

In this Torah portion we have the Ten Commandments. At one time the Ten Commandments were part of the davening right next to the Shma. The Rabbis, though, about over 2000 years ago took the Ten Commandments out of the prayers although they are still at the end of the Siddur because to many people were saying that all there is to religion is the Ten Commandments. The trouble with this is that the Ten Commandments are just statements of principle. It's how you apply them that counts. How do you honor your father or mother? How do you worship G-d? How do you create a society in which there is no murder or robbery? It is how you implement it that is important. Unfortunately, too many people feel that if they believe in the principle that's all that's important. Whether or not they implement the ideals of the Ten Commandments is irrelevant. This is wrong. This reminds me of the story of when I was teaching school and one little girl raised her hand and said, "What is the difference between unlawful and illegal?". Another little girl raised her hand and said, "I know, I know. Unlawful is when you do something that's against the law. Illegal is when you have a sick bird". Unfortunately, this is the way many people treat the Ten Commandments. They are not so sure how to apply them. One of the reasons communism <sup>doesn't</sup> works is because when it's everybody's money it's nobody's money. We just read how somebody embezzled the bank claiming what difference does it make? The insurance company will pay anyway. People fail to make the correct distinctions. They have a way of fudging moral distinctions. This Torah portion which contains the Ten Commandments is named after a non-Jew, Jethro. Not only is it named after a non-Jew it is named after a man who worshipped idols, who joined seven different cults, a man who even made Moshe promise to raise his first son as an idolator. That's why when Moshe was going down to Egypt the angel of death wanted to attack him because his son was not circumcized but Sipporah, his wife, circumcized him. Why should this Torah portion which contains the Ten Commandments be named after him?

After all, why isn't it named after Moshe? There is not even one Torah portion named after Moshe. The answer, to my mind, is because when the Jewish people were being enslaved Pharoah had three advisors. One was named Bilam, one was named Job and the other was Jethro. When Pharoah decided to issue his evil decrees Bilam thought it was a good idea. He told Pharoah he had to do it to preserve his kingdom, etc. Job remained noncommittal. He did not say yes. He did not say no. He fudged his position. That's why the Rabbis say later on he was punished because he should have spoken out. Jethro, on the other hand, protested and he left. He was a man of integrity. That's why he also changed his religion so many times. He would not put up with things which were not on the up and up. When he came to see his son-in-law, Moshe, he also did not like it that Moshe was sitting while the people were standing. This was not proper. This did not show the people the proper respect. The reason this Torah portion is named after Jethro is because he taught us that the Torah must be implemented with integrity. He also told Moshe that he should divide the people into tens and hundreds and thousands. He should delegate authority. He should not be a tyrant. The Torah would spring from the people. After we read about the Ten Commandments we also learn how the altar is to be made. Religion also can become corrupt if it is not pursued with integrity. Why did Jethro come to see the Jewish people? Because he heard that Moshe Rabbeinu and Joshua fought for the Danites. When the Amalakites attacked them they thought the rest of the Jews would not fight for them since the Danites were backsliders and had become idol worshippers. Moshe and Joshua fought for them. The Ten Commandments must always be implemented with humanity and integrity and then they will survive. If they are only worshipped as holy principles they will lead to great abuse.

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This Torah portion opens with the statement that Jethro, the Priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard all which G-d did from Moshe and for Israel and its people that G-d brought out Israel from Egypt. Rashi explains that what did Jethro hear? He heard about the splitting of the Red Sea and the war of Amalek and Rashi also continues to say that when it says "all which G-d did" this means the manna, the well of water, and the war of Amalek. Why this contradiction? Rashi should say he heard five things or four things since he repeats the war of Amalek. Also, why does it say Jethro, the Priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe? Why must it say both these things? The answer to this question, I believe, is in a Midrash which states that when G-d was giving the Ten Commandments all the nations of the world were quiet. They were also listening. When they heard the first few commandments about I am the Lord Your G-d, you should have no other G-ds, do not take G-d's name in vain, keep the Sabbath day, they were not impressed. They said what an egotistical G-d. He is only interested in His own glory. But when they heard about the commandment honoring your father and mother they quickly became impressed. In the Haphtorah that we read today we learn how Isaiah overheard the angels say, "Holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts". G-d is holy and completely different than we are. He is special. He is unique yet he wants to have a bond with each of us. This is the type of relationship that we must have with each other as well. We must each recognize each other's uniqueness and specialness. We must never tamper with it or try to destroy it, but we must want to have bonds of friendship with everyone. Jethro heard two things which made him come. He heard about the splitting of the Red Sea. G-d was doing miracles for the Jewish people. He had a special relationship with them, and he heard about the war of Amalek. He heard how Amalek could not stand the fact that the Jewish people had this special quality. He did not want to have any bonds of friendship with Israel. Unfortunately, in our day this is still true. People want to destroy us because we are special and unique. Zionism is now a code word for evil. Jethro wanted to throw in his lot with our people because he knew that this special relationship should be maintained and he knew that the Jewish people wanted to have bonds of friendship with everybody. We also learned what G-d had done for Israel.

G-d had given them water and food and the ability to overcome their enemies. Jethro is referred here as the father-in-law of Moshe to emphasize the point that the Jewish people got this strength only because of their families. If they will keep their families, strengthen them, the nations of the world will be impressed and G-d will give them the strength to take care of their material needs and to overcome their enemies. But if their families falter they will not have this strength. Each of us must establish families in which everyone is treated as special and unique but with whom everyone wants to have a bond. The story about a man whose daughter married a fellow who did not seem to have too much on the ball. The father-in-law took him into the business. He told the young man that he would give him 50% of the business but he wanted him to start at the bottom to learn the business and when he retired he would give it all to him. He put him in the shipping room where he made a terrible mess. He put him in accounting and things got all messed up. He put him in sales and all the customers got insulted. He put him in manufacturing and all the machines broke. He took him to the office and said, "What should I do with you? You made a mess of everything." He said, "I don't know, why don't you buy me out?". Unfortunately, the nations of the world say the same thing to the Jewish people. They take our principles and ideas and twist them around and they want to buy us out. They do not want us around but we have been assured that if we keep our families strong we will always have the strength to overcome.

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In the Torah portion, Yisro, we have the famous statement when G-d gave the Torah to Israel "so you should say to the house of Jacob and to the sons of Israel". The Rabbis learn from this verse that G-d first gave the Torah to the women before He gave it to the men, because He knew that if the women would not accept the Torah it was no use giving it to the men. It was the moral courage of the women which allowed and still allows the Jewish people to continue. The Jewish women did not participate in the sin of the Golden Calf and they also did not participate in the sin of the spies who returned from the land of Canaan with an evil report. In fact, the Rabbis say that the blessing that the women say thanking G-d for making them according to His will only women can say because they are closer to G-d's will than are men. They do not have as many violent impulses. In this Torah portion we learn how Yisro joined the Jewish people and became a Jew. The Rabbis tell us that Yisro became a Jew because he heard two things; one, about the splitting of the Red Sea, and two, about the Jewish people's fight with Amalek. The Rabbis tell us that these two things impressed him because they said something about the Jewish people's values. When the Jewish people were trapped between the desert and the sea with the Egyptian army pursuing them, they did not give up. They tried their best. They were even willing to go into the sea. The ability to persevere in spite of troubles and problems is a very important quality. G-d does not require that we do more than we can. He just requires that we persevere, that we try. The reason the battle with Amalek impressed Yisro was because Yisro heard that Amalek attacked the tribe of Dan who were idol worshippers. They were not sure that they wanted to be Jewish, but the Jewish people fought for them. They did not abandon them because they had the wrong ideology. The ability to help and the willingness to help is very important. To persevere and always help everyone are the values which drew Yisro to Judaism. Yisro was a man who had tried all different philosophies. The Rabbis say that he had seven names because he had tried seven different ways of living and they did not work. He eventually came and became a Jew. He tried Chovov, to be a lover. He tried Chovav, to social climb. He tried Petuel, to become a rich man, a millionaire. He tried Re'uel, mysticism. He tried Kaine, to be an artisan, to be just

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concerned with the arts, but that did not work. He tried Yeser, ideology, but that did not work either. Unfortunately, people who submit to ideology are doing the worst thing because they sacrifice truth. This week I heard Patrick Moynahan talk and he said how once again you Jews are in the forefront of the fight against totalitarianism. In the 30's it was Hitler screaming "Jew, Jew". In the 80's it is the Russians screaming "Zionist, Zionist". You know who murdered all the Jews at Babiya? Zionists and Nazis. To say something like that is ludicrous, but people believe it now. In the world today Zionist and sinister mean the same thing. We find the Arabs at the UN saying that Israel is Zionist Nazi State. How can anyone believe that? Patrick Moynahan told us that we are in great danger and so are the democracies. Hitler's attack in the 30's on the Jews was really against democracy. So today Russia's attacks are against democracies. Zionism will allow them to pick democracies off one by one. After all, nobody wants to fight for the Jews. Yisro was very impressed with the Jewish people because they put people above ideology. We must always do something. I am reminded of the story they tell about a shortage of meat in Russia. One day they announced they would hand out meat. Everyone came at 6:00 a.m. At 7:00 they told all the Jews to go home. At 8:00 they told all the non-Communist to go home. At 10:00 they told all those who were not Communist officials to go home. At 11:00 the local Commisar came out and said, "We really do not have any meat. Please go home." at which point one Russian said to another, "See, these Jews, they always get preferential treatment".

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In this Torah portion we learn how Yisro comes and joins the Jewish people. Up to this time his name had been Yesser not Yisro. When he came to join the Jewish people he became different. He added a Vahv to his name. Jews have always been looked at differently. Yisro was an educated man. In fact, the Rabbi say he was a very good and compassionate man. They say that when Pharaoh was about to issue his decree casting all the Jewish boys in the river he asked his three counselors to give their opinion about it. The Rabbis say his three counselors were Bilam, Job, and Yisro. Bilam told him it was a wonderful idea. Job was silent. Yisro told him he did not like the idea and he quit and went into the desert. We Jewish people have been made the scapegoat for many things in the world. The world does not want to face up to its own problems. Yisro was not going to be looked at differently. Even today we Jews are judged and condemned for events which are totally ridiculous, like, for example, this recent event of the Marine who supposedly stopped three Israeli tanks from entering U.S. controlled territory. Everyone agrees the tanks were in territory assigned to Israel. A non-Jewish reporter from "The Philadelphia Inquirer" who saw the incident, relates that the tanks were in Israeli assigned territory. It looks like they went out to get shot. This, of course, would have created a terrible incident and then all Israeli support could be withdrawn as if without Israel all the problems of the Middle East would be solved. The headlines and slanted news, though, make Israel and all Jews by inference to be terrible people. In this week's Torah portion we learn that when the Jewish people would accept the Torah it says "and Moshe brought out the people to greet G-d at the camp and they stood under the mountain" which the Rabbis interpret to mean that the mountain was bent over them like a cask. If they would accept the Torah, well and good. If not, the mountain would tumble over them. But why did G-d had to resort to this strategem to get the Jewish people to accept the Torah? Hadn't they already said, "We will do and we will obey"? There are many answers to this question one of which I wrote about in the bulletin, but another answer is that the Jewish people wanted the Torah but they feared the consequences, the consequences that would come to them from the other peoples. They would be different. They would be set apart. In fact, the Rabbis say the word for hatred in Hebrew, "Sina", and the word "Sinai", the mountain

upon which we received the Torah are related. Since the time the Jewish people received the Torah they have been hated and singled out and judged much more harshly than anyone else. It was this difference, this knowledge that hatred would now be directed against them which caused the Jewish people to equivocate. However, there is another explanation. Tachtis can mean "under". The Jewish people would become subterranean people, people without identity and purpose, helpless and hopeless if they did not accept the Torah. Unfortunately, in our day we see that this is true, that many Jews do not realize the great contributions that Jews throughout the centuries have made to the world, and they are somehow ashamed to be Jews. We have to remember what is stated in this Torah portion, "and you shall be for Me My own treasure among the peoples and you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy people". We Jewish people should be proud of what we have given to the world. Unfortunately, many Jews have believed the lies that have been told against us. In fact, there are even Jews who sympathize with the Nazis. Just this past week, January 30th, marked the 50th year that Hitler rose to power. He rose to power by directing and deflecting all the people's frustrations upon our people. Some Jews even went so far in Berlin as to commit suicide because they believed Hitler and the best thing they could do for the world was cease to exist and then all the world's problems would cease to exist. This, of course, is nonsense, but it is still happening today. If somehow the stubborn Jew could be humbled, everything would be fine. The papers today are trying hard to discredit Israel. Nothing they do could ever be right. We, of course, should always be proud of our achievements, but we should never boast. In the last sentence of this week's Torah portion it says "you shall not go up by steps upon My altar, that your nakedness should not be uncovered". The Rabbis interpret this to mean you should not bring up your "Malos", good qualities, all the time unless people start to concentrate on your bad qualities, on your weaknesses. We Jews are not perfect but we are not the devils the world makes us out to be either. Every Jew should open his mouth and say the truth and not accept lies or phony incidents to be used against him. The story about a young man who went to Hollywood and got a part in a movie. He called his father and said, "Dad, I just got a character part in a movie playing opposite a woman who is very similar to Mom". His

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father thought a minute and said, "I am sorry, Son, I was hoping that you would get a speaking part". Not enough Jews speak up. The hatred may be inevitable, but we do not have to believe it.

How do we arrive at truth

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Too often today people are looking to understand their problems in newspaper headline fashion. They really do not want to probe into their problems and find out what all the issues are before coming to a decision. Instead, they want someone else, in two or three words, to explain to them what they should do or what they should believe in and let it go at that. They are not interested in looking for the context which surrounds their problems or in really analyzing the issues so that they can come to a correct conclusion. They have a notion that truth and right are very simple things and should be able to be stated in a very few words.

In fact, many times they will tell me, "Rabbi, I am not interested in all these speculations, just tell me what I should or should not do". I might tell them what they should or should not do but then they are acting like robots. They have not thought the issues through and in other situations they may do the wrong thing. They then could say, "But, Rabbi, you told me to do this", and I would have to answer them, "Yes, I told you to do what you are doing, but I told you to do what you are doing in a different situation". The problem of ascertaining the truth and thereby establishing a course of action is not an easy one. The Jewish idea of truth is different from the Greek platonic idea of truth. The Greek idea was that there was one truth, one ideal for everything. There was one ideal man, society, building, etc. and we just had to conform all our actions to it. We do not believe this. Life, <sup>to us</sup> ~~thus~~, is a constant tension between many contrasting and conflicting truths and every situation forces us to look again and to clarify what is true and right in every particular circumstance.

This is what Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz pointed out in his brilliant lectures when he stated that the Talmud is a strange book. It is a strange book because ~~in order~~ to learn it you must argue with it and doubt it. In fact, the very text shouts at you, "Doubt me". ✓

The problems and dilemmas which the Talmud discusses are never really resolved. They continue from generation to generation. We are constantly called upon to re-evaluate positions and to clarify issues based upon these debates which are always couched in the present tense, "Rova says or Abaye says". Because of this fact many times in Talmudic

debate when two sages are arguing one sage will actually say to the other, "You know, you can get out of the dilemma I got you into by my sharp questions by offering me this solution". In other words, the important thing is the debate, not who wins. We should all want to debate the subject further. You should even help your opponent clarify his opinions when you can. When we deal with truth it is not important who wins or loses. We all must struggle and struggle over and over again to find out what is proper in every context.

Most problems in life arise because we take mental shortcuts. For example, I remember once when as a boy I entertained a visitor from a foreign country who knew just a little English. He arrived at my house just as the evening paper was being delivered. As a boy I was very interested in sports and the first thing I did was turn to the sports page. There he sounded out the headline. It read "Reds Massacre Cardinals". He was convinced that a Communist revolution was taking place and that all the bishops had been killed. I tried to assure him that this was not so, but it took a lot of explaining. Many times we, too, make all sorts of assumptions which are fallacious, and the problem with many people is that they do not want to sharpen their thinking so that they can tell what are facts and what are assumptions and thereby be able to get to the heart of the problem.

In the Torah portion, Yisro, we learn about the Ten Commandments. It says "Honor thy father and thy mother". Besides, of course, the literal explanation there are other explanations which refer the character of a father and the character of a mother to other parts of our tradition. In the "Yalkut Reuven" we read that "thy father" refers to the written Torah and "thy mother" to the oral Torah. The association of father with the written Torah and mother with the oral Torah is similar to the roles of the two parents. The written Torah is like a father, strict and authoritative, demanding obedience, making no concessions and knowing no compromise. The oral Torah, on the other hand, is compared to a mother. It considers circumstances. It looks at the weaknesses as well as the strengths of human nature. It puts things into context. It would seem, at first glance, that the oral Torah would be more appealing and attractive to the Jewish people than the

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written Torah. However, the Rabbis explain that this was not so.

In the Midrash Tanchuma we learn that Israel would not accept the Torah until the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an inverted cask. This is because of what it says in our Torah portion, Yisro, "and they stood under the mountain".

Rav Dimi explains that this means that the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel, "If you accept the Torah, o.k., if not then ~~there~~ <sup>will fall on you and it</sup> Mount Sinai shall be your burial place".

The Midrash continues by saying that we cannot claim that G-d threatened to overturn the mountain on them because they would not accept the written Torah, because as soon as G-d had asked them if they would accept the written Torah the Jewish people had responded, "We will do and we will listen". It must, therefore, be that they did not want to accept the oral Torah. The reason why they were so willing to accept the written Torah was because there was no toil and trouble about it and it was brief. On the other hand, G-d had to coerce them to accept the oral Torah because it demanded rigorous thinking and going into minute details. To understand the oral law was an extremely hard undertaking. The written Torah, on the other hand, required no effort.

People today especially do not want to put forth any effort. They want to make learning fun. This extends to religion as well. Anything that requires hard work and effort they shy away from. "Rabbi, just tell me what the rules are, that's all I want to know."

Unfortunately, in life it is not so easy to give a few rules and hope everything will go well. Things are much more complex. When we say "Honor thy father and mother" and say that this concept of father and mother refers to written Torah and the oral Torah, we mean that just as the father initiates the birth process, so does the written Torah initiate the Torah process, and just as the mother labors to give birth to a child, so does the toil and laboring of the oral Torah produce the unique Jewish personality. The very toiling and struggling with the oral law is what establishes the unique Jewish personality. In fact, we learn in the Talmud, itself, that G-d has said, "Better that My children should forget Me than that they should forget My Torah. Let them study My Torah and forget Me rather than vice versa."

In life today we are all looking for short answers. We have fast service food, digests of every sort, instant two minute news, and because of this we think we can also have instant religion and instant wisdom without the toil and the effort that are required. This has spilled over into our marriages and into all our relationships. Instant gratification is the rule. It will not work. We need to struggle and toil with concepts and ideas. We need to work at things if we want to make them work. We are Jews not because of the written Torah. We are Jews because of the oral Torah. Other religions have, for the last 2000 years, taken over our written Torah but not our oral Torah. We Jews have accomplished much in the world because we have always maintained our capacity to think and to analyze, to struggle and to see both sides of almost every issue, to combine faith and doubt. As Rabbi Steinsaltz said, the secret of the Jew is that we have learned to think. We have never stopped analyzing and learning.

In the story of Purim we have a prime illustration of what happens when a people does not think. Achashveros is a man who always wants ready-made opinions. He is only interested in partying. He hasn't the time to think. Because of this, he executed his first wife, almost has all the Jewish people murdered in his name, and ends up looking like a bumbling idiot. We not only harm ourselves when we don't think clearly, we also can end up harming others. We Jews have always prized thinking and analyzing. This has been the secret of our success. May we continue to do so because it is only in this way that we will, like the Jews of Esther's time, survive as Jews.

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We are going to read the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are grouped into two parts; those between man and man and those between man and G-d. Those between man and man speak about the limitations of human achievement. They, though, by inference stress the fact that we are to go out and achieve. The first five Commandments stress the fact that we all need someone to bring these achievements to. We all need to be appreciated. Most people, what wouldn't they do to get a Yasher Koach, a well done, from their family or parents? Many times people achieve something not for the money, but for appreciation from those they love. That's what it means to be a blessing, a Brocha. The word Brocha in Hebrew means not only to bless, but to greet, to thank, to appreciate. Unfortunately, in our day and age there are too many people who do not know this. They never want to appreciate or thank anyone. Because of this, their families suffer. We all need to be appreciated. In the Torah portion, Beshalach, we learn about a strange word, "Horem" which is used only three times in the Torah. This word is used by G-d when He tells Moshe to lift up his staff before the Red Sea splits. This word began the splitting of the Red Sea, and the subsequent song of praise that Moshe sang. We must learn to sing, to thank, to appreciate. The Rabbis tell us that Chisyaho was supposed to be the Mashiach. He was a great and a good King, but after a miracle happened to him (the Assyrian army had <sup>Surrendered</sup> ~~seized~~ Jerusalem and when all seemed lost either a terrible plague or a meteor explosion or some other event happened which destroyed the Assyrian army) Chisyaho did not sing praise to G-d and, therefore, the Rabbis say he could not be the Mashiach. We all need families to teach us how to thank and appreciate and lift up each other's spirits. The other two times "Horem" is mentioned is in the story of Elisha when a fisherman lost his tools and Elisha said, "Lift, oh sea, these tools". The third time is when G-d told Isaiah, "Lift up your voice". Education should teach us three things. It should teach us how to thank, how to appreciate. It should give us character. It should also teach us skills and finally it should teach us how to express ourselves, how to lift up our voice, how to express ourselves in music, art, etc. Unfortunately, in our modern day we only learn skills and how to express ourselves in school. We do not learn how to thank and appreciate. A few months

ago a young man came to see me. He was a Phi Beta Kappa. He had a very fine job in computers, but the man had nowhere to go. All he did was come home, take a walk, and go to bed. He could not relate to anybody. He had a severe personality problem. I tried to get him to get help. I don't know if he did or didn't, but I am sure that if he will not he will end up committing suicide. On Shabbos we have three different portions in the Shmone Esre. On Friday night we speak about G-d being the Creator. On Saturday morning we speak about G-d giving us the Torah, and on Saturday afternoon we talk about G-d sending the Messiah. We need all these things to be man the appreciator. We need to know that G-d has created us, that we are here for a purpose and a reason, that we are needed. We have to know that there is a right and a wrong. We also have to know that we can contribute to the future. It is not enough just to have skills. We must also have character, must know that we are needed and wanted and that we know how to appreciate and thank others, that we know how to be a blessing. We learn this mainly in the family. It is my hope and prayer that our youngsters will form these types of families because it was these types of families that molded the Jewish people. Sure, there was criticism, but there was also love and appreciation. What we wouldn't do to get a good word from those we love. There is too much emphasis on skills now. We need more than skills. It reminds me of the story of the missionary who was sent to Borneo to convert the cannibals. Then he returned home to England three or four years later he was asked if he was a great success. He said that he was. He was then asked if he had stopped the cannibals from eating other human beings. He said he hadn't. They then asked how he was a success to which he replied, "I taught them how to use a knife and fork". Unfortunately, in our day we are not teaching our children how to be human beings. We are teaching them how to use a knife and fork.

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In the Torah portion Yisro we learn about the Ten Commandments. Originally, the Ten Commandments were put right next to the Shma and were recited every day. However, since many people thought that all there was to the religion was the Ten Commandments, the Rabbis discontinued this practice. In Judaism the important thing is not espousing principles. It is implementing these principles in practice. This Torah portion, Yisro, opens by telling us how Yisro held the priest dominion, the father of Moshe all which G-d did for Moshe and for Israel, His people, and Yisro took the father-in-law, Moshe, Ziporah, the wife of Moshe, after he had sent her away and two of her children, etc. Later on it says that Yisro became the father-in-law of Moshe. Why does the Torah stress over and over again the father-in-law of Moshe? Yisro was obviously bringing Ziporah, his wife, and children to him. Moshe, when he had gone down to Egypt, had seen the persecution and slavery the Jewish people were under and he sent his wife and his children away so that they would not suffer. Yisro was now sending a message either by letter or a messenger telling him that he was coming. Here he is mentioning over and over again that he is Moshe's father-in-law, and, what is more strange, he mentions two of her sons. Why didn't he say two of your sons, your being plural? Why does he mention that these sons were Ziporah's sons? What's more, when Yisro does come to Moshe he gets very upset because he sees that Moshe is sitting all day judging the people while they are standing. He does not like that. He feels that Moshe is being disrespectful to the people. He proposes that Moshe delegate authority and appoint judges over hundreds and tens and thousands. It is wrong to concentrate authority.

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We do not believe that just one person should have all the power, but what upsets Yisro more is the fact that Moshe is sitting and the people are standing. This is not right. Either Moshe should be standing and the people standing, or Moshe sitting and the people sitting. Yisro is very sensitive to these types of slights. The Rabbis tell us that originally Yisro was one of Pharaoh's three advisors when Pharaoh decided to throw all the Jewish boys in the river. Bilam thought Pharaoh was doing the right thing, Job, who was Pharaoh's second advisor, stayed quiet. He did not comment. Yisro thought it was a terrible thing and left. Yisro did not care that the astrologiers predicted that a baby would be born who would save the Jewish people from slavery and who would ruin Egypt. It was wrong to hurt little babies. It was wrong to hurt people. Yisro was very sensitive to this. According to the Rabbis, Yisro tried every religion and philosophy that there was, but he was always disappointed because these religions and philosophies put theory in front of people. When people were suffering they said, "Oh, well, that's the way it has to be." They are willing to sacrifice people for theory. They are willing to heap insult, injury, degradation, and even death for the sake of their theory. Yisro could not take this. Yisro knew that you always had to respect people. All the other philosophies with their protestations of love and good were no good unless they resulted in good. Many times philosophies say they stand for love and kindness, like in our day when Communism stated a beautiful theory: "Each should give according to his ability and take according to his needs", but, of course, we know how it ended in degradation and death. This same lesson is brought

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home by the story they tell of a potential convert who came to Shammai and he said, "Teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot so that I should know if I want to convert." Shammai got mad at him and chased him away with a builder's tool. This was not a serious approach. The potential convert then went to Hillel, who was tolerant and forbearing, and he said, "Teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot." Hillel told him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest, go and learn." The prospective convert was impressed, learned, and did convert. Why, though, did Hillel state the golden rule in the negative while the Torah states it in the positive, "You should love your neighbor as yourself." Hillel did not even quote it to him in Hebrew but in Aramaic. Why should Hillel have quoted the rule in the negative? Why didn't he quote it in the positive as the Torah does? The answer is that it is a lot harder to love your neighbor as yourself. It is a lot harder to do unto your neighbor as you would have him do unto you, because then you have to know him. You have to know what he likes and dislikes. When it comes to hurt and pain, it is almost universal. What hurts one person will probably hurt another. This is the very least that religion had to be based on. Many times people, for the sake of a greater good, feel they can insult and hurt people, but this is not so. The very bottom line is that you cannot hurt anybody. You may be able to go to a higher level and love them more intensely, but this does not mean that your love can allow you to hurt them. This was, of course, Torquemada's, the Spanish inquisitor, argument. He said he loved the Jews so much he was willing to torture them for an

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hour or so so they should not have to suffer the pains of eternal hell. Loving somebody never gives you the right to treat them with disrespect or cruelty or gives you the right to insult or degrade them. Many times people will say, "But, you know how I feel." That does not count. It is your deeds that count. This is, too, why the Rabbis tell us that the fourth commandment to honor thy father and mother is to be taken literally and also has a second meaning. The father refers to the written Torah and mother to the oral Torah. We need to have both. The oral Torah tells how to implement the written Torah. We just cannot believe the ideals of the written Torah without implementing them in practice. That is, too, why the Rabbis teach us that when the Torah was given to the Jewish people it says that "Vayis Yatz Vu B'Sachtees Hohor" "and they stood underneath the mountain". The Rabbis explain that this means that the mountain was hovering over them like a cask. If they would accept the Torah it would be all right, but if they would not accept it the mountain would come cascading down on them. Other Rabbis say how can this be so because we have just learned how the people had said, "Na'ased Vanishma" "We will do and we will understand the Torah." The Rabbis tell us that the Jewish people had accepted the written Torah, but not the oral Torah. Without implementing religious ideals in practice by showing respect and dignity to every individual, religious ideals become false. This is why in the beginning of the Torah portion it said, "and Yisro held the priest dominion, the father of Moshe, all which G-d did for Moshe and for Israel, His people" it mentions the father-in-law Moshe over and over again because when Yisro sent the message he was not sure how

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Moshe was going to greet him. After all, at one time he had been an idol worshipper. Was Moshe going to treat him with disrespect? What's more, Yisro was not sure how Moshe was going to treat his own wife, Ziporah. After all, maybe her conversion was suspect. That's why it says "and the two of her children" because the children go after the mother. If Ziporah's conversion was suspect, too, her children were not Jewish. Yisro did not know whether common decencies were going to be sacrificed for great goals as in other religions. That's why, too, Yisro was upset when he saw Moshe sitting and everybody else standing. After all, nobody else could love the Jewish people more than Moshe. He was willing to give his life for them. Even accidental disrespect rankled Yisro. Yisro knew that any religion whose adherence will demean and insult others is not worth much. You cannot go to a greater love. The basis must be, do not hurt anybody. Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you. There is a cute little shaggy dog story I heard which illustrates this point. A dog went into a bar and ordered a drink. The bartender was astounded, but gave it to him and told him it would cost \$10. The dog made a terrible face but put his paw in a purse, pulled out \$10, and put it on the counter. The bartender was astounded and looked at the dog and said, "We don't get many dogs here." The dog said, "Yeah, and at \$10 a drink, you won't see me here anymore either." Taking advantage of people or treating them with disrespect is a terrible thing and shows that a person who does that is truly not religious.

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In the Torah portion Yisro we learn about the Ten Commandments. We learn that the Jewish people had to make many preparations before they were allowed to receive the Ten Commandments. The rabbis explain on the verse, "And they travelled from Refitim and they came to the desert of Sinai and they camped in the desert and he camped there Israel opposite a mountain three different requirements that the Jewish people had to do before they were found worthy of receiving the Ten Commandments. When it says that they travelled from Refitim it means that they had to be willing to correct their deficiencies, their moral lapses, because Refitim is where they had been attacked by Amalek, and the rabbis say that the reason the Jewish people had been attacked by Amalek at Refitim was because they had doubted whether or not G-d was in there midst. In order for us to receive the Torah, in order for us to implement the Torah's teachings we, first of all, have to believe that we have the power to overcome our problems. If we do not believe that we have the power to overcome our problems then, of course, the Torah will do us no good because we will not feel that we have the strength in order to implement the teachings of the Torah into the world. The Jewish people after Refitim felt that they could change, they could make different characteristics stand out in their own personalities, that they could correct their moral lapses, and that they travelled through Refitim. The emphasis here is on the word travelled. Only if a person believes they can face the day with the inner strength necessary in order to become a better person it is only then that he can be found worthy of receiving the Torah. Those people who feel for some reason or another that they cannot face the new day, that they have to either use alcohol or drugs or something else in order to face their problems, they cannot receive the Torah because they do not feel they have the inner strength in order to do those things necessary to implement the teachings of the Torah in their own personal lives. So the Jewish people had to travel from Refitim, from this terrible depression which affects many people in all strata of society whether they are rich or poor. In fact, we know that other religions actually

say that a person has no power in order to be good, that other religions run around the problem, I know what is good, but where do I get the power to do it? They believe that they have to believe certain things or do certain things in order to get the power. We believe that G-d has given us all the power necessary for us to do good. We just have to be willing to use that power and want to do good. Our problem is we say, I have the power to do good, but what is good? That requires study, the study of the Torah to give us the exact way that we should evaluate different situations so that we can arrive at doing that which is good.

The second requirement before they could receive the Torah is that it says that they came to the desert of Sinai. The Jewish people had to realize that their lot was like living in a desert. There is a big difference between living in a desert and living in fertile land. If you live in Iowa or Indiana or Illinois all you basically have to do is put the seed in the ground and something is going to grow. You have really very little to do, and an individual can farm great tracts of land, but if you live in a desert it is not so. A desert needs the cooperative efforts of many, many people working together to grow anything. You have to have irrigation and fertilizers. It requires an awful lot of cooperation in order to grow anything in the desert. A person has to realize before he can accept the Torah that he is part of a family, part of a nation that helps him and that he needs them. You cannot make it all on your own. No farmer alone in the desert can make it by himself. He needs irrigation. He needs the water that is brought from someplace else. All the supplies have to come from someplace else. He cannot make it on his own. Therefore, you have to realize that you are part of a group and that the group needs you. In fact, we emphasize this over and over again in Judaism by the fact that we say that you have to daven by a minyan. We all need other people in order for us to realize our own potential. So they came to the desert of Sinai.

Finally, it says here, too, "And he camped here there Israel opposite the mount," singular. They were united. Here the essence is not that I need the other people to fulfill my destiny but also I have to be willing to contribute to society. Unless I am willing to contribute to society then I, too, will not be able to accept the Torah because the Torah demands that I be concerned about other people, that I have a compassionate relationship with them, that I am a caring individual, that I share what I have with other people so that Israel really becomes one, and they use the singular here, Vayeechan. It is not enough that I realize that I need other people to fulfill myself. I have to also realize that I, in order to fulfill myself, must also give to other people. That is the third requirement that is mentioned here before the Jewish people could receive the Torah.

It is also interesting to note that when Moshe came to the Jewish people and he told them about the Torah it says, "And all the people answered together and they said, 'All which G-d said we will do'." Notice that they emphasize the fact that they said that they are going to do it, and Moshe returned the words of the people to G-d. Actually, if we notice earlier what G-d said to Moshe He said something different. He said, "Now, if you will listen to My voice and you observe My commandment..." First He says, "If you will listen to My voice," means to understand what I am talking about. The Jewish people here did not say that we will understand. It says that we will do. Many times people are not interested in understanding things. They are only interested in what they have to do in a given situation, but G-d, in effect, says that that is really not enough. G-d wants more from us than that. Notice, also, that when Moshe gave this word to G-d about how the people said they were willing to do, G-d said to Moshe, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud in order that the people listen when I speak with you and the people will understand when I speak with you." It is not enough many times just to know what particular

commandments Judaism demands of us. We also have to understand how they relate to our lives, how they bring us closer to G-d and to man. We have to show how they are relevant to who we are as human beings, and that requires study. That, of course, is why Jewish study is so important because the more we study about Jewish things the more we see that the insights of the Torah have great bearings on our personal lives, that they teach us how to have better interpersonal relationships. It was only later in the Torah portion Mishpotim where the Jewish people said, "Not only will we do," although there, too, they answered, "And they answered all the people with one voice and they said, 'All the things which G-d spoke we will do'." But G-d was not really satisfied with that. It was later when it says, "And he took the book of the covenant (referring to Moshe) and he read in the ears of the people and they said all the people, 'We will do and we will understand'." It is not just enough to do because, unfortunately, many people, if they do not understand what they are doing, will stop doing it. We see that here in America today. In order for the Torah to be a part of our lives it is not enough that we should just say that we are going to do it because in most instances if we do not understand how what we do brings us closer to others, how it actually enhances our lives, we will not do it. We will say we will do it but we will not. We also have to have a certain basic understanding. It does not mean that we have to understand all the reasons to their full depth as to why G-d commanded certain things, but we have to realize how they really do bring us closer to G-d, how they really do bring us closer to our fellow human beings. Even though at the first blush many of the commandments may seem to have nothing at all to do with our relationship with others and with G-d, but we know that if we do them and we see how they bring people closer together. We see how a Friday night dinner brings a family together. Staying home on Shabbos is a wonderful thing because it draws a family closer together. Singing at the table brings a family together even closer than just eating together.

If we see, too, how when a family comes to shul together, how they discuss things together, how the children see how the father, too, needs the help of G-d, this draws a child closer to G-d and closer to his parents. It is important that we understand as well as that we do. Unfortunately, many people neglect Jewish learning. If we neglect Jewish learning then Jewish practices seem unconnected. They do not seem to fit together as a whole. They do not seem to have an effect on the whole personality of a human being. Therefore, it is very, very important that not only that we do but that we also understand. So another actual requirement for receiving the Torah is the effort that we must expend in order to learn how to keep the Torah. In fact, the rabbis say that when it says in the Torah that Moshe Rabbeinu brought out the people to greet G-d from the camp and they stood underneath the mountain, that that means that G-d had arched the mountain over the Jewish people like a cast and He had said, "If you are willing to accept the Torah, fine and dandy, if not, I'll have the mountain fall on you." How can that be? We just said before that the Jewish people had willingly said twice we will do it. They said another time we will do it and we will understand. The answer to that is that there are actually two Torahs. One Torah is the written Torah. The written Torah is a short Torah, like the constitution of the United States is a short constitution. The oral Torah, though, teaches us how to apply the Torah in every given situation, and that is very difficult and requires a great deal of effort. It requires a great deal of understanding. The Jewish people were willing to accept, the rabbis say, the written Torah but the oral Torah they were not sure they wanted at all because it was so much work, so much effort, but G-d said, "Unless you accept the oral Torah the written Torah is almost worthless because you will not know how to apply it." It will become some sort of an idealized vision, a utopian vision of how people should live but you will not be able to live it in your real life. In order for us to make it part of our life we have to learn it. We have to be willing to expend the energy and the time in order to make it part of us in every single one of

our activities. Unless we do that the Torah will not be part of our lives.

That's why, too, in this Torah portion when we learn how Yisro came to become a Jew that he came for three reasons. One rabbi, Rabbi Yehoshua, says he came because of the war of Amalek. Rabbi Eliezer says he came because of the splitting of the Red Sea, and Rabbi Eliezer Mordechai says he came because of the giving of the Torah. Actually, to be a practicing Jew, to be one who wants to be Jewish in the fullest sense we really need all these three things. If a Jew really wants to be a Jew he must be willing to fight for his people. That is what Rabbi Yehoshua said that Yisro heard about the Jews fighting Amalek. You have to be willing to stand up and fight for Jewish principles and not hide in the corner and be ashamed. You have to be proud of who you are and be willing to fight for it. The second thing is that Yisro heard about the splitting of the Red Sea and that is why Rabbi Eliezer says that that was why he came, because that showed to Yisro that there was a spiritual element to Jewish history, that the Jewish people exist not just for themselves but they exist because they represent a spiritual element to the world. Thirdly, Rabbi Eliezer Mordechai said because of the giving of the Torah, that Judaism has principles that the world still needs. Unless the world is going to learn these principles the world is never going to know peace and prosperity and harmony and brotherhood. Our ideals of compassion and of Chesed are not going to be found throughout all strata of society. Therefore, in order to be a Jew, in order to want to fulfill Jewish ideals we must be proud of who we are, we must realize that there is a spiritual component to our people, and we must be willing to implement the teachings of the Torah in all aspects of our lives. That, of course, implies that we know and we feel that we have the power to effect change in our lives if we have to, that we know that we need the cooperation of other people just to realize ourselves, and we also know that we can make a positive contribution to the world and that we should be willing to help everyone. That, of course,

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is very, very important. Finally, we have to be willing to struggle with the Torah in every aspect of our life to make sure that everything we do lives up to its high standards.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a man who was very tired and exhausted who came home from work. There he was met by his wife who said, "Honey, I have some good news and some bad news. What would you like to hear first?" He said, "Well, tell me the good news first." She said, "Honey, you know the air bags really work." We can always reframe things and make things seem different than what they are, but if we have Torah we will be able to recognize right and wrong no matter in what situation we find ourselves, and we will be able to lead decent and good lives. Let us all hope that we will lead decent and good lives so that the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

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In the Torah portion Yisro we learn how the Jewish people received the Ten Commandments and the Torah. The rabbis say that the Jewish people really did not want to accept the Torah, that G-d took Mount Sinai and inverted it as a cask over the Jewish people and He said that if you will accept the Torah, the cask will not drop upon you, but if you do not accept the Torah, then this mountain will down upon you. That's why the text reads, "And Moshe brought out the people to greet G-d from the camp and they stood underneath the mountain." Now the word Sachtees is unusual. It should have said B'Sachas and because it says Sachtees the rabbis were able to learn that that meant that the Jewish people actually accepted the Torah unwillingly. In fact, they say that the Jewish people only accepted the Torah willingly during the time of Esther, that in the Book of Esther we read how it says how the Jewish people accepted the Torah willingly. This, according to these rabbis, explains why the Jewish people deviated so much from the Torah during the time of the First Temple because they never had really accepted it willingly, but it seems very hard to accept this interpretation when just a few sentences earlier it says, "And they answered all the people together and they said, 'All which G-d spoke we will do'." So here we see that the Jewish people willingly accepted the Torah, so how can these rabbis say that the Jewish people did not accept the Torah willingly at Mount Sinai?

Perhaps we can understand this question and the answer to it if we look at a passage in the Talmud which speaks about the argument that Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva had. In the sentence right before the Ten Commandments where it says, "And G-d spoke all these things saying..." and it mentions saying and the word saying usually means that you repeat the word over again, that G-d gave the Torah to Moshe saying, which means that Moshe received the words of the Torah and then would repeat them to the people, but here it says G-d spoke to all the people how it could mean that the words were given over again, so it must mean that the people answered themselves. Rabbi Ishmael says that when the Jewish people got a positive commandment they said, "Yes, we will do it." When they got a negative commandment they said, "No, we will not do what you say. We will not commit adultery. We will not steal. We will not commit

into a much better person. He was able to contribute so much to society because he knew how to implement the laws of the Torah into every aspect of his life. He knew how to make himself the person that he should be and that he could be. Where did Rabbi Akiva get the strength to do all these things? He got the strength to do all these things because he saw the thunder. Also, he was able to judge everything correctly. You know, many times people have certain negative experiences and they will generalize them to everything. Maybe a person will have a bad teacher in Hebrew or day school and then they will generalize and say that Judaism is this way all over, or maybe you will have a parent who cruelly mocks Jewish customs or cruelly mocks you if you do not do them 100% and, therefore, you throw everything out, too. Or maybe you have a bad experience at a shul meeting or with a shul officer and, therefore, you do not have the proper judgment in order to arrive at the feeling that the Torah really does enhance your life. Therefore, we need two things in order to lead a positive and a good life. You need to have the laws of the Torah and the teachings of the Torah as a vision in your heart. You must actually see the thunder so you are able to overcome all the obstacles that are put in your way. You must also have the proper judgment. Rabbi Akiva saw the thunder and the mountain was smoking and fire was coming out of the mountain. He knew that the Jewish people were not always going to have it good, but he still had the faith to contend with the persecution and with the terrible degradation that the Romans were putting upon us.

Today, too, we saw that in our own generation, where did the Jews get the power and the strength to overcome the terrible happenings of the Holocaust? Where do they get that strength to persevere in the face of persecution? They got it because they saw the thunder. They had it implanted in their hearts and they knew that inspite of the lightnings which strike here and there or the persecutions or the pogroms or the killings eventually the Jewish people would overcome.

They were able to look at Jewish history as a unity and know that they had to persevere as Jews. We today salute those people who came through the Holocaust and, by and large, the people who came through the Holocaust are much more religious than the Jews who did not go through the Holocaust. In fact, all the Chassidim today are actually survivors of the Holocaust. They did not lose their faith. They lost their faith perhaps in man, that they knew that Judaism allowed them to live a good life, that Judaism was not just a declaration of principles that you then discarded but that Judaism if it is implemented in a person's life totally and completely transforms a person's life. That is what the Jewish people did not realize at Mount Sinai. In fact, the rabbis compare the written Torah to the father and the oral Torah to the mother, and that's why we read in the Book of Proverbs, do not desert the teaching, the instruction of your father and the Torah of your mother because the father initiates the birth process but it is the mother who carries the child for 9 months, and it is the mother who nurtures the child and takes care of the child primarily during the early years of the child, and it is this constant care and concern and love which shapes a person and makes a person realize himself and gives a person an identity and allows a person to be more than even he would normally otherwise be. Rabbi Akiva knew that. He knew that the Jews had striven for all these years. Other nations and other groups have accepted the Torah Sheva Saab. After all, the basis of western civilization is the Bible and the Moslems in the Koran have incorporated many of the stories and the teachings of the Bible, but the Torah Sheva Alpeiz is unique to the Jewish people. It allows us to hear the thunder and allows us to see the lightning. Let us all hope and pray that all of us will continue to see the thunder and to hear the lightning so that the Jewish people will always have the strength to overcome all obstacles and will always have the inner fortitude to listen to the laws of the Torah because it makes them better people and allows them to create the wonderful things and to contribute vastly to civilization

and so it will also allow us to be ready for the Mashiach when He comes so that the world, itself, can be completely redeemed.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a piano teacher who was talking to the parent of one of her students. She said, "You know, your daughter's fingers are like lightning." The woman said, "Oh, because she plays so fast on the piano?"

The teacher said, "No, because her fingers never touch the same note twice."

We all know that there are problems and we all know that for all of us in order to overcome these problems we must have the strength and the strength can only come if we really see the thunder. We talk a lot about Jewish continuity but there can only be Jewish continuity if we all see the thunder and if we all hear the lightning. If we all put in proper perspective the persecution of the Jewish people and our own personal negative experiences at times with different people who purport to be concerned or represent our faith. Let us all hope and pray that we will all continue to see the thunder and hear the lightning so Judaism will persevere and so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

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In the Torah portion Yisro we learn about the Ten Commandments. It is strange, though, that right before we learn about the Ten Commandments we have the sentence, "And G-d spoke all these things saying..." The strange thing here is the use of the word Elohim. We know that principally there are two words that are used for G-d throughout the Bible although in Hebrew there are many words for G-d. The first word is Elohim, which, of course, speaks about the G-d Who is the G-d of nature, the G-d who has a relationship with the universe. Then you have the word Yud Kay Vav Kay, which we do not know how to pronounce now, which speaks about G-d's relationship with man. In the beginning of the Torah when we have the two creation stories Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that the reasons why we have two creation stories is that the first one speaks about G-d and His relationship to the universe, that G-d created the universe with different laws and regulations and nobody can break them except at their own peril. You can be the most pious man in the world, the greatest Tzadik, but if you violate the natural laws you are going to be hurt. If you take a knife and cut your finger you are going to bleed. If you jump off a cliff you are going to be hurt. You cannot defy the natural laws with impunity. G-d can change the natural laws but we say we should not realize on a miracle. G-d will not normally do such a thing. The second word that refers to G-d is the word Yud Kay Vav Kay, which means G-d wanting to have a relationship with us, and in the second creation story G-d is referred to as Adonai Elohim. The reason for it is that we are also part of the universe, part of the world, and G-d relates to us as part of the world, but He also relates to us especially as individual human beings.

Throughout this Torah portion of Yisro the word Yud Kay Vav Kay is used. In fact, just in the sentence before we say, "And G-d said to him..." and the word Yud Kay Vav Kay is used. Go down and you will come up, you and Aaron with you, and the Kohen and the people...and then it says, "lest they shall break through to go up El:Yud Kay Vav Kay", that name of G-d which refers to the relationship between

G-d and man, and, yet, right before the Ten Commandments in the introductory sentence to the Ten Commandments it says, "And G-d said all these things saying..."

The rabbis also comment that usually when it says "saying" it means that you are saying it to somebody else. In other words, I am telling you to say it to a third party, but here, of course, G-d said it to all the Jewish people. Everyone agrees that the first two Ten Commandments were given directly to the people, so what does this word "saying" here mean? The rabbis explain that that means that when the Jewish people heard each one of these commandments they answered. There is a disagreement between Rabbi Shmuel and Rabbi Akiva as to what exactly this means. What does it mean when they answered? Rabbi Shmuel said for every commandment that said you should do things they answered yes and for every commandment that said you should not do things they answered no. So it said, "Honor your father and mother," and they said, "Yes; we will do it." It said, "Remember the Sabbath," and they said, "Yes, we will do it." It said, "Don't kill," and they said, "No, we will not kill." But Rabbi Akiva said no, that everyone of these commandments they answered yes, even to the negative ones they said yes. Yes, we will not kill. Yes, we will not commit adultery. Yes, we will not steal. What is this argument all about?

Perhaps we can understand this if we understand that there is another argument between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shmuel and that is later on when we learn how G-d appeared to the Jewish people and the Jewish people saw the thunder and the lightning and the voice of the shofar and the mountains smoking. Now Rabbi Akiva says that they actually saw the thunder and heard the lightning. Rabbi Shmuel says, no, that is not so. What they did is they saw the lightning and heard the thunder. So what is this all about?

Actually if we look at the Ten Commandments we can see that the Ten Commandments are given to man to obey. There are three basic ways, according to Adin Steinsaltz,

that man can accept religious authority, that G-d has told him, commanded us, to do these different things. One way he said was to respond to the voice of G-d G-d told us and we heard G-d say it and so, therefore, we must obey. The problem with that is that G-d has not talked to people lately or at least He has not talked in a clear voice to people lately. Therefore, it is hard to understand whether these are really G-d's commandments or not. We have to accept them on a basis of tradition, and some people can say that the tradition is flawed. Another way that we can accept these as G-d's commandments is that they are utilitarian, which means that they are beneficial to man. What that means is that if we observe them they are good for our health and they are good for us. In fact, he illustrated this by saying that once he gave a talk at a left wing kibbutz saying how wonderful it was to fast one day a year for 25 hours. Of course, he wanted them to fast on Yom Kippur. When he finished his talk, complete with all sorts of scientific evidence, an elderly gentleman got up in the back and said, "You convinced me, Rabbi Steinsaltz. From now on I am going to fast 25 hours one day a year, the day after Yom Kippur," so even if these things are utilitarian they do not have to be exactly the way the Torah said. Of course, the final proof is that they fit our human nature entirely. Since G-d created the moral laws He also created us that they fit and are a natural expression of ourselves. This is the way that we really feel most at home in the world. This, of course, he illustrated by telling how a person could break his arm and when a person breaks his arm he can still get along in the world but he is constantly noticing his broken arm. It is hard to dress, hard to drive the car, hard to pick up certain objects, but, of course, after your arm heals and the cast is off and you do the exercises and your hand is then back to normal you do not even notice it. It is so normal and natural. It is the way you are meant to be. That, of course, is the beauty of the Jewish religion because it fits the human psyche perfectly. When we are doing these things they just become part of you, so that if a person observes Shabbos

after a while he does not do it because he is afraid of all sorts of dire consequences if he does not do it. He does it because it is natural. It is part of him. He looks forward to it. The Jews have always looked forward to the Shabbos. It is only in America that they stopped observing it and in the modern world because we are given such a terrible choice. It was not that if you kept Shabbos you earn \$9000 a year and if you did not you earned \$10,000 a year. The choice was if you kept Shabbos in the early days of this century you earned zero and if did not keep Shabbos you earned \$10,000 a year. Normally Jewish practices fit the human psyche. They make you feel better with yourself and the world and, therefore, they are natural. You do not even notice them after a while. That is why the word Elohim is here because it teaches that by fulfilling the Ten Commandments we are fulfilling our own nature. It is something that is not imposed on us totally from the outside because it also is part of our nature. It is a combination of both. In other words, as I talked about last week, the purpose of Jewish education is to want to make us do what we ought to do. They become part us. It becomes wholly a part of us.

Now, what was the argument between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shmuel? You have to look at their backgrounds. Rabbi Shmuel came from a priestly family. He was used to all the Jewish observances. His family had been practicing them for generations, so they were to him natural and part of him and part of his whole family. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, came from converts. In fact, the rabbis say he came from Sisera, who was a great enemy of the Jewish people. Rabbi Akiva did not know anything about Torah until he was 40 years old. To him it took a gigantic effort in order for him to make these things natural, to make these things part of himself. Therefore, he had to have a constant vision of the Torah and the Torah way of life in front of him to overcome the reality of his own existence. That's what it means when Rabbi Akiva said that they actually saw the thunder and they heard the lightning. The rabbis say that Shmeeah is not like Reeah.

Seeing something is not like hearing about it. When you see something it makes an immediate impact upon you. Therefore, you have an indelible impression which cannot be shaken. In fact, there is a Jewish law which says that if a judge sees something, sees something himself, sees two people quarreling he cannot be a judge in that case because he already has an indelible impression and subsequent evidence would not sway him one way or the other. Of course, what we see is not true.

It can be an optical illusion. Therefore, a judge cannot judge a case if he actually saw it. On the other hand, if you just hear about things it does not make that same impression upon you. So, therefore, according to Rabbi Akiva the people had to see the thunder. They had to see that vision in their minds about how the world had to be, that that was more important than their present reality.

Of course, this is what caused Rabbi Akiva to observe the religion with such verve.

It is probably what caused him to think Bar Kochba was the Mashiach because he lived so much in the Messianic era he already could smell it. He already thought it was here. Therefore, the current reality did not bother him too much. Of course, we can say the same thing about Peres and Rabin. They already think and feel so much about peace that they think it is already here and they discount all the terrorism and all the violations of Arafat. On the other hand, Kushanimi felt so strongly that the land of Israel is all ours that they did not know what to do with the 2 million Arabs. They did not even consider it. Therefore, we have to be careful that when we live in this world that we also take into account the present reality as well as our dreams. Rabbi Akiva said you have to see the thunder and the present reality, the lightning that you see you can discount it as secondly. On the other hand, Rabbi Shmuel, who was frum from birth and there is a current expression which calls him f.f.b., frum from birth, to him he did not have this great verve, this great struggle in order to become a religious and a pious Jew. To him he saw the lightning and he heard the thunder. Reality was reality. This is the same thing when it came to the Ten Commandments. Rabbi

Shmuel said to those that were yes they said yes. To those commandments that said no he said no because it was just reality. He just dealt with the reality that was here, but Rabbi Akiva said even yes to the nos. In other words, someone who comes to the religion with such great verve he wants to accept more and more upon himself and he wants to put on more and more restrictions on himself. In fact, we know that happens today among certain Baal Teshuvos. Certain people come back to Judaism or come to Judaism they actually enjoy every restriction that can be put upon them. In fact, there is a joke about the Chumra of the week club that meets in Munsey of finding another restriction that they can put upon themselves. They say yes to all the restrictions. Of course, Rashi, when he gives the explanation to this Posef uses half the explanation of Rabbi Shmuel and half the explanation of Rabbi Akiva to teach us something very important and that is to teach us that we need both the verve and fire of Rabbi Akiva. On the other hand, we also need the moderation of Rabbi Shmuel. We have to balance them. This is, of course, a very great lesson for our own day. In our own shul we thank G-d nobody looks to anybody else and we get along well, those who are f.f.b.'s and those who just came to the religion, because we know that we need both. We need the verve and we need the moderation of those to whom Judaism was a natural thing from the very beginning of their life and to those who are trying to make Judaism the most natural thing in their life. There are drawbacks to both positions. Of course, if you do not have verve then Judaism can degenerate into just a bunch of outward observances without much meaning. On the other hand, if you have too much verve Judaism can end up to be a false Messianic movement and can cause a person to completely isolate himself from the world, so we need both the verve of Rabbi Akiva and the moderation of Rabbi Shmuel.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a owner of a team whose team was much like the Oilers this year, who lost about every game. They were having all sorts of trouble with the personnel. The owner of this team had a temper and did not

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along with the coach or the players, so at a press conference they asked him, "How are you going to improve your team? Which one of your backs are you going to get rid of so you can have a good team next year?" He looked them in the eye and said, "I am going to get rid of my drawbacks." Each of these positions has strengths and drawbacks. It is our job to combine them both so that we have the verve of a Rabbi Akiva and the moderation of a Rabbi Shmuel. Let us all hope that we will have this combination so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

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At the end of the Torah portion Yisro, we learn that a ramp had to go up to the altar and not steps. Why should this be? One reason given is because of modesty. Steps sometimes, when you are wearing a skirt, reveal too much.

The second reason is because ramps refer to access. Steps stop people from entering, but even wheelchair bound people can enter up a ramp.

The third reason is that steps connote a rest place. It is possible to rest going up and going down. Judaism, though, teaches us that spiritually we cannot rest. We have to continue moving forward. If not, we will slip back and there will not be a step to catch us. We have to make sure, especially in our interpersonal relationships, that we deal with our emotions correctly and not look at surface impressions as the most important thing. If we are concerned only with surface impressions, we will slide down the ramp and nothing will stop us, and we will spiritually degenerate.

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I am reminded of the story they tell about a man on his deathbed. His wife was baking strudel. His daughter came in and he said, "Sophie, please tell your mother that before I die, I want to taste one of her strudels." She went out and returned and said, "Mommy said you can't have anything." He asked why not, and she replied, "Because Mommy said it's for after."

Let us make sure we have all our priorities correct so we do not slide down this slippery slope, so we will not stress the inconsequential things of life and neglect the important things of life. Let us hope that we will always know what is important and act accordingly so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day.

Amen.

YISRO 2000  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion, Yisro, we learn how Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, joins the Jewish people. The Torah portion which contains the Ten Commandments is named after him, which teaches us that the Ten Commandments are open to everyone. It also teaches us that the Ten Commandments standing alone will not suffice. When Yisro came to Moshe and he saw Moshe judging the people from morning to night unaided, he said that was not a proper thing to do. He told Moshe that he should establish courts, and that Moshe should set up judges over tens and fifties and hundreds and thousands of people. In other words, justice should be close to the people. Moshe, according to the rabbis, was at first reluctant because he was afraid these judges would make a mistake, but G-d confirmed Yisro's suggestion. It was not important if judges make a mistake as long as they are honest and do whatever they sincerely feel is correct, but, meanwhile, the people can get immediate justice because justice delayed is justice denied. To implement the Ten Commandments correctly, there must be a judicial system.

In this Torah portion, the Ten Commandments are bracketed by two things. One is a judicial system, and at the end of the Torah portion, we learn about setting up places of worship. We learn the rules and regulations of setting up

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an altar to G-d. It is not enough just to have the Ten Commandments; there has to be a place which propounds the Ten Commandments and allows the people to understand them deeper, and which implements them in daily life. When Yisro told Moshe to set up courts, he said, "And they will judge the nations at all times and every big thing they will bring to you and all little things they are judged." When Moshe implements this system, he does it differently. He says, "And they will judge the people at all times, and the hard things they will bring to me and all the little things they will judge." In other words, the distinction is not between big amounts and little amounts. Unfortunately, in our legal system, the thing that determines whether you get into a certain court is the amount of the claim. I know that 30 or 40 years ago, you had to have a claim of \$10,000 to get into the federal court. Today, it must be \$25,000. Whether a claim or dispute concerns a large amount of money or not is not really relevant to human dignity. There are many issues that have nothing to do with large sums of money. Moshe said that the hard things, the difficult cases should be brought to him.

In a synagogue, too, everybody is to enjoy equality. Everybody has one vote,

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no matter how little or how big their dues. The synagogue is a place in which we all meet G-d on equal terms. We know that from a minyan. You can have nine millionaires, but you will not have a minyan. On the other hand, you can have ten paupers, and have a minyan. You can have nine educated rabbis, and still have no minyan, and, on the other hand, have ten semi-literate Jews and have a minyan.

The rabbis teach us that the Tabernacle and, by extension, the synagogue was established to further the ideals of the Ten Commandments. At the end of this Torah portion, we learn that there are two requirements for the altar of G-d. It says, "When you make for Me an altar of stones do not build them hewn for you would have raised your sword over it and desecrated it." The second condition is, "You shall not ascend My altar on steps, so that your nakedness shall not be uncovered upon it." We can understand the first condition. Strife and the sword have no place in a house of worship, in a place dedicated to the Ten Commandments, but what is this about you cannot have steps, you must have a ramp? Rashi explains that all the priests in the Tabernacle wore pants, and, therefore, there is no fear of immodesty here. What is prohibited here is

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that people should act in a Minchag Beezayom, in a disgraceful fashion. People have a tendency, especially in religious matters, to lord it over others. As Rashi says, "They take gross steps." In other words, they say, "I have reached a certain level of religiosity and, therefore, I can look down my nose at other people" This is 100% forbidden. We, in a synagogue, must never feel we have reached a certain level and now can look askance for others. We are all on a ramp working our way up. We can also slide backwards. We have to help each of us rise up to fulfill our moral potential and get close to G-d. That's what a synagogue is all about. It is about all its members trying to raise each other so we can get close to G-d. It is not about raising certain levels so you can then look askance at people below you. No one is perfect in a synagogue. We all have faults, and we all need each other to help raise each other up. Each of us is born incomplete, and we know that we need others to fulfill ourselves. Each of us have, so to speak, a hole in our hearts. We need to attach ourselves to others and to great ideals so we can lift ourselves up and be all we can be spiritually.

We all know, too, that many people use a synagogue to aggrandize themselves.

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This is wrong. They create strife so they can rise to the top or be a big shot. They would never do this on their jobs or in their business because they know they would be fired or lose customers. Somehow, they feel they can do this in the synagogue. That's why hewn stones are not to be used because strife is to be minimized in the synagogue, not maximized. We should not try through foolish criticisms to destroy people, even if we think we are right on a particular issue. I suppose that unrelenting, continual, devastating criticizing people learned when they are youngsters in their parents' home. They learn that if they tell their parents that one of the siblings is doing this or that, their parents will say what a good boy or girl they are. This type of strife is unwarranted.

Our beautiful synagogue today is here and been renovated and rejuvenated because of the love the people have for the synagogue and for each other. We must remember, though, that the essence of the synagogue is to lift us all up. A synagogue is not a business. We do not ask if our minyan pays for itself. That's what a synagogue is for. If we have to raise more money, we will. Also, our relationships should be on a higher level than any business. We are

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called upon to implement the Ten Commandments. Everyone here should feel wanted and needed and gratified to everyone who worked so hard to help us all have an institution which will allow us to reach up, which will allow us to feel the hole in our hearts, so to speak, an institution in which we will all feel equal and know we will be treated with dignity and respect.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a man who was sitting in the first row of a boxing match. The fighter in white knocked down the fighter in blue. The man yelled, "Kill him, kill him." In the next match, the blue fighter knocked down the fighter in white. Again, the man yelled, "Kill him, kill him." The man standing next to him said, "You can't root for both of them." The man replied. "Yes, I can. I can root for both of them because I'm their dentist." Especially in a synagogue we do not need to foment strife, and we also must always treat each other with respect. There were no steps leading up to the altar so no one would ever say I reached a higher level than you. We are all striving to rise higher. Let us hope we will help each other achieve greater spiritual heights and that our new facilities will make it easier to do so. Let us hope if we will do these things the Mashiach will come quickly in our day.

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Amen.

To: Jewish Herald Voice  
From: Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

One of the most difficult problems all of us face in life is, when should we be strong and unyielding, demanding respect, and when should we be weak and yielding, forgiving of insult? We all know that in our relationships with others, especially in a marriage relationship, we must many times be yielding and forgiving if we want our marriage to endure. Only when there are issues of morality or financial issues which would bring ruin to both parties or issues of violence or when one party refuses to be intimate with the other at any time, then strong stands have to be taken.

It is very difficult to know when a person should stand strong, and when a person should yield. Every party in a relationship has a right to once in a while complain and tell the other party that certain things have hurt their feelings, etc., but this should never be done in a demeaning or sarcastic way, but a spouse, especially the husband, has to learn how to take these things, and a wife should learn how to speak up. Many times, when I advise couples, the wife comes forward with many complaints, and I ask her, "Did you tell your husband about these things?" Most of the time, the wife will answer by saying, "No, I didn't tell him, but if he loves me he should know."

How should he know unless you tell him? Men are not sensitive many times to their wife's feelings unless their wife tells them what they feel.

This problem of when to be yielding and when to be unyielding has confounded all personal, community, and national relationships since the dawn of time. We do not believe that honor is the highest value. Obviously, you cannot let people walk all over you, by killing members of your family, raping your wife, and stealing all your possessions. These are things that have to be stopped and stood up for. Our country had to respond to the killing of 3000 innocents by the al-Qaida suicide bombers.

In the Torah portion, Yisro, we learn about how we were given the Ten Commandments and the Torah on Mount Sinai. We learn how Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, the priest of Midian, "heard all which G-d did for Moshe and the Jewish people, Israel, when G-d brought them out from Egypt." The rabbis all ask the question, what is it that Yisro heard? They say that he heard about the splitting of the Red Sea and the battle the Jewish people had with Amalek. They all ask the question, why was he so impressed by just these two things? Why wasn't he impressed by all the plagues that G-d had brought upon the Egyptians? Why wasn't he just impressed by the very fact

that two million people had escaped Egypt when before not even one slave could escape?

The rabbi's answer that the reason Yisro was so impressed by the splitting of the Red Sea and by the battle against Amalek was because that showed him that the Jewish people knew when they were to stand tall, and when they were to yield. Yisro, according to the rabbis, had tried all the pagan religions and found them wanting because they did not treat individuals well. They were willing to sacrifice the lives of countless individuals for no reason. They did not know how to balance weakness with strength. When the Jewish people at the Red Sea were confronted by the pursuing Egyptian army, they broke into several camps. One said, "Let us return to Egypt." Another said, "Let us protest." Another said, "Let us commit suicide." Another said, "Let us fight," and the last said, "Let us trust G-d and move forward." They eventually trusted G-d and moved forward. They did not try to fight and confront the Egyptian army. They did not just protest their plight or decide to commit suicide. They did not decide to give up and go back to Egypt. They decided to trust G-d and go forward. They adopted a respectful, yielding position. They were not going to go back to Egypt, and they were not going to fight to the last man. They were going to maintain their dignity but without

fighting. G-d did save them, and the waters came cascading down on the Egyptians.

Yisro also saw the battle that the Jewish people had against Amalek. Amalek had attacked the weak and the helpless, the stragglers of the camp, those who were outside the clouds of glory, the Tribe of Dan, who were still worshipping idols. The Jewish people rose up and defended these weak and helpless idol-worshipping Jews. This impressed Yisro very much. The Jewish people were unyielding when it came to the saving of Jewish life. They were willing to fight. In many cultures, when the weak and the helpless are afflicted they are thrown, so to speak, to the dogs. The rich and the mighty do not want to expend their energy or their wealth to save them. They feel that they do not count anyway, especially if they are people who are not 100% followers of that society's faith. The Amalekites got paid measure for measure. Just as they had attacked the weak, they, themselves, were weakened. As the Hebrew says, "Vayachalosh Yehoshua -- and Yehoshua weakened Amalek and his people by the mouth of the sword."

This combination of strength and weakness has always been the hallmark of our people. We have survived all these thousands of years because G-d has

given us the courage to know when to be weak and when to be strong. Let us all hope and pray that we will continue to know when to be weak and when to be strong so that we will continue to have wonderful families, good communities, peace in the world, and especially peace between Israel and her Arab neighbors. Amen.

## Yisro

We all know that the Ten Commandments were given on two tablets to Moshe Rabbinu. The question is often asked, "Why two tablets? Why not just one?" We know also in the Torah portion Ki Sissa, the word "luchos" is spelled without the vav, so it could mean tablet, singular, which emphasizes the unity of the Ten Commandments. The rabbis tell us that there were two tablets to remind us of Heaven and Earth, bride and groom, Michael and Gabriel, this world and the next. The common explanation given is that the tablets were the ketubah and that G-d and the Jewish people were the bridegroom and bride, and that Heaven and Earth were the eternal witnesses, and that the marriage of G-d to Israel is eternal both in this world and the next. However, this does not speak to the content of the Ten Commandments. We know the first five were basically spiritual, between G-d and man, so to speak Heavenly. The second five were between man and man, so to speak Earthly. The Midrash says the two tablets are "shekulah," of equal importance. Rabbi Solaveichik says that they are interdependent. On Mt. Sinai, the Jewish people heard the voice of G-d from the midst of fire. Rabbi Solaveichik says that he learned all the laws of Shabbat from his father, but learned how to make the Shabbat, the enthusiasm, from his mother. She provided the fire and enthusiasm. Man needs more than spiritual ideas; he

must have them flesh out. Love, too, to my way of thinking, is a combination of emotional attraction and sexual attraction. Heaven and Earth. Both are important in order to cement a marriage. Emotional opposites almost always marry. People marry those culturally the same as them, but emotionally opposite. We all know Michael guards Israel. So does Gabriel. Michael stands for compassion and understanding. Gabriel stands for responsibility and justice. In marriage, you need both characteristics, just as if the husband is emotionally attracted to the wife, but won't be intimate, the marriage won't last. So a marriage based on only complete understanding and forgiveness, with no responsibility, will not last. The wife can forgive the husband one or two times for forgetting to deposit a check, but the husband must be responsible. The same goes for the wife. The husband can forgive her for not caring for the kids once or twice, but not more. Marriage requires understanding, but also responsibility. Minor things can be forgiven; the husband doesn't put his clothes away, the wife is not a good cook. But with important things there is far less leeway. Also love can transcend life. We all know those gone before us are still loved in our hearts. Even though we might remarry. Love transcends death. It is in this world and in the next. In order to have a happy marriage, we must have Heaven and Earth. We must have understanding and responsibility. We must cultivate love by doing

things together, so the marriage can last forever. Let us all hope and pray that all of our marriages will be happy, so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.