



MACHSHAVOT

Parashat Yitro

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What I Learnt from Four Giants of Torah

Rabbi Andrew Shaw
Chief Executive, Mizrahi UK

About 15 or 16 years ago something very special happened, well for me personally and for millions of others. Doctor Who came back to our screens.

Now I'd grown up in the 70s with Tom Baker and Peter Davison in the 80s and I loved it. My brother and I loved watching it, it was a real family favourite and then it went off the air.

It came back in 2005 and I was very excited to see if it would be good. When it left in the late 80s it had become pretty rubbish and I was happily surprised that it was good. However, it didn't get really good until a certain episode of that first season when it reintroduced one of the Doctor's oldest enemies in the Daleks.

Now why do I tell you this? In essence it's going to have a lot to do with what's happening at the moment in the Jewish world and what the deaths of certain great people have really taught us about what Torah is, what it should be and what it shouldn't.

So let's get back to Doctor Who.

The episode was set in the future where the Doctor had stumbled upon a billionaire's collection of alien artefacts that had basically been purchased from across the world and put in his private museum under the ground in his facility.

There's a conversation that I remember watching when it first came out, I was really inspired by the Doctor's response to him, but I never realized what that response meant in terms of the Jewish people and in terms of what's happening now to the Jewish world.

Confused? Let me explain.

The dialogue goes as following. Van Statten, the billionaire, has the Doctor in his office and they're talking, debating and the Doctor says the following to Van Statten:

'Let me tell you something Van Statten, mankind goes into space to explore, to be part of something greater'.

Van Statten replies, 'Exactly I wanted to touch the stars!'

The Doctor retorts angrily 'You just want to drag the stars down, stick them underground underneath tons of sand and dirt and label them, you are about as far from the stars as you can get!'

When the Doctor says this, he's passionately angry, because he loves the stars, he loves exploration, he loves showing people the beauty of the universe and the cosmos, opening people's eyes to the wonder of the Universe and the beauty all around.

He can't stand the fact, that this guy is taking this beauty and stuffing it underground for nobody but himself.

That leads me on to the tragedies of the last nine months.

Four people, four great rabbis have left this world, some from Covid, some for other reasons, but these four were tragedies for the Jewish world and for the non-Jewish world as well – they truly were greats.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, Yeshiva University – 31st May 2020

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz – Steinsaltz Talmud – 7th August 2020

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth – 7th November 2020

and just this week **Rabbi Abraham Twerski**, Psychiatrist, inspiration and support to millions across the globe.

Four very different Rabbanim. They weren't all modern orthodox, they weren't all Hasidic. Rabbi Steinsaltz was Chabad, Rabbi Twerski was a Chassid from Chernobyl dynasty, Rabbi Lamm was the head of Yeshiva University and of course Rabbi Sacks was the head here in the UK.

But what did all four of these greats share? They shared the idea of making Torah broad, showing the world what Torah is, showing the Jewish world what Torah could do for a person, how it can transform a person's life. They didn't keep Torah underground – they let it shine.

Whether in Psychiatry with Rabbi Twerski.
Whether in Science with Rabbi Steinsaltz.
Whether in Philosophy with Rabbi Sacks.
Whether in Sociology with Rabbi Lamm.

All four of them inspired me with their books and their words and in turn the world.

Torah is there to inspire the world, if you keep it just to yourself, if all you're concerned about is what is happening to my Torah, then it's going to end up in a very very dark place.

I believe part of the problem we're having at the moment in certain parts of the Jewish world, is because that's what it is, it's very insular, it's just for them, the outside world is the enemy.

Contrast that with Rabbi Twerski, contrast that with Rabbi Sacks, with Rabbi Lamm and with Rabbi Steinsaltz, how they saw the world as a place to inspire, how they saw the world as a place to talk to, to engage with and yes to be challenged by.

Because the ideas out there in the secular world are challenging, but what do we do? Do we hide from those challenges? Or do we take them front on?

Rabbi Sacks saw massive challenges potentially between Torah and Science, so he researched and wrote a book and inspired millions to understand that there is no contradiction.

Rabbi Twerski understood the dangers of the modern world with all its addictions but how, using the Torah ideas on self-esteem as well as secular wisdom he could help transform people, if he could find a way to get through to them. He managed it and transformed people's lives for the better.

While Rav Steinsaltz realized that the world of Talmud was unknown to so many people, Jews and non-Jews as it hadn't been translated in a modern, scholarly and inclusive way. So he did that, and made the world of Talmud open to the world.

Rabbi Lamm took a 1950s and 60s drifting American Orthodoxy who were engaging with the world but not with Torah and inspired them and their generations afterwards to understand that you could live both in the modern world and be fiercely loyal to Torah.

A famous philosopher once said 'Ships are safe in the harbour but that's not what ships are for.'

Torah is meant to be lived, bravely and courageously to inspire way beyond the 'harbour'.

This week in Parashat Yitro, Hashem gives the Torah to the Jewish people.

Every single Jew, man, woman and child heard Hashem speak the first two commandments and then Moshe completed the ten. The message being that Torah is not just for those in yeshiva, it's not just for those who grew up in a strong Torah environment - it's for everybody, everybody has to find a way to connect the Torah, to learn Torah.

Of course that is through the *mesorah* and of course through the Orthodox tradition, that is no question. Those four greats made sure they never ever compromised that *mesorah*, Rav Sacks, Rav Twerski, Rav Lamm and Rav Steinsaltz were fiercely loyal to Torah but they managed to make that Torah speak to a broad range of people and that is what we need to do.

We need to realize that if we just worry about ourselves, our Torah will wither. Look at what Chabad have done, by worrying about the world, look at what the Outreach organizations have done by worrying about the world - their Torah speaks to a lot of people. It inspires those teaching and those being taught.

I'm so proud of the United Synagogue Rabbinate that I've been part of and working with for so many years. Because again, they're engaging with the other, with their communities, with people who have different ideas and different concepts and different beliefs and that's okay, we shouldn't be scared to engage with people to speak, to debate, to discuss.

Sometimes it gets passionate, sometimes we're challenged in a very difficult way, but we should never think that Torah doesn't have the answers to those challenges.

That's what those four rabbis taught me. I read their books, thankfully with Rabbi Twerski and of course Rabbi Sacks, I spent time with them and realized that these people were giants of intellect, giants of Torah and giants of realizing that Torah is there to inspire and we should never be afraid of anything the world throws at us because Torah has the answer.

This Shabbat in Parshat Yitro we remember Matan Torah. Over 3000 years ago Hashem said to us, here it is, here is the Torah that's going to transform the world, it was given to Bnei Yisrael, to all of us. We say it everyday, '*Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe Morasha Kehillat Yaacov*'. It is a *Morasha*, an inheritance, our inheritance - for all of us.

Let us this week on Parshat Yitro make sure that we recommit ourselves to those values, to realize that the people that taught those values to us over the last 50 years or so, have tragically departed but their books and their ideas and their vision lives on. It is for us to recommit ourselves to that vision of a Torah engaging with the world, of a Torah inspiring the world, of a Torah that is not scared to face the challenges of the world.

That is how we inspire a generation, that is how we inspire ourselves and that is how we inspire the future of the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom

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Rav Ari Silberman, Rav Shaliach Mizrachi UK - Manchester



Part II: Sunday, 21st Feb @ 8:30pm

WHEN EXACTLY DID PURIM TAKE PLACE?

Rav Andrew Shaw, CEO of Mizrachi UK

Rabbi Shaw served as Rabbi at Stanmore and Canons Park United Synagogue for over 15 years. He has also been a leading figure in the United Synagogue's central organisation for more than a decade and was the founder of Tribe as well as Director of the Living & Learning department. Rabbi Shaw lives in Edgware, London with his wife and two sons.

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About Shabbat

Yoni Abrams

Participant of the Mizrahi UK Fellowship Programme

What has sustained the Jewish people in exile, giving the ones who stayed within the fold a sense of belonging and purpose?

The pre-state Zionist thinker and writer, known by his pen-name Achad Ha'am, stated, "more than the Jewish people have kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept the Jewish people." Shabbat is emphasized time and again in the Torah as being a Mitzvah which speaks to the essence of what it means to be Jewish, so Achad Ha'am's suggestion begs us to take a deeper look at how Shabbat represents our Jewishness.

Shabbat anchors us by reminding us where we came from on two levels. First of all, in a universalist context. Shabbat evokes a recollection that Hashem is the ultimate Creator, as we read in this week's Parsha Yitro: "For in six days Hashem made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day" (Yitro 20:10).

Secondly, Shabbat helps us recall our particular covenant with Hashem, as Hashem tells us explicitly about Shabbat that it is "a sign between Me and you throughout your generations; that you may know that I am Hashem who sanctifies you" (Shemot 31:13).

Shabbat also serves to help us focus and redirect our lives if we feel we have been drifting. R. Abraham Joshua Heschel calls Shabbat "a sanctuary in time" because Shabbat affords time to the Jewish people to be with family, reflect on what is most important to us, and assess our development in our relationships to others and to ourselves. If, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Zt"l says, "faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise," then Shabbat is the tuning fork that helps the faithful find the chord that resonates with them. Releasing us from the pangs of a discordant week, Shabbat provides us an atmosphere of harmony.

Managing to leverage this reality for our own mental and spiritual health is not an easy task, but a worthy one to commit to. For some, scrupulous commitment to the specific laws of Shabbat is the first step. For others, making sure to prepare fun games and discussions for the family Shabbat meal is the most essential. Numerous other paths exist as well, but the cornerstone that unites the Jewish people here is that Shabbat is meant to be a meaningful "sanctuary in time."

We have spoken about two elements of Shabbat. Firstly, recalling that Hashem created the world and has a particular covenant with the Jewish people, and, secondly, that Shabbat provides us with the space to focus on what is really important to us as an individual, as a family, and as a people. Along these lines, the great 11th century commentator and poet, known as *Eben Ezra*, wrote in a *Shabbat Zemer* that many of us sing weekly, "*ki eshmerah Shabbat, kel Yish'mereini - when I guard the Shabbat, Hashem will protect me.*"

Have a wonderful Shabbat!

(Listen to a very pleasant rendition [here](#))

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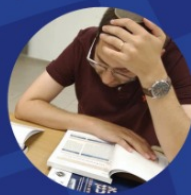


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Their prize was a catered Shabbat meal from Jonathan Robinson of Jasmine Catering – enjoy!

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