

Parshat Yitro  
"Jethro" (Exodus 18:1-20:23)

Guided contemplation  
February 18, 2017  
Rhonda Karlton Rosen, text  
David Goldstein, chant suggestions

## Introduction

This contemplation is overtly mystical. It is largely drawn from Zohar and the Isbitza. Sit quietly, listen if you are drawn to the words, let them steep in you like tea leaves in warm water. This is the Sabbath, a time of receptivity, a time when our soul is enlarged, with an enhanced capacity for quietness, joy, for the taking in of nourishment, and the quieting of disgust.

Heschel, The Sabbath, p. 116, footnote 5 in chapter 10

## Niggun

### 1. Arriving at Sinai

We have traveled a long way to get here. In the Biblical narrative, we have made the journey from slavery, crossing the Red Sea. We have developed the faith that nourishment will be there for us. The reality of the grace of the Sabbath has been established. And now we are to prepare our selves to hear and see and know the living presence of God. How do we prepare ourselves?

idea from the Chabad web site on Yitro, taken from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, "The Silent Day"

The first thing we do is rest and empty our vessel for receiving. We can rest in silence.

and "...If one comes to purify himself, he is assisted...for whoever desires to come near is brought near."

Zohar, p. 430

And what kind of listening is necessary for us to know, to be brought near?

We need to be willing to know awe.

We must be willing to know the unity in mystery of the Angel of Life and the Angel of Death.

Zohar, p. 380

"There is no awe except where completeness appears..."

Zohar, p. 426

Do we need a brush with mortality to know awe?

Zohar, p. 380

Jethro simply heard the story of the Exodus and quaked, was broken open, knew God.

Zohar, p. 379

Jacob had his dream of the ladder.

He awoke from his revelatory dream and concluded, "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

Zohar, note 204 p. 426

Is that how we will know awe?

And sometimes we know and we forget and frequently we forget we know.

Zohar, p. 429

..."If one comes to purify himself, he is assisted,...for whoever desires to come near is brought near."

Zohar, p. 430

And we remember, our experience of the Divine mystery is always mediated, always approaching and never arriving.

"The more a man apprehends in the depth of the Torah, the more he will then understand that until now he was in darkness. This is hinted at in the night and the day. 'Day' means that the blessed God opens the gates of wisdom for man, and 'night' means that man should not imagine that he has apprehended all in completeness, for all he has attained is like night in comparison to the day that follows. So it goes on forever, and it follows that all is night in the face of the light that Holy One...will open in the future."

Living Waters, p. 142

So let us sit in silence and prepare ourselves to know what we can know today, in this light. On this Sabbath afternoon. Being still, open, receptive.

**Chant:**

**Harpu ud'u ki Anochi Elohim**

**Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46:1)**

**Silence**

## **2. Receiving at Sinai**

"And it came to pass on the third day, when morning came, that there was thunder and lightening, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of the shofar exceedingly loud; and the entire people within the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain..."

And God came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And God called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses ascended."

(Ex 19:16-20)

"At Sinai, God revoked the decree which had confined matter and spirit to two distinct realms. God came down on Mount Sinai, bringing the spirituality of the heavens down to earth. He summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, empowering physical man to raise his physical self and world to a higher state of existence. The Torah could now sanctify physical life."

"A finite, physical thing becomes holy, as its substance and form come to embody the realization of a divine desire and command."

And the voice of God is described as "great and unceasing", without echo. Why should the divine voice at Sinai have been distinguished in this manner from all other sounds?

"...an echo is created when a sound meets with a substance which resists it: instead of absorbing its waves, the substance repels them, bouncing them back into the void. Prior to Sinai, the voice of Torah had an echo... At Sinai, however, God rescinded the decree which had severed the heavens from the earth. The world could now fully absorb the divine voice; a physical object could now become one with its mission and role."

From the Chabad site, "The Breakthrough"

The bridge between heaven and earth is always present

"You cannot find a single blade of grass that does not have a constellation in the sky, striking it and telling it: "Grow!"

Zohar, p. 436, note 249

"And a heavy cloud on the mountain (Ex 10:16) --a mighty cloud settling in its place, not moving.

"And the voice of, a shofar, very strong (ibid)--out of this mighty cloud issues that voice, as is said: "When you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness. (Deut 5:20). ...that voice issued is inmost of all.

..."Inmost of all, of which is written 'a might voice, unceasing' (Deut 5:19)

..."All the people were seeing the thunderings. Were seeing...those voices, were engraved in that darkness, cloud, and dense fog, and were visible in them as a body is visible, and they saw what they saw and heard what they heard from within that darkness, dense fog, and cloud. From within the vision that they saw, they were illumined by supernal radiance and knew..."

Zohar, p. 442

... 'a mighty voice (Deut 5:19); a voice of sheer silence (1 Kings 19:12)--with radiance more subtle and lucid than all.

'Silence (1 Kings 10:12). What does silence mean?...That one must be silent about it and muzzle one's mouth..." Mystery cannot be told.

Zohar, p. 446

a sound of sheer silence...

We are left with the unanswerable question, the mystical name "Who?" becomes our focus...it concerns everything that cannot be grasped. Its question constitutes its answer.

Zohar, note 289, p. 446

And we go into inward, in darkness toward the ceaseless voice of sheer radiance.

"All the hearts of Israel are called 'My altar'

Izbitzer, p. 147

## **Chant:**

**Al hargavoa ali lach**

**Get yourself up upon the high mountain (Isaiah 40:9)**

## **Silence**

### **3. Living commandments**

The commandments require effort and practice. These are not so easily done. They require great efforts of purification.

Living Waters, p. 143

"When a man commits to the commandments, commits to the practice of Shabbat, and comes Shabbat and then he forget[s, and] he forgets God...Shabbat ....come[s] around again, and then he... remember[s]... and " a great cry erupts from his heart, saying 'what have I done?' For a man cannot uphold the Torah unless he has failed in it. Then the blessed God gives him advice, which are the offerings that make atonement..."

Living Waters, p. 146

"In how many ways does Torah admonish a person not to sin before his Lord! In how many ways does it advise him not to stray....In how many ways does it advise him how to return to the presence of his Lord and be forgiven!"

Zohar, p. 456

Returning, always returning to remembering, to wholeness.

The Sabbath, today, now, is our sacred container,

"...On this day the patriarchs are crowned and all the children suckle, unlike all other holy days and festivals. On this day the wicked in Hell find rest. On this day all judgments are suppressed, not arousing in the world."

Zohar, p. 502

"On this day all souls of the righteous revel in the delight of the Holy Ancient One, concealed of all concealed. A spirit of this bliss spreads through all worlds, ascending

and descending, extending to all the holy children, to all guardians of Torah, and they rest in perfect tranquility, each of them forgetting all agitation, judgments, and toil...Therefore Sabbath is equivalent to Torah, and whoever observes the Sabbath is considered to have observed the entire Torah..."

Zohar, p. 504

We are told to honor thy mother and father.

"...A river issues from Eden to water the garden (Gen 2:10) A river gushing of the spring issuing constantly, never ceasing; from the river of this spring the whole garden is watered. The river of the holy spring is called Father. Why: Because it flows to nourish the garden.

Zohar, p. 510

.."Honor your father--the blessed Holy one. And your mother—the Assembly of Israel."

"...That which is concealed has no beginning we call He. The place from which beginning appears we call You, and it is called Father, as all is one. Blessed be His Name forever and ever, Amen.

Zohar, p. 511

And we think about that which has not beginning, about binding to Ayin, to nothingness, as opposed to a known somethingness.

"I raise my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come?"(Psalm 121:1) Me-ayin means both where and nothing. So we can read, from nothing-ness comes my help. "God cannot come to my help unless I bind myself to Ayin This is the meaning of "from ayin comes my help."

Do not recoil from that which lies beyond what we know of existence.

Zohar, note 328, p. 457-8

This is the beginning of awe.

**Chant:**

**Esah aynai el heharim mayayin yavo ezri (Psalm 121:1)**

**silence**

**niggun**

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza, translated and edited by Betsalel Philip Edwards, Living Waters, 2001

Rabbi Yehyah Leib Alter of Ger, translated and interpreted by Arthur Green, The Language of Truth, 1998

The Zohar Vol IV, translation and commentary by Daniel C. Matt, 2007

Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Sabbath, 1951