

**B”H**

**LIGHT  
FROM  
THE  
FUTURE  
PARSHAS YISRO**

# **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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**Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who,  
more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us  
for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption**

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## INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Yisro* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

“The time of your Redemption has arrived.”

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the

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capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus/exile* mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

The parsha Yisro is obviously a fundamental parsha because it marks the first step in bringing heaven down to earth – the hallmark of the Messianic Age.

# **ESSAY ONE**

## **MEMBERSHIP TICKET**

**Moses accepted Yisro not only as a father-in-law but as a respected member of the Jewish people.**

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## **ESSAY ONE**

### **MEMBERSHIP TICKET**

#### **Moses' Sons' Names**

Just before the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, Yisro, Moses' father-in-law arrives with Moses' wife and two sons to join the Jewish Nation.

In the very beginning of this week's parsha the Torah relates:

“Yisro, Moses' Father-in-law, took with him, Tziporah, Moses' wife... and her two sons. One of them was named Gershom, because he said, ‘I was a stranger in a foreign land,’ and one was named Eliezer, because, ‘The G-d of my father came to my aid and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword.’”

Why was it necessary for the Torah to tell us, precisely at this point—when Yisro was

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bringing them back to Moses—the reasons for the names of Moses' sons?

### Would Moses Accept Yisro?

The answer to this question perhaps lies in Rashi's enigmatic commentary that Yisro was not sure that Moses would accept him. Yisro thus sent the message to Moses: "If you will not come out for my sake, then come out for your wife's sake, and if you do not come out for your wife's sake go out for her two sons' sake."

It is incredulous that Moses would hesitate to greet his own father-in-law, or that his father-in-law would entertain the thought that Moses would shun him. It is even more puzzling that Yisro imagined that Moses might not even go out to greet his wife and children.

Another difficulty arises. Why did Yisro emphasize that these were **her** children? Wouldn't Moses have been more receptive to them if Yisro would have emphasized that these were **his** children?

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### Embracing Yisro as a Member of the Jewish Community

It may be suggested that Yisro was not really concerned that Moses would shun him and not even accept and embrace his wife and his own children. Yisro's question was not about Moses' accepting them but **why** and **how** he would accept them:

Would Moses accept them solely as members of his family or would he treat them as members of the Jewish **community**? Would this be a private family reunion or was this going to turn out to be a far more momentous rendezvous?

Phrased differently, Yisro's quandary was: Would Moses embrace them with love and affection simply and solely because they were his closest relatives, his flesh and blood? And if this was indeed the case and the extent of Moses' relationship with them, Yisro concluded that Moses would most likely greet them in his role as a private citizen and

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family member and not involve the entire community and its leadership.

But Yisro wanted more than that.

Yisro wanted Moses to receive them in his capacity as the leader of the Jewish people. He wanted Moses to accept them not only because they were his children but also because they were sincere in wishing to become a part of the Jewish community, share their fate and destiny.

Would Moses accept them as an integral part of the Jewish people despite the fact that they were not raised in Egypt and did not share in the experience of bondage with their brethren? Perhaps, Yisro thought, Moses would not feel that they were qualified to be members of the Jewish nation since they did not share their trials and suffering.

The Ten Commandments that the Jews were about to receive begin with the words, “I am G-d, Your G-d, who has taken you out of Egypt, from the House of Bondage.” It links our relationship with G-d to our role as slaves in Egypt. How then could Yisro and his

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family become a part of this community when they were not in Egypt and were not witnesses to the slavery that crushed the backs of their brothers and sisters?

Yisro was uncertain if they qualified as members of a community without the history and experiences of the community. Can an outsider become an insider? Does one need a shared history to have a shared destiny?

Perhaps, Yisro thought, Moses would not go out and accept him as a member of the community for his sake because of his idolatrous past and especially as his role as a priest for many pagan religions. Perhaps, he thought, he was not worthy of entering into the community of Monotheists?"

But what about Moses' wife? At least, she was married to Moses and absorbed some of his monotheistic teachings. Maybe he would accept her as a full-fledged member of the Jewish community. But, perhaps not. Maybe his wife who also grew up in that idolatrous environment was also not worthy of being accepted into the Jewish fold. But, Yisro was

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hoping that Moses would, at least, accept her children into the nation of Israel notwithstanding their status as “foreigners.” There was a greater chance that they would be more receptive to the message that would be given at Sinai notwithstanding their non-involvement in the Egyptian experience of bondage.

Yisro therefore stresses that they were her—Tziporah’s children—because he knew Moses, as a private citizen, would accept them as members of his family. Yisro wanted to know whether he would accept them even if they were only **her** children. Would their relationship to Tziporah and Yisro be held against them insofar as their membership into the Jewish nation was concerned?

### **Moses’ Response**

What was Moses’ response?

The Torah continues: “Moses (together with Aaron, Nadav and Avihu and a huge welcoming committee –Rashi) went out to greet his father-in-law, and he (Moses) bowed

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down and kissed him.” And the Torah continues how Moses recounted to his father-in-law all that G-d had done for Israel, which prompted Yisro to strongly praise G-d.

Moses’ response was thus an unequivocal yes!

Yisro, his daughter and grandchildren (**her** children), were to be embraced not just as Moses’ family members, and not just as “honorary” members of the Jewish people because of their close relationship with Moses, but as an integral part of the Jewish nation.

Yisro passed the test of entry into the Jewish nation with flying colors.

In the final analysis, it mattered not that he did not share in the suffering of the Jewish people. What mattered was that he rejoiced in their salvation and recognized that it was G-d’s hand that brought them out of Egypt and performed all of the miracles for them.

This explains why, when the Torah introduces Moses’ sons, it says that one was named Gershom because “he said that he was a foreigner in a strange land.” In other words,

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by invoking his naming of his son Gershom, the Torah underscores how he too was a foreigner in a strange land. And that being a foreigner—and not experiencing the suffering of his people—did not preclude the option of becoming a full-fledged member—and indeed the leader—of the Jewish people.

### **Moses' Qualifications**

However, that just raises a question. What **were** Moses' qualifications to be admitted into the Jewish people? How did Moses join the community of Israel after such a protracted absence in a foreign land?

The answer to this question was provided for by his second son Eliezer, who was born to him just before he returned to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. Eliezer was so named because Moses acknowledged G-d's role in saving him, in general, and saving him from Pharaoh's sword, in particular. Moses never lost sight of the miracles G-d wrought for him.

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By telling us that the second son was named Eliezer, the Torah wishes to suggest to us that the criterion for entry into the Jewish nation is not just sharing in their negative experiences; it is also determined by one's ability to appreciate the continuous role G-d plays in one's life and in the life of the Jewish people.

Thus, Yisro hints to Moses: "One can even be a foreigner ("Gershom"), but it shouldn't prevent me from entering into the fold just as it didn't prevent you from joining the Jewish people and even becoming their leader. Why should it stop me and my family from doing the same? After all, I too represent the combined features of Gershom and Eliezer; although I am a stranger to Jewish suffering I am cognizant of G-d's role in saving them from their enemies, for which I am eternally grateful."

### **Emphasize the Positive!**

The lesson we can derive from this narrative is that contrary to the notion that one must

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be able to relate to the suffering of the Jewish people to be part of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, it “suffices” for one to share in and identify with the positive experiences of the Jewish people, and recognize that they were/are orchestrated by G-d.

To be sure, it is important for us to study and know Jewish history and relate to the relentless suffering of our people. It is also true that a prospective convert must be told of the suffering that the Jewish people has endured. It is also true that in the Passover Haggadah we make explicit reference to our suffering in the past, which makes our remembrance of the Exodus more meaningful. It is certainly true that we must never forget what Amalek did to us, including the modern day Amaleks.

However, the **emphasis** of Jewish education for a child, and even for an adult, does not have to be—nor should it be—on the sad and tragic past of our people. A child can grow up and even be unaware of the suffering and still become a strong member of our people. As long as they are inculcated

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with the awareness of the miracles of our survival and prosperity as a people, and know that it is because of G-d's role in our history, their identification with the Jewish nation will not suffer.

Conversely, one could be exposed to the horrors of the past and not feel the need to be a part of the Jewish people. On the contrary, many have been frightened away from their people because of their exposure to a past riddled with sorrow.

### **Reflect on the Modern Day Miracles**

Moreover, as we approach the Messianic Age, even greater emphasis should be placed on the current miracles that we see on a daily basis and the view that the future will even be better. These miracles are G-d's way of giving us a "taste" of the miracles of the future Messianic Age. For the Messianic Age is compared to the Shabbat. And just as it is customary to taste some of the food before the Shabbat so that we will savor the taste of

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Shabbat, similarly we are getting a taste and glimpse of the future Redemption.

And while we must always be mindful of the threats to our people and do everything to counteract them, we must also be aware that among the strongest weapons against the forces of evil are joy and optimism that derive from faith and trust in G-d.

And while we might still be in exile (“strangers in a foreign land—Gershoms”), we are also “Eliezers.” We are all grateful to G-d who continuously “saves us from the sword of Pharaoh;” from those who—in the words of the Passover Haggadah—“stand against us in every generation to destroy us.” But as we conclude that piece, “The Holy One, blessed is He saves us from their hand.”

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## **ESSAY TWO**

### **LIVE IT!**

**Inspiration is a terrible thing to waste. When it comes, we must harness it to actions without delay, otherwise it will dissipate.**

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# ESSAY TWO

## LIVE IT!

### What Did He Hear?

The Torah portion that contains Judaism's and history's most important event is named *Yisro*, after Moses' father-in-law who joined the Jewish nation.

The Torah introduces his arrival with the words:

“Yisro, the priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel, His people; that G-d had taken Israel out of Egypt.”

The Talmud and Midrash, cited by Rashi, ask the question “What report did he hear that caused him to come? The splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek.”

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Commentators are puzzled about the question: what prompted Yisro to come and join the Jewish people? Doesn't the Torah state clearly that he heard that G-d took Israel out of Egypt? Isn't that a sufficient reason for him to have come? Why do our Sages feel there must have been something else that motivated him to come? And why did they conclude that it was actually two events which influenced his decision: the splitting of the Red Sea and the war against Amalek?

And more importantly, why would the Torah highlight the most pivotal event of history with Yisro's arrival? What relevance does his coming to join the Jewish people—after hearing of the splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek—have to us?

### **The Heavenly Voice from Sinai**

One interpretation of the above bases itself on a well-known Talmudic tradition that every day a heavenly voice emerges from

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Mount Sinai and declares: “Return you errant children, return.”

The Ba'al Shem Tov asked the obvious question: Who hears this heavenly voice? If the people are so spiritually sophisticated that they can receive the message, they are, most likely, on a higher wave-length and, therefore, would not require this heavenly reminder on a daily basis. And, conversely, those people who might benefit from these heavenly reminders do not, in fact, ever hear them. So what is the purpose of the heavenly broadcast if the audience for whom it is intended does not even know of its existence, let alone hear its message?

The Ba'al Shem Tov answered that the part of the soul that is not cloaked within the body does indeed hear the call loud and clear. It then relays the message to the soul within the body. But when it reaches the conscious mind it arrives only as a feeling that he or she should change. A person can be walking in the street or engaged in a casual conversation and, without warning, feel inspired. It usually lasts only for a fleeting

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moment and then disappears. While we don't hear the actual message we do get a jolt when the message is transmitted.

However, the question reasserts itself: if the inspiration brought on by the heavenly voice will just dissipate as if it had never come, what purpose is served by the heavenly voice broadcasting to us a need that we change when this inspiration does not last?

### **Harness the Inspiration, now!**

The answer given in Chassidic literature is that when one feels these feelings of spontaneous inspiration he should immediately harness them to some positive action. One should never let an inspiring occasion go to waste. When harnessed to a mitzvah, the inspiration from above acquires a "home" that prevents it from just fizzling out.

Where do we see an illustration of this principle in the Torah? We see it in two key narratives: the splitting of the Red Sea and the struggle with Amalek.

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The Exodus from Egypt was certainly not only a physical event; it represented a spiritual liberation as well. But the spiritual high was actually reached only when they crossed the Red Sea. At that time, our Sages tell us, even a lowly maidservant was able to experience Divine revelations that surpassed that of the great prophet Ezekiel. At that moment the Jewish nation had reached the pinnacle of spiritual enlightenment.

Yet, despite the lofty heights to which they rose at the splitting and crossing of the Red Sea, the Jewish people soon regressed to their previous state again. When they came to the city of Refidim their spiritual high dissipated and gave way to doubts about "whether G-d was in their midst," as recounted at the conclusion of last week's parsha. This expression of doubt gave rise to the attack of Amalek who exploited their vulnerability. Indeed, the word Amalek is numerically the same as the Hebrew word for doubt (*safek*) because it was doubt that unleashed Amalek, and it was Amalek who unleashes doubt.

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How could it be that from such a high perch they fell so low in just a few weeks? How could a nation that witnessed the greatest revelations of G-dliness become so vulnerable?

The answer is that when an inspiration is initiated from above, unless there is a way of translating that initiative into some practical and tangible action, it will not endure.

### **Yisro's Reaction to the Miracles**

This, then, is what motivated Yisro to join the Jewish people. When he heard about the Exodus from Egypt he was inspired. In his mind the inspiration was a good beginning which he felt would help him in his desire to grow spiritually. At that point Yisro did not feel the need to make a total break from his Midianite environment and to join the Jewish nation. He felt secure that one inspiring event would spark more spiritual awareness and that he would grow incrementally. All he would have to do was sit back and watch the unfolding events.

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These feelings were compounded and buttressed when the Exodus was followed by the splitting of the Red Sea. It served to add a new level of inspiration to Yisro's feeling about G-d's abilities and the spiritual awareness that this engendered in him.

However, Yisro's casual reaction to the miracles changed dramatically when he heard of the war against Amalek. This war, Yisro realized was precipitated as a result of the subsequent decline of the Jewish people. Yisro was shocked to hear of the Jewish nation express doubts about G-d's ability. How could they have so degenerated? They had just witnessed a myriad of miracles culminating with the Splitting of the Red Sea. They had just "pointed their fingers" and declared, "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him!" And after all of this they could still question G-d's presence in their lives, which resulted in the attack against them by Amalek.

All of this jolted Yisro and caused him to reach the conclusion that inspiration which comes from Above does not suffice. It cannot last unless it is followed by some drastic

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measure on the part of the one who is inspired. And it was this immensely important recognition that led him to pack his bags and join the Jewish people in the desert in order to receive the Torah with them. He wanted to immediately translate his inspiration into concrete action so that his inspiration should not fade away. He could no longer sit passively and watch the miracles unfold.

### **Revelation and Reciprocation**

This lesson is not merely of secondary importance. The fact that the giving of the Torah from G-d followed Yisro's arrival underscores the importance Judaism assigns to **our** efforts. Any spiritual experience that comes from Above without any effort on our part, even if it is an authentic experience, is not what G-d has in mind with giving us that inspiration. The objective of every initiative from G-d is for us to immediately respond by creating a physical “residence” for that inspiration. That physical residence is

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expressed in the Mitzvos that we perform, and particularly those Mitzvos that do not initially resonate with us. When a Mitzvah comes easily it does not permeate our beings. Only when we struggle to go beyond our nature in fulfilling G-d's will, does our effort serve as the most concrete instrument which will channel G-d's energy into our lives—permanently.

Thus, G-d waited for Yisro to join the Jewish nation before giving the Torah. Without this lesson of harnessing inspiration from above to action from below the entire objective of G-d giving us the Torah would be lost.

### **Welcoming Moshiach Proactively**

Nowhere is this message more relevant than in the preparations for Moshiach. Moshiach's ushering in the Messianic Age does not suggest that someone will fly down from a cloud and unilaterally get us out of exile. The process of Redemption--as the culmination of the Revelation at Mount Sinai--demands that we each do our part in greeting and

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welcoming Moshiach with our increased devotion to the study of Torah and the observance of the Mitzvos.

In the past few decades we have witnessed incredible miracles of “Biblical proportions.” From the victories of Israel over its enemies in the many wars of survival it has fought to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the miracles of the Gulf War, etc., the Jewish people have certainly been inspired. Who could not be inspired hearing the Rebbe declare, unequivocally, that the “time of your Redemption has arrived,” which means that we are living in momentous, Messianic times, and that soon we will see the Redemption materialize?

The lesson from Yisro is that we cannot rely on the inspiration from Above; we must translate this inspiration into action on our part. We must begin to live as if we were already beyond the period of exile and already well into the period of Redemption.

# **ESSAY THREE**

## **THE IDEAL HUMAN BEING**

**What makes us truly human? Our intellect?  
Our ability to speak?**

**It is our ability to translate lofty ideals into  
deep emotions and concrete action.**

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## ESSAY THREE

### THE IDEAL HUMAN BEING

#### Yisro: The First to Bless G-d?

Yisro, Moses father-in-law, upon hearing of the incredible miracles that accompanied the Exodus from Egypt—discussed in this week’s parsha that carries the name Yisro—was impelled to join the Jewish nation. After Moses elaborates on the miracles they experienced, Yisro exclaims: “*Baruch Hashem*—blessed be G-d who has saved you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh, and who saved the nation from under the hand of Egypt.”

Our Sages comment that Yisro was deserving of honorable mention because he was the first person to have exclaimed “*Baruch Hashem*—Blessed is G-d.”

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This comment has elicited a strong question. Did not Abraham and others bless G-d for His kindness? Didn't we just read of how the entire Jewish people—led by Moses—sang praise to G-d when they crossed the Sea of Reeds? Why then is Yisro credited as the first person to have praised G-d?

*Kesav Sofer* (a nineteenth century commentator) answers that while Abraham and others thanked G-d for the miracles that they themselves experienced, Yisro thanked G-d for the miracles enjoyed by others. In other words, the distinction of Yisro's praise was not so much that he praised G-d, but that he was grateful to G-d for the benefits enjoyed by others.

This answer, however, can be challenged by referring back to the story of Abraham upon his winning the war against the four kings who took his nephew Lot hostage. Upon his return from the battlefield, Malkitzedek, the king of Shalem, said the following: "Blessed be Abram to the supreme G-d, who possesses heaven and earth! Blessed be the supreme G-d, who has delivered your enemies into your

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hand!” Here too, Malkitzedek blesses G-d for the good G-d has done for Abraham. What then makes Yisro’s blessing of G-d for the miracles enjoyed by others unique?

### **Difference between Yisro and Malkitzedek**

One can perhaps distinguish between the blessing of Yisro from earlier blessings, including the blessing of Malkitzedek, in another fashion.

It is evident from the Biblical text that Malkitzedek, as Abraham, was a monotheist. Moreover, as a priest it was his responsibility to bring offerings to G-d. This is particularly true in light of the Oral tradition’s interpretation that Malkitzedek was, in fact, none other than Shem, the son of Noah, who actually served as the transmitter of G-dly teachings to others. It was no surprise then that Malkitzedek would bless G-d. After all that was his role as a priest.

By contrast, Yisro was initially not a monotheist. He was formerly a pagan priest. And yet when he heard about the Exodus and

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heard from Moses about all of the miracles they experienced, this information effected a complete transformation of his theology. His response of “Blessed is G-d” was not a perfunctory one that was a part of his responsibility as a priest, but was an expression of an inner voice within that recognized the one G-d’s role in history.

In short, Malkitzedek’s blessing of G-d was part of a ritual that he was trained to perform. While it may have been sincere on his part and infused with feeling, it was nevertheless prompted by his external role as a priest and teacher of theology.

On the other hand, Yisro’s blessing of G-d originated deeply within his soul. It was his own profound understanding of the one G-d and his faith in and love for Him that was awakened that impelled him to spontaneously bless G-d for the miracles enjoyed by others.

Thus there were two things that distinguished Yisro blessing of G-d: First, it was for the good enjoyed by others. Second, it represented a radical departure from the

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theology he held previously. It was a Eureka moment for him. He finally discovered something that he had never realized before and it found expression in his saying “*Baruch Hashem*-Blessed is G-d!”

### **From Academic Knowledge to Emotion**

One might still ask the follow up question. Wasn't Yisro exposed to monotheism by virtue of his relationship with his son-in-law Moses when the latter lived with him in Midian?

The answer to this question actually underscores the uniqueness of Yisro's expression of gratitude to G-d in this parsha.

Yisro had indeed acquired the knowledge that there is one G-d from Moses. Yisro had already abandoned his belief in all of the pagan gods he had previously worshipped. What changed was that he had graduated from the academic knowledge of this subject to the point where the knowledge actually transformed him from within and prompted

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him to exclaim “Baruch Hashem!” This was truly a remarkable and unprecedented event.

### **People and Trees**

The above lesson—the uniqueness of Yisro’s emotional expression of thanks to G-d—is also reflected in the theme of the holiday of the Fifteenth of Shevat (known in Israel as Tu Bishvat), the new year for trees, that always coincides with the reading of the parsha of Yisro.

When the Torah speaks of the analogy of humans to trees in the Book of Deuteronomy it says: “for a person is a tree of the field.” And the Talmud asks: Is a person really a tree? The Talmud’s answer is that when a person endowed with knowledge uses his knowledge for the good he or she is compared to a fruit bearing tree that must not be cut down. If however that knowledge is not used for the good then the person is like a barren tree that can be cut down because it has no use.

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The question asked here is why did the Talmud even ask the question “is a person really a tree?” Didn’t the Talmudic sages know that it was only a figure of speech and it was obviously not meant to be taken literally?

### **What Really Distinguishes the Human Being?**

The Rebbe answers this question and discusses the analogy of man to a tree at great length. The Rebbe prefaces his analysis with the discussion of four words in Hebrew that mean man or person. Of these four, the word Adam is the one employed in the Torah’s comparison of a person to a tree. The four names correlate to the four domains of existence that are incorporated within the human condition. A human being is a composite of the inanimate (actions), the vegetative (emotions), practical intellect (animal) and abstract intellect (human). The term Adam reflects the highest form of human expression; the human being’s ability to fathom truths that are above the human—

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i.e., the recognition of a G-d who is utterly transcendent

Hence the Talmud's question "Is a person (Adam) really a tree" was meant to ask the following: Is a tree, which symbolizes emotion, the right metaphor for the term "Adam?" Adam, as stated, represents the highest form of humanity; his intellect. Is it then appropriate for the highest human function to be associated with the level of humanity that is represented by a tree?

In other words, from the Torah's comparison of Adam, the highest form of humanity, with a tree, it indicates that it is our emotions and not our intellect that is the ultimate expression of our humanity. Is that truly so?

And the answer is yes and no. While humanity is characterized and distinguished by its ability to know abstract things it does necessarily mean that an ideal human being is one endowed with this knowledge alone. The apparently sophisticated person who is endowed with the most abstract and sublime knowledge is only considered to be full and

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ideal human being when this superior intelligence he or she possesses affects the emotions. When a human being, and particularly a Jew, translates his or her abstract knowledge into concrete feelings of faith, love, awe, respect and concern for G-d and others, then that person can truly be called a full-fledged human being, and is worthy of the appellation Adam.

We can now appreciate the significance attached by our Sages to Yisro's expression of gratitude to G-d and what distinguished it from Malkitzedek's blessing of G-d. In Yisro's situation his abstract knowledge of G-d was translated into real feelings.

### **Torah's Ideal Human Being**

We can now also understand the reason why the Zohar states that the Torah could not have been given until Yisro came to join the Jewish people. With all due respect to Yisro, why was his participation so crucial for the giving of the Torah?

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One answer that may be proposed in light of the above analysis is that it was Yisro's ability to take the abstract knowledge of the oneness of G-d and translate it into heartfelt emotions that is what the Torah is truly all about. The Torah is not just interested in imparting Divine knowledge to us.

The Torah wants us to transform our personalities by taking that knowledge and applying it to our feelings, as Moses exclaims to the Jewish people before their entry into the Promised Land: "And you shall know this day and take to your heart that G-d is G-d in heavens above and on the earth below; there is no other."

To be sure, translating knowledge into emotion too does not suffice. We must take our feelings and translate them into action. However, when dealing with Torah's vision of the ideal personality type it wants to see a person who develops the proper emotions and not be content with theoretical knowledge even if it leads to proper action.

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### **A Taste of the Messianic Age**

When Maimonides describes the nature of the world in the future Messianic era he states: “In that time there will be neither famine nor war, envy or competition for... the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know G-d.” Maimonides seems to be saying two things:

First, the reason all of our attitudes will change is because we will be endowed with the knowledge of G-d.

Second, by prefacing the changes that will occur in the world before mentioning that we will be occupied with the knowledge of G-d is to underscore that the ultimate goal of our knowledge is to transform us into a higher level of humanity—one that is deserving of the title Adam. Indeed, the very word Adam is said to be a composite of Adam, Moses and Moshiach. This suggests that the ultimate realization of the term and status of Adam is through Torah (Moses) and Moshiach.

There are many changes that will occur in the Messianic Age. The one that is arguably

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most significant to us is that we will live up to our human potential. We will be Adam again in the full sense of the word; in theory and in the concrete!

## **ESSAY FOUR**

# **A STRANGER IN A FOREIGN LAND**

**Torah is the one stop source for all the  
knowledge we need.**

**While we can learn valuable lessons from  
“foreign” sources, the ideal is to get them  
straight from Torah.**

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# ESSAY FOUR

### A STRANGER IN A FOREIGN LAND

#### **A Strange Dialogue Between Moses and Yisro**

This week's parsha relates why Moses named his first born son Gershom. This name is a contraction of two words: *ger shom*, which means "a stranger there." Moses said at the birth of his firstborn: "I was a stranger in a foreign land," alluding to the time he spent in exile, in Midian, where he met his wife Tziporah, the daughter of Yisro.

The Midrash that contains many of the oral traditions that fills in the gaps of the Biblical narrative cites an incredible dialogue between Moses and Yisro that sheds light on the words "foreign land."

Moses said, 'Since the entire world worships idols whom shall I serve? The

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One whose word created the world.  
For when Moses asked Yisro to give his daughter to marry Tziporah, Yisro insisted that he would do so on the condition that Moses' first son would be for idolatry and the other children for G-d.

The Midrash concludes that Moses acceded to his request!

This enigmatic Midrash is problematic on many counts:

First, how strange are these cryptic words of the Midrash that suggest that Gershom, Moses' firstborn, was groomed to be an idolater! And even more bizarre is Moses' acquiescence to this proposal.

Second, the Midrash introduces this dialogue with Yisro by stating categorically that Moses said he would only worship the one G-d. How does that reconcile with the end of the Midrashic comment that he would agree to raise his firstborn for idol worship?

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Third, if Yisro was so keen about idolatry, why didn't he make that request of Moses himself?

Fourth, if Yisro wanted his grandchildren to be idolaters, why didn't he ask for Moses to raise all his children in that tradition?

### **Relentless Pursuit of Truth**

In truth, while Yisro was known for his involvement with various idolatrous religions, which he eventually gave up in favor of Judaism, Yisro was constantly examining each religion for its truth. Yisro eventually came to understand the falseness of all these religions and the truth of Judaism. Yisro came to the truth because he searched for the truth.

Thus Yisro did not want his grandchildren to be idolaters, G-d forbid. And even if he did, Moses would certainly not accept that condition. Yisro rather wanted that one of Moses' sons should be given the opportunity to search for the truth by first examining other cultures and their beliefs and then, at the end, come to the conclusion that there is

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one G-d. In Yisro's mind, one can much better appreciate truth when it is arrived at after painstaking research. Yisro knew this from his own experience.

One of the reasons Yisro was so named is because of the association of the word Yisro and the statement of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes that there is an “advantage (*Yisron*) to wisdom over foolishness just as there is an advantage to light over darkness.” Chassidic philosophy explains that he was referring to the advantage to light and wisdom when it comes out of darkness. When a person realizes the truth after having groped through the darkness it is superior to the person who has always been exposed to the light.

Yisro, true to his name and life's experience, wanted his first grandchild to similarly achieve a higher form of light and wisdom by first being exposed to darkness and foolishness. approach

Yisro only asked for this approach for the first-born knowing that the other children

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will be raised in a Jewish milieu and could not be expected to be searchers in other domains. But, the firstborn, who will be born and raised in a foreign country where idolatry thrives, should be exposed to these foreign cultures, Yisro thought. What happened later did not concern him.

### **A Mistake**

According to the Midrash, Moses acceptance of this condition was a mistake. Although Gershom did not become an idolater, a descendent of his did become a priest for idol worship. In the final analysis, Moses' agreement to Yisro's condition was not the ideal and it actually planted a seed of idolatry that would materialize in the future.

What emerges from this analysis is that there are two approaches towards discovering truth:

The first is to carefully examine all the different religions, isms and cultures and methodically go through the process of elimination until one reaches the ultimate

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realization that there is one G-d and that He transmitted His message to us at Sinai etc.

The second approach is to begin at the end. Spare the children the ordeal of having to struggle with finding the truth. Give the children the luxury of growing up in a pure, stress-free environment where the truth of Judaism is not challenged. Provide our youth with the pride of being Jewish without compelling them to “graze in foreign pastures,” or as Moses put it: “I was a stranger in a foreign land.” This doesn’t mean that a Jew cannot be familiar with the outside world—“foreign land”—it does mean that we should view everything else through the prism of Judaism.

To be sure there are the Yisros of today whose journey to Judaism took them through many winding paths—and more power to them. Yisro is never criticized for his approach of searching for the truth. On the contrary, our Sages tell us that G-d would not give the Torah until Yisro joined the Jewish people. Moreover, Yisro’s suggestion to Moses was accepted by G-d and incorporated

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into the very body of the Bible—an honor accorded to no one else. Indeed, the entire section of the Torah that describes the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai—the most important historical event—is named Yisro.

But Yisro—the historical and the modern day ones—were, by Divine Providence, raised in these “foreign lands.” It is to their immense credit that they possessed the intellectual curiosity and integrity to let their search take them wherever it would take them.

But, when we are presented with a challenge how to approach the new generation that grows up in a Jewish environment, the second approach is by far the more desirable one. We ought to provide our youth with a pure Jewish attitude to everything from which all other areas of life will be informed.

In practical terms this means that rather than telling the child what others think and then present the Jewish approach, the child should use the Jewish approach as his/her foundation for all other knowledge and experience.

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### **Open Your Eyes!**

Unfortunately, we are not always in control of the influences that reach us and our youth. We are still in Galus/exile, which is not just a geographic phenomenon, but also a state of alienation from our own culture and identity. We are still in a “foreign land” in more ways than one. Considering where we are, we must not allow the well intentioned Yisros to get us more deeply into exile and its mentality. We must muster all the energy we have to liberate us from our own internal exile—our submission and surrender to the way of thinking of the “foreign land.”

This is what the Messianic Age is all about. At that time we will see and appreciate things in their purist state and see existence from a clear Torah lens without any intrusion of the secular mindset, which fails to see the inner dimension of everything.

Today, as we are still in exile, are challenge is to try to see reality from Torah’s perspective. This is what the Rebbe meant when he said that our mission today is to “open our eyes.”

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Never before have we been so close to getting in touch with reality as we are now. It will take only a small effort to see things clearly since we are on the very cusp of the Messianic Age of Redemption.

## **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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# **ESSAY FIVE**

## **CLIMB THE MOUNTAIN!**

**A person must know their limits.**

**Many a mountain climber has lost their  
balance because they did not know their limits.**

**One must not then think that knowing our  
limits is a perpetual red light. It is only a  
pause to be followed by scaling much greater  
heights.**

# **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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## **ESSAY FIVE**

### **CLIMB THE MOUNTAIN!**

#### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

This week, the Torah discusses history's most momentous event—the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Every important event does not happen in a vacuum. It is axiomatic in Judaism that every holy experience and milestone must come through intensive preparation and soul searching.

The question is why are all the preparations necessary?

In other non-spiritual areas of life we can easily understand the need for practicing before you perform or execute a difficult task. But spiritual matters seem to be different. If G-d would want to give us a spiritual

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experience without any preparation on our part he could easily do it.

That is certainly true. We don't have to practice for G-d to reveal His Torah to us. He could unilaterally reveal it to us and we would feel great. The problem would be that it would not be ours; we could never internalize it. Our relationship with it would be superficial and its effects would dissipate in no time.

Indeed, the entire Egyptian bondage is seen by our Sages as a form of preparation for nationhood and the acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people.

And for the last two thousand years we've been preparing for the ultimate period of Redemption. All of our experiences in exile are a prelude to the coming of Moshiach.

### **Boundaries**

One of the final steps the Jewish people had to take in preparation for the giving of the Torah was to not even touch the mountain

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for three days. This procedure is referred to as *hagbalah*, creating boundaries; knowing how far or how close one could get to the mountain.

There is an anomaly in the way these boundaries are phrased in the Torah. Commentators point out that in one verse where G-d commands Moses to tell the people how to prepare for this event He says,

You should set boundaries for the nation.

In a later verse, G-d tells Moses,

Go down warn the people (they should not go on the mountain – *Rashi*).

Moses responds to G-d and says,

The people cannot ascend to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, “Set boundaries for the **mountain** and sanctify it.”

**Knowing our Limits**

## LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO

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Initially G-d tells Moses to set boundaries for the **people**, but Moses quotes G-d as saying that required setting boundaries for the **mountain**. Why the different ways of expressing ostensibly the same thought?

When G-d initially told Moses to set boundaries it was for the **people** who had not yet prepared themselves for the revelation of G-d on that mountain. There, the emphasis is on not trying to climb a mountain they were so ill prepared to do.

After three days of intense purification and sanctification, there were those who might have entertained the notion that now they were ready to touch the mountain because they were now on a much higher level, For these people, the emphasis was not on their lowliness but on the recognition that no matter how high they may have risen the mountain was still beyond them. The emphasis has to be placed on the exaltedness of the mountain rather than the lowliness of the people.

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There were thus two reasons why they could not go on to the mountain: one because of their initial lowliness, and two, because of the exalted level of the mountain.

The lesson form this is obvious: we have to know our limits and respect the height of the mountain and not try to arrogantly climb it when we are not suited for that venture. We must understand our limitations and also the true exalted nature of Torah that it is G-dly teaching and approach its study with humility, respect and awe.

### **Boundaries Removed**

However, G-d then continued to instruct Moses,

When the shofar sounds a long, drawn out blast they may ascend the mountain.

The question can be asked if the mountain was so holy how could they be allowed to climb it after the shofar is blown?

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The conventional answer provided by Rashi is that once the shofar sounded it was an indication that the divine presence departed from the mountain.

There is another approach taken with regard to the prohibition and subsequent “license” given to climb onto the mountain. But first a word of introduction is in order:

When a person is told by G-d that they may not engage in a certain activity, there is a need to discern between two distinct circumstances. The first is: the prohibition is meant as a permanent order to keep away from certain behavior. You may never enter this area; don’t trespass. In this category we can place most of the Torah’s prohibitions that are meant to get us to cease and desist from engaging in harmful activity. “Do not commit murder” and “do not commit theft” are obvious examples of the permanent nature of most of the Torah’s demands of us.

There is, however, a second form of restriction G-d imposes on us that was meant to be a temporary measure and was not

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intended to be institutionalized. The analogy of a stop sign or a red light on the road conveys this idea. While one is required to stop as a precautionary measure—so as not to be hurt by a vehicle crossing the intersection—it was never intended to make you turn around and retreat or just stay there idly forever. It is just a pause.

Included in this second category are the prohibitions against engaging in certain areas of Torah study that were deemed to be too esoteric for the average person. Even some of the great Talmudic sages were not privy to these teachings. These teachings are metaphorically referred to as mountains. By no means, though, was this prohibition of climbing G-d's "mountain" intended to be a permanent one. On the contrary, the "stop signs" and "red lights" set up were meant as ways of assisting us in safely navigating the treacherous highways of life so that we will eventually reach our destination and be able to scale the greatest heights.

From the days of the great Kabbalist, the Arizal, and especially after the mystical

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teachings of Judaism were made accessible to the human mind by the masters of the Chassidic movement, it no longer behooves us to stand at the foot of the mountain and dare not even touch it. On the contrary, once the proverbial sound of the shofar has been sounded we may—nay we must—climb that mountain.

Sadly, many conflate these two situations. They will allow their spiritual growth to be stunted by applying the two arguments the Torah uses for not climbing the mountain: either they feel they are too low for the mountain or that the mountain is too holy for them. Either way, it prevents them from growing in their spiritual lives.

Many will even invoke the words of King David in the Psalms: “Who may ascend the mountain of G-d, and who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart who has not used My name in vain or sworn falsely.”

Perhaps the repetition in this verse corresponds to the two rationalizations we

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use to prevent us from ascending the mountain: The first is “who may ascend the mountain of G-d?”—who are we? We are too lowly to climb the mountain. And the second is “who may stand in His holy place?”—Even a spiritually sophisticated person cannot stand in such a place, because the degree of holiness is awesomely great.

It is obvious that King David’s intention was not to deter or discourage us from ascending the “mountain.” On the contrary. The psalm continues with praise for the one who does venture onto to the mountain and aspires to climb higher and higher: “He shall receive a blessing from G-d, and kindness from G-d His deliverer. Such is the generation of those who search for Him, [the children of] Jacob who seek Your countenance forever.”

### **The Shofar of Moshiach**

What is meant by the sound of the shofar in contemporary terms?

Many commentators see the sound of the shofar of the Sinai era as an allusion to the

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Messianic Age. When Abraham sacrificed the ram in place of his son Isaac, our Sages tell us, the two rams horns were preserved for the world's two most momentous events: The first horn would be the shofar to accompany the revelation at Mount Sinai and the second one will be the shofar of Moshiach.

The Rebbe once referred to the cataclysmic events that affected the Jewish people in the last century—that jolted the Jewish nation and touched them to their very core—as the figurative “Shofar of Moshiach.” These events beckon us to get closer to the “mountain.” These events were a wakeup call that we’ve fallen asleep at the stop sign. The horns are blaring! It’s time to wake up and get our mountain climbing gear in order because whether or not we are adequately prepared, we will imminently be entering in to a new heightened phase of history.

We have two choices: we can be ready and climb the mountain with confidence and joy, or we could be dragged along. We can no longer use the excuses of lowliness or putting Moshiach on a pedestal, claiming that it is

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beyond our reach and our ability to withstand.

There were times in the past, when some cautionary statements were made about the degree we are to clamor for and obsess with Moshiach and Redemption. That was then, thousands of years ago, when we were far away from our goal. Then the focus was more on the preparations—the boundaries that had to be respected—than on the goal. Today, after we’ve heard the “shofar” sound, we must place the greatest emphasis on our faith in, hope and prayer for Redemption coupled with doing more and more Mitzvos to bring Moshiach.

By all means, preparation for Moshiach is as relevant as the preparations for the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, but, we’ve been preparing for too long; now is the time to say “We are ready.” Let’s roll!

# **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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**ESSAY SIX**

**THE ELUSIVE PURSUIT  
OF EMES**

Truth in Hebrew is a three letter word.  
Each letter stands for another characteristic  
of truth.

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## **ESSAY SIX**

### **THE ELUSIVE PURSUIT OF EMES**

#### **Qualification for Judges**

Yisro, Moses' father-in-law, admonished Moses for the way he unilaterally judged the Jewish people. He encouraged him to delegate responsibility to lower courts. Moses consulted with G-d and the Jewish multi-tiered judicial system became a reality.

Yisro did not only suggest the idea of appointing other judges. He also advised Moses about their qualifications. One of the requirements was for the judges to be “men of truth.”

It is quite startling that Yisro had to mention this condition for judgeship. Would it have occurred to anyone in his or her right mind that one could appoint a dishonest judge?

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In truth (no pun intended), the term for truth in Hebrew, which is *emes* is not what it means in English. In English the word truth and lie are antonyms. In Hebrew there are about a half-dozen antonyms to the word *emes*.

To be sure, lying is certainly the opposite of *emes*. But, so are the words: inconsistency, peripheral, superficial and many more.

### Consistency

To understand what *emes* truly (pun intended) denotes and connotes it is important that we cite the Jerusalem Talmud's exposition of the word *emes*. *Emes*, the Talmud states, is a composite of three letters; an *aleph*, *mem* and *tav*. The aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the mem is the middle letter and the tav is the final letter. This is what *emes* is: Consistent from the beginning through the middle to the end. Whether we are dealing with a person or a concept; it is only worthy of the appellation *emes* when it is totally consistent.

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To better appreciate the various nuance of *emes* and its opposite, *sheker*, let us analyze the very names of the letters that comprise these two words.

The word *sheker* begins with the letter shin. This word is related to the word *shein* which means tooth. In fact, the letter shin resembles the teeth and it requires the use of the teeth to pronounce.

The Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 3a) discusses the tort called *shein*, when an animal uses its teeth to devour someone else's food. This tort is rooted in the Torah where it discusses the case of an animal that grazes in someone else's property. The Torah uses the word *bee'air* to describe the destruction it wrought. And the Talmud proves that this word is related to destruction caused by teeth. The proof it adduces is from the Biblical statement, "As the *galal* devours until its end. The word *galal*, Rashi states actually means human or animal waste, which is created by, and therefore a byproduct, of the tooth!

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At first glance this association seems to be far-fetched, but it conveys a profound philosophical truth about what is *sheker*, the initial of which is a *shin-shain*-tooth. Something that looks appealing and appetizing does not end up that way. This is emblematic of the physical world where everything eventually disintegrates and ceases to exist the way it does at the outset.

This is the first lesson of *sheker* and its reverse-*emes*.

### **Mastery**

If we look at the material world and all its interest they are but fleeting pleasures. They all end up the same and they are not *emes*. To be *emes* one must look not at the present but at the past and future as well. *Emes* is something that endures with the same intensity and beauty as it did on day one.

The first letter of the word *emes*, the *aleph*, is the antithesis of the letter *shin* in this regard. Whereas the *shin* indicates something you can get “your teeth into” for the moment,

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you cannot sustain that in the future. The *aleph* by contrast means Master, alluding to G-d who is the ultimate Master of the world and is not subject to the whims and caprices of any other force.

Moreover, the very shape of the letter *aleph* alludes to G-d's mastery over past present and future. The *aleph* is a composite of two letters *yud* that are joined by the letter *vav*. These three letters that constitute the shape of the *aleph*, have the numerical value of G-d's name, known as the Tetragrammaton. This name is a composite of the three words: *haya*-was, *hoveh*-is and *yihye*-will be, suggesting that G-d is master over the entire expanse of time. G-d and all that is associated with Him does not get old and worn out.

The letter *aleph* also alludes to the concept of *peleh* (which is formed by rearranging the letters of the word *aleph*): a wonder. The *aleph* symbolizes the wonder of the Creator Who endures forever.

**Monkey *Sheker***

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The second letter and lesson of the word *sheker* is the letter *kuf*. The word *kuf* or *kof* is monkey or ape. It is so called because it closely resembles the letter *hei*, which is one of the letters of G-d's name. While the *hei* the *kuf* “apes” and mimics the *hei*.

Indeed, the very word *kuf* or *kof* is etymologically related to a root word that means superficial.

This is the second characteristic of *sheker*. While there is nothing false in the art of imitation it is nevertheless inauthentic. The external appearance belies the inner nature of the person who lacks *emes*.

The Talmud relates the story of how Rabbi Gamliel would only allow a select few students into the academy because the standard of acceptance was that the applicant be one “whose inside was like his outside.”

### Submerged

This second characteristic of *sheker* is countered by the second letter of *emes*, the

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*mem*. The *mem* is unique in that the letter is spelled phonetically by repeating the same letter. This implies that *mem* personalities are the same on the inside as they are on the outside. There are no pretenses; no facades.

The word *mem* and its shape is like *mayim*, which means water or a Mikveh, a pool of water. This is an allusion to such time about which the prophet states, “The world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea.” The world will be totally inundated and deluged with Divine knowledge. Not just the outside but also the inside.

The first lesson of *sheker* is that it may be good now but it doesn’t last. The second lesson is that even now it is only superficially good.

### The Impoverished *Reish* of *Sheker*

The third lesson derives from the last letter *reish*. This letter means impoverished. So spiritually and morally deprived is the *reish* personality that he or she doesn’t even have

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the superficial veneer of integrity. In Hebrew, not surprisingly, there are many synonyms for poor. But of all the synonyms, the letter *reish* is identified with the verse :”And the *rosh*-poor person has nothing. He doesn’t even have the modicum of integrity of the *kuf*, the imitator brand of *sheker*.

The opposing letter in the word *emes* is the *tav*. The word *tav* means a mark or a sign that was employed in the past to brand someone. According to the Talmud it was used to brand someone with the word *tichyeh*, “he will live,” which is also an allusion to the Resurrection of the Dead, at which time we will live forever. And whereas the *reish*, the totally impoverished individual, is bereft of life—as the Talmud says that a poor person is like a dead person—the *tav* is G-d’s mark guaranteeing life in its fullest and richest sense.

The letter *tav*, written with lines in every direction, similar to the *hei*, is a symbol of wealth and is in opposition to the *reish*, the ultimate symbol of poverty.

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The Psalmists states: “Send Your light and your *emes*.” According to the Midrash, “light” in this verse refers to Elijah the prophet and “*emes*” refers to Moshiach.

In light of the above we can understand why Moshiach is characterized as *emes*.

### **Moshiach: the Embodiment of *Emes***

Moshiach possesses the three components of this virtue.

First, Moshiach is one that is a master of his body and environment. As stated in a preceding message, Moshiach depiction as a poor man riding on a donkey is actually a reference to his mastery over the material and ephemeral aspects of physical life. He possesses the *aleph*-master of *emes* and he therefore is eminently qualified to place the *aleph* in the word *golah*-exile that renders it *Geulah*-Redemption.

Moshiach is also one whose entire being is permeated with Torah. His inside is just like his outside. As such, he will usher in the age

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that will be deluged with the knowledge of G-d. No part of the human being will be left outside of the water. This knowledge will totally permeate our entire being. This coincides with the letter *mem* of the word *emes*.

And finally, according to the Midrash, Moshiach will accumulate all the wealth in the world. This is to be understood in spiritual terms that he will be endowed with the greatest spiritual treasures. And he will therefore usher in the age about which it is stated, “The delicacies will be as abundant as the dust of the earth.” The ultimate state of wealth is when Moshiach will usher in the period of the Resurrection of the Dead. The world will then, be marked with eternal life and experience ultimate *emes* on all levels.

One way of preparing for this age is to endeavor to introduce *emes* consistency, harmony between the inside and the outside and the acquisition of enduring spiritual wealth.

**ESSAY SEVEN**

**DELEGATE, BUT DON'T  
ADULTERATE**

**Moses was the consummate lover of Israel.**

**Moses wanted to personally give them an  
unadulterated version of Torah.**

**Yisro recognized that G-d empowers each of  
us to deliver an authentic message.**

## **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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## **ESSAY SEVEN**

# **DELEGATE, BUT DON'T ADULTERATE**

### **Yisro's Rebuke**

When Yisro, Moses' father-in-law, observed how Moses would single-handedly judge the people, "from morning until evening," he admonished him: "What is this thing that you are doing to this nation? Why do you sit by yourself, while all the people stand before you from morning until evening? You will surely wear yourself out, along with this nation that is with you! For the matter is too heavy for you. You cannot do it alone!"

Yisro then proceeded to explain to Moses how he should delegate responsibility to other judges. But, even before he counsels Moses about appointing lower level courts

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and judges, he advises him about what **his** role ought to be:

“You (should represent) the people before G-d, and you will bring (their disputes) to G-d. You will caution them about the statutes and the teachings, and you will show them the path to follow, and the things they must do.”

Only after these introductory words of advice to Moses does Yisro proceed to advise him as to the qualifications of the judges he should appoint: “You should seek out from among all the people, men who fear G-d etc.”

### **Why the Need to Counsel Moses about His Role?**

The obvious question here is that Yisro’s introduction was uncalled for. Moses certainly knew that he had to bring the issues that confronted the Jewish people to G-d if he hadn’t already heard from G-d concerning these matters. Why then did Yisro have to tell Moses to approach G-d with these matters?

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Furthermore, why did Yisro have to tell Moses to caution them about the statutes and the teachings, and show them the path to follow and the things they must do? Would Moses have thought that once he delegated some judicial responsibility to others that he could retire from his role as the leader, teacher and mentor of the Jewish people?

### **It's Elementary, Moses!**

The answer to these questions can be found in the Rebbe's analysis of Moses' approach to justice and his answer to the question posed by many a commentator as to why Moses himself did not think of the elementary idea of appointing other judges to complement his role as chief judge?

The Rebbe explains that Moses realized that he enjoyed a unique relationship with G-d as the one with whom the A-mighty G-d communicated directly. Moses felt that by being personally involved in the teaching and judging of the people he would be able to

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impart some of that G-dly dynamism and holiness to the people that he himself experienced. By delegating responsibility, Moses felt, he would be adulterating the Divine message. Moses, who was consumed with a love for the Jewish people, was loathe to deny his people the integrity and inspiration of the Divine message he received.

Yisro, on the other hand, understood that it was crucial that the people be able to absorb the teachings of the Torah even when they would be engaged in their most mundane business matters; entanglements that would have precipitated their quarrel, and for which reason they came to be judged. In that mode, Yisro thought, it was impossible for them to be directly uplifted to the level of Moses. This would be particularly true in the future when the people would enter the Promised Land and would not be in Moses' physical presence. Therefore, it was crucial that Moses impart some of his authority to lower level judges.

However, it is to be assumed that when Moses acceded to Yisro's proposal it would

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not be at the expense of the people. It would not be fair for Moses to deprive his people of the benefit of having a face to face involvement with him. Because this multi-tiered system was sanctioned by G-d it meant that through Moses' appointing other judges, he was actually imbuing them with his spirit.

### **Yisro's Convincing Argument**

With this abridged version of the Rebbe's analysis we can shed some light on Yisro's introduction. Knowing quite well Moses' rationale for wanting to personally be involved in the judgment of the Jewish people, Yisro had to convince Moses that the people would not fundamentally lose by Moses handing over his position as judge to others.

Yisro therefore tells Moses that by "representing the people before G-d, bringing their disputes to Him, cautioning them about the statutes and the teachings, and by showing them the path to follow and the

## **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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things they must do,” he will connect the people to G-d.

Moreover, the Hebrew words for “You will caution them” “*v’hizharta et’hem*” can also be translated as: “You will illuminate them.” In other words, Yisro was advising Moses to not just teach the people and admonish them, but he must also impart some of the light and G-dly radiance to them when he teaches them. In effect, when the lower level judges will judge the people they will be prepared to feel the G-dly light.

### **Moses’ Wish Coming True**

We know that the wish of a righteous person will always be granted by G-d at some point. Moses’ wish to teach and judge all of the Jewish people directly so that they do not lose any of the qualities that he possessed, will finally come true in the Messianic Age. It is taught that Moshiach, who is endowed with Moses’ soul, will personally teach each and every Jew.

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How can one person have the time to personally instruct every individual?

The answer is that Moshiach will employ a totally different approach to teaching. The conventional method of teaching is through the medium of speech and hearing. The teacher teaches one word, sentence, paragraph, chapter at a time. One cannot hear and absorb more than one sound.

Moshiach, however, will employ the method of visual teaching, where we will see the entire picture with one sweeping glance. In this format, everybody will learn simultaneously. Indeed, this “panoramic” view of Torah knowledge provides the student with a much broader and deeper understanding of the subject. Utilizing the visual medium he will be able to teach all of the Jewish people without having to delegate and thereby water down any of these newly revealed teachings. Moses’ desire for the Jewish people will come to fruition through Moshiach.

## **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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**ESSAY EIGHT**

**THE TEN  
COMMANDMENTS OF  
THE FUTURE**

**The Ten Commandments of the future will  
be on a more sublime level.**

**Observance of these commandments today  
prepares us for their heightened observance  
in the future.**

# **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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# LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO

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## ESSAY EIGHT

### THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF THE FUTURE

#### **Fulfilling the Purpose of Creation**

In his classic work *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe expounds on the revelation at Mount Sinai. What happened there was more than just the giving of a set of ten commandments, most of which were already known. Far more significantly, it was an unprecedented revelation of G-d's presence in our physical world. No longer were the physical and the spiritual realms disparate entities.

The Alter Rebbe cites the famous words of the Midrash as to the *raison d'être* of Creation: "G-d desired a dwelling place in the lowest of realms." G-d's reason for creating a physical existence for the world was to have the People make it a receptive place for His

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presence by fulfilling His commandments. With the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, one who performs a Mitzvah with his physical body, or with a physical object, introduces Divine energy into the physical world and helps make it a dwelling place for G-d.

However, the Alter Rebbe adds, the revelation at Mount Sinai was a one-time event. What happened at Sinai was the beginning of a process that will come full circle with the Messianic Age. At that time, G-d's presence in our world will become a permanent reality.

It may be suggested that if the revelation at Sinai was the beginning of the road to Redemption it should be reflected in the initial communication, the so-called Ten Commandments. And, in fact, it is.

### **The Promise**

The First Commandment is: "I am the L-rd your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of Bondage."

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The scholarly medieval work known as the Semak states that the commandment contains a fundamental promise: just as G-d liberated us from the Egyptian bondage, so too will He liberate us from the present exile.

### **In G-d's Presence**

The Second Commandment is: “You shall not have the gods of others in My presence.”

The words “My presence” imply that idolatry and G-d's presence are mutually exclusive. For idolatry to exist, in any form, the idolators can not be aware of G-d's presence; otherwise, they would worship Him instead of their idols. In the Messianic Age, when the veil that obscures the truth of G-d's presence is finally removed, no vestige of idolatry, even in its most subtle form, will be able to survive.

We can now rephrase the Second Commandment to read as a declaration rather than a mandate:

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“You will not have the gods of others, **because** you will all be in My presence...” This construction reflects the many Biblical prophecies that all foreign deities will be eliminated. The Aleinu prayer, recited thrice daily at the end of our services, demonstrates our yearning for fulfillment of this prophecy.

### **Restoring Stability**

The Third Commandment is: “You shall not take the name of the L-rd your G-d in vain, for the L-rd will not hold blameless anyone who takes His name in vain.”

This commandment is unique. It is the only one which G-d says He will not forgive. The Talmud states that the entire world shook when G-d uttered this commandment. Why is this transgression singled out from among all the others?

The answer is that all the other transgressions are committed in spite of G-d. Either one forgets G-d’s presence or, heaven forbid, even rebels against Him. This specific transgression can only be committed by

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making G-d's name an "accomplice" to the crime. We can see in this transgression the ultimate state of exile, where not only is G-d's presence veiled, it is actually transformed into an agent of evil, G-d forbid.

Hence the Third Commandment warns us how low one can go as a result of Galus conditions. The first level of degradation, represented by the Second Commandment, is the concealment of G-d's presence. From there, it degrades even further into the perversion of using G-d for evil.

These two characteristics of Galus have come to the fore in recent times. The world today, including its academics and journalists, is plagued with a secular tyranny that denies G-d and repudiates the very notion of absolute standards of morality and righteousness. Simultaneously, we are witness to the appalling evil of terrorism "in the name of G-d," as was tragically evidenced in the terrible massacres in Paris a few weeks ago.

The final Redemption will end these distortions of reality. The Third

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Commandment thus declares that “You will not take the name of the L-rd your G-d in vain...” This phenomenon can only occur in a Galus-oriented world that is inherently unstable.

This present instability, which enables G-d’s power to be so sullied, echoes the instability of the world before Sinai. It was only when the world’s purpose for existence was validated by the giving of the Torah that the world stopped trembling, according to the Talmud. Thus, with G-d’s declaration that “I am the L-rd your G-d...” G-d’s presence and a concomitant stability were introduced to the world. However, whenever a person swears falsely and diverts G-d’s energy into his falsehood, it returns the world to its pre-Sinai instability and reverses the very mechanism for Redemption.

### **The Sabbath of Existence**

The Fourth Commandment is: “Remember the Sabbath and sanctify it.”

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This commandment alludes literally to the seventh day but its deeper reference is to the seventh millennium, the ultimate Sabbath of creation. By telling us to remember it, the Torah is also hinting that when we observe Shabbos today we should remember that it is an allusion to the Messianic Era which we know is the Shabbos of creation. It is the time that we will enjoy true stability and tranquility.

### **The Length of Days of the Future**

The Fifth Commandment is: “Honor your father and mother, in order that your days be lengthened on the land that the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you.” Our Sages state that “long life” here refers to long life in the future Messianic Age, particularly in the period after *Techiyas Hameisim*, when the dead are restored to life.

In summation, the first five commandments tell the following story:

G-d will redeem us. We will bask in His presence. The world will become a stable and

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tranquil dwelling place as the prelude to the time when we live forever.

### **The Divinity of the Body**

The Sixth Commandment is “You shall not commit murder.” Many have asked why the Torah had to command us to avoid such a heinous crime? Isn’t its evil nature self-evident?

One answer is that the focus here is not on the moral degradation of the murderer; that needs no special mention. Rather, the seriousness of this crime derives from its denial of the belief that every individual body is created in G-d’s image. This is a repudiation of the G-dly value of the physical body. Many non-Torah spiritual ideologies regard the body as lacking intrinsic holiness. At best, the body is seen as a temporary “Temple of the soul.” In Judaism, however, the body is rooted in G-d’s essence and it was the body that G-d chose at Mount Sinai.

Chassidic philosophy reveals that this unique status of the body will be fully revealed in the

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Messianic Age, especially after the Resurrection of the Dead. At that time, the full extent of the body's intrinsic G-dly nature will not only be revealed but the body will be viewed even as superior to the soul! The root of this notion is the commandment against murder. The Torah is in effect declaring: "Do not under-estimate the G-dly nature of the body."

### **The Ultimate Marriage**

The Seventh Commandment is "You shall not commit adultery."

Here too, the Torah wishes to go beyond the conventional wisdom that adultery is a crime against morality. While certainly true, there was no need for the fanfare of Sinai to teach such an elementary law. Many other cultures honor this command without having been made aware of the Ten Commandments. Rather, this law is about appreciating and respecting the awesome G-dly nature of the physical relationship between husband and wife. In some other religious ideologies,

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marriage and intimacy are seen as a necessary evil to control and curb our animalistic desires. In Judaism, it is the source for introducing the most sublime Divine energies into our world.

Indeed, marriage of a man and a woman is a micro version of the ultimate marriage between G-d and the Jewish people. Fidelity in marriage as the holiest institution in existence is a precursor to that future marriage that occurred at Sinai and will be consummated in the Messianic Age. This commandment alludes to the exclusivity of our relationship with G-d.

### **The G-dliness Within the Physical**

The Eighth Commandment is “You shall not steal.”

Although our Sages teach us that the principle meaning of this commandment is not to kidnap, it also alludes to the general law against theft of property. This too reflects the sophisticated way Judaism views physical objects and property. If it were merely a

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command against stealing another's property it would not have necessitated the imposing accompaniment of thunder and lightning. Rather, it is a testament to the way we ought to view the physical world. G-d's purpose in creation—which will be fully realized in the Messianic Age—is not for the spiritual realms, but for our physical world. By respecting the integrity of property we demonstrate that we respect the integrity of the physical world and the role that each person is given to cultivate and elevate his or her personal property by revealing its true G-dly essence.

### **We are G-d's Witnesses**

The Ninth Commandment is: "You shall not bear false witness against your fellow."

We are created as witnesses to G-d's existence and presence in our world. When we are in exile we are unable to serve G-d adequately; many of His commandments cannot presently be fulfilled. Furthermore, we no longer have the Holy Temple, where G-d's

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presence was revealed. We are thus incapable of testifying fully to G-d's presence. That lack will be remedied in the Messianic Age.

### **No More Jealousy**

The Tenth and final Commandment is: "You shall not covet..."

The very last redemptive change to humanity that will occur is spelled out in Maimonides' conclusion to his Mishneh Torah: "In that age there will be no more jealousy and rivalry..." The deeply embedded human failing of envy, cause of the very first crime against another human when Cain killed Abel, will finally be rectified in the Messianic Age.

To summarize the last five commandments:

In the Messianic Age we will appreciate the Divine character of the physical body; experience the ultimate marriage; value the physical world; be empowered to be complete witnesses of G-d and to overcome the last of our human frailties.

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Today our challenge is to anticipate these changes and attempt to implement them in our daily lives. This will prepare us for the imminent coming of Moshiach and the unfolding of the Final Redemption!

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## **ESSAY NINE**

# **OUTSIDERS AND INSIDERS**

**The lesson we derive from Yisro the convert  
is not to rest on our laurels.**

**Yisro had two names that connote adding on  
to one's accomplishments.**

**There are two ways of adding: one from the  
outside and the other from the inside.**

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## ESSAY NINE

### OUTSIDERS AND INSIDERS

#### **Waiting for the Watershed Event**

The most significant event in world history is undeniably the giving of the Torah by G-d on Mount Sinai. With that watershed revelation, G-d entrusted humankind with His Master Plan for the universe. The world would now have a purpose and life would become meaningful. According to the Midrash, G-d's prior "decree," that the physical and spiritual realms could not meet, was rescinded. After Sinai we were empowered to make this physical world a "dwelling place" for G-d. When this plan is fully implemented, we will reach the goal of Creation—the Messianic Age. All this became possible at Mount Sinai.

This momentous event was revealed within parsha *Yisro*, named after Moses' father-in-

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law, who rejected the paganism of his upbringing and converted to Judaism. Placement of the Sinai narrative in this parsha speaks volumes concerning Judaism's view of outsiders who enter the fold.

Indeed, according to the Zohar, G-d waited for Yisro to arrive to give the Torah.

### **We are All Converts**

On the simple level, this refers to the Talmudic statement that all Jews—including the souls of future Jewish generations, all of whom were present at Sinai—converted to Judaism at Mount Sinai.

There are some very powerful lessons we can derive from this. First, it reinforces the Torah's commandment to treat the convert with respect and to love him. Second, it also reminds us of how the convert's choice of Judaism should inform our own acceptance of and attitude towards it. True, a Jew born Jewish has no choice in the matter. A Jew born a Jew remains a Jew regardless of his or her actions and choices to the contrary.

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Nevertheless, a Jew must always strive to incorporate the “Yisro-choice” element inherent in a conversion to Judaism; one should always be looking for ways to apply his or her own initiative, just as if he or she were choosing Judaism for the first time. The advantage of treating this as a choice is that it is usually something one does with fervor, enthusiasm and Joy.

Conversely, the convert to Judaism must recognize that he or she has always possessed a Jewish soul, one that stood at Mount Sinai with all the other Jewish souls and enthusiastically declared “*Na’aseh v’nishma*—we will do and we will listen!” The convert is no less an heir to the Torah than a born-Jew and is in that sense not an outsider after all.

### Nature, Nurture and Beyond

Judaism is a composite of nature and nurture or receiving and contributing. There is the part of Judaism that we view as a treasure that we inherited from our ancestors. This treasure is ours and can never be discarded

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or taken from us, regardless of our choices. As a recipient of this treasure at birth, one can live his or her entire life and never access it or choose to rest on his or her laurels.

There is, therefore, an equally significant part of Judaism that is based on how we nurture that treasure and continue to grow and contribute to it.

This duality continues throughout life. There will always be a need for us to look for ways to “convert” or to offer ourselves to G-d in ways that go beyond yesterday’s offering. So, while we treasure and use the gifts we received in the past, we must always also look for ways of going forward and increasing it; in other words, adding on to the treasure. This is the Yisro aspect of Judaism—for, indeed, the word Yisro is related to the word for increase.

### **Micro and Macro**

If on the micro level all of life is a process of accessing our treasures from the past and

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making new investments for the future, this is also true on the macro level.

Over all of the time since creation, through and including today, we have accumulated unbelievable spiritual treasures. As the Rebbe informed us on numerous occasions, the good of the past is cumulative and it is for us to uncover, access and enjoy.

However, no matter how much we've accumulated—and it is formidable—we need to go one major step forward. We must break out of the constraints and limits of our past accomplishments because they are all contained within the framework of Galus.

What Yisro was to the Jewish people prior to the giving of the Torah at Sinai is what the Jewish people need today. We need to add something significant to our lives, something that goes beyond all that we've inherited from the past. We must make the transition from Galus complacency to Geulah initiative.

**Yeser and Yisro: What's the Difference?**

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Now, according to our Sages, Yisro actually had seven names. One of his names was Yeser, which means increase and the other name was Yisro, which also means increase. Why two names that denote the same idea of increasing?

Rashi informs us that when he who-was-not-yet-Yisro offered his idea to Moses on how to establish an efficient judicial system, his name was Yeser in recognition that he would be blessed to add to the Torah. G-d approved of his judicial proposal and an entire section within this week's parsha was added to the Torah, for which he is given full credit. It was when he embraced the commandments and became a Jew that he was given the name Yisro. Yisro is actually spelled the same as Yeser with an added letter vov at the end.

An obvious question begs to be asked: We've already established that Yisro connotes to not rest on our laurels. What is the difference between the Yeser stage of his life and the Yisro stage? Both stages involve adding on; in the case of Yeser it is contributing a section of the Torah and in the case of Yisro it

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involved converting to Judaism. What was so fundamentally different about the second stage that a new letter, *vov*, had to be added to his name?

Second, how do the two dimensions of change—Yeser and Yisro—relate to the need we have to go beyond the accomplishments of Galus and to forge ahead into Geulah?

### Outside Contribution

When Yisro or Yeser made a suggestion to Moses that was accepted by G-d and was incorporated into Torah, for which he was given the name Yeser, he did so as an **outsider** contributing to those who were inside, i.e., those who were already Jewish. This can be compared to the non-Jewish elements who helped facilitate the construction of the Holy Temple. Another example of an outside influence that contributed to Jewish knowledge is the indexing system, which was not common in Jewish texts; today it is a useful tool and makes learning that much easier. The

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printing press and computer are other examples of “outside” ideas and inventions that have contributed to the accessibility and proliferation of Torah knowledge.

However, even as much as these inventions have added to the Torah, the index, printing press and computer have not become an integral part of Torah; they remain outside factors that contribute to Torah.

Prior to his personal acceptance of the Torah, Yisro was able to contribute to it while remaining outside of the Torah. He was merely an accessory. He was a Yeser-outsider individual; not yet a full-fledged Yisro-insider.

Moreover, Yisro’s suggestion for improving the judicial system was taken from his own past experience and knowledge. His contribution to Torah came wholly from the outside, and even after it had been made he was an outsider; esteemed, yes, but still an outsider.

### **Inside Contribution**

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When Yisro embraced the Mitzvos, the letter *vov* was added to his name. That letter is a straight vertical line and thus suggestive of a process that sends something from above downward. In contemporary jargon we would use the term “download.” Yisro was no longer just an accessory to the Torah. He was now able to download all of that which is contained in Torah—its Divine character as well as its knowledge—and integrate it within himself. Yisro no longer just contributed; he was the contribution.

### **Two Approaches to Adding a Mitzvah for Geulah**

If we apply this mode of thought to Galus and Geulah we may suggest that here, too, there are two ways of conceptualizing the way we “add” to our progress in the direction of Geulah.

On one level, which we can call the “*Yeser*” macro-model, we are each encouraged to perform one more Mitzvah because it could be the final one that gets us over the top. We

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must reach a critical mass of Mitzvos to bring the Redemption; therefore one additional Mitzvah—any Mitzvah, big or small—has the potential to do just that and be the proverbial feather that breaks the back of Galus.

However, in this “*Yeser*” macro-model the focus is on how that additional Mitzvah—which is no different from the Mitzvos we have performed for the last 2,000 years—is added to the pile of accumulated Mitzvos. There is nothing fundamentally new about the additional Mitzvah nor does it result in our internalizing the Geulah even as we become catalysts to bring it on. The Mitzvah we do to bring the Geulah is not something radically new. Moreover, even after we perform it we are still outside the Geulah world.

The second approach—the *Yisro* model—takes us into uncharted territory. We not only add to our Mitzvah observance; we instill that same Mitzvah with a “futuristic” Geulah character. We look for the deeper meaning in that Mitzvah and consider how it

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relates to Geulah. By doing that Mitzvah, even as we are still in Galus, we become insiders to Geulah. The Mitzvah is an act of the future and we are now inside the dynamic of Geulah, not just outsiders contributing to it.

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PARSHAS YISRO**

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**ESSAY TEN**

**JUDAISM 101**

**The Ten Commandments are really Ten  
Statements, which provide us with a basic  
introduction to Judaism.**

# **LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO**

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## LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS YISRO

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# ESSAY TEN

JUDAISM 101

### Mislabeling

One of the most prevalent examples of mislabeling occurs in this week's Torah portion: The Ten Commandments. They are referred to in the Torah as the *Aseres Hadibros*, or, Ten Statements. The Torah actually comprises 613 commandments. The *Aseres Hadibros* represent one grouping of commandments, but by no means is this an exhaustive list of the Mitzvos.

The question thus begs itself. Why did G-d choose these Ten Statements out of all the 613 commandment to be part of His initial communication to the Jewish people?

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Upon close reflection, we realize that these Ten Statements espouse fundamental principles that are relevant to all of Judaism.

### **The Foundation**

Firstly, the first two statements: “I am the L-rd your G-d who has taken out of the Land of Egypt from the House of Bondage,” and “You shall have no other g-d’s” represent the basis of all the Mitzvos of the Torah.

The affirmative statement that G-d is our G-d and liberator is the basis of all Positive commandments. When we realize the role G-d plays in our lives, we feel compelled to acknowledge G-d’s presence by following His will and performing all the other commandments.

The second statement that forbids us to have other g-ds, forms the foundation for the observance of all the proscriptive commandments. When a person acts in defiance of G-d’s will they are – albeit, subtly – repudiating G-d.

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### **The World Quaked**

The third statement not to say G-d's name in vain, refers specifically to a person who swears, invoking G-d's name, in vain. When G-d uttered these words, our sages tell us, the entire world shook.

What distinguishes this transgression from all others?

The answer lies in the unique nature of this sin. Instead of doing something in spite of G-d's will to the contrary, this individual who swears, invokes G-d's name and introduces G-d into his transgression.

By this statement, the Torah teaches us that, in reality, every time we go against G-d's will and "contaminate" ourselves we "drag" G-d into the impurities with which we are associated.

### **Shabbos: Affirming Creation**

The fourth statement to observe the Shabbat is more than just one commandment. Shabbat observance is tantamount to

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observing the whole Torah. It is our most dramatic way of declaring with our whole essence and being that we believe that G-d is our Creator – who created the world in six days and rested on the seventh – and Liberator.

### **Parents: G-d's Paradigm**

The fifth statement to honor parents was intended to give us a worldly model for the honor we must accord G-d. The Talmud states that G-d has equated the honor of our parents with the honor of G-d. By honoring a parent, we are vicariously, honoring G-d and conditioning ourselves to accord Him honor directly, as well.

### **Relationship with G-d Depends on Relationship with Others**

The second tablet consists of five statements that deal with our relationship with others, without which our relationship with G-d is flawed. Not to kill, steal commit adultery and

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not to steal (according to the Talmud “kidnap”, but, by extension includes all forms of theft) and, represent G-d’s declaration to us that we should respect the lives, relationships and resources of others. These are fundamental principles without which one cannot be conscientious about any of the other social commandments in the Torah.

### **We are All Witnesses**

The commandment not to bear false testimony is a statement that expresses what we do wrong **whenever** we transgress. The prophet Isaiah declared that, “You are My witnesses.”

We are here to show the world that there is a Higher Authority who controls everything and to whom we are beholden. Whenever we transgress we bear false testimony and misrepresent G-d to the world.

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### **Establishing Boundaries**

The last statement “Not to covet,” i.e., to desire what belongs to someone else, is the ultimate ingredient necessary for respecting the rights of others. This statement establishes the need to recognize the boundaries that G-d instituted in this world. A Jew must realize that what is not their own is totally out of bounds and one should not even consider taking it.

### **The Messianic Age**

This complete realization of this last statement will occur in the future age of Redemption, at which time (as Maimonides concludes his Mishneh Torah):

“There will be no jealousy and rivalry... because the whole world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea.”

One who is imbued with knowing G-d (the first Statement) will have absolute and total respect for the integrity of all others.

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Indeed, the very last vice we will have conquered in the Messianic age is the one that allows us to be content with what we have and have no need to measure what we have relative to others. This is the essence of the very last commandment, not to covet, and it seems it will be the final human flaw to be corrected, as Maimonides concludes his treatment of the future with the knowledge that there will be no more jealousy.

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## **ESSAY ELEVEN**

### **SENSITIVITY TRAINING**

**Torah is about sensitivity to G-d and to  
others.**

**Sensitivity to one entity should never cause  
us to be insensitive to the other.**

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# **ESSAY ELEVEN**

### **SENSITIVITY TRAINING**

#### **The Anti-Climax Climax**

Without question, the most distinguishing factor of this week's parsha is the Ten Commandments.

(Parenthetically, it should be stated that the correct phrase is "Ten Statements." The total number of commandments in the Torah are actually 613. These "Ten statements" reflect the first set of G-dly teaching that serve as the foundation of all of Judaism.)

The giving of the Ten Commandments (or: Ten Statements) was the world's single most spiritual experience. Never before and never since did G-d reveal Himself to the world as He did at Mount Sinai. With this revelation,

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the world was exposed to the most lofty G-dly experience.

So powerful was this event that the Torah relates that the Jewish nation begged Moses to take over and relay G-d's words to them. They could not endure the powerful G-dly light that accompanied the giving of the Torah.

Yet, when we juxtapose the sublime nature of the revelation of Sinai – described in the middle of this week's Torah reading – with the very end of this week's Torah portion, a stark contrast emerges.

The very last verse deals with a rather mundane commandment concerning the building of the altar in the Temple. To climb onto the altar in the Temple, the Torah commanded them to build a ramp and not a staircase. The Torah provides the reasoning that using a staircase would require taking large and "immodest" looking steps. By contrast a ramp would allow them to take shorter and more modest appearing steps.

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The question begs to be asked. What connection does this unusual commandment have with the revelation at Sinai. And secondly, why would the parsha conclude with this commandment as if this was the end result and objective of Sinai?

### **Sensitivity to Rocks!**

To answer these questions it would serve us well to know the reason for this commandment concerning the altar.

Our sages comment that the reason for not alighting on a staircase is to teach us sensitivity to others.

“If the tones of the altar – which do not feel any shame – should not be disgraced by taking wide immodest strides while alighting the altar, certainly a person who is fashioned in the mold of His Creator, should not be subjected to any shame.”

In simple terms, the objective of this commandment is to condition us to always

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be sensitive to the feelings and dignity of others.

When we think about the objectives of Sinai, we might incorrectly conclude that G-d desires us to be pure and spiritual, to the extent that we become oblivious to our surroundings and the needs of others. After all doesn't G-d want us to rise above this physical world and become like angels?

But our parsha concludes by teaching us to what degree we must be sensitive of another's feelings. And while it is true, G-d wants us to rise above the constraints of the physical world, He doesn't want us to achieve that goal by ever losing touch with the feelings of others.

Thus, by concluding with the theme of sensitivity – that even when one walks onto the stones of the altar they must not denigrate their honor – our Torah portion demonstrates that no matter how high one can go – even if he or she climbs onto G-d's altar in the Temple and is soaring to the

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heaven's – one must never lose sight of another's needs and feelings.

### **Never Too Engrossed in Study**

A story is told of Rabbi Dovber – the second leader of Lubavitch – who was once deeply engrossed in his studies. His young baby who was sleeping nearby fell out of his cradle and started to cry. Rabbi Dovber was so engrossed in his studies that he was oblivious to the child crying just a few feet away. His father, Rabbi Schneur Zalman – the founder of the Chabad Lubavitch dynasty – who lived in an upper story and who was also deeply engrossed in study, heard the baby's cries, descended, picked up the baby, and rocked it back to sleep.

Thereupon, he rebuked his son and told him that no matter how deeply engrossed in one's studies, one must never be deaf to the cries of a child, literally and figuratively.

The objective of Sinai is also to be sensitive to the cries and needs of those Jews who – because of circumstances beyond their

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control – remained children in terms of their Jewish knowledge. We must be sensitive to their needs and the silent cries of their souls.

Our sages tell us that the experience Jews had at Sinai was but a temporary one. It will become permanent, however, during the Messianic Age. Just as the parsha that deals with the giving of the Torah at Sinai concludes with teaching about sensitivity while on the heights of holiness, it is certainly applicable today as we stand on the threshold of the redemption. It behooves every one of us to hear the cries and cater to the needs of our fellow Jews and indeed the entire world.

**ESSAY TWELVE**

**EARTH SHATTERING  
NEWS**

**What's worse than the commission of a  
crime?**

**When the person involves others in its  
performance.**

**Especially, if the other is G-d.**

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## ESSAY TWELVE

### EARTH SHATTERING NEWS

#### **Worse than Murder?**

When the A-mighty declared “Do not bear G-d’s name in vain” — a reference to giving a false oath, invoking G-d’s name — the entire world trembled.” (Talmud, *Shevuot* 39b)

What was so earth shattering (pun intended) about giving a false oath, using G-d’s name in vain? And why is it more devastating than idolatry, murder or adultery?

The Talmud addresses this question and answers that it is because in certain ways it is a more serious breach than the other commandments and it is reflected in the way G-d punishes for it. But this too requires explanation. Why is it treated differently from

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other serious crimes that are listed in the ten Commandments?

*Iyun Ya'akov*, a Talmudic commentator, answers, citing the statement of our sages in *Pirkei Avos* that the world endures by virtue of three things: Justice, truth and peace. When one gives a false oath, they undermine all three of these foundations. They pervert justice, distort the truth and create strife. If the very underpinnings of the world are removed, no wonder the world trembled.

One can still ask, even if one were to make a false statement in court — without swearing — they undermine justice, truth and peace. What is so different about a false oath?

### Schlepping G-d

One answer to this question requires a basic understanding of the dynamics of an oath in Jewish tradition.

Why is it that when a person testifies about any matter and gives his word that what he says is true, it may not suffice in a legal

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proceeding, and the court will impose an oath. If the person's word is not believed, why would we believe his oath? If a person could be suspected of lying, why would he be trusted with an oath? Furthermore, an oath is administered in many cases where the individual is suspected of theft. If the person is suspected of stealing, why would we trust his oath to the contrary?

Indeed, the Talmud makes the declaration that “one who is suspected concerning monetary impropriety is **not** suspected to swear falsely in court.” (*Bava Metzia* 5b). But the question is, why?

Rashi addresses this question with the assertion that “people consider a false oath a more serious crime than theft.” But, this assertion requires explanation as to why this is so. The *Tosaphist* commentary answers by referring to the Talmudic statement that “the world trembled when G-d said, “you shall not take G-d's name in vain.” This, of course, brings us back to square one. Why did the world tremble for this commandment more so than for any other?

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The explanation for all this lies in the difference between all other transgressions and a false oath. When one commits any crime, they go against G-d's will. It is a momentary denial of G-d.

When one swears falsely, using the name of G-d, however, they are deliberately invoking G-d's name, as if to say, "G-d is my witness that what I say is true." The crime here is not doing something evil in spite of G-d, or ignoring G-d, but it is doing something evil **because** of G-d. G-d becomes one's accomplice in the evil act itself.

Moreover, our mystical ages explain that when one makes an oath they access a more powerful manifestation of G-d. By swearing falsely, in G-d's name, is to sully and contaminate the most sublime G-dly forces.

Every violation of the Torah, thus, adversely affects one's own personality. It does not however, threaten the stability of the world, because G-d remains the foundation of the world that cannot be shaken or removed.

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When one actually “drags” G-d into the crime, and uses Him for falsehood, the G-dly foundation of the world is so sullied and undermined, that the very foundation begins to shake. The endurance of the world is guaranteed so long as the foundation is an enduring one. When one perverts G-d’s role and utilizes Him for falsehood, the very foundations of the world begin to falter.

### **Foundations Strengthened and Renewed**

One of the most salient distinguishing factors between the period of exile and that of Redemption is the prevalence of truth. During the Messianic Age, when ultimate truth will prevail, the foundations of the earth will therefore be strengthened, because at that time the entire world will be permeated with an acute awareness of the true nature of G-d’s existence and the existence of G-dly truth.

Moreover, we are told that in the Messianic Age, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Because of the reign of truth, the

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world will acquire greater stability, and will no longer be vulnerable.

In the present, the earth's existence is precarious and one false oath can wreak havoc on it. In the Messianic Age, the earth will be given infinite G-dly strength because there will be nothing that could undermine its stability.

## **ESSAY THIRTEEN**

### **HIGH AND LOW**

**The higher we climb the greater the pressure  
to go down.**

**Don't let success deter you from continuing  
to climb and weather the winds that try to  
force you down.**

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# **ESSAY THIRTEEN**

### **HIGH AND LOW**

#### **No Stairs; Just a Ramp**

At the end of this week's parsha, the Torah discusses the manner in which the Altar in the Temple should be constructed. The Torah states: "[When you build a ramp] to My Altar do not [make it] ascend with steps, so that it will not [look as if] your nakedness is exposed upon it."

Simply put, the Torah was concerned with the modesty of the Kohain. Rather than climb stairs, the Kohain would alight onto the Altar by way of a ramp. This would make it possible for him to take small steps instead of wide strides.

This commandment is mentioned at the end of this week's parsha, which stands out as the

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one that describes Jewish history's most momentous and defining event—the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The question arises, why would the Torah include such an apparently minor detail concerning the construction of the Altar in the Temple in a section that touches on the most important event ever?

Indeed, there is an entire section of the Torah that is devoted to the construction of the Mishkan. The Torah could have mentioned the detail about the ramp of the Altar there. Why did the Torah have to include these details here?

### **Don't Exaggerate!**

To appreciate the importance of this law concerning the Altar and its ramp, we ought to refer to a commentary of the great Chassidic Master, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, in his classic work *Noam Elimelech*.

The word for steps in Hebrew *ma'alot* can also be rendered virtues or qualities. When

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we focus inordinately on our own qualities in our service of G-d, it can lead to the exposure of our faults as well. While we must not be ignorant of our own qualities, overemphasis of them can be detrimental.

Even, nay, especially, when we ascend to the greatest heights and realize how high we've climbed as we alight onto the Altar of G-d, we must maintain a spirit of humility. Otherwise, our "nakedness" will be exposed; everyone will see how low we really are.

We can now appreciate why this admonition is placed at the end of the parsha that deals with the most significant event of the giving of the Torah.

When the Jews experienced this event, they had climbed to the highest plane of spiritual experience. To forestall the danger that this would lead to their feeling smug and arrogant upon realizing how high they've climbed, the Torah therefore admonishes them—and anyone who likewise soars to the spiritual stratosphere—do not let this get to their/our heads, lest it will expose their/our glaring

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faults. For when the spotlight of G-dly light shines on an individual, one can see through them and discover their faults as well.

### **Revealing the Sub-Conscious**

One can take this a step further. Each one of us possesses revealed as well as hidden qualities and faults. Most of the time we function at a level where our hidden talents and shortcomings remain dormant. However in times of crisis, or when we are filled with inspiration because of an unusual event that we've lived through, we discover that we possess far more power than we had ever imagined we had. These hidden qualities begin to surface in a way that surprises not only other people but even ourselves.

In particular, the book of Daniel predicts that prior to the coming of Moshiach all the hidden matters will become revealed and all obscure matters clarified. This refers, among other applications, to the actualization of our hidden qualities that will become manifest in the pre-Messianic Age.

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But, at precisely these times, when our hidden talents and virtues are revealed, we may discover that we also possess certain negative qualities that we were never aware of. We could not fathom that we were that flawed just as we could not predict our possession of the hidden positive energies. Once we realize these heretofore hidden faults, we can deal with them and transform them into forces for good.

### **Surprise!**

We can now understand how it was possible for the Jewish people, just weeks after they had received the Torah at Sinai directly from G-d, to have constructed and worshipped a Golden Calf. How could people who were so high fall so low?

In truth, it may be suggested, that their precipitous fall was not in spite of their meteoric rise, but rather because of it. When a person is in a heightened state of consciousness there is always the possibility that the most dangerously negative energies

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that were deeply embedded in our psyche may be actualized together with the most powerful positive energies. We should not be surprised or demoralized when these flaws surface. On the contrary, this knowledge itself will assist us in dealing with these negative energies.

In recent times we've witnessed a tremendous surge of both positive as well as negative energy in the world at large. They are not contradictory phenomena. As stated, when the deepest spiritual energies are released there is a concomitant release of negative energy as well. This suggests that we are standing on the very threshold of the Messianic Age and every Mitzvah we do will "bring us over the top," to prepare us for the time when the negative will be transformed into positive.

## **ESSAY FOURTEEN**

### **JUDICIAL REFORM**

**Contrary to a popular myth, we are always  
judging others.**

**The way we judge should be determined by  
objective criteria.**

**Some matters require judgment by our  
internal spark of Moses.**

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# ESSAY FOURTEEN

### JUDICIAL REFORM

#### **Big versus Difficult**

When *Yisro*, Moses' father-in-law saw how Moses personally judged the multitude of Jews, he suggested to Moses that he appoint "lower" courts and judges. Yisro then said:

"All **large** cases shall be brought to you while all the small matters shall be judged by them."

Now, although Moses complied with his father-in-law's judicial reform, there was one deceptively minor change in the way Moses characterized Yisro's plan. Yisro reserved the big cases for Moses and the small cases were to be judged by the other judges, Moses, by contrast, emphasized that the "difficult" cases

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he would judge personally while the easy ones will be judged by his appointees.

Commentators wonder why Moses altered the terms of this reform. Why did he reject the notion of judging the big cases and instead offered to try the “difficult” cases?

### No Small Claims Court

Commentators answer that Yisro’s proposal was in line with modern day legal procedure where cases that involve large sums of money are usually tried by higher level judges, whereas cases that involve small amounts of money are relegated to the small claims court.

Moses, however, rejected this procedure. In the spirit of the Talmudic exhortation to judges:

“May a cases of one penny be as dear to you as a case of a hundred *maneh*.”

Moses did not consider cases that involved the poor and which therefore usually involved paltry sums of money, to be insignificant. The

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only criterion Moses would accept for personally trying a case was that the case at hand should be a difficult one. It made no difference how much money was involved. As long as the case was a complex one, Moses felt it was his responsibility to handle it. If the case was straightforward, even though it might have involved huge sums of money, Moses delegated the trying of the case to a lower level court.

### **Two Models of Judging and Interaction with Others**

There is a profound lesson in all of this that applies not only to judges but also to leaders. It applies not only to leaders of countries and communities, but to every individual in his relationship with others. We are all in the position of judges, every time we judge the character, motives and actions of others. Moreover, whenever we interact with another person we stand in judgment as to the extent and quality of that relationship. Based on the

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“verdict” we will adjust our lives vis-à-vis the other individual, accordingly.

The two approaches — of Yisro and Moses — in judgment can be applied to our every interaction with others.

Embedded in each and every one of us is a spark of Moses as stated in Tanya (Chapter 42). This means that Moses’ unique level of awareness, knowledge of and reverence for G-d exists within the soul of each and every one of us.

However, one does not need to access this powerful sense of awareness every time we are compelled to judge others. Most of the time, our interaction with others demands that we summon our “lower” soul faculties. For most situations, our internal “judges,” i.e., our intellect, sense of fairness and righteousness, will suffice to determine how best to relate to the other person.

There are times, however, when mere intellect and a sense of fairness will not suffice because the situation is complex. In these instances, one must search deeply

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within one's soul for the Moses component which allows us to view the situation from a more G-dly vantage point.

### **Summoning the Spark of Moses**

The lesson from Moses' response to Yisro is that the need to pull out all the stops depends not on the scope of the case, but on its complexity. One should not dismiss a mere exchange of words with another as a trivial matter. Even these "small" matters involve complex ethical and moral issues. Even "minor" comments can have major repercussions that cannot be sorted out by utilizing one's conventional faculties. To this end, one must seek guidance by summoning the "spark of Moses" within one's soul.

In the spirit of our Sages' statement that "Moses was the first redeemer and Moses will be the final redeemer," one must realize that our liberation — both physical and spiritual — depends on the degree to which we call upon the Moses component of our souls to define the way we relate to and judge others.

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By constantly being aware of G-d — the spark of Moses within us — we will be far more conscientious in our dealings with others, never taking anyone — or anything we say or do to anyone — for granted,

This enhanced conscientiousness will certainly create an atmosphere of a world of Moshiach that will hasten and prepare us for the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach, whose soul is suffused with the spirit of Moses.

**ESSAY FIFTEEN**

**HONOR YOUR  
PARENTS: THE BRIDGE**

**Parents are G-d's way of teaching us respect  
for higher authority.**

**Two parents teach us that G-d relates to us  
in two distinct ways.**

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### **ESSAY FIFTEEN**

#### **HONOR YOUR PARENTS: THE BRIDGE**

##### **Why is it on Tablet A?**

Honor your father and mother, the fifth of the Ten Commandments (or, more precisely, the “Ten Statements”) appears in this week’s parsha, and is a pillar of most civilized societies.

That this commandment is central to Judaism is evident from its inclusion in the Ten Commandments. There is, however, a question that has been raised by Bible commentators regarding its “position” within those Ten Commandments.

There is a well-known tradition that the reason the Ten Commandments were divided into two tablets, five commandments on the one tablet and the other five on the other,

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was to reflect the two thrusts of obligations we have. On the first tablet, the obligations between man and G-d were delineated, while the second tablet details our obligations towards our fellow human being.

Armed with this premise, commentators wonder why the commandment to honor one's father and mother was included in the **first** tablet. Aren't parents human? And isn't our obligation to honor them an obligation that should have been included in the category of "man to man" precepts?

The standard answer given by commentators is that, by extension, honoring our parents **is** a form of honoring G-d. In the words of the Talmud, "G-d equated the honor due to parents to the honor due to G-d." To dramatize this notion, the Talmud relates how a certain sage upon hearing his mother's footsteps, would remark, "The Shechinah (Divine presence) is coming!"

But this answer only begs a follow-up question. Why did the Torah equate the honor of mere mortals to the honor of G-d?

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### The Human Condition

To answer this question, we need to preface an understanding of the human condition.

Human beings are unique creations. While every creature consists of both a body and a soul, there is a fundamental difference between the relationship of a human body to its soul and that of all other creatures.

All living beings were created with bodies that were suffused with souls. The body of an animal, for example, is therefore inseparable from its soul. There is no conflict between the two. What this means is that the soul of an animal is so limited that it “fits” neatly in its body, without any resistance.

The human being’s body however, was created **before** G-d infused it with a soul. The body does not readily embrace the soul. The body and soul can therefore appear to exist independently. Although the body could not survive without its soul, the body could easily be unaware of its source of life. Likewise, the soul can exist within the body without

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making an effort to “strike up a dialogue” with the body, leaving the body unaffected.

Because of this dichotomous relationship, a body may have a hard time attaining the level of respect and honor for G-d. For the body to perform a Mitzvah would be easier, because even a materialistic body recognizes the need to do things that go against the body's instincts. The body can also be made to understand the need and benefit to submit to a discipline.

When we deal with the concept of honor, it is quite a different story. How does a body, with its limited appreciation for anything that is beyond the physical realm, develop an appreciation for anything spiritual and abstract? How does a body begin to approach honoring G-d?

### **A Glimpse into the Dynamic of Creation**

To bridge this gap, between a physical human body and the awareness of a G-d whom we must honor, G-d gave us parents. Parents, who choose to get married, bear and

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raise children, act vicariously as G-d's agents and partners in the creation and the shaping and molding of new life.

By honoring parents we thus develop an appreciation for those who are responsible for our existence. In doing so, we are compelled to look deeper into our existence and come ultimately to the realization that we did not just happen. There must be a Creator Who created us and our parents, and Who is responsible for everything in our lives. The very institution of parenthood is G-d's way of introducing Himself to us.

It now becomes clear as to why honoring parents was included in the first tablet that focuses on our obligation to G-d.

### **Why Two Parents?**

All of this begs a further question. If the institution of parenthood was to introduce us to our Divine Parent, why did G-d create a natural order that requires **two** parents? Wouldn't the unity of G-d demand that there be only one proxy of G-d?

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In truth, while there is only one G-d, there are two ways in which He manifests Himself. G-d can either act towards us as a mother, with warmth, closeness and a spirit of nurturing.

G-d, alternatively, can relate to us as a Father, who does not show His emotions, who maintains some distance from the child. This parallels the biological process where the mother's contribution to reproduction differs markedly from that of the father. The mother and father metaphor in relation to G-d likewise reflects G-d's intimate involvement in our lives, and His detachment from our lives, respectively.

The "father" and "mother" modes of G-dly expression, parallel the way G-d related to us in the days when the Temple stood as compared to the way He relates to us in the present state of exile. In the present, G-d conceals His love and appears aloof and detached from His people. Nevertheless, we are duty bound to develop a sense of honor and respect for Him. But, at the same time, we must also express our desire to see the

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other side of G-d's relationship. We must constantly pray to G-d to bring about the coming of Moshiach who will usher in an Age where G-d's presence will be revealed, and take us into "Her" motherly embrace.

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**ESSAY SIXTEEN**  
**KIDNAPPED**

**Destroying a person's potential is a form of  
murder.**

**Diverting one's G-d given talent away from  
serving Him is a form of kidnapping.**

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## **ESSAY SIXTEEN**

### **KIDNAPPED**

#### **Kidnapping, Not Theft**

One of the Ten Commandments is “You shall not steal.” According to our oral tradition, as recorded in the Talmud, it refers not to theft of property, but to kidnapping which is a capital crime, and is in line with the two preceding capital offenses of murder and adultery. The prohibition against monetary theft is actually mentioned in Leviticus.

To incur the death penalty for kidnapping, however, the Torah tell us, one must also sell the victim.

The Ten Commandments were singled out from all others in the Torah because they serve as fundamental teachings and convey far more than just their literal meaning. To

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be sure, the first and foremost meaning of the Biblical text here is the simple meaning that we should not commit these heinous crimes. However, since the Ten Commandments must speak to a civilized human being as well—one who would never even allow a thought to commit such crimes to enter his mind—these teachings must also possess a more subtle meaning, that is relevant to all.

### **A Subtle form of Murder, Adultery and Kidnapping**

The crime of murder is one where we create a separation between the body and soul of the victim. Thus the Talmud states that by embarrassing someone in public one is guilty of the crime of bloodshed. The rationale behind that is that embarrassing someone indicates that one does not respect their human dignity. The one who embarrasses another has separated the person from his honor and dignity.

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One can take this a step further. One can be guilty of “murder” anytime he or she demonstrates a sense of disregard for and a sense of disconnectedness from his or her spiritual and G-dly self. Denying the existence of the soul or denigrating it is a subtle form of bloodshed.

Following this line of reasoning, the prohibition against adultery can refer to people who do acknowledge the existence of the soul and spiritual dimension of life. Their problem is that they pledge allegiance to multiple influences in their lives. In addition to their professed belief in G-d, they will also show loyalty to other ism’s and belief systems that are not consistent with our belief in G-d.

While there is certainly much value in the arts and sciences, it is because they are part of G-d’s universe, not because they have value independent of their Creator. Indeed, our Sages at the very end of Ethics of the Fathers declare, “All that G-d created, He created it for His glory.” If one uses science and literature to see the presence of G-d and glorify Him, then these disciplines do not

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represent a compromise of one's loyalty, rather an affirmation of it. However, when one separates these areas of knowledge from the oneness of G-d, then, in a subtle sense, one has committed adultery, by having multiple loyalties.

There is a third level where one does not reject the existence of a spiritual dimension and does not even share his loyalty to G-d with other influences. The “problem” here is that the person has “kidnapped” and “sold” his spiritual identity. This refers to the person who appreciates, all too well, the existence and benefits of spirituality. However, he utilizes its life-enhancing capacity to extract some profit and gain in an area that is inconsistent with the spirituality.

For example: Among the features of a G-dly awareness is that it creates a sense of excitement, generates enthusiasm and inspiration. A materialistic existence, by contrast, is dull and devoid of feeling. The body—without the involvement of the soul—cannot feel joy and happiness. Depression occurs when the body and animal nature

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eclipses the natural zest for life that comes from the soul.

To kidnap and sell one's spirituality is to get excited about some non-G-dly enterprise. When one invests their soul in business, golf and tennis, or any other mundane pursuit, rather than to get excited about Torah and Mitzvos, while not destroying their spiritual nature or compromising it, they transfer it to another domain.

To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with many of these activities. It is the investment of one's soul-energy into these areas instead of the areas for which it was intended that is, in a subtle way, a violation of the commandment not to kidnap and sell. Don't divert your soul from its mission and don't try to derive benefit from it for the wrong endeavor.

### **Don't Take the Bus to Work; Drive Your Luxury Car!**

This can be compared to a person who is given a luxury car for business purposes so

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that they can get to their place of work more quickly, enjoyably and with more class and dignity. Instead this individual uses the car for leisure and takes the crowded subway or bus to work.

Similarly, G-d gave us the soul and all its faculties for **His** business of making this world into a G-dly and holy world. To the extent that we use our business and our leisure activities for that goal, one has a right—nay, an obligation—to enjoy life and be filled with a zest for life. However, to take the excitement of the soul and use it for other purposes while “taking the subway” to achieve our spiritual goals is a subtle way of violating this eighth commandment.

### **Messianic Age: No Diversions**

Unfortunately, one of the casualties of exile life is that we are not aware of our soul's mission, which can lead to its diversion into other areas. One of the characteristics of the Messianic Age is that our souls and all of its powers—will be directed in the right place,

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that will bring life, joy and fulfillment to all of  
our endeavors.

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## **ESSAY SEVENTEEN**

### **PURSUIT OF TRUTH**

**There are few who seek absolute truth.**

**There are fewer who will be prepared to give  
up everything they stood for when the reality  
of absolute truth hits them.**

**That was Yisro.**

**When he arrived, G-d gave us the Torah; the  
embodiment of absolute objective truth.**

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# **ESSAY SEVENTEEN**

### **PURSUIT OF TRUTH**

#### **Who was Yisro?**

Yisro, Moses' father-in-law was Judaism's first convert. While it is true, as our sages tell us, that all Jews were converted at Mount Sinai when they received the Torah, yet Yisro was the first person who left his family, nation and religion to become part of the Jewish people.

The greatest tribute that can be given to him is that the Torah portion that contains the single most important event – the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – is named after him – Yisro. Yisro was also credited by the Torah as having counseled Moses how to judge the Jewish people. The A-mighty Himself agreed with him. And even before he made his contributions to the judicial system,

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the Torah relates how Moses and all the other Jewish people went out to greet him. No such honors were ever accorded to any other individual.

And this is where the question arises. Who was Yisro? What did he do before coming to join the Jewish people? And why was he accorded so much honor?

### **Midianite Priest**

The answer to this question is provided for in the Torah's description of Yisro as the “priest of Midyan.” In other words, as our sages point out, he was the leading idolater in the land of Midyan.

Rashi further observes, that when Yisro said that he recognized that G-d was greater than all other g-ds, he meant to say that he actually worshipped every deity. He was not only an ordinary idol-worshipper; he worshipped and was a priest for every idol, until he came to the recognition that there was only one G-d, the G-d of Israel.

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### **Profound Philosopher**

Chassidic thought adds a deeper dimension to the fact that Yisro worshipped and then abandoned all the idols of the world. Yisro was a profound philosopher, who probed all the different aspects of theology and philosophy. When he worshipped an idol, he was not simply bestowing divinity on a statue of wood or stone. Rather he looked at the icons as representations of the natural and spiritual forces within the universe.

In his pursuit of the truth, however, unlike other philosophers and idolaters, he did not stop at a point where he was impressed with the power and depth of the spiritual force. He came to the realization that there must be an even more sublime source of the spiritual force with which he was already impressed to the point of worshipping it.

When he came to the realization that there is something higher, he dropped the previous deity and started to worship the more exalted force. He continued in his quest for truth, until he recognized that there is one absolute

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G-d, who is responsible for all the other forces in the world. He also realized that these forces have no power of their own; they are only G-d's instruments and they should not be worshipped.

Most people, when they find something that impresses, inspires and commands their allegiance, are not capable of looking beyond that which they discovered in the pursuit of truth. People rarely care about absolute truth. They are fine with relative truth, which is not truth at all.

### **No Compromising Truth!**

Yisro, was different. Notwithstanding the deep awareness and appreciation he had for his spiritual attainments, with all the attendant physical rewards and honors, Yisro was able to abandon his former level because he knew that the truth resided elsewhere.

There are some people who might be prepared to swallow their pride in the pursuit of truth. But, rarely, if ever, did we find a person who was prepared to do it

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repeatedly, rejecting all one's life's beliefs and ideals, because of the truth.. His passion for the truth was unparalleled.

Furthermore, when someone has the true belief in one G-d because that was the belief he was introduced to, it cannot compare with the level of light and enlightenment that one discovers when one finds the light after being in the dark.

Yisro thus epitomizes the incredible increase (indeed, “increase” is one of the translations of the name Yisro) of light that is generated when it comes out of the darkness.

### **Naming Rights**

We can now understand why Yisro was given the distinct honor of having the Torah portion containing the narrative of the Ten Commandments, named after him. Yisro's pursuit of truth and his ability to discover the light going through all the different levels of darkness represents the greatest ideal of Torah.

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The lesson for our times is clear. Our existence in exile that is likened to darkness and is punctuated with inconsistencies, will lead imminently to the redemption that is likened to light and ultimate truth. Had we not been exposed to the darkness we would not have the ability to reach the highest level of

G-dly light was its brightest when G-d gave the Torah at Sinai after Yisro arrived and declared, “Now I know that G-d is greater than all the g-d's.”

### **Light After Exile**

If the light that followed Yisro's arrival was so powerful, we have to imagine how bright the light will be in the Messianic Age that followed nearly 2,000 of dismal exile darkness!

Our generation can be labeled the Yisro generation because of the light that we have seen coming out of the darkness of exile.

# **ESSAY EIGHTEEN**

## **THE CONVERSION AT SINAI**

**Realizing our potential is the greatest thing  
we can aspire to. But can we aspire to  
experiencing new potentials?**

**The revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai  
will provide us with an answer.**

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## ESSAY EIGHTEEN

### THE CONVERSION AT SINAI

#### Why Name this Parsha Yisro?

This week's Torah portion, *Yisro* is arguably the most important Torah portion. It is the source of the *Aseres Hadibros* (popularly known as the Ten Commandments and more accurately as the Ten Statements). In addition, this Torah portion recounts the world's most significant event ever – the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The fact that this portion is so significant begs the question as to why it is named *Yisro* after a convert to Judaism, Moses' father-in-law. Why not name it Torah, Sinai, or some other more dramatic name?

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We are All Converts!

One approach to this matter is that *Yisro* – a convert to Judaism – was representative of what occurred at Mount Sinai. Our sages inform us that the experience of Sinai constituted the conversion of the entire Jewish people. Whatever status they enjoyed before could not compare with their new and exalted status they acquired at Sinai.

What is it that changed so dramatically at Sinai? Even before Sinai the Jewish people observed many of the Mitzvos. Was it the commitment to observe additional Mitzvos that justified referring to Sinai as a conversion process?

Before the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai there were many things a person could do to become a better and even a more spiritual person. It was not possible, however, for one – no matter how hard they tried – to go beyond their potential.

Translated into simple terms this meant that no matter how hard one tried to connect with Hashem, one could not succeed in

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getting anywhere beyond one's own inherent parameters.

The rationale for this is that G-d created us to be mortal and finite beings. By definition a finite being cannot, no matter how hard one tries, get closer to an infinite Creator. All that the observance of Mitzvos before Sinai could achieve was to make the person into a better person, a more complete creation – within the confines of creation.

### **New Potentials**

All this changed at Sinai. For the first time in history, G-d decreed that through the observance of the Mitzvos (the same Mitzvos one did before as well as additional ones) it was possible for one to break out of the mold of being a mere creation of G-d. One can access the Divine and rise above the confines of one's physical existence.

In effect, Sinai represented the recreation of the Jewish people. They were now not a people governed by the same conventions of nature. They were now given a totally new

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potential. Now they have the power to rise above the world and transform it into a dwelling place for G-d.

This explains the name Yisro, which is related to the word that means “increase” or “profit.” At Sinai there was an exponential increase in our spiritual potential

### **Realizing the New Potential**

The inauguration of this potential occurred at Sinai some 3,300 years ago. The complete realization of this potential will occur with the true, complete and imminent Redemption. Then, the entire world will see the connections we made to Hashem through the observance of the Mitzvos.

Moreover, compared to what was revealed and actualize at Sinai, the future Redemption will result in another leap; an exponential growth in our spiritual potential.

## **ESSAY NINETEEN**

### **STAND OR SIT**

**The Ten Commandments stand out amongst  
all the other commandments.**

**Yet there is controversy if one should stand  
while the Ten Commandments are read.**

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## **ESSAY NINETEEN**

### **STAND OR SIT**

#### **The Dispute**

The Ten Commandments are featured in this week's parsha.

There is a dispute among the legal authorities on the custom to stand while the Ten Commandments are read in public. Maimonides was queried about this question and he strongly discouraged this practice. He bases himself on the statement in the Talmud that the Sages sought to include the recitation of the Ten Commandments as part of the daily liturgy alongside the recitation of the Shema. The rabbis negated this practice because of the fear that the heretics would use the highlighting of the Ten Commandments as a suggestion that Judaism

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consists of only these ten statements, to the exclusion of all the other teachings of Judaism.

To have everyone stand for the reading of this section only, Maimonides reasoned, would lend support to the erroneous belief that only these Ten Commandments are important.

Other authorities take issue with Maimonides' comparison and make the distinction between including only the Ten Commandments in the daily liturgy and standing for the reading of the Ten Commandments. In the latter situation, since the entire Torah portion is read aloud, everyone will realize that the Ten Commandments, notwithstanding their singular importance, did not preclude the other parts of the Torah.

To this day there are variant customs on this matter of sitting or standing while the Ten Commandments are read.

**That's Our Custom!**

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A humorous story is told of a young rabbi who assumed his position as rabbi during the week when the Ten Commandments were read in the synagogue. No sooner do they reach the Ten Commandments, and pandemonium breaks loose. Half of the crowd stood while the other half defiantly remained seated; each side shouting and hurling insults at the other side.

The young rabbi decided to seek out the retired and aged rabbi of the synagogue to determine its original custom. He described the chaotic situation and the arguing that prevailed in the synagogue to this senior rabbi, and asked him, what the original custom of the shul was. The rabbi's answer was: "That was precisely the custom of our synagogue; half would stand and the other half would sit and they would all be shouting at each other."

**The Irony of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith?**

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It is interesting to note that Maimonides was the one who formulated the Thirteen Principles of Faith, for which he was criticized. One of the criticisms was that he had singled out certain beliefs from the rest of Judaism. This was akin to promoting the Ten Commandments at the expense of all the others.

Isn't it ironic that Maimonides, who took such a strong stance against standing for the reading of the Ten Commandments, was the one who formulated these 13 fundamental principles? Why wasn't Maimonides concerned that the people might consider these 13 principles as exclusionary as he was with the Ten Commandments?

Two explanations come to mind.

First, among the thirteen principles one finds two that speak of the Divine origin of the entire Torah—Written and Oral—and that the Torah can never be abrogated. No sane person after reading this list of principles would then go out and declare that one does not have to follow the rest of the Torah!

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### **A Foundation and a Structure**

Second, Maimonides formulation of Thirteen Principles of Faith was intended to provide us with a foundation for Judaism.

While Judaism is a religion primarily of action, one cannot expect these actions to have meaning and endure if they are not based on a firm footing.

It is like a person who builds a home, but tells the contractor that in the interest of speed he should skimp on the foundation. While the structure has a function, it will not last very long. The slightest seismic event will undermine the structure.

Conversely, if we were to build only a foundation it would defeat the entire purpose of building the structure in the first place.

Thus, Maimonides wanted us to have both a solid foundation as well as an appreciation for the integrity of the structure of Judaism itself. To this end Maimonides strongly criticized any attempt to accord more importance to any one collection of teachings, including the Ten Commandments. On the

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other hand, Maimonides wanted that we should understand that Judaism consists of an elaborate edifice that was built on solid foundations. And when one closely examines these foundations one sees how they demand and encompass the totality of Judaism.

### **Belief in Moshiach is Belief in All of Judaism**

One of the Thirteen Principle (the 12<sup>th</sup> one) is the belief in the imminent coming of Moshiach.

When one examines the belief in Moshiach one sees how it leads to the acceptance of and appreciation for all of Judaism. In Maimonides' own words in his Mishneh Torah, Moshiach's task is to usher in a world that will facilitate the observance of all of the Commandments without any impediments or distractions.

Not only is this knowledge not suggestive of a belief that excludes other tenets and practices of Judaism, but, on the contrary, the very definition of a Messianic Age is one where

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the integrity of the entire Torah is ensured and enhanced.

The Thirteenth Principle of Faith actually incorporates all the preceding within it. IN the Messianic Age we will all be exposed to the reality of One incorporeal Creator who communicated His Torah to us so that we transform the world into a dwelling place for G-d.

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**ESSAY TWENTY**

**THE TEN  
DECLARATIONS THAT  
WILL CHANGE THE  
WORLD**

The Ten Commandments deal primarily with  
proper human behavior.

They also declare how the world will operate  
in the future Messianic Era

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## **ESSAY TWENTY**

### **THE TEN DECLARATIONS THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD**

#### **Commandments or Declarations?**

The Ten Commandments are actually referred to in the Torah as “Eseres Hadevarim, the Ten Statements,” because they are not just commandments; they are declarative statements!

A declarative statement, in contrast with a commandment, is a statement of fact; “this is the way it is,” as opposed to a commandment which expresses a desire on the part of the Commander that this is the way He would like it to be. And, indeed, this is the way the world will look like in the future Age of Redemption, when G-d’s plan will finally be realized.

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Hence, we may take the liberty, to retranslate the Ten Statements in ways that they will reflect that future reality and the state of humanity then:

### **True Freedom**

1. "My very Essence and transcendence will permeate your consciousness; which will liberate you from all constraints and forms of bondage.

In this first declaration G-d informs us how, in the ultimate age of enlightenment, we will experience true freedom because our entire being will be suffused with G-d's Essence.

### **No Other Controlling Influences**

2. You will have no other controlling influences in your life because you will all be in My presence.

In the Messianic Age, there will be no false gods or other powers or influences in the world. While Moshiach will be our king and leader, it will be manifestly clear that he is

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“simply” channeling G-d’s power to the world. It goes without saying that we will no longer worship money, fame, influence and power. We will be liberated from these debilitating obsessions.

### **No Compromise**

3. "You will no longer compromise the name of G-d, your G-d.

In the present, when we refer to G-d by name it does not capture His true Essence. Because of Galus-exile conditions we may not pronounce G-d’s ineffable name. Instead we use an alternate name which describes G-d in His mode of Master rather than His transcendent Essence. In the Messianic Age, the prophet predicts “G-d will be one and His name will be one.” The Talmud explains that this means we will no longer have to modify and thereby compromise G-d’s name.

In the present day and age we tend to “bifurcate” G-d. There is the elusive, transcendent aspect of G-d associated with His ineffable name, and there is the aspect of

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G-d which is involved in our world and in our lives. To be in our world, G-d has to contract and obscure His true identity. In the Messianic Age, there will be no need for that “bifurcation.” We will be able to see that the transcendent G-d and the contracted, involved G-d are one and the same. Our G-d will no longer require a compromised name.

### **No Need for Reminders**

4. "You will be fully aware of the Sabbath's illuminating power, and experience its other-worldliness.

Today our lives are marked with forgetfulness when it comes to spiritual matters. While we instinctively get out of bed and go through the daily rituals of getting dressed, etc., without much thought, spiritual matters demand special attention. We have to be commanded to remember those things that ought to be an integral part of our lives at all times. The Messianic Age will be completely different. It is referred to as the ultimate Sabbatical Age. We will enjoy eternal rest and

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tranquility and bask in G-d's utter sublimity. We will not need to be reminded of our spiritual nature and of G-d's presence.

### External and Internal Parents

5. "You will appreciate your father and mother as well as the intellectual faculties of *chochma* and *binah* they represent."

In today's world, there is (and, and in truth, throughout history there has been) a much commented on generation gap. Our parents are the bridge between G-d's authority and us. Resistance to G-d's authority and the lack of appreciation for parents, which is natural in pre-Messianic times particularly in exile, is what creates the schism between children and their parents and ultimately leads to societal breakdown.

The breakdown of authority can further be traced to the failure to use our soul's intellectual powers of *chochma* and *binah*, which are referred to as the father and mother of our emotions. *Chochma* is the ability to conceptualize and *binah* is the ability to develop and flesh out an idea. When

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our internal father and mother are respected and valued we can control our emotions.

In the Messianic Age, we will fully appreciate the role of our earthly parents. There will no longer be an external generation gap because there will no longer be an internal generation gap between our *chochma-binah* and our emotions.

This list concludes the First Tablet, which focuses on our relationship with G-d. We now proceed to the Second Tablet which highlights the way we will relate to other people and retranslate the next five statements to conform to the reality that will become the norm in the imminent Age of Redemption.

### Divine Imprimatur

6. "You will not deny the image of G-d imprinted on every human being."

Today, we can cause harm to others—even, G-d forbid, murdering them. Before an evil person can cause harm to another, he must

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first devalue the other and deny the other's humanity, which the Torah defines as created in the image of G-d.

In the Messianic Age, however, we will no longer see a human being without also seeing his or her Divinity. We will fully value each other and recognize that our faults do not define us.

In today's distorted world, when a person does something wrong people commonly say "well, he's only human." That is a misnomer. When a person commits a crime we should say, "that's the animal soul within his humanity," and only when someone is doing something right say "he is human!" G-d's image, which defines humanity, expresses itself through each person's goodness and righteousness.

In the Messianic Age, our Animal Souls will be fully tamed and refined. There will be nothing clouding our Divine images and therefore nobody will do anything to disrespect another.

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### **No Pendulum Swings**

7. "You will no longer be capable of dividing your loyalties."

Adultery is just the most extreme example of betraying one's loyalty to another. But we currently engage in far more subtle forms of this betrayal. With the dawn of the Messianic Age we will no longer compromise our relationships – any of them.

Betrayal is the consequence when we forget that certain individuals deserve more love and attention than others. One of the worst forms of contemporary evil is the attempt to make everyone equal by declaration. This leads to our having no special relationships with anyone. Instead we extend our care and concern to everyone, and in so doing dilute them. The Torah demands that we discriminate between people. We must treat our spouses differently from everyone else. There are also special roles for a friend, members of one's family and extended family and the Jewish people.

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The problem with relationships throughout history has been their pendulum-like swings in opposite directions. Either we demonize those who are not like us and erect barriers between us or, quixotically, we declare the equality of every member of society. Both systems—which reached their nadir of evil with the Nazi and Stalinist ideologies—are responsible for the greatest inhumanity to, and betrayal of the other.

In the Messianic Age, while we will grasp the underlying unity of all existence, we will still be able to recognize our unique relationships for what they truly are: precious.

### **The Supremacy of the Physical World**

**8.** "You will not disrespect the integrity of the physical world."

According to the Talmud, this statement in its "commandment mode" prohibits kidnapping, but by extension, it may include all forms of theft.

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Although, it may seem counterintuitive, a lack of respect for the physical world, and its role in realizing the purpose of creation, underlies the evil of theft in all its forms.

When G-d gives us our bodies, and by extension our material possessions, He does so with a purpose. Our physical aspect is not evil. On the contrary, it is the only channel we have to connect to G-d. The only way we can connect to Him is by performing a mitzvah which involves our bodies and our possessions. However, each one of us is given our own exclusive body and possessions to refine and elevate. Stealing another's physical resources (be they body or material) denies that person the ability to elevate the physical world and fulfill its purpose.

In the Messianic Age, we will come to a complete understanding of the value of the physical and how our bodies and possessions are ours to use in the service of G-d.

**True Integrity**

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9. “You will not misrepresent who you truly are.”

At the present time we misrepresent (“bear false witness”) ourselves by not having our lives in perfect alignment with G-d and our soul’s true nature. Just as if we were to complain of the cold in the midst of the heat of summer, we misrepresent reality. When we go in directions inconsistent with our mission and soul, we are, in effect, bearing false testimony about who we really are and whom we represent.

In the Messianic Age, there will be no dichotomy between the reality of who we are and how we comport ourselves.

### **No Need for Rivalry**

10. “You will not need to covet your neighbor’s possessions and resort to the motivating force of rivalry.”

The last statement of Maimonides’ Code of Law, in which he describes the more advanced stages of the Messianic Age,

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mentions that there will be no more jealousy and rivalry because everything will be abundant and the world will be deluged with the knowledge G-d.

It would seem that rivalry and jealousy are the last human frailties that will be remedied. Because, after all is said and done, rivalry is part of what motivates us to grow. To get rid of rivalry prematurely might stifle our spiritual progress. We may never be content with our spiritual lives. However, once we have seen the fulfillment of the preceding nine declarations, which will enable us to say “mission accomplished,” then can we shed our need for rivalry entirely.

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**ESSAY TWENTY-ONE**  
**A DIRECT LINE**

There are two ways to connect to G-d; direct  
and indirect.

The converts approach is direct

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# ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

### A DIRECT LINE

#### **Moses and Israel**

This week's parsha opens with some enigmatic statements:

It begins: "Moses' father-in-law, Yisro, the priest of Midian, heard about all that G-d had done for Moses and His people Israel when He brought Israel out of Egypt."

A question is posed, why does Yisro separate Moses from Israel?

Another question is asked on the following verses: "Yisro brought along Moses' wife Tziporah... and her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom, because he declared, 'I was a foreigner [Ger] in a strange land...'"

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The reason for choosing this name Gershom had already been mentioned earlier at the time of his birth. Why repeat it here?

### **Yisro's Unusual Position**

To answer these questions we must first answer a much more fundamental question concerning the name of the parsha, as well as some of its content:

This Torah portion, can be called the “mother of all Torah portions” because it contains the events of Mattan Torah, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. So, shouldn't the parsha have been named “Torah,” “Moses” or “Sinai” instead? Or indeed any other name that would capture history's most momentous event? Instead, this parsha is named after Yisro, Moses' father-in-law, formerly a Midianite pagan priest!

Moreover, the Zohar states that G-d waited for Yisro to arrive at Sinai before He was ready to give the Torah to the Jewish people! Why was his participation so crucial?

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If this is not sufficiently puzzling, the Torah relates that Yisro actually contributed to the design of the Torah's judicial system and thereby added a section to the Torah!

It seems clear that Yisro was hardly an inconsequential figure, although he was the consummate “outsider” with dubious credentials.

How can we explain Yisro's elevated position in the Torah?

### **The Conversion Paradox**

To crack this riddle, we have to examine the Torah's view of the Jewish nation and its relationship to outsiders who join the fold. We routinely identify ourselves as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah. There is hardly a section in the Torah that doesn't invoke their memory. G-d's “love affair” with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs is so powerful that in their merit G-d overlooks our iniquities and promises to liberate us from exile.

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Moreover, our Sages speak of the distinguishing traits of the Jewish people as though they are part of our DNA, inherited directly from the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The Talmud states that one who lacks compassion, kindness and modesty will have his or her Jewish identity called into question and reasonably so. Thus, the refusal of the Gibeonites to soften their harsh demand for retribution against the descendants of King Saul for the harm Saul had caused them, was King David's cue to bar them from marrying into the Jewish community. They were banned because of their un-Jewish attitude.

It would stand to reason that Judaism is based on our biological connection to our ancestors.

Yet, the Torah not only permits conversion to Judaism, but as Maimonides states emphatically, there is a double Mitzvah in loving a convert to Judaism. The first commandment is the general one that applies to all the Jewish people, who are to be loved as ourselves. The second is a specific Mitzvah to love the convert in particular.

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The question therefore arises, how do we reconcile the converts' lack of genetic continuity with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and their total acceptance into the Jewish fold?

### **The Soul's DNA**

The answer lies in a better understanding of our relationship to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. Whatever genetic material they possessed cannot possibly be preserved undiluted beyond a few generations. In addition, the Talmud states that our feeling for our progeny does not normally extended beyond four generations. It is therefore hard to imagine why the Patriarchs and Matriarchs would feel such closeness to the Jewish people who are hundreds of generations away from them. Moreover, they are also the progenitors of many other groups of people. Yet, nowhere does the Torah ascribe to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs a feeling of love and responsibility for all their descendants. Their love for us is rather selective.

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And just as it is hard to imagine how their love can extend down to us, it is equally challenging for us to feel close to our ancestors going back so many generations.

It is therefore obvious that our relationship with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs is not just based on biology but rather on the unique souls they possessed and bequeathed to their descendants. What we have inherited from them is spiritual DNA, embedded in our souls, which translates into the attitudes that even the most unaffiliated Jew possesses innately.

This soul, which everyone born Jewish possesses, is shared by all those who have undergone Halachic conversion. The conversion process, according to the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sephardic Sages known as the Chida, is actually a process of discovery. In it the convert discovers that he or she has always possessed a soul with the imprimatur, “Descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah” etched in its fabric

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One can still mount an argument that the convert's relationship to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs is less pronounced than it is for those who were born Jewish. After all he or she is not biologically connected and did not share in the Jewish people's history.

### **Direct Line to G-d**

Maimonides, in one of his celebrated letters to Ovadiah the convert, turned this argument on its head. After explaining that he may refer to Abraham as his father and identify with all of the experiences of the Jewish people he concludes with the famous words,

“Do not consider your [Ovadiah's] origin as inferior. While we are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you derive from Him through whose word the world was created. As is said by Isaiah: “One shall say, I am G-d's, and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob” (Is. 44:5).”

Maimonides stated that while our devotion to Judaism is primarily based on our receiving

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the tradition from our parents and they from their parents, all the way back to the original progenitors of the Jewish people, the convert seeks and discovers his or her relationship with G-d directly.

In other words, the convert enjoys a unique status. On the one hand, he or she has become an integral part of the Jewish people and shares their past tragedy and salvation. On the other hand, because the convert's physical connection is less self-evident (they are not biological descendants of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs) they compensate for this by their more direct connection with G-d.

Now we can better understand Yisro's ambivalence as he joined the Jewish people. Yisro did not know what his status would be as a converted pagan. After all, he did not share their DNA (although a descendant of Abraham, he did not descend from Isaac and Jacob). More significantly, he had not shared their formative experiences in Egypt. If Judaism is understood to revolve around our shared experience as slaves and our

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liberation, how could Yisro feel that he would be fully accepted since he had not shared that experience?

This answers the question we initially posed above: why did the Torah describe Yisro as mentioning Moses separately from his mention of the Jewish people? Like Yisro, Moses was an outsider in terms of the collective Jewish experience. First, as a member of the Tribe of Levi he was not enslaved. All the pain and suffering visited upon the Jewish people did not apply to the Levites. Moses, in particular, had been raised in Pharaoh's palace and was thus doubly insulated from the anguish and torture. Yet it was clear that G-d treated Moses as one of the People and had an unparalleled relationship with him.

This gave Yisro great comfort because it demonstrated two salient points:

First, when we are a part of the Jewish community, we share in all of its historical ups and downs, as if they had happened to us personally. We can empathize with the

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experiences of the historical others because we are members of one organic people. If that could apply to Moses, who was an “outsider” in terms of his experiences, Yisro realized it might very well apply to him too.

We can now also understand why the Torah repeats Moses’ reason for naming his son Gershom: “because he declared, ‘I was a foreigner [Ger] in a strange land.’” The repetition of the rationale for Gershom’s name underscores the fact that Moses himself was a stranger, an outsider, and yet he became the consummate insider.

Second, Yisro realized Moses’ ability to connect directly to G-d and G-d to him made up for the apparent lack of shared experiences with the People. Yisro realized that he too had a direct relationship with G-d.

We can now also understand why G-d waited for Yisro before giving the Torah at Sinai. While Yisro may have been an outsider, he enjoyed an advantage over the rest of the

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Jewish people because of his direct connection to G-d.

G-d gave us the Torah to facilitate our direct connection to Him. It did not suffice for us to be connected to Him through our forebears. When we lack the “directedness” to G-d we fall back on our link to Him through the past. This is the converse of the convert, who while weaker in the indirect approach via the past makes up for it in the direct approach to Him.

Yisro’s epiphany was the prelude to Mount Sinai where we underwent a direct experience as well. Every Jew, man, woman and child, saw and heard G-d communicate with the People in the most direct fashion. But not for long. The power of G-d’s direct revelation proved too much, and so they asked G-d to transmit the rest of the commandments through Moses. That direct communication was replaced over time by the transmission of the Torah from generation to generation.

Yisro, in effect, became the model for the direct communication of G-d to us, and

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serves as an important motivation for us to relive the spirit of Sinai.

In the Messianic Age we will see the full and permanent restoration of the direct Sinai experience. We will all prove capable of receiving G-d's open revelation. The prophet Isaiah (30:20) declares, "...Your Teacher shall not hide Himself anymore; but your eyes shall see your Teacher." Whereas Sinai was a temporary and limited phenomenon, the Sinai experience will become a permanent and universal phenomenon in the Messianic Age.