



The life of Queen Shlomit Alexandra was fraught with violent, political conflict and internecine strife. The saintly queen, however, survived to right the enormous crimes of her predecessors, and eventually became known as Shlomtzion--she who brought peace to Zion.

Her first husband, the ruthless king Aristobulus, seized power from his own mother, imprisoned his brothers and persecuted the Sages with great vengeance. After he died, having reigned only one year, the rule passed to his widow, Queen Shlomit Alexandra. She was the sister of the renowned Torah giant Shimon ben Shetach, the leading sage of the generation, and it was under his guidance that she did so much to repair the damage done to the Jewish people during this violent period.

The Queen's first act after the death of Aristobulus was to free his imprisoned brothers, the oldest of whom, Alexander Yannai, she married. Unfortunately, and to the terrible detriment of the Jewish nation, Yannai was no better than his short-lived brother. He devoted his energies to war, which took up most of his 27-year reign. His military exploits, however, were performed for his own lust for power and glory.

Far more serious for the Jewish people was the battle raging between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, tearing apart the fabric of the Jewish nation. The Sadducees, whose objective it was to eliminate the Oral Torah, strove in every possible fashion to seize power from the Pharisees, the ancestors of all Jews today. To that end, they exerted pressure on the rulers through political intrigue and even outright slander against their enemies. Eventually King Yannai used the mercenary troops which supplemented his own native army to mount a deadly persecution of these leaders of the Jewish people.

We can only imagine the terrible pain of Queen Shlomtzion, married to two Jewish kings of noble lineage, who perpetrated terrible crimes against the Torah Sages, the greatest of whom was her own brother. It was under her benevolent influence that Yannai was persuaded to relent in his war against the Pharisees for a time, and allow those remaining to return to Israel from their forced exiles. Once back in the Holy Land, Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach and his sister the queen were able to do much to restore Torah to the people. They acted to restore the authority of the Sanhedrin and to insure the education of the young.

The pair were responsible for establishing the first system of public education known. In earlier times education was the domain of the parents. If the parents were poor, uneducated, or deceased, the child was not educated.

This respite in the persecution of the Sages did not last, however. In a desperate attempt to wrest power from the Pharisees, the king and his Sadducee allies staged a ploy which succeeded in enraging the populace and provided a pretext on which to enlarge their terrible, bloody designs. When this despised king finally died he transferred power to his queen, instructing her to make peace with the Pharisees, calling his erstwhile allies, the Sadducees, "hypocrites."

Now the Queen could finally do as she wished, and her accomplishments are her praise even to our generation. It is said that during the reign of Queen Shlomtzion rain descended every Friday night (as a sign of blessing). The produce of the Land was remarkable. Wheat grew as big as kidneys, barley like olives and lentils were the size of gold dinars (the largest coin of that time).

When the Queen assumed the throne all persecution of the Sages ceased and the Pharisees were restored to their rightful positions of power. Shimon ben Shetach sat at the head of the Sanhedrin, and in every area of life the queen and her brother

worked diligently to restore peace and harmony to the Land. It was during her rule that the institution of the ketubah, the legal marriage contract, was established. This ensured that no Jewish woman would be left economically unprotected in the event of a divorce or widowhood. The courts were reorganized so that justice was again available to the people.

Her reign was a true "Golden Age" for the Jewish people in their land. The Sages even preserved samples of the amazing grains which flourished in her time to show succeeding generations the rewards of observing the Torah. Just as during the reign of the pious King Shlomo, now also, the Jews lived securely in their land, undisturbed by the nations which surrounded them.

THOUGHTS THAT COUNT

On the weekly Torah Portion

And Yitro [Jethro], the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law...and Yitro, father-in-law of Moses (Ex. 18:1, 2)

Why is "father-in-law" mentioned twice in describing Yitro? Yitro was an important man in his own right. As the "priest of Midian," he already enjoyed a high status. Yet he chose to be known as "Moses' father-in-law," for he knew this was his true claim to greatness. (Ohr Hachayim)

You shall select out of all the people...men of truth, hating bribe (18:21)

You will have to search hard to find these people, Yitro counseled Moses, for men possessing these qualities usually run away from positions of honor and do not sit idle all day, enabling you to find them easily. (Shaar Bat Rabim)

And Yitro heard...and he came...to Moses (18:1-5)

What did Yitro hear to cause him to seek out Moses? He heard of the miracles of the Red Sea and the war against Amalek. These events aroused in him a strong belief in G-d, and he set off. Why did he need to see Moses personally? Yitro knew that in order to learn Torah properly, he couldn't rely on second-hand information. He had to go to the leader of the generation and learn from him directly. (Sichot Tzadikim)

You shall sanctify today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their clothes (19:10)

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi once said, "You shall sanctify today and tomorrow" refers to the G-dliness and holiness that is bestowed from Above; "and they shall wash their clothes" refers to the effort that each of us must make on his own behalf.

His grandson, the Tzemach Tzedek, elaborated: "The command to sanctify 'today and tomorrow' was given to Moses, and indeed, in every generation, the tzadik and leader of that generation has the power to elevate the world and imbue it with more holiness. However, this must first be preceded by the preparation of 'washing the clothes.' Each individual must first work on himself to cleanse the garments of his soul--his thoughts, deeds and actions--before asking for help from Above."



5:12 Candle Lighting Time

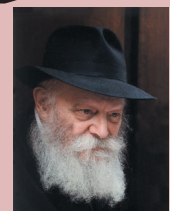
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Dedicated to the memory of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson
"To You I lifted up my eyes, You Who dwell in heaven" (Psalm 123:1)



LIVING WITH THE REBBE

from the teachings of the Rebbe on the Torah portion

The climax of the Exodus from Egypt and the purpose for which the world was created was the Revelation on Mount Sinai. It was there that G-d gave the Ten Commandments and the Torah to the Jewish People. In front of the assemblage of every single Jewish man, woman and child, and in the presence of the souls of every Jew that would be born throughout the millennia, G-d descended on Mount Sinai and said, "I am (anochi) the L-rd your G-d." These historic events are described in this week's Torah portion, Yitro.

The Midrash points out a curious fact: The word "anochi" is not Hebrew--it is an Egyptian word!

The Ten Commandments are a condensation of all the guiding principles of the Torah. Of these, the first two commandments, "I am the L-rd your G-d" and "You shall have no other gods," have an even greater measure of holiness, for they were heard by the Jews directly from G-d Himself, and not through Moses. The first of these two commandments, by virtue of the order in which it was given, has even more significance. Why, then, did G-d choose to express the most lofty and exalted concept, the "I," the very essence of G-d Himself, in a foreign tongue? Why didn't G-d use the Hebrew word for I--"Ani"--to begin the most important utterance ever heard?

In order to understand this paradox, we must first examine the purpose of the Revelation on Mount Sinai. The Torah was not given to guard the holiness contained in the Hebrew tongue; for this, no G-dly earth-shaking Revelation would have been necessary. G-d descended on Mount Sinai for one reason only--to enable us to elevate even the lowest and most mundane aspects of our lives and of the physical world, including the Egyptian language, the spoken words of the most corrupt and abominable nation.

Holiness existed before the Revelation, and Jews had long occupied themselves with the Torah. The innovation of the Revelation was the ability to "fuse" holiness with mundane, to imbue physical matter with spirituality. Even things that were seemingly far removed from the realm of holiness could now be used to bring G-dliness into the world.

The aim of the Revelation is pointedly emphasized by the use of the Egyptian word "anochi." A Jew's daily life involves elevating the physical and transforming it into a vessel for G-dliness. Prayer and Torah study enable us to reach only a limited level of spirituality; elevating that which is base and seemingly trivial, by adhering to the laws of the Torah, enables us to attain even greater heights of holiness.

When we fulfill G-d's will by elevating even the "anochi," as G-d Himself did, we fulfill the purpose of the Torah and carry out the world's Divine plan.

Adapted from the works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

True Connection Is In The Details

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Recent surveys show that as much as 80-90% of Americans will say that they believe in G-d, but 40-50% will say they do not practice a religion.

Indeed, if G-d is all-powerful and infinite, and religion is a set of laws and rituals and a list of things that one must or must not do, it would seem that G-d could hardly be described as "religious." Nor would it seem that being religious will bring a person closer to G-d. If G-d transcends all limitations and definition, why would the way to relate to G-d be to impose further restriction and definition on our already finite and constricted lives?

Yet this paradox is not confined to the religious-spiritual aspect of the human experience. Throughout the ages, whenever man has endeavored to escape the bounds of the mundane and the everyday, he did so by submitting to a structured, even rigid, code of behavior.

My favorite example for this is the discipline of music. There are just so many musical notes on the scale, and no one--not even the greatest musician--can create additional notes or subtract any. Anyone who wishes to play or compose music must conform to this absolute, immutable system.

And yet, by submitting to this framework, the musician will

create a piece of music that touches the deepest place in a person's heart--a place that cannot be described, much less the defined. By using this very precise, mathematical formula, the musician will create something that transports the listener to a place high above the confines and fetters of everyday life, high above the strictures of physics and mathematics.

Imagine, then, a musical discipline whose laws are dictated by the inventor and creator of life--by the one who has intimate knowledge of life's every strength and every vulnerability, of its every potential and its every sensitivity.

The only question remaining is: but why so many laws? Why must this discipline dictate how we are to wake and how we are to sleep, and virtually everything in between?

Because life itself, in all its infinite complexity, is our instrument of connection with G-d. Every "scale" on its "range" must be exploited to achieve the optimum connection.

Music being our metaphor, we cannot but quote the famous anecdote in which Archduke Ferdinand of Austria reputedly says to Mozart, "Beautiful music, but far too many notes." To which the composer replied, "Yes, your majesty, but not one more than necessary."

