

Parashat Yitro 5783, 2023:

To Know the Almighty

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Yitro is preeminently the *parasha* of the *Asseret Hadibrot* (The Ten Statements). The first of these *dibrot* begins with the famous words, “*Anochi Hashem Elokecha* (I am the L-rd your G-d), Who took you out of the land of Egypt), out of the house of bondage...” (*Sefer Shemot* 20:2, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In his *Commentary on the Torah* on this verse, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) notes that the phrase, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, is a *mitzvat asah* (positive commandment) that Hashem tasked Moshe to:

... teach and command them [the Jewish people], in order that they should know and believe that Hashem exists, and He is their [sole] *Elokim*. This means, He is, and He was, and everything stems from Him, according to His will and [unlimited] ability. [Moshe also needed to instruct them that] He was their *Elokim*, and they were therefore obligated to serve Him. (Translation my own)

In *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 1:1, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) formulates the *mitzvah* of *Anochi Hashem Elokecha* in this manner: “The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know (*leida*) that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being.” (All Rambam translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger) My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, expands upon the Rambam’s formulation and in so doing, helps us to attain a deeper appreciation of what it means to know Hashem—*leida et Hashem*:

To know (*leida*) means that our conviction of the existence of God should become a constant and continuous awareness of the reality of God, a level of consciousness never marred by inattention... the term “to know” (*leida*) the reference is to a state of continuous awareness—that the belief in God should cause man to be in a state of perpetual affinity, of constant orientation. God should become a living reality that one cannot forget even for a minute. This keen awareness of the existence of God should constitute the foundation of our thoughts, ideas, and emotions in every kind of situation and under all conditions. Everything else inevitably depends upon this supreme article of faith. (*On Repentance in the Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, translated and edited from the Yiddish, Professor Pinchas HaKohen Peli, pages 145-146)

In sum, for the Rav, to know Hashem connotes “a constant and continuous awareness of the reality of God, a level of consciousness never marred by inattention.” This, in turn, strongly parallels the Rambam’s understanding of the love one should develop for Hashem:

What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person’s] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for God should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded [Sefer Devarim 6:5: “Love God...] with all your heart and with all soul.” (Hilchot Teshuvah 10:3)

These ideas are reflected in the *pasuk* we recite at the conclusion of the first paragraph of the *Aleinu*: “And you shall know (*v’ya’da’ta*) this day and consider it in your heart, that the Lord He is God in Heaven above, and upon the earth below; there is none other (*ain od melvado*).” (Sefer Devarim 4:39) With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may this guide and inspire us as we strive to draw near to Him, each and every day, *v’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at rdbe718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)