


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 17 January 2014 - 16 Shevat 5774
 Sedra Yitro

DIVINE DEMOCRACY

IS JEWISH LAW DEMOCRATIC? DOES IT RESPOND TO THE DESIRES and needs of the many? The first answer is that quite obviously Jewish law comes from above, from G-d. In the most remarkable event ever reported, described in our Sedra¹, the entire Jewish people encountered the Creator of the universe. Gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai they experienced a Divine revelation, rather as if each person had become a prophet.

G-d spoke to them and told them the basic teachings of Judaism, the Ten Commandments. They can be summed up as commanding (a) recognition of G-d, (b) observance of the special laws connecting us to G-d, such as Shabbat, and (c) personal morality in all aspects of life.

In each of these areas the definition of the command comes from G-d, in the teachings of the Torah, both Written and Oral. A person might think “Certainly I want to worship G-d. In fact I will make a beautiful statue of G-d and I will bow down to it...”

Sorry, says the Torah. That is considered idolatry. You have to worship G-d beyond any form...

So too in the second area. The Fourth Commandment tells us to keep Shabbat. But how do you define what one may or may not do on



In Memory of Reb Meshulam Scharfstein ע"ה
 10 Shevat - Dedicated by his daughter Dr Jutta Singer תקי'

Shabbat? Here too we are dependent on the Torah, which presents “Thirty Nine Categories” of forbidden activities. They are defined in the Talmud and the Code of Law.

Personal morality too is defined by G-d, not by man. Who tells us we may not take another person's wife? G-d. Society may change in all kinds of ways; nonetheless, the Torah insists on its own definitions of what is permitted and what is forbidden. The Ten Commandments, and all Torah teaching, is G-d communicating with and instructing humanity, not humanity voting for the most acceptable law.

So the first answer to our question about democracy is that Torah teaching comes from above: our immediate need is to discover the ability to accept it. The verse “We will do, and we will hear” (Ex. 24:7) describes our relationship with the Torah. We undertake to keep its laws, even before we know what they are, and whatever they may be.

However, there is also another answer to our question. But this needs a little more investigation about the inner nature of a person. Who am “I”, what is my true identity?

The Sages tell us about two aspects of our inner being². One is composed of natural drives and urges, in some ways quite similar to a very intelligent animal. This is our Natural Soul, also called our Animal Soul. The other is a spark of the Divine.

From the point of view of the Animal Soul, Torah is indeed imposed from above, and there may well be a struggle about keeping its laws. The Torah provides the ultimate good for this dimension of ourselves, but it might take some time for us to discover this.

By contrast, from the point of view of the Divine identity, the teachings of the Torah express immediately our innermost needs. Only through these laws can we connect with G-d in every aspect of our lives. Only through these commands from Sinai can our deepest desires be fulfilled...

So while the first answer is that the Torah comes from above, and we have to accept it, the second answer is that the Torah expresses our own longing for self-expression, coming from the deepest level of our being.

1. Exodus chs.18-20. 2. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya*, chs.1-2, 4, 6-7, 9.

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SEDRA YITRO

WELL MEANT?

Michal stood by the open fridge, looking for a suitable snack. Her mother called from the living room, "Michal, dear, would you be willing to go to the grocery shop and pick up a few things for Mrs Stern, please?" Michal rolled her eyes. She really was not in the mood to help out their elderly neighbour, and was about to claim that she was too busy when she remembered Mrs Stern's chocolate chip biscuits...

"Okay, Mummy", she said as she closed the fridge door. "Give me the list and I'll go in around five minutes". This was becoming a regular chore since Mrs Stern had her hip operation, and though Michal did not particularly enjoy the errand, the hot chocolate chip biscuits that awaited her in the elderly widow's home at the end of the trip seemed to make the whole hassle worthwhile.

The following Thursday when the family was sitting together at dinner, Michal's father turned to her and said "Michal, your mother and I have been really proud about all the effort that you have been making to help Mrs Stern. Being elderly, alone and ill is an uncomfortable situation for anyone, and the fact that you have been helping her with her errands has really meant a lot to her."

Michal grinned, "Actually, it's only worth it because Mrs Stern always has some amazing delicacy awaiting me when I get to her house."

Misha, Michal's brother started laughing. "That's not exactly the intention one should have when doing a Mitzva!"

Michal's mother shrugged her shoulders as she helped herself to some salad. "The main thing is that Mrs Stern is actually receiving the help she needs. Actually, there is something similar discussed relating to this week's Torah portion. We learn how G-d gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai. The question is, did we accept the Torah of our own free will, or was there an ulterior motive?"

"I thought we said to G-d 'we will do whatever You tell us', before hearing what He would command", said Misha. "That sounds very dedicated!"

"Yes, but it also says that G-d held the mountain over us and said we *must* accept the Torah" said their mother. "I read this means that it was so exciting to get to Mount Sinai after all the things that had happened, like going out of Egypt and the Splitting of the Sea, that we couldn't think straight. At that point we weren't able to say 'no'. We just had to go along with it."

"You mean we were just drooling for those chocolate- chip cookies", said Michal.

"Yes. But the Sages tell us that when a person does the right thing for the wrong reason, eventually they will come to do it for the right reason. So it's right to do it, chocolate-chips or not!"

"Mmm", said Michal, feeling a little embarrassed at all the attention she was getting. "The truth is, I do enjoy Mrs Stern's company; she has some really interesting stories of when she was a little girl during the war. Do you think that listening to her stories is also an ulterior motive?"

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