

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XVII: Yitro (Ex. 18:1–20:23)

Essay 18. The guarantee of the children

In this week's parsha, Moses ascended Sinai and received the Torah. This essay discusses a midrash that G-d asked the Jewish people for guarantors that they would uphold the Torah.

“O L-rd, our L-rd, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth, You who have set Your splendor upon the heavens! From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength, on account of Your foes, to put an end to enemy and avenger. When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place, what is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him.” – Ps. 8:1–5

"מפי עוללים וינקים יסדת עז". יש לדקדק מה קושר יש לפסוק זה עם הפסוק הקודם "מה-אדיר שמה בכל-הארץ" ועם הפסוק שלאחריו "מה-אנוש כיי-תזכרנו" וכו', ועוד מהו "צור-ריד" ומה ענין "להשבית אויב" בכאן.

“From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength.” We need to examine the connection between this verse and the preceding verse, “how majestic is Your name throughout the earth,” and with the following verse, “what is man that You have been mindful of him,” and also what is this “Your foes” and what is the subject “to put an end to enemy”?

ויש לומר שאמרו ז"ל שפושבא הקב"ה ליתן התורה לישראל שאל מהם ערבים וכו', ולבסוף בנים שלהם נכנסו ערבים לישראל כדכתיב "מפי עוללים" וכו'. והעולם מקשים הואיל שלמתן תורה צריד ערבות וזה הערבות צריד שיהיה דוקא מהבנים. אם פן המלאכים שאין להם בנים באיזו סברא היו טוענים שימתן התורה להם, והא אין להם שום ערבות ליתן.

It can be said that [the rabbis] of blessed memory said when the Holy One, Blessed be He, came to give the Torah to Israel, he asked them for guarantors that they would observe it. In the end, the children entered as guarantors for Israel, as it is said, “from the mouths of

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infants” etc.¹ Everyone asks: since for the giving of the Torah, [G-d] required a guarantee, and this guarantee specifically needed to come from the children; if so, regarding the angels, who have no children, by what sort of thinking were they claiming that He should give the Torah to them, when they have no children to give a guarantee?

ולפי דעתנו בא הכתוב לתרץ קושיא זו ממש, דלאחר "אשר תנה הודך עליהשמים" הוסיף לומר "מפי עוללים וינקים" וכו', פלומר טעם וצורך לערבבות הבנים לא שייך אלא לבני אדם, לפי שהם נכשלים בעבירות ואז התורה שלומדים אינה תורה טהורה, והעולם אינו מתקנים אלא בהקבל פיהם של תינוקות של בית רבן, וכדאמר ליה אבני לרבא דידי ודידה מאי? אמר ליה אינו דומה הקבל שיש בו חטא להקבל שאין בו חטא, כדאמרין בשבת פרק ט"ז, ועוד אמרין התם כל עיר שאין בה תינוקות של בית רבן מחריבין אותה, כדאיתא במדרש על פסוק "הקל קול יעקב", כל זמן שצפצפו קולן של תינוקות נשמע בבתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות של יעקב אין הידים ידי עשו שולטות וכו'.

In our opinion, the Scripture came specifically to solve this question. For after the text, “You who have set Your splendor upon the heavens,” it continues, saying, “From the mouths of infants and sucklings” etc. This is as if to say, that the reason and the need for the guarantee of the children was only relevant to the sons of man, because [adult men and women] fail by their sins, and thus the Torah they learn is not a pure Torah.

The world only exists by the breath of the mouths of schoolchildren who learn Torah, and as Abaye said to Rava, “My [Torah study] and yours, what [is its status; i.e., why is it worth less than that of children]? He said to him, there is no similarity between the breath of adults, that has sin within it, and the breath of children, that has no sin within it,” as it says in tractate Shabbat, chapter 16.²

Also, it says there, “Any city in which there are no schoolchildren [studying Torah], destroy it.” As it is brought in the midrash on the verse, “the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau” (Gen. 27:22), “as long as the singing voice of schoolchildren is heard in synagogues and study houses of Jacob, the hands that are the hands of Esau will not rule.”³ Thus, the children would guarantee the observance of the Torah, sustaining the world, and also protecting the Jewish people.

¹ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:4: “At Sinai, when the Jews were ready to receive the Torah, G-d said to them, ‘What? Am I supposed to give you the Torah without any security? Bring some good guarantors that you will keep it properly, and I will give it to you.’ Jews: ‘Our ancestors will be our guarantors.’ G-d: ‘They themselves need a guarantor! Abraham questioned Me: “How will I know?” (Gen. 15:8). Isaac loved Esau although I hate him (Malachi 1:3). Jacob thought I mistreated him (Isaiah 40:27).’ Jews: ‘Our prophets.’ G-d: ‘I have complaints against them, too: “The shepherds sinned against Me” (Jer. 2:8). “Israel, your prophets were like foxes” (Ezek. 13:4).’ Jews: ‘Our children are our guarantors.’ G-d: ‘Now, that’s a guarantor! “From the mouth of infants and babes You founded strength” (Ps. 8:3)—this [refers to] Torah (Ps. 29:11).’ What happens if the borrower doesn’t pay? The lender collects from the guarantor. ‘If you forget [My] Torah, I will forget your children’ (Hosea 4:6). Therefore, a man must bring his child into the Torah and educate him in it.”

² Shabbat 119b, though our edition quotes Rav Pappa speaking to Abaye, rather than Abaye speaking to Rava.

³ Gen. Rabbah 65:20.

והם הם דברי המלאכים, יש לה לימן התורה על השמים, ואם תאמר שאין לנו בנים להיות ערבים, הלא זה לא איקפת כלל, שהרי לנו אין צריך ערבות, שהטעם דאיצטריך לישראל היינו משום ד"מפי עוללים וינקים יסדת עז", כדי שתהיה תורה טהורה לקיים העולם, כמו שהוא הפה של עוללים וינקים. ועוד כדי שלא יבוא האויב להכרית את ישראל ולהשחית העולם, "למען צורריך" וכו', אבל אנו שאין בנו חטא והתורה שלנו תהיה לעולם טהורה, אין הכי נמי שאין צורך כלל לערבות.

These are the words of the angels: "You should give the Torah to the heavens, and if You say we angels have no children to be guarantors, this shouldn't matter at all, for we do not need a guarantor, for the reason that it was required for Israel was because, 'from the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength,' in order that the Torah will be pure to sustain the world, as though it is the mouth of infants and sucklings. Also, in order that the enemy will not come to cut off Israel and to destroy the world, 'on account of Your foes,' but we angels, who have within us no sin, and whose Torah will always be pure—it is true that there's no need at all for a guarantee." Thus, the angels argued that they could fulfill the same duty as the Jewish children: sustaining the world, and protecting the Jewish people.

ולכן "מה-אנוש פיתזכרנו" וכו', והלא "פירארא שמיך מעשי אצבעתיך" הם כלם טהורים, ולמה אתה תפץ להשרות שכינתך בארץ מקום מטומאה, "מה-אדיר שמך בכל-הארץ אשר תנה הודך על-השמים."

The angels continued their argument: **"Therefore, 'what is man that You have been mindful of him'" etc., for isn't it "when I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,' they are entirely pure? Why do you prefer to spread your Shechinah in a land that is a place of impurity, 'how majestic is Your name throughout the earth, You who have set Your splendor upon the heavens!'"**

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