way of looking at this parasha." So, now that we have sufficiently acquired your attention, let us proceed.

One note before we begin. The student may notice that there is no outline this week. The reason is that midrashim do not usually lend themselves to outlines. This does not mean there is no organization. There is. Hopefully the student will pick up that organization as he reads this commentary.

In this excerpt from Parashat Yitro, we will focus on the first section.

A Wedding!

It is our opinion that most of this parasha is about a wedding between God and His people, Israel. Of course, we are not alone in that viewpoint, nor are we the first ones to see things this way. For example, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, basing his remarks on centuries of Jewish biblical interpretation, says, "It is significant that God's taking of Israel as His nation is likened to a marriage."² If this is so, then there are several features in this week's sidra which, when taken together, show

that here at Mount Sinai, we are attending a sacred wedding. Let us look at these different features.

I. The Engagement

We have already seen God's betrothal to Israel in a previous Torah portion (*Va'eira*). It may be helpful however, to review that.

In Exodus 6:6–7, the Lord gave Moshe several promises of deliverance for Israel. The student may remember that four of these promises became the basis for having four cups of wine at the Pesach Seder. This week we will draw our attention to the fourth promise. It says, "I will take you to Me for a people and I will be a God to you." The Hebrew word translated "will take" is from the word, *l'kakh*, (לקח). This is a common word that usually has to do with taking anything. Among the many things someone could take, it is also used in the Tanakh to mean "to take a wife." Therefore, what the Lord seemed to be saying in this verse was that He was proposing marriage to Israel. Even more, He was making a proposal which was very difficult to resist!

In Jewish terminology, an engagement is called a "betrothal" or *erusin* (ארוסין). In biblical times, as well in some circles today, to break this betrothal involves going through an official (rabbinic, not civil) divorce procedure. The betrothal did not permit the couple to live together, but it did give "marriage" status to them. Sometimes the betrothal ceremony was held one year before the actual wedding. In this regard, it is interesting to note that there was about a one-year period between the start of the plagues and the Exodus, or between when the Eternal One may have made the promises in Exodus 6 and the meeting on Mount Sinai.

This engagement, then, was a binding agreement between God and Israel. As far as the Lord was concerned, it was as good as a marriage. However, as far as Israel was concerned, they hardly knew about it! This indicates that this relationship from the start, was initiated, carried out, maintained, and [will be] consummated totally by the Eternal Groom Himself.

II. Separation of the Bride

Being engaged, the bride, Israel, was not permitted to pursue other grooms. To help her to remember this, God began a separation process with the goal of making her unreachable for other pursuers and helping to ease any temptations to unfaithfulness she may face. This process culminated with the Exodus. The theological terminology for this process is called "sanctification," a separation from everything else in order to serve only God. Accordingly, notice that Moshe's main plea to Pharaoh throughout the plague period was, "Thus says the Lord, 'Let My people go that they may serve Me.'"

One reason, therefore, why the Lord brought Israel out was to sanctify her as His bride. In the process, after the Exodus, the Holy One then brought her to a beautifully secluded spot, and spoke kind and tender words to her. His speech is recorded in 19:5–6,

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Let us unpack these important and beautiful verses.

A. *Segulah*

There is a very moving and touching scene in the opening verses of Exodus 19, if we understand what is going on. It is recording a moment when the eternal God and Creator of the universe acts as a Bridegroom, looking into the eyes of His beloved bride, Israel, and tells her how much He loves her. One of the endearing terms that He uses to address her is, in English, “beloved treasure” (19:5). Some translations use the phrase “peculiar treasure.” However, the Hebrew word is *segulah* (סגולה). This is a very picturesque word.

In ancient times *segulah* was used in Ugaritic (Canaanite) literature to describe how a king would estimate the value of the possessions he may have acquired when he conquered another people. He would have many new and valuable pieces, but only a few choice ones would he classify as *segulot* (plural of *segulah*). These he considered the most prized possessions, which he treated with special care and kept under special protection.

Rashi also explains this word in like manner by saying, “Segulah means a cherished treasure, the same as Ecclesiastes 2:8, and treasures of kings, costly vessels and precious stones which kings store up.”³ Accordingly, in verse 5, the King of kings speaks to His beloved, Israel, and says, in essence, to her, “In the same manner shall you be unto Me a cherished treasure more than other peoples.”⁴ That is why He calls her His *segulah*.

B. *The Nature of their Marriage*

While He was speaking in such endearing terms, the Eternal Bridegroom also outlined for Israel what their marriage would be like. To begin, God mentioned that He already had the “ketubah” prepared. (More on this later.) Then, He told Israel that He had a special purpose for their relationship. This marriage would have unique goals and direction. God said that Israel would be a “kingdom of priests.”

One of the main functions of priests was to lead others into an understanding of God’s role on the earth and to help them to worship and to serve Him. In this context, the entire nation of Israel is to be dedicated to leading the world to understand and accept God’s mission. Stated another way, it was the job of the priest to act as God’s representative to others. Similarly, according to 19:5ff, Israel was to be “God’s representative for and to other nations.”⁵ This would fulfill the ultimate promise of the Covenant with Abraham when it says that Abraham would be a blessing to all of the nations.

C. *A Nation Among Other Nations*

Implied in this designation for Israel is the promise that she was going to be a nation, a “kingdom.” This nation would also have a King: God Himself (though this would change later in their history). God even told them that they would be a “*holy nation*” (italics ours). This word “holy,” *kadosh* (קדוש), once again, does not imply some ethereal religious status. It simply means as we outlined above, that this bride was to be different from and separate from all the other nations.

Thus, in the opening verses of chapter 19, we see that not only would Israel enjoy the unique status of being God’s special, beloved people, but they also

would have both the privilege and responsibility to “show-and-tell” the nations of the world who God really was. In short, Israel was/is to be a nation among the other nations of the world, serving as a perpetual witness and testimony to the one true God. How this would actually transpire is the subject of much debate, but the *fact* of her calling is certain.

III. The Wedding Itself

A. The Mikveh

We come now to the actual wedding day, recorded in Exodus chapter 19. Before a traditional Jewish wedding, it is customary for the bride to go into the *mikveh*. (In some circles, the groom also goes, but separately from the bride.) Aryeh Kaplan asserts that, “In many ways, immersion in a mikveh is even more important than the wedding itself.”⁶

The mikveh means much more than the usual meaning given to it of “purification.” It also carries with it the idea of rebirth.

In many ways the mikveh represents the womb. When a person immerses, it is as if he has momentarily returned to the womb. Then when he emerges, it is as if he were reborn. He is a completely new person.⁷

It is because of this “born anew” concept that new converts to Judaism are immersed. According to Kaplan, the basis for this practice is found in our present passage.⁸ Here, Israel stood before the Lord at Mount Sinai. Before the Torah was given, all Israelites had to immerse, as we see in verses 10 and 14.

Actually, although the text states that their clothes were immersed, it also implies that they immersed their bodies as well. The Talmud also agrees with this interpretation. It says while commenting on verse 19:10, “how much more should ablution (ritual immersion) be required where washing of the garments is required.”⁹

When the Holy One instructed Israel to immerse, it was as if the bride had to end her period of separation before being intimate with the Lord. Furthermore, “at that time, every Israelite was like a convert to Judaism, who must immerse as part of his conversion.”¹⁰

As we draw this discussion about the mikveh to a close, we turn our thoughts to the prophet Ezekiel. Perhaps he was referring to the immersion of Israel at Mount Sinai when he wrote in 16:8–9, “I [God speaking] also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became mine...then I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you, and anointed you with oil” (NASB).

Their status was changing from that of being an extended family that was enslaved, to that of being God’s bride, God’s holy people, and God’s kingdom of priests.

B. Under the Chupah

We have seen, therefore, that one of the traditional customs practiced in preparation for a Jewish wedding, the immersion into a mikveh, finds its roots here at the divine wedding at Mt. Sinai. There is a second Jewish wedding custom also evident in Exodus 19 — the *chupah*.

A “chupah” is the canopy under which a wedding takes place. The word chupah (חופה) is also used in the Bible. We find it both in Joel 2:16: “Let the bridegroom go forth from his chamber, and the bride from her chupah,” and in Psalm 19:6 (Hebrew text) where it talks about the bridegroom, “coming out of his chupah” (author’s translations).

In traditional Jewish thinking, the chupah “is a symbolic house. It is a single domain into which the groom welcomes the bride.”¹¹ Indeed, it even looks like a little house with open sides.

Where was the chupah on Mount Sinai? Perhaps it can be seen in 19:16. When Moshe went up the mountain, “there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain.” May we suggest that the cloud was God’s chupah? If so, then it was there that He welcomed Israel, as represented by Moshe into their new “home.” Their new “home” or place of dwelling was to be eternally with Him!

Please remember, however, that the text does not state that the cloud **was** God’s chupah. This is merely part of our midrash. However, does it not seem possible?

C. The Ketubah

We come now to a central part of this wedding, the *ketubah*. The *ketubah* (כתובה), in traditional Jewish weddings, is the marriage contract or covenant. It is a legally binding agreement between the bride and groom, which governs their marriage. It is always written, which is how the word ketubah derives its name, from the Hebrew root meaning “to write,” *k-t-v* (כ-ת-ו). The Ketubah is read and signed during the Jewish wedding ceremony.

In truth, using a written ketubah is not found in the Torah written by Moshe. It is rabbinic law and even, “as late as 360 CE there is evidence that, at least in some areas, the custom was not to put the *ketubah* in writing.”¹² Having said this, however, we should realize that there was always (at the least), an oral marriage agreement, which was legally binding. This agreement was biblically referred to as a “covenant.” For example, in Malachi 2:14, the Lord rebukes Israel for the way the husbands treated their wives who were wives of their “marriage covenant.”

In this wedding at Mount Sinai, what is the ketubah? What is the legally binding marriage covenant/contract between God and His bride, Israel? It is the Torah! For here in chapters 19 and 20, the Lord begins to give His Torah to his bride, Israel. Kaplan also concurs with this understanding, although with a slight variation. He says,

The ketubah also has a symbolic meaning. Since the bride and groom represent Israel and God at Sinai when the Torah was given, the ketubah represents the “Book of the Covenant” that Moses wrote prior to the revelation at Sinai (Exodus 24:4, 7).¹³

Upon closer examination, however, it does not appear that the Book of the Covenant was written before Sinai. It seems that all the revelation that Moshe received from Sinai onward was put into the Book of the Covenant. It is this revelation which Kaplan calls the “ketubah.” If we are correct in our interpretation, it still stands, therefore, that the entire Torah is the ketubah.

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- ¹ Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* xii.
² Aryeh Kaplan, *Made in Heaven*, 46.
³ *Rashi: Shemot*, ArtScroll Edition, 98.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Alan Cole, *Exodus (TOTC)*, 145.
⁶ Kaplan, op. cit., 74.
⁷ Ibid., 77.
⁸ Ibid., 78.
⁹ Yebamot 46b
¹⁰ Kaplan, op. cit., 78.
¹¹ Ibid., 142.
¹² Ibid., 98.
¹³ Ibid., 99.