

EARTH-SHAKING EVENT

by Rabbi Dovid Green

"And Yisro the Priest of Midyan heard all that G-d had done for Moshe and Yisrael; that G-d had taken them out of Egypt" (Exodus 18:1). Rashi asks the famous question: What news (in particular) did he (Yisro) hear which caused him to come? The answer: the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, and the war with Amalek. As we may know, at the end of last week's parsha the Jewish nation was attacked and fought with a nation called Amalek. Many question the significance of these two pieces of news in particular which motivated Yisro to journey into the wilderness to join the Jewish nation.

Rabbi Shalom Noach Brezovsky, the Rebbe of Slonim, explains as follows. After the splitting of the Sea of Reeds was it still possible to have a nation who would come and challenge the Jewish people? Weren't they convinced of the might of the G-d of the Jews? Didn't they know they would lose? How could they be so foolish? As a result Yisro reasoned that it must be that faith in G-d cannot depend solely on arriving at one's own conclusions through reason or proofs. Today I can arrive at one conclusion, and tomorrow I can be convinced of the opposite. There must be a better way to maintain faith which doesn't depend on proof. For that reason Yisro made his way out to the Wilderness of Sinai to be among the Jewish people. What is this better way to maintain faith?

The Rebbe of Slonim continues. Even after every Jew experienced prophesy at the Sea of Reeds G-d still gave them the directive in the Ten Commandments to believe in Him. Did they still need to be convinced to believe? No! But being convinced through proofs, even experiential validations is not a reliable, long-term foundation for faith. Giving the directive to believe teaches us that the only consistent basis for faith is believing because we are commanded to. (Obviously this presupposes belief in the divine origin of the Torah). Here believing doesn't only mean accepting there is a G-d Who took us out of Egypt, but cultivating faith, and living with it on a daily basis. Faith which has the Torah as its foundation is a faith which will sustain through all situations and generations.

It is no coincidence that the parsha of our receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai begins with the story of Yisro's journey. It teaches us the prerequisite for receiving the Torah. Accepting the yoke of Torah means that we look to the Torah as the ultimate guide and bottom line for our behavior and attitudes.

When the Jews arrived in the wilderness of Sinai, the Torah states "And Yisrael camped there opposite the mountain" (Exodus 19:2). The Hebrew language has masculine, feminine, singular, and plural conjugation of its verbs. The Midrash points out that the word camped (VaYeechan) is written

in the singular conjugation even though it referred to the entire nation. The reason given for this is that the Jewish nation at this juncture had achieved perfect unity "Like one man with one heart." The prerequisite for accepting the Yoke of Torah is the commitment to unity. The definitions of unity and divisiveness, have become obscured in our times. However, the Torah definitions are defined in this week's parsha.

As we learn from Yisro, the basis for our faith in G-d has its source in the Torah. The Torah is the authoritative reference book for all Jewish issues. Through the giving of the Torah we received our identity. It would make sense, therefore, that the Torah, and the Talmud, which go hand in hand, are the source material of any Jewish-related question. Based upon this, we arrive at the definition of Jewish unity. It doesn't necessarily mean that everyone agrees on every point. Debating issues and arriving at opposing conclusions doesn't necessarily undermine Jewish unity, as long as both sides are sincere and agree that the Torah is the authority. Even if we can't come to agree on something, I acknowledge the expertise of my opponent. I can accept that those who come to him for his legal decisions should follow them, and that that is G-d's will. Needless to say, those who make such decisions must be experts in the Bible, the Talmud, and the subsequent classical texts. Just as one would not rely on an ignorant doctor to make medical decisions, so a student of Torah would only rely on an accepted, expert authority in Jewish law.

Based upon this, we arrive at the Torah definition of divisiveness. It does not mean that an accepted authority disagreed with another after putting in his best effort at rendering a Torah decision. It doesn't mean that someone opposed behaving in a manner clearly contrary to Torah. Rather, it is when someone challenges an accepted authority without sources. If something cannot be proven using a Torah source, then it is manufactured or a product of a personal agenda. This is the source of divisiveness, when non-authorities ignorant of the sources set themselves up as opposing authorities and claim that the real authorities are divisive. We should view such people the same as we would view doctors who were found severely lacking in their training.

The giving of the Torah was an earth-shaking event. Its thunderings are still heard loudly and clearly to this day. It has shaped world history in a most profound way. It was an event which defined us as a nation - through adherence to the Torah we retain our uniqueness. By accepting the yoke of Torah, we strengthen the unity of our people. May we all merit to hear the voice which still resounds...

Good Shabbos!

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