

Parashat Yitro, 5780, 2020:

Experiencing Transformative Moments

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains one of the three places in the Torah where the phrase, “*atem ra’eitem* — you have seen,” is found. (*Sefer Shemot* 20:19) The other instances are *Sefer Shemot* 19:4 and *Sefer Devarim* 29:1. One of the essential principles of Torah analysis is the singular import of every word and verse in the Torah’s text. This is particularly the case when a word or phrase, such as, “*atem ra’eitem*,” is repeated, which almost always indicates its crucial significance.

In our *parasha*, Hashem deploys *atem ra’eitem* to urge Moshe to remind the Jewish people that He had spoken to them from the heights of Heaven. The verse, and the usage of this expression, is a natural prologue to the prohibition of creating golden or silver images of other gods. To paraphrase: Since I, Hashem, directly communicated with you (the Jewish people) during the Revelation on Mount Sinai, you are thereby proscribed from making idolatrous silver or gold images of other gods:

The L-rd said to Moses, “So shall you say to the children of Israel, ‘*Atem ra’eitem that from the heavens I have spoken with you.* You shall not make [images of anything that is] with Me. Gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves.’” (20:19-20, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Sefer Shemot 19:4 and *Sefer Devarim* 29:1 utilize *atem ra’eitem* as a reminder of the wonders and miracles that Hashem performed for us in Egypt: “*Atem ra’eitem* what I

did to the Egyptians, and [how] I bore you on eagles' wings, and I brought you to Me...And Moses called all of Israel and said to them, '*Atem ra'eitem* all that the L-rd did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, to all his servants, and to all his land.'"

As we have seen, our three *pasukim* (verses) each use *atem ra'eitem* to refer to two different actions of Hashem that were witnessed by our entire nation, namely, the Holy One's verbal communication with the Jewish people during the Revelation at Mount Sinai, and the *eser makkot* (Ten Plagues) against Pharaoh and his people. Why did the Torah specifically choose this expression to reference these pivotal events in our nation's history? We are fortunate that in his *Commentary on the Torah on Sefer Shemot* 19:4, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch *zatzal* (1808-1888) addresses this very question. He begins by noting: "*Atem Ra'eitem* — The basis of your knowledge of G-d and of yourself does not rest on belief, which can, after all, allow an element of doubt. It rests solidly on the evidence of your own senses, on what you have seen with your own eyes, have yourselves experienced." (This and the following quotations, *The Pentateuch Translated and Explained by Samson Raphael Hirsh*, translated from German by Isaac Levy, 2nd edition, The Judaica Press, New York, 1971.)

In Rav Hirsch's view, undeniable experiential knowledge of the Exodus and the Revelation ensures that the Jewish people will forever recognize the unquestionable historical truth of these two pivotal events:

The two fundamental truths on which the whole of Judaism rests, the Exodus from Egypt [in part predicated upon the *eser makkot*] and the Lawgiving on Sinai, stand firmly on the actual evidence of your senses, and as they were seen, heard, felt, and experienced simultaneously by so many hundreds of thousands of people, every possibility of deception is ruled out.

For Rav Hirsch, the very foundation of authentic Judaism is built upon the

incontrovertible knowledge that the Exodus and the Revelation were witnessed by multitudes of our ancestors in both Egypt and at Mount Sinai. As Rav Hirsch emphasizes:

Both these fundamental truths accordingly share the highest degree of certainty, are completely out of the realm of mere believing or thinking, are within the bounds of what we know with certainty, and are, accordingly, irrefutable facts which must serve as the starting-point of all our other knowledge with the same certainty as our own existence and the existence of the material world we see about us.

In sum, these shared transformative events, and the experiential knowledge they endow, are the shared legacy of the entire people that reverberates until our own historical moment. With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may this legacy infuse our thoughts and actions forevermore. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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

*** 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.