

# North American Inclusion Month

# NAIM

BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE JEWISH COMMUNITY

## NAIM Torah Thoughts

**By: Rabbi Jack Abramowitz, Associate Director of OU Synagogue Services**

### PARSHAS YISRO

18:6 Yisro sent word to Moshe that he was coming and he was bringing Moshe's wife and children with him. Rashi cites a Midrash that Yisro's purpose in doing so was to communicate the message "If you don't want to come for me, come for your wife. If you don't want to come for your wife, you should at least come for your children." Yisro had become worried that Moshe had become a "big shot" since he had last seen him and may have forgotten all about "the little people," so he sent him a little nudge to remind him about the importance of interpersonal relationships. (As a recent convert, Yisro was not aware how much emphasis the Torah places on mitzvos bein adam l'chaveiro.) Yisro need not have worried. Not only did Moshe come to greet him, he bowed down humbly before his father-in-law. When Yisro was feasted, not only did Moshe personally wait on him, he waited on all the other guests, who were his subordinates in both scholarship and rank. Moshe excelled in his treatment of others not despite his lofty station, but because of it. We see from this that the greater one is, the more careful they are to include and not look down upon others.

19:2 One of the simplest lessons on unity is communicated by this verse: And Israel camped opposite the mountain. Rashi is quick to point out that the verb in the Hebrew is in the singular ("he camped") rather than the plural ("they camped"). The singular verb is used, Rashi tells us, because at that time the Jews were "like a single person with a single heart." Later campings use the plural verb because the nation had been splintered by arguments. In order to receive the Torah, however, they had to be in a state of unity. When we all get along – even though we may have different opinions and points of view – we can reach the greatest heights

20:22-23 There's a surprising amount we can learn from the construction of the altar at the end of this parsha. For starters, iron tools were not permitted to be used because iron is an implement of war. Furthermore, the altar was approached by a ramp rather than stairs, which would have caused the kohein to approach in a manner that was minimally inappropriate. Rashi quotes the Mechilta on each of these verses, inferring important lessons from these facts about the altar. If these things concern us when it comes to the altar, which is nothing but stones, how much more should we be worried about peace between people and not treating others disrespectfully?



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### PARSHAS MISHPATIM

21:1 In the very first verse of this parsha, G-d tells Moshe to set the laws before the Jews. Rashi quotes the Mechilta that G-d said to Moshe “Don’t think it’s sufficient to go over things two or three times and they’ll know it. You have to lay it all out in front of them.” From here we learn the importance of teaching something in the way that the student will best be able to absorb the material. It doesn’t matter if the teacher is bored with reviewing things, he must have the patience to ensure that his students master their work. The Talmud in Eruvin 54b tells us about Rav Pereida, whose student needed to review his daily lesson 400 times to fully understand it. On one occasion, Rav Pereida had an appointment. The student was so nervous that his teacher was going to leave early that he couldn’t concentrate. When Rav Pereida saw his pupil hadn’t grasped the day’s lesson, he assured him that he wasn’t going anywhere until they were finished, then he reviewed it an additional 400 times.

22:20-21 In many places, the Torah cautions us to be careful not to oppress converts, widows or orphans. These are people that start out lacking some form of support system – the widow has no husband, the orphan has no father, the convert has no Jewish family whatsoever. In order to compensate for this disadvantage, G-d Himself takes special interest in their causes. It should require no explanation that we should not be cruel to those who are different or whose situation may present hardship, but the Torah goes an extra step by making us empathize. “Don’t oppress a convert, who is new among you,” the Torah tells us, “After all, you were strangers in Egypt and didn’t like it when others did it to you!” We all have something different about us and we are all at a disadvantage in one way or another. Just like we wouldn’t want to be discriminated against, we must be careful not to mistreat others! (A similar lesson is taught in 22:24. The Torah tells us not to be demanding with people who may owe us money and Rashi says that we must see ourselves in the debtor’s place.)



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## PARSHAS TERUMAH

25:6 G-d told Moshe to have the Jews contribute a wide variety of materials for the construction of the Mishkan: gold, silver, copper, precious cloth and skins, as well as gem stones and more. But among the items requested there was a call for oil for the Menorah and spices for the incense. These were not used in building the Mishkan, they were regular aspects of its operation. The lesson being imparted is this: People would get excited about donating gold and jewels to building the Mishkan. It's a rare opportunity and a big deal. But donating the oil or the spices for its daily work? That's not exciting – it's drudgery! By including these items among the donations for the Tabernacle, the Torah is telling us that they're just as important as the things that may impress us more and we should dedicate them with the same enthusiasm. Similarly, it takes all kinds of people to make up a community: some are athletic, some are studious, some are quiet and shy, etc. Everyone is different. We have to embrace every member of our community with the same enthusiasm because they are each equally important to forming the whole!

25:11 The Ark was made of wood covered in gold. But the Ark was the holiest vessel in the Tabernacle! Didn't it deserve to be made of pure gold? The Chizkuni tells us that the reason it was made mostly of wood is because gold is very heavy. It would be a lot more work for the Levites to carry a solid gold Ark than it would to carry a wooden Ark covered in gold. The lesson is that we should be aware of the burden that others have to carry. We should have realistic expectations of others and do what we can to lighten their loads.

25:15 The poles used to carry the brass altar of the Tabernacle were removed when it was not being carried, but the poles of the Ark remained in the rings all the time. What's the difference between the two cases? The Ark was kept in the Holy of Holies, which was only entered by the Kohein Gadol on Yom Kippur. The altar, however, was out in the open, where people walked around it. The poles, if left in their rings, would pose an obstacle and obstruct the path. Providing ease of access is important and we must be careful to facilitate people's abilities to get to the places they need to be!



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### PARSHAS TETZAVE

4:3 According to the Talmud (Yoma 35a), the special garments worn by the Kohein Gadol (High Priest) had to be property of the public (though he could personally contribute). If the Kohein Gadol wanted to wear privately-prepared garments, he first had to turn them over to the public. This is because the Kohein Gadol, for all of his spirituality and holiness, was not a free agent, he was a representative of the people as a whole. He may have been the one that actually performed the service, but every member of the community contributed in their own way. If the Kohein Gadol served in privately-owned clothes, his service would not have been valid. The holy work of the Temple is always about “us” and never about “me.”

The Kohein Gadol wore a special breastplate that contained something called the Urim and Tumim, which G-d used to communicate with the Jewish people in the early days of the kingdom. On the breastplate there were 12 stones, corresponding to the 12 Tribes of Israel, and they were engraved with the names of the Tribes as well as the names of the Forefathers (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and the words “Shivtei Yeshurun” (“the upright Tribes”). This gave the Urim and Tumim all the letters of the Alef-Beis, which would light up to communicate any message necessary. But if a stone was missing? Then letters would be missing and the Urim and Tumim would not be able to function. It would be like a keyboard missing the letters E and P: All your mssags would b incomlt and ossibly incomrhnsibl.(All your messages would be incomplete and possibly incomprehensible.) For G-d to communicate with the Jews, the entire community must be represented!



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