

Parashat Yitro: The God of Simplicity and Joy

Dear Friends,

This week Am Yisrael receives two gifts. The first is bestowed by Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law: a justice system which will last through the generations. The second is given by God: the Ten Commandments. Both gifts are beautifully wrapped. The first is wrapped in the human wisdom of social order and hierarchy, and the second is wrapped in the sublime and in the experience of collective divine revelation.

And then, a moment before the end of the parasha, as the sounds of the shofars fade and Am Yisrael is returning slowly to their tents, God adds a small but very important addendum: **The LORD said to Moses: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. Make for Me an altar of earth...** (Sh'mot 20:19-21)

Be simple, God says to Moshe. I may have spoken to you from the heavens - wherever that is - but you will connect with me through mother earth. When you are worshipping Me, do so with simple materials - an altar of earth is all you need. Beware of glitter, He warns. Don't confuse material with materialism. Material is a blessing; the blessing of abundance. Materialism, on the other hand, is a form of idolatry. Don't seek God with silver and gold. Seek Him in simplicity.

Yes, this is one of the lessons I have been trying to internalize for years - without great success, I have to admit - the idea that God dwells in simplicity. If something is too complex, complicated, and clumsy, it is probably not divine.

Oh boy! I am so drawn to the complicated and the complex...

But what is simplicity - the kind of simplicity through which I may find God?

Hmmm... If I try to explain simplicity will I not miss the mark again, and commit the sin of complexity, as I so often do? When an explanation is required, when something does not explain itself, it is most likely not simple... and if it's not simple, then God will not be found there...

Chassidism teaches that the divine may be found in places of joy. If this is so - and I **know** it is, in the deep sense of knowing - then joy, too, is to be found in simplicity.

Leah Goldberg, one of Israel's beloved poets, wrote it so beautifully, with simplicity, wholeness, and grace. Please, take the time, relish every word, delight in its simplicity and in the aroma of the earth which rises from it.

At the end of the drasha there are links to three versions of this poem put to music. Each conveys a different form of simplicity, great joy, and another aspect of the divine.

Listen, read, and enjoy.

[A note to our English readers: we were unable to locate a professional translation of this lovely poem, so we have done our best to convey its form and meaning in this loose translation].

Will days of forgiveness and grace arrive
When you will walk in the field like a simple vagabond,
And your bare feet will feel the leaves of clover,
Or sheaves of wheat that will prick you sweetly.

Or you may be caught in the rain, with its many raindrops falling
On your shoulders, your bosom, your neck, and your head, so fresh.
And you will walk in the wet field and silence will expand within you
Like the light at the edge of the cloud.

And you will breath in the aroma of the furrow; breath in and be calmed,
And you will see the sun mirrored in the golden puddle,
And things are very simple and alive, and may be touched,
And love is possible, it's possible.

You will walk alone in the field. Not scorched by the heat
Of the fires from the paths that bristled with terror and blood.
And with a whole heart you will again be humbled and submissive
Like one of the grasses, like a human.

Leah Goldberg passed away exactly fifty years ago (on the 8th of Sh'vat, 1970). I was six years old, but I remember the day. She achieved great recognition in her lifetime, but the greatest poets of her generation such as Alterman and Shlonsky, who respected her very much as a researcher of literature and a first-rate translator, never acknowledged her as a poet. They felt her poems were too simple! Yes, Leah Goldberg's poems were "too simple." Indeed, they were right! But those poets did not understand that this, precisely, is the soothing power of her poetry.

Moshe Rabbeinu, forty years after Parashat Yitro, taught in his parting words from Am Yisrael, that the most important principle is: **Be Tamim [simple and wholehearted] with the LORD your God.** (D'varim 18:13) My two favorite words in the Torah are "Ayeka" and

“Hineni,” but my favorite verse is this one, from D’varim. I chose it to grace my certificate of rabbinic ordination.

Although more than three thousand years have passed since Moshe uttered these words, fifty years have elapsed since Leah Goldberg wrote her words, and twenty years have passed since my ordination, I am still trying to embrace the verse from D’varim and the path of simplicity of Leah Goldberg.

I will therefore continue to learn the Torah of humility and the message of simplicity, and believe wholeheartedly that God is to be found in joy and in simplicity.

Indeed, “things are very simple and alive, and they may be touched,
And love is possible, it’s possible”..

Chava Alberstein’s rendition: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqBu-IEPKWg>

Shlomi Saranga’s rendition: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYTkkWJ09d4>

Boaz Shar’abi’s rendition: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqqKC9tUPr0>

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha