



4 Minutes Of Torah

A Project of the Department of Synagogue Services

The National Council of Young Israel (NCYI) is proud to present a new series called "4 Minutes of Torah."

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Living Torah In The Present

Rabbi Moshe Taub

Mara D'atra, Young Israel of Holliswood

The elderly rabbi slowly takes his place by the pulpit. "Rabosai" he begins, "I will soon be in the next world."

Shock waves go out among the congregation. The rabbi continues: . "Worry not, I was raised not to fear death, even as a young child I was taught that life is fleeting." The rabbi then tries to bring the message home, "Indeed Rabosai, every member of this Shul will one day pass on and will need to give an account of their lives in this world." One man in the front row sat pleased with a smug smile. Breaking from the sermon, the rabbi asked: "Sir, do you find something amusing?" "No rabbi," the man replied,

"I am smiling because I am not a member of this shul, I am only here for the weekend visiting my sister!"

We tend to view the narrative of the Torah as past events that have happened to our forefathers. G-d spoke to them, not us; G-d tested them, not us; G-d demanded perfection of them, not us. We then put these holy men and women on a pedestal claiming that they are what we cannot be, as opposed to building our own pedestal so as to reach their heights.

Sadly, those who read the Torah's narrative in such a fashion are depriving themselves of the great *personal* journey the Torah asks each one of us to make. "Chayav Inish..." – the obligation on Pesach to view the festival as if we ourselves are exiting slavery, is a reminder of how G-d views time as a two-dimensional map laid out in front of Him. On any given date on the calendar, whether a Yahrtzeit, a festival or a biblical account, it and all other activities through the ages are happening at once. As we read in this week's Parsha about G-d's giving and our receiving of the Torah, we must know that at that same moment G-d sees us in real time, in America staying up through Shavout night – and He sees our mothers putting us to bed saying "maybe next year we could stay up and learn." Time itself, after all, was an invention of G-d.

It seems, however, that Yitro, is the one portion in the Torah in which we all take great *personal* pride. Chazal teach that we were all there, in body or spirit, to accept G-d's law.

Although we view the events within Parshat Yitro – both in our calendar and in our ethos – as our "rendezvous with G-d" and the moment we became a nation, did we not lose it all by the sin of the golden calf? Weren't the *Luchot Shniot*, the second set of Tablets, the ones that are our everlasting covenant? If so, it would mean that Yom Kippur, the day we received the second set, should be the date we mark through history (indeed the Torah itself never calls Shavuot the day of the giving of the Torah), and Parshat Ki Tissa as the Parsha we highlight as our eternal bond with the Torah! If anything, Yitro should sadden us with the reminder that soon the *kallah* (bride) will be leaving the *chattan* (groom) at the alter.

These questions may be answered as follows: The Gaon of Vilna teaches that the miracle of Nissanas HaTorah was not the fact the B'nei Yisrael received the Torah, but rather that G-d was willing to give it away at all – to take His greatest treasure and make it accessible to humanity. It is a celebration of the gift and her Giver, not the receiver. It is for this reason the Talmud records that the angels put up a struggle

when Moshe went up to heaven to obtain it. "Why are you giving this treasure to mankind?" they asked. Moshe's response to them is illuminating: "Do you have parents to honor, possessions to steal, or a *Yetzer HaRah* (evil inclination)?"

It would seem that the angels are *capable* of observing the Torah. Moshe's answer is that Nessinas HaTorah was not in spite of the imperfection of man but because of it. It is because of the struggle mankind experiences in attaching the physical to the spiritual that the Torah must come down to help.

The principal of an elementary school once approached Rav Yaakov Kamentzky Z"l to ask if they are allowed to place their *mezuzot* lower on their door frames to enable the children to reach them (according to halacha, they should be placed on the upper third of the door post). He replied that this would be an opportunity to teach children a Torah ideal: *We do not lower the Torah to reach our level. Rather, we take a booster and raise ourselves up to it.*

To celebrate the Luchot Shniot would be to cheat ourselves out of the true lesson of the Torah. It is the first set of Luchot that reminds us of humanity's need for the Torah. It is Parshat Yitro that reminds us that the Torah did not arrive simply as a gift of forgiveness (as it did in Ki Tissa), but rather as something to be constantly earned – something that is perfect, although its adherents are not.

For this reason we all relate so strongly to Parshat Yitro's great event. We are reminded that the giving of the Torah is not a past experience but is a present challenge. We can ever so slightly still hear the faint cries of the angels as they ask our Father in heaven why this spiritual entity is given to man. And His reply to them remains the same: "you are angels; they are trying to *become* angels."

Shabbat Shalom