

Torah Table Talk
 Parshat Yitro,
 Exodus 18: 1 – 20:23
 Only United Can Israel answer
 God's call



Not long after arriving in the wilderness, Jethro came to visit his now famous son-in-law and brought Moses' family to join him on their journey to the Promised Land. While visiting, Jethro saw how heavy the burden of leadership was for Moses and suggested that Moses choose worthy people to serve as judges for the community so that only the most difficult conflicts were brought to him. He warns Moses, "You will surely wear yourself out!" if he carries the burden by himself.

Seven weeks after leaving Egypt the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness of Sinai at the foot of a mighty mountain. Having accepted God's challenge to become a nation of priests and a holy people, Moses instructed the people to prepare for a momentous day when they would witness the presence of God. The revelation at Sinai became a moment of transformation for Israel.

Parshat Yitro combines divine revelation with human insight. Israel learns important lessons from both God and the Midianite prophet, Jethro. Both are sources of truth, and shape the destiny of the Jewish people.

Exodus 19:2

Having journeyed from Riphidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and they encamped in the wilderness. Israel (He) encamped there in front of the mountain.

Exodus 19:8

And all the people answered as one, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!"

1. **Rashi:** And Israel encamped there – As one man with one heart. But all the other encampments were done in a murmuring spirit and in dissension.
Notice that the first half of the Exodus 19:2 is plural: "...They entered...they encamped....," while the last phrase in this verse is singular: "Israel (he) encamped in front of the Mountain." Rashi wonders why the switch in person from plural to singular in the middle of the verse. He concludes that something happened that transformed the quality of life when the people of Israel reached Mount Sinai. They became a people united by a common purpose.
2. **Ramban on 19:8** – Moses spoke to the elders and the judges of the people. He presented all the commandments in the presence of the entire nation since all of them are commanded to observe them, as it says, "Speak to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel (Verse 19:3)." The people however did not wait for the advice or decision (of the elders. "The people answered as one and said..." Everyone from the youngest to the oldest (answered Moses.)
3. **Vilna Gaon** – Why does Scripture emphasize that all Israel answered "as one," that, "All that God has said we will do!" The Vilna Gaon said that the individual, no matter how righteous and pious he may be, cannot fulfill all the Mitzvot in the Torah by himself. Only when the entire Jewish people are united as one are they able to fulfill all the commandments. It is for this reason that the Torah emphasizes that just before the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the people stated, "All that the Lord has stated we will do."

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Rashi mean when he says that the people camped at the foot of Mount Sinai as one person and with one heart? In your memory have there been times when the world wide Jewish community have been “one people with one heart?” How can we promote such unity in the Jewish world today?
 2. How do Ramban and the Vilna Gaon carry the theme of the previous Rashi one step further? How do they understand the expression “*Yachdav*, as one?” Note that they seem to be saying something more than simply, “They answered God all together.” What is the significance of answering God “as one?”
 3. Consider the nature of Jewish life today. How might we view the Jewish community as a unit in which each group fulfills a different aspect of Jewish living so that together we are able to live by the whole Torah? What do Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, Reconstructionists, Zionists, Secular, etc...each add to the fulfillment of Jewish life?
 4. Why can't one person fulfill all the Mitzvot of the Torah? What aspects of the Jewish tradition do non orthodox Jews fulfill that Orthodox Jews do not?
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Glossary

Rashi (1040 -1105) – Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki lived in Troyes, France. He is considered the outstanding Biblical commentator in the Middle Ages

Ramban (1194- 12700 - Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman; Born in Gerona. He was one of the leading Talmud scholars and Kabbalists of his generation. His commentary on the Torah is considered one of the most important.

Vilna Gaon (1720 -1795) - Elijah ben Solomon Zalman; a major scholar and intellectual leader. He was as a staunch opponent of the Chasidic movement.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*

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