

WHAT OUR EYES HAD JUST SEEN

by Rabbi Label Lam

And Yisro heard...(Shemos 18:1)

What did Yisro hear that caused him to come? The splitting of the sea and the war with Amalek! (Rashi)

What was it about these two pieces of news that motivated Yisro to take action and to come and join the Jewish Nation? Was it the good news that G-d had bent history and nature to assist a fledgling nation? Was it the bad news of the sneak attack that brought out a pugnacious response? Perhaps it was the combination of both!

Seeing that the sea split for a nation drove fear deep into the hearts of the nations of the world. The Jewish Nation was untouchable. It was not only the factor of strength or invincibility, but rather the point of respect. At that historical moment it was clear that the entire world is densely packed with meaning. There are no empty spaces, no vacuums.

Although, as Winston Churchill said, "The wheels of history grind slowly but thoroughly!", the full cycle of exile and exodus blossomed before the eyes of the entire world. There wasn't a nation or a person who was not shocked by the introduction of this concept. Everyone was reeling from the shocking news. It rocked peoples' categorical boxes and prior assumptions about the way the world worked. Finally after partially recovering from the aftershock of cognitive dissonance something equally startling happened.

"Along came Amalek.." and took a desperate and suicidal shot at the champions with the sole goal of injecting the venom of cool doubt into the veins of the world and it's emerging paradigm shift.

Years ago we took a group of American college students on their first visit to Israel to a moving experience at a settlement in the Gush Etzion Block. The historical presentation in the theatre was charted with pictures, and maps the long and arduous process of settlement by holocaust survivors of an arid and rocky unforgiving piece of real estate that eventually would blossom under their hands.

Then in 1948, with the UN partition declaration, a story of horror unfolded before our eyes. A woman described how she and others were ordered to throw hand grenades into bomb shelters where all the children were hunkering for safety and then with tears described how the enemy forces carried out the deed before their eyes. That deed which they the mothers had refused to do. As the house

lights were turned on and the drama of the presentation concluded the screen was lifted, and revealed behind its facade the bunker where all those children were brutally murdered. We all moved with great awe and reverence and were drawn magnetically to stare at that remnant of recent history. It was a powerfully sobering and stirring event for all of us. We returned to the bus.

We had barely left the parking lot when some of us broke the sacred silence with a medley of silly sitcom ditties. A few of the leaders were shocked and angered at the immediate need to drown so foolishly the conscience and erase the impression of what we had all recently experienced so profoundly. One of the senior leaders, not to excuse, but to explain, told us that this is the product of a culture raised on flipping channels from the tragic to the sublime to the absurd and the ridiculous. One sees murders and ads for hamburgers and soft drinks and has a hard time eventually sorting out fiction from reality.

Yisro saw that the sea could split and the whole universe is brought into order almost with the raise of the conductor's baton. Then, within a heartbeat, Amalek can mock the silence with a shameful slur. Yisro understood clearly that he cannot remain neutral anymore. The whole world and everyone on the bus that day was forced to take a stance. The task became enormous to simply hold the memory of what our eyes had just seen.

Good Shabbos!

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