In loving memory of Harav Yitzchak Yoel ben Shlomo Halevi

"They journeyed from Refidim, and arrived at the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert, and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain" (Shemot 19:2).
Sidra Summary: Yitro

1st Aliya (Kohen) – Shemot 18:1-12
Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law and a Midianite priest, hears about the miraculous Exodus from Egypt. He comes to meet Moshe in the desert, together with his daughter (Moshe’s wife) Tziporah and Moshe’s two sons. Moshe greets Yitro and relates to him what has happened to the Israelites. Yitro and Moshe bring offerings.

**Question:** Why did Moshe call his first son Gershom? (18:3)

2nd Aliya (Levi) – 18:13-23
According to Rashi’s commentary, the narrative now skips forward to an incident after the giving of the Torah. Moshe is busy making halachic rulings from morning to evening. Concerned about this being too much for Moshe, Yitro advises him to set up an alternative system of judging the people, involving the appointment of a cascading system of judges. Only the major issues would be brought directly to Moshe for his judgement.

3rd Aliya (Shlishi) – 18:24-27
Moshe accepts Yitro’s advice and appoints judges over sub-groups of 1000, 100, 50 and 10 men. Yitro returns to Midian.

**Point to Consider:** Why did Yitro choose to return to Midian? (see Rashi to 18:27)

4th Aliya (Revi’i) – 19:1-6
The narrative switches back to Rosh Chodesh Sivan, one and a half months after the Exodus. Prior to the giving of the Torah. The people travel from Refidim and arrive in the Sinai Desert (see p.3 article). Moshe ascends Mount Sinai. God tells Moshe to inform the people that if they listen to His voice and keep His covenant, they will become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”.

5th Aliya (Chamishi) – 19:7-19:19
The people agree to God’s offer. God tells Moshe to instruct the people to wash their clothing, refrain from marital relations (Rashi) and not to encroach onto the mountain for the next three days. Moshe relays this to the nation. God’s Presence descends on the mountain; there is thunder, lightning and shofar blasts; the mountain is covered in smoke.

6th Aliya (Shishi) – 19:20-20:14
God ‘descends’ upon Mount Sinai and Moshe ascends again. God once again tells Moshe to warn the people not to encroach onto the mountain. After Moshe descends, God speaks the Ten Commandments:

1. Faith in God’s existence
2. Prohibition of idol worship
3. Prohibition of swearing false oaths
4. Keeping Shabbat
5. Honouring one’s parents

Prohibition of:

6. Murder
7. Committing adultery
8. Stealing
9. Bearing false testimony
10. Coveting what others have

7th Aliya (Shevi’i) – 20:15-23
Trembling from this awesome experience, the people retreat and ask Moshe to be God’s conduit, instead of God speaking to them directly, lest they die. Moshe reassures them. God tells Moshe to warn the nation not to carve certain images (see Rashi). The commandment is given to build a designated altar upon which offerings to God should be brought.

Haftarah

The prophet Yeshaya sees a vision of the heavenly court, occupied by God and His angels. Whilst the angels assure Yeshaya that he is personally free of sin, God tells him to warn the people of their eventual exile, due to their stubbornness and iniquities. The evil king Achaz ascends the throne; he will be shown Divine mercy in order to save his righteous son, the future king Chizkiyahu.
From the moment that God created the universe, He looked forward to the day when Israel would come to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah (see Rashi to Bereishit 1:31). This is why the Torah describes Israel’s arrival at Mount Sinai with such excitement: “In the third month of the children of Israel’s departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived in the desert of Sinai” (Shemot 19:1). The excitement was so great that this verse is actually out of sequence; only in the following verse do we learn about their journey to Mount Sinai (see commentary of Ohr HaChaim, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar d. 1743).

If this was such an important, momentous occasion, what took so long? Why only in the third month, seven weeks after the Exodus?

The Sages of the Talmud compare the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai to a wedding; God was the groom and Israel the bride. At weddings, we often hear how the couple met and it sometimes turns out that they had met earlier, but “it wasn’t the right time”.

So why, in the weeks before the people’s arrival at Mount Sinai, was it “not the right time”?  

The Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Luntschitz d. 1619) gives the answer in one word: shalom (peace). In fact, in response to several questions on the first two verses of chapter 19, he says that these verses are “proof that Israel was not worthy of receiving the Torah until there was peace between them”.

The Kli Yakar notes that the sign of the zodiac for the third month, Sivan, is Gemini, identical twins holding hands, representing closeness and love, i.e. peace.

The stop before Mount Sinai was Refidim, a place full of arguments and bickering, both with God and with each other. This had caused the people to loosen their grip on Torah values. The Kli Yakar therefore understands the phrase “they journeyed from Refidim”, in verse 2, as informing us that their journey away from Refidim was not only geographical but also spiritual; they left the arguments and bickering behind and came to Sinai, in readiness for accepting the Torah.

Finally, the Kli Yakar brings the well-known Midrash that the people camped at the mountain ‘as one person with one heart’ (see Rashi to ibid. 19:2). The entire nation is referred to in the singular form (“vayichan”), reflecting unity. He also says that the people understood that God had chosen Mount Sinai, a low, ‘humble’ mountain, on which to give the Torah. The way to peace is through humility, not an inflated ego.

The Ohr HaChaim, who described the great excitement of the arrival of Israel at Sinai, identifies three pre-conditions for them to receive the Torah. Two of these echo the thoughts of the Kli Yakar, humility and unity. The third pre-condition is that it takes great strength and determination to learn and keep the Torah. The journey from Refidim to Sinai represents the resolve to leave behind their weaknesses.

It was “time” to receive the Torah!
Continuing our theme of honouring parents, in the last article we began to study the Kaddish prayer, usually recited by children (amongst other relatives) of the recently deceased.

The Aruch Hashulchan (Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein d. 1908) devotes several paragraphs to explaining the meaning of the Kaddish prayer. Here is a summary of what he says, concentrating mainly on the start of the prayer:

Kaddish is structured as a call-out and response between the person saying Kaddish and the congregation. The Kaddish-sayer prays for God’s Name to be enhanced (through His Presence being felt more and the world’s purpose being realised) and the congregation responds in kind:

Yitgadal ve’yitkadash Sh’meh rabbah – ‘may His great Name be increased and sanctified’. These words are taken from verses in the book of Yechezkel (Ezekiel 38:23) which refer to the Messianic era.

Be’al’ma di v’ra chirutei – this is a continuation of the request. We are asking that this Kiddush Hashem (sanctification of His Name) occur “in the world that He created according to His will”. In essence the world is perfect. Similarly, we too are internally perfect – our souls are pristine. Any problem in the world (or within us) is effectively caused by subsequent errors of choice that we (or others) might have made. Yet since the world is essentially perfect, it will one day return to that state, as things naturally return to their essence. This is what is meant by the world being “created according to His will”.

Ve’yamlich malchutei – this is a slight addition to the previous request. We are asking that the Kiddush Hashem be substantial, that His kingship (His overt presence) be manifested.

Bechayechon uvymechon uvechayei dechol beit yisrael – this is a plea that the request be fulfilled ‘in our days’ and ‘in the days of the Jewish People’ as a whole.

Ba-agala uvizman kariv – we now ask that the request be fulfilled “speedily and in our days”. Sometimes we ask or pray for events to occur, but we may not want to experience them ourselves. Asking for a Kiddush Hashem to occur ‘in our days’ means that we are truly invested in the idea – we want to experience it ourselves.

Veimru amen – the mourner calls upon the congregation to respond in kind by saying ‘amen’.

The congregation now responds with ‘amen, yeheh sh’meh rabbah mevarach le-alam ul al’mei al’maya’. This has the same meaning as the opening yitgadal request of the Kaddish-sayer, just this time it is in pure Aramaic (the yitgadal ve’yitkadash opening two words are in Hebrew). The congregation add that His great Name be blessed forever. They add this word to emphasise that the Kiddush Hashem not be rescinded, unlike the glory of the first and second Temple periods, which came to an end.

The Kaddish-sayer then underlines this request by adding a further eight words asking for God’s Name to be blessed and increased. Together with the opening two words of Kaddish (Yitgadal ve’yitkadash) this makes a sum total of ten, corresponding to the Ten Commandments.
During the latter half of the 13th century, an astounding number of exceptional scholars and leaders emerged, who produced a wealth of literature: Talmudic commentaries, Torah commentaries, responsa (written halachic rulings) and books on Jewish philosophy. The outstanding leader of Spanish Jewry was Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nachman, known as the Ramban (or Nachmanides 1194-1270). He greatly influenced the leaders of the following generations due to his revered stature and comprehensive writings.

After the Ramban’s death, the acknowledged leader of Sephardi Jewry became Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham Aderet, referred to as the Rashba (1235-1310), who wrote over 10,000 responsa to Jewish communities all over the world. At a similar time, the leading authority of Ashkenazi Jewry was Rabbeinu Asher ben Yechiel, referred to as the Rosh (c. 1250-1327). Ashkenazi Jews during that time faced physical threats, which caused the Rosh to flee to Spain in 1303. He was received in Barcelona by the Rashba, with whom he had already had much correspondence. The Rosh settled in Toledo, where he became the Rabbi. This turn of events meant that the Rosh served as a bridge between the Sephardi and Franco-German schools of Torah study.

Among his numerous literary works, his *magnus opus* was most definitely *Hilchot Rabbeinu Asher*, a halachic code based on that of the Rif (whom we discussed in Part 2), but providing more elaborate explanations and drawing heavily from other opinions such as those of Rashi, the Rambam, the Tosafists, the Ramban and many others. The work of the Rosh ‘bridged’ that of all of these scholars to a new phase, marking a fundamental milestone in the halachic process by providing the backbone for what was later to become a new structure and method in establishing a universal halachic code.

One of the sons of the Rosh was known as Rabbeinu Yaakov Ba’al HaTurim. He was born in Germany in 1270 and fled with his father to Spain. He completed several works, but by far the most monumental was the *Arba’ah Turim*, which organised halacha in a novel way. *Arba’ah Turim* means ‘four rows’, named after the four rows of precious stones on the breastplate of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). It categorises all halachic material relevant to Jewish life in the post-Temple era into four major sections, each with its own name. Their main contents are summarised below:

1. **Orach Chaim**: Daily routine, including prayer, blessings, Shabbat and festivals.
2. **Yoreh Deah**: Including dietary laws, family purity, charity, circumcision, mourning and agricultural laws.
3. **Even HaEzer**: Relationships, marriage and divorce.
4. **Choshen Mishpat**: Civil and criminal laws including loans, damages, theft, partnerships, ownership and inheritance.

In order to ensure that this code would not suffer from the two main issues that many scholars saw in the Code of the Rambam (who did not identify the sources of his halachic rulings and rarely quoted dissenting opinions), Rabbeinu Yaakov instead brought a broad range of opinions (both Sephardi and Ashkenazi) in his discussions of each law. In addition, he quoted each source by name. This masterpiece, consisting of a total of 1714 chapters, soon became universally recognised as a milestone in halachic transmission and became the prototype for a new format used to create the *Shulchan Aruch*, which we will discuss next week, in the final article of this series.

First page of the third book of the *Arba’ah Turim*, written in Mantua in 1435. Housed at the Vatican Library.
The sectarian rivalry between the Sadducees, Essenes and Pharisees played a central role in the background to the destruction of the second Temple. In fact, there is a well-known view that it was internal fighting that ultimately led to the destruction and the nation’s exile.

Who were these sects? The Sadducees were the heirs to the Hellenists. They believed only in the Written Torah and were from the upper echelons of Judean society. They included many Kohanim in their ranks. The Essenes, who we will discuss in next week’s article, were perhaps an off-shoot of the Sadducees.

The Pharisees were the precursors of the Talmudic Sages and the Judaism we practise today. The word Pharisees is a translation of the Hebrew word Perushim, meaning ‘separate’ or ‘apart’. As part of their identity they adhered strictly to the laws regarding ritual purity (tahara). They endeavoured to remain ritually pure at all times, while the common people would just purify themselves three times a year, when making the pilgrimage to the Temple for the three festivals (Pesach, Shavuot and Succot). The Pharisees strictly adhered to the Oral Torah, not just the Written Torah.

John Hyrcanus (known in Rabbinic literature as Yochanan Kohen Gadol) switched allegiance from the Pharisees to the Sadducees towards the end of his life and decided to disband the Sanhedrin (Rabbinic high court). By the time Yochanan’s son Aristobulus came to the throne in 104 BCE, the control and power balance had shifted into the hands of the Sadducees.

Aristobulus was hostile towards the Sages. He was the first Hasmonean to change the form of government from a constitutional semi-monarchy to a full monarchy, with himself as king. Josephus (the Roman Jewish first-century historian) writes that Aristobulus was tricked into having his brother Antignus murdered. Within a year of taking the throne, suffering from mental health issues, Aristobulus died.

The next in line to the throne was his wife, Shlomtzion HaMalka, or Queen Salome. She was the sister of the great Pharisee Sage Shimon ben Shatach. Alexander Yannai, the brother of Aristobulus, then married the childless Shlomtzion, thus fulfilling the mitzvah of levirate marriage (yibum). Shlomtzion’s political acumen and relationship to Shimon ben Shatach meant that the Pharisees found themselves once more in control; the persecution against them was halted for a time. The Talmud (Berachot 48a) relates the following story:

King (Alexander) Yannai and the Queen sat at a banquet. Since Yannai had killed the Sages, there was no one to lead Birkat Hamazon. Yannai turned to his wife and said: “who can get us a man to recite the blessing?” She answered: “swear to me, that if I bring you such a man, you will not cause him anguish”. Yannai agreed and swore. The Queen then brought her brother (Shimon ben Shatach). He sat down between the King and the Queen. The King said to him: “do you see what honour I show you?” He bravely responded: “It is not you who honours me; it is the Torah that honours me”.

Answer: It refers to Moshe “being a sojourner in a strange land”.
ISRAEL 70
GALA SHOW

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Yitro: Revelation to the Nation!

This week's Parasha describes the dramatic revelation at Sinai when God gave the Jewish people the Torah. In an awesome multi-sensory experience, God gave the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people.

But did you know that the Ten Commandments appear twice in the Torah? Once, here in Parashat Yitro, and again in Parashat Va'etchanan. There are few differences between them. We have two pictures of the spectacular events at Sinai. Can you help us spot ten differences between them?

How did you do?

1. Man on left is taller.
2. Man in white's fingers.
3. Woman's earrings.
4. Man's beard.
5. Pillars in front of leaders.
6. Number of spots on woman's head.
7. Tilt of dressed woman's right.
8. Woman's expression.
9. Man in white's shoulder.
10. Man on right.

Answers:

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