

Am Segulah —The Biblical Status of the Bride

Commentary on Parashat Yitro (Exodus 18:1-20:23) {Jethro}

When Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father in law...(Exodus 18:1)

When our Jewish people in *Parashat Yitro* were offered the opportunity to become *Am Segulah* (“...my own **treasure** (*segulah*) from among all the peoples (*am*)...and you will be a kingdom of *cohanim* for me, a nation set apart.” Ex. 19:5-6), the response by all of Israel in Exodus 19:8 was “Everything *יהוה* has said we will do.” The proposal was great, the one making the promise was reliable, and I believe our Jewish people intended to obey everything when it came to doing what *יהוה* had said. While it is true that Israel later disobeyed and strayed from the path, it is also true that the generation of our people that left *Mitzrayim* were willing to obey their new Master, without reservation. This is always true at any wedding—the bride is ready to honor, cherish, love and obey her soon husband-to-be! This commitment is one that we must have in our innermost being today. Will we in Kol Simcha implicitly obey whatsoever *יהוה* says?

A Wedding

This concept of a wedding is one of the most discussed *Midrashim* in all of Jewish literature. What is a *Midrash*? According to Jacob Nausner it is “an ancient Jewish homiletic commentary on some portion of the Hebrew Scripture, in which allegory and legendary illustration were freely used.” The majority of this portion discusses a “wedding,” if you will, between *יהוה* and His people, Israel. Of course, I am not alone, nor am I the first one to see things this way. If this is so, then there are several features in this week's portion which, when put together, show that here at Mt. Sinai, we are the attendants of a sacred wedding. Let us look at the different features from which we can conclude this.

The Engagement

We have already seen *יהוה*'s betrothal of Israel in a previous *Torah* portion, *Va'Eira*. Here is a brief review. In Exodus 6:6-7, *יהוה* gave *Moshe* five promises which He intended to carry out for Israel. Do you remember that four of these promises are the basis for the four cups of wine at the Passover Seder? Let me go back to the message from January 24, 2009 on *Parashat Va'eira*. In it I wrote:

I Will Take You to Me—*VeLakachti Etchem* (ולקחתי אתכם)—Acceptance & Betrothal

The Hebrew word used in this last promise is the commonly translated “to take.” However, there are other times when it is used in reference to someone taking a wife. An example of such is found in *Bereshit* 24 where Abraham instructs his servant to take a wife for Isaac (See Gen. 4:19, 6:2, 11:29, 12:19). Based on this usage, it seems that when *יהוה* told Israel He wanted to take them to Himself, He may have been proposing marriage! If this is correct, then this was Israel's moment of betrothal, or formal legal engagement to their future Husband, *יהוה*!

Even more, He was making a proposal which was very difficult to resist! In Jewish terminology, an engagement is called a “betrothal” or *erusim* (אירוסים). In biblical times, as well in some circles today, to break this betrothal would involve going through an official (rabbinic, not civil, although for all practical purposes in modern Israel it is now a civil matter as well) divorce procedure. The betrothal did not permit the couple to live together, but it did give *marriage* status to the couple. Sometimes the betrothal ceremony was held one year before the actual wedding. In this regard, it is interesting to note that there was about a one-year period between the start of the plagues and the Exodus.

This engagement, then, was a binding agreement between יהוה and Israel. As far as יהוה was concerned, it was as good as a marriage. However, as far as Israel was concerned, they hardly knew about it! This relationship from the start was initiated, carried out, maintained, and [will be] consummated totally by the Eternal Groom Himself!

Separation of the Bride

Once engaged, the bride, Israel, was not permitted to pursue other grooms. To help her, יהוה began a separation process with the purpose of making her unreachable for other pursuers and helping to remove any temptations on her part. This process culminated with the Exodus. The theological terminology is called *sanctification (kiddushim)* a separation from everything else to serve only יהוה. Accordingly, notice that Moshe's main plea to Pharaoh throughout the plague period was, “Thus says יהוה, ‘Let My people go that they may serve Me.’”

One reason, therefore, why יהוה brought Israel out was to sanctify her as His bride. In the process, after the Exodus, the Holy One then brought her to a beautifully secluded spot, and spoke kind and tender words to her. His speech is recorded in *Shemot* 19:5-6:

Now if you will pay careful attention to what I say and keep my covenant, then you will be my own treasure from among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you will be a kingdom of cohanim for me, a nation set apart...

Segulah

The book of *Shemot*, in chapter 19, presents a very moving scene where the Groom (יהוה) tells His would-be bride, Israel, how much He loves her. One of the words He calls her is (in English) “beloved treasure.” Some versions use the phrase peculiar treasure. But the Hebrew word is *segulah*, סִגְלָה. It is a very picturesque word.

In ancient times it was used in Ugaritic (Canaanite) literature to describe what a king would think concerning the possessions he may have gained when he conquered another people. He would have many new valuable objects, but only a few choice ones would he classify as *segulot* (plural of *segulah*). These he considered the most prized possessions which he treated with special care and kept under special protection. Rashi also explains this word in like manner by saying,

Segulah means a cherished treasure, the same as (Ecclesiastes 2:8), “and treasures of kings” costly vessels and precious stones which kings store up. In the same manner shall you be unto Me a cherished treasure more than other peoples.

Accordingly, the King of Kings possesses all of the earth, as stated in *Shemot* 19:5, but He considers only Israel to be His special, valued and loved possession—His *am segulah*. We see here that יהוה had already coined a term of endearment for His would-be bride, Israel.

Showing Them Who He is

While He was speaking such loving words, He also outlined for Israel what their marriage would be like. To begin, יהוה mentioned that He already had the “*ketubah*” ready. For another, He told Israel that He had a special purpose for their relationship. This marriage would have goals and direction. יהוה said that Israel would be a “*kingdom of cohanim*.” One of the main functions of priests was to lead others into an understanding of יהוה's role on the earth and to help them worship and serve Him. In this context, the entire nation of Israel is to be dedicated to leading the world toward an understanding and acceptance of יהוה's mission.

Stated in another way, it was a responsibility of the *cohen* to act as His representative to others. Similarly, according to *Ex. 19:5*, Israel was to be יהוה's representative for and to other nations. This would fulfill the ultimate promise of the Covenant with *Avram* when it says that *Avram* would be a blessing to all of the nations.

A Nation Among Other Nations

Implied in this designation for Israel is the promise that she was going to be a nation, a “kingdom.” This nation would also have a King: יהוה Himself (though this would change later in their history). יהוה even told them that they would be a “holy nation.” This word “holy” (*kadosh*), does not imply some ethereal religious status. It simply means that this bride was to be different from and separate from all the other nations.

Summarizing what the Eternal One was telling Israel, His bride, we see that not only would Israel enjoy the unique status of being יהוה's special beloved people, but they also would have both the privilege and responsibility to “show-and-tell” the nations of the world who יהוה really was. In short, Israel was/is to be a nation among the other nations of the world serving as a perpetual witness and testimony of the one true *Elohim*. How this would actually transpire is the object of much debate. But the fact of her calling is certain.

Imagine how it would have been if, on the night of your wedding engagement, your potential spouse told you in lovingly endearing terms exactly what יהוה's plans for your marriage would be—glorious, meaningful and praiseworthy plans! This is exactly what יהוה was telling Israel. He described, in most definite terms, what their marriage would be like. Since יהוה was the One who formulated this marriage, in one way or another, these plans would ultimately be carried out with Israel.

The Wedding Itself

The Mikveh

We come now to the actual wedding ceremony in Exodus chapter nineteen. Before a traditional Jewish wedding, it is customary for the bride to go into the *mikveh*. (In some circles, the groom also goes, separately from the bride, of course.) Let us clarify what the concept of a *mikveh* means. A woman is required by *Torah*, to immerse herself in a *mikveh* (a pool of gathered fresh waters) following her monthly menstrual cycle. During this cycle, the couple is to refrain from sexual activity until after seven days, and following her immersion. During this time the woman has the status called, *niddah*, (Hebrew: נדה). According to the book “Made in Heaven” Rabbi Kaplan states,

The word niddah has no implication of dirtiness or uncleanness. Rather, it comes from the root meaning 'removed' or 'separated.'

Before this separation can end, she must be immersed. The *mikveh* is much more than the usual “purification,” however. It also carries with it the idea of rebirth. Rabbi Kaplan states:

In many ways, the mikveh represents the womb. When a person immerses, it is as if he has momentarily returned to the womb. Then when he emerges, it is as if he were reborn. He is a completely new person.

Thus, in a sense, a woman is “born anew” every month after her cycle and *mikveh*. It is also because of this “born anew” concept that new converts to Judaism are immersed. According to Kaplan, the basis for this practice is found in our present passage. Here, Israel stood before יהוה at Mt. Sinai. But, before the *Torah* (*ketubah*) was given, all Israelites had to immerse, as we see in *Shemot 19:10, 14*:

And יהוה said unto Moses, 'Go to the people; today and tomorrow separate them for me by having them wash their clothing... Moshe went down from the mountain to the people and separated the people for יהוה, and they washed their clothing.

Actually, although the text states that their clothes were immersed, it also implied that they did too! When the Holy One instructed Israel to immerse, it was as if the bride had to end her period of separation before being intimate with יהוה. Furthermore, at that time, every Israelite was like a convert to Judaism, who must immerse as part of his conversions.

Kaplan, then, offers these concluding remarks: Speaking of His marriage to Israel at Sinai, יהוה said,

Again I passed by you, looked at you and saw that your time had come, the time for love. So I spread my cloak over you to cover your private parts and entered into a covenant with you,' says Adonai ELOHIM, 'and you became mine. Then I bathed you in water, washed the blood off you, and anointed you with oil. (Ezekiel 16:8, 9)

The immersion refers to that of the Israelites before receiving the *Torah*. In the metaphor of the bride, however, it also refers to the immersion of a bride before marriage."

Under the Chupah

We have seen, therefore, that one of the traditional customs practiced in preparation for a Jewish wedding, the immersion into a *mikveh*, finds its roots here at the divine wedding at Mt. Sinai. There is a second custom also evident in *Shemot* chapter nineteen—the *chupah*.

A "*chupah*" is the canopy under which a wedding takes place. The word "*chupah*," is also used in the Bible, both in Joel 2:16, "*Let the bridegroom go forth from his chamber, and the bride from her chupah*" and in Psalm 19:6 where it talks about the bridegroom, "*coming out of his chupah.*"

In Jewish thinking, the *chupah*: "... is a symbolic house. It is a single domain into which the groom welcomes the bride."

Indeed, it even looks like a little house with open sides. Where was the *chupah* on Mt. Sinai? It is dearly seen in verse 19:16 where we read that when Moshe went up the mountain, "*there was thunder and lightening and a heavy cloud on the mountain.*" May we suggest that the cloud was Adonai's *chupah*? Certainly! It was there that He welcomed Israel, as represented by Moshe. Their new home or place of dwelling was to be eternally with Him!

The Ketubah

We come now to a central part to this wedding, the *ketubah*. The *ketubah* in traditional Jewish weddings is the marriage contract or covenant. It is a legally binding agreement between the bride and groom which governs their marriage. It is always a written agreement, which is how the word *ketubah* derives its name, from the Hebrew לכתב to write. The *Ketubah* is read and signed during the Jewish wedding ceremony.

In truth, the custom of using a written contract only dates to about the middle of the third century of the Common Era, not back to Mount Sinai. However, there was always (at the least) an oral marriage agreement which was legally binding. This agreement was biblically referred to as a "covenant" (i.e., a *B'rit*).

For example, in *Malachi* 2:14, we read of יהוה rebuking Israel for the way the husbands treated their wives who were wives of their "*marriage covenant.*"

In this wedding at Mt. Sinai, what is the *ketubah*? What is it that is the legally binding marriage covenant/contract between יְהוָה and His bride, Israel? It is *Torah*! For, here in chapters nineteen and twenty, יְהוָה begins to give His *Torah* to Israel. The first part of the revelation of *Torah* is what the Scripture calls the “*Ten Words*” better known as “The Ten Commandments,” Kaplan also concurs with this, although with a slight variation. He says,

The ketubah also has a symbolic meaning. Since the bride and groom represent Israel and יְהוָה at Sinai when the Torah was given, the ketubah represents the “Book of the Covenant” that Moses wrote prior to the revelation at Sinai. (Exodus 24:4, 7)

Upon closer examination, however, it does not appear that the Book of the Covenant was written before Sinai. It seems that all the revelation which Moshe received from Sinai onward was put into the Book of the Covenant. It is this revelation which Kaplan calls the *ketubah*. If we are correct in our interpretation, it still stands, therefore, that the entire *Torah* is the *ketubah*.

One Unit

What can we say about the Ten Commandments that has not been said before? The first thing to note about them is their unity, especially with the rest of *Torah*. Both for contextual and literary reasons, the Ten Commandments cannot be separated from the rest of *Torah*. Many non-Jewish teachers have fallen into this error. They teach that all people must follow the Ten Commandments because they are the best moral system. But they fail to note that immediately following the Ten, יְהוָה begins instruction on other issues which were meant to be part of this *ketubah* also.

Another way in which the unity of the Ten is diminished is by teachers attempting to separate certain ones out from them. This is usually done by non-Jewish believers in *Yeshua* concerning the fourth commandment: *Shabbat*. Their method of hermeneutics calls for them to say that only the commandments which are repeated or taught in the *B’rit Chadasha* are “*valid for today*.” The fourth commandment, they say, does not fall into this category, therefore, believers in *Yeshua* are not required to follow *Shabbat* as it is outlined in the fourth commandment.

Again, this represents a careless misinterpretation of not only *Torah* itself, but the teaching of the *B’rit Chadasha* as well. They fail to take into account the teaching from *Yeshua* Himself concerning *Torah* in Matthew 5:17. In addition, they fail to consider the life-style of the early Messianic Jewish believers as it is revealed in Acts 21:20-26.

Just A Preamble

It is true that within the *Torah* itself, there are references to specific commands of the Ten Commandments, suggesting that the Ten are a self-contained unit. But that is only because they simply serve as a convenient summary for the rest of *Torah*. In other words, the rest of *Torah* is the Ten Commandments fleshed out and expanded to their fullest meaning. It may be compared to the “Bill of Rights” in the US Constitution. They are a unit of literature in and of themselves, but certainly connected to the rest of the Constitution. It could be said that in many ways, the rest of the Constitution explains what the Bill of Rights summarizes.

The same is true about the Ten Commandments. The rest of *Torah* explains what they summarize. Hertz goes so far as to say that all denominations and schools of Judaism are in agreement that,

The Ten Commandments (are) the fundamentals of the faith, as the pillars of the Torah and its roots. In modern times, various exponents of Judaism have shown that all the ritual observances prescribed in the Torah are visible embodiments of the general truths enshrined in the Decalogue; and that, in fact, the whole content of Judaism as creed and life can be arranged under the ten general headings of the Commandments.

For All Peoples

Having established the absolute unity of the Ten Words with the rest of the *Torah*, we can now comment on their outstanding influence in the world. It is true that people have erroneously attempted to divide the Ten from the rest of the *Torah*. Nonetheless, the Ten have had a universal influence far beyond any other moral or religious system. In this regard Hertz, again, comments,

“The Humanists, the Deists, and even the Freethinkers spoke in reverence of the Law of Sinai. He then quotes Renan who said, “The Ten Words are for all peoples; and they will be, during all centuries, the commandments of יהוה.” Hertz then concludes, “All historians of civilization are generally agreed that, low as the ethical standards of the world at present undoubtedly are, it is certain that they would be even lower, but for the supreme influence of the Ten Commandments.”

The Ketubah Itself

Let us return to our initial thoughts about the *ketubah*, lest we lose sight of the importance of viewing the *Torah* as a marriage contract (the Ten Commandments, being just the introduction to this contract). By referring to the *Torah* as a *ketubah*, we are, then, suggesting that it is not merely a nice ethical system, or list of do's and don'ts.

It functions as the sacred marriage covenant between יהוה and His people, Israel. It outlines the way the marriage is to be lived out. Its stipulations are what make this a happy and fruitful marriage. Its precepts describe how the marriage would function. Its pictures tell what the marriage would look like. Its judgments describe how each of the partners would relate to each other. For either party to violate this agreement is to violate the marriage itself. The Groom promised never to violate it. It was always the bride who did so. When it was violated, יהוה sent the prophets to rebuke “the unfaithful bride” and help her to return back to the *ketubah*, the *Torah*.

The Ring

What is a wedding without a ring? A wedding ring is an outward symbol of the marriage. It is given as a token or pledge that the person who made the promises will, in fact, keep those promises. It also serves as an outward sign to others that particular man or woman is married, not fair game for would-be suitors.

Kaplan gives another rather fascinating observation regarding the ring. He contends that the ring is not the important thing, it is what the ring represents. According to him,

... using a ring for a ceremony is only a custom ... The main part of the ceremony is the groom giving something of value to the bride.

One reason why this is interesting is that, in a sense, יהוה gave His bride some valuable gifts when He took them out of Egypt. Exodus 13:35-36 describes how יהוה gave Israel favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and the Egyptians gave them articles of value such as vessels of silver and gold.

There is another traditional suggestion for what the ring was. It also is adequately expressed by Kaplan. According to this viewpoint, the *Torah* is the ring.

The Torah is like a ring; it is endless, and as soon as one finishes, one must begin again ... The Torah is therefore like a wedding ring, a circle without beginning or end.

While what Kaplan says about *Torah* is most definitely true, I do not think, however, that it best symbolizes the wedding ring given by יהוה at Mt. Sinai to His bride, Israel. But, the *Torah* itself does tell us what the ring is. It says in Exodus 31:13, *Veshamru B'nei Yisrael...*

You shall keep my Sabbaths, for it is a sign (Ot) between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am יהוה who sanctifies you.

The ring is *Shabbat*! We are told in these verses that *Shabbat* is a sign (Hebrew: אות). Just as the ring is an outward sign that the husband and wife belong to each other, so is *Shabbat* an outward sign for יהוה and Israel. It is an outward symbol that Israel and יהוה belong to each other.

In a marriage, if the ring were to be removed, people would have sufficient reason to question if the marriage was still intact. This is also the same for *Shabbat*. Since it is a sign that *Elohim* is *Adonai Echad*, removal of *Shabbat* from the midst of Israel would be like saying that the marriage between יהוה and Israel is over.

Since יהוה promised in Jeremiah 31:35-37 declares unequivocally that this relationship will not cease, then it would follow that the sign function for *Shabbat* is still in force for Israel.

The House

If there is a wedding going on in this portion, then there must be a family structure and a place for the family to have intimate times with each other. These issues are also discussed in *Parashat Yitro*. *Shemot* chapter 18 gives some information about the family structure. In this chapter, יהוה provided Jethro, the father-in-law of Moshe, to give him some practical help in organizing the judicial structure of Israel.

As far as the place of intimacy, the Groom began to make provision for such a place right after the Ten Words. In *Shemot* 20:21, Moshe received instruction concerning the “altar,” the place where the husband would meet with the wife in a special way. The next *Parashat* will give more details about their new “house.” This would be the place where this divine couple would meet with each other in the most intimate fellowship.

Like many families, this family would move and change locations of residence quite a bit. Hence, the place of the house would change over the years. Eventually, however, they would “settle down” in Jerusalem.

The Bride of Messiah

There is yet one last element to this *Midrash*: the bride. If the *Tanakh* were all that we possessed of יהוה's revelation, there would be little confusion about the identity of the bride. It would clearly be the physical descendants of the Patriarchs, the nation Israel. Yet within Israel there seems to have been a spiritual division of people. There seems to have been those who were part of Israel by physical birth only and those who were not only physically part of the nation, but also spiritually connected to יהוה in a way in which the others were not. The Scripture calls these “the remnant.” Thus, as far as the *Tanakh* is concerned, the remnant, the faithful believers within Israel, is the bride. It is for the sake of this remnant that *Adonai* has kept His wedding promises. It is this remnant that has kept Israel alive as a nation.

As if that scenario is not complicated enough, the waters really become somewhat muddy when we examine the teachings within the *B'rit Chadasha*. For we are told specifically by Rabbi *Sha'ul* in Ephesians 5 that the bride of *Adonai* is “the Church.” If so, then it would appear that *Adonai* has two brides. How can this be?

When we see that word church in the *B'rit Chadasha*, for the most part, it simply means literally, “called-out ones” It does not carry with it the overtones of the anti-Semitic religious megalith which it shortly acquired after the first century. These “called-out ones” are those Jews *and* those from among the nations who believe in *Yeshua*. *Sha'ul* makes it very dear in Romans chapter eleven that the called-out ones from among the gentiles are grafted into the olive tree of Israel. They are not a separate entity. They do not replace Israel. They are in some way, shape, or form, brought into Israel.

The Bible, therefore, does not teach that there are two brides: one being the Church and the second being Israel. There is one bride. This bride consists of the remnant of Israel along with the remnant of the nations who are grafted into Israel. It would seem from this viewpoint that the *ketubah* would have some definite ramifications for this composite bride. It does. But, that is the subject of an important discussion outside of the confines of this *Torah* Commentary. (If it is of interest to you to further study this subject, I would like to invite you to read the book entitled *Take Hold*, published by First Fruits of Zion.)

The Great Banquet

Parashat Yitro speaks of the divine wedding between *יהוה* and Israel. We all know that when a wedding is over, everyone looks forward to the banquet! This portion does not discuss the banquet. But, perhaps, we may see a hint of it in other parts of the *Torah*. (If so, then we are witnesses that the *ketubah* provides for it!) The last of the seven Holy Days written about in Leviticus chapter 23 is *Succot*. It is a time that all Israel is to live in little temporary houses for a week. According to Zechariah, the prophet, when *Adonai* returns to earth to set up His Kingdom, He will command that all nations celebrate *Succot*. *Succot* is a time of intense rejoicing and feasting, characteristic of a wedding banquet.

Commenting on these end-time events, the book of Revelation 19:9 talks about a “marriage supper of the Lamb.” Daniel Juster comments, “*I believe Succot is the marriage supper of the Lamb and the inauguration of the King and His Queen?*” If so, then all who are in Messiah, the bride, will be there rejoicing with our Groom.

♪ Let us rejoice and be glad, for the marriage of the Lamb... ♪

♪ Y a su esposa se le a concedido, que se vista de lino fino ♪