

# SHEARINGS AND SHEARLINGS

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

One of the most challenging issues facing newly observant and older "returnees" is how to view celebrities in the sports world and in show business who command almost universal respect. Finding these heroes unappreciated and often disdained in the religious world comes as a great shock to the newly observant. Weaning oneself from a state of adulation to a more objective assessment of these iconic figures is a slow process requiring delicate guidance.

Yisro's personal journey recorded in this week's parsha may not be all that different from the path of our modern-day baal teshuva. As the high priest of Midyan, Yisro was revered and adulated in his home environment. Inspired by his newfound beliefs, he turned his back on the lifestyle and pagan practices he had espoused, forfeiting the stature and esteem his leadership had brought him. Rejected and spurned by his fellow countrymen, he nevertheless stood his ground. Attesting to his extraordinary moral integrity, a parsha in the Torah was ultimately recorded in his name.

The Torah tells us that upon Yisro's arrival at the Jewish camp in the wilderness, his son-in-law, Moshe Rabbeinu, recounted to him the miraculous events of the Exodus and the nation's subsequent journey through the wilderness. Yisro's response is recoded in the Torah with an interesting word: "Vayichad Yisro," Yisro rejoiced over all the good that Hashem had done for the Jewish people, saving them from the murderous Egyptian hordes.

The word "Vayichad" that is used to describe Yisro's joy has no parallel in the Torah. It would seem to be connected to the word "yichud" - meaning unifying, for by recognizing the unity of G-d, one realizes a state of joyous spiritual awareness that has no parallel.

Our sages in Sanhedrin (daf 84) offer divergent insights into the allusions hidden in the word "vayichad." Rav tells us the etymological root of the word is "chad," sharp, intimating that Yisro took a sharp knife and performed bris milah on himself. He thereby completing his conversion, becoming bonded as one with the Jewish people.

Shmuel provides an opposing opinion, saying that "vayichad" is an illusion to the word "chidudim," prickles of the flesh. Although Yisro rejoiced, his skin "crawled" at the thought of the downfall and the decimation of the Egyptians and their civilization. He still experienced feelings of attachment to the peoples and society from whom he had separated.

Perhaps Rav's and Shmuel's divergent interpretations actually complement one another. Rav teaches us that Yisro harnessed all his instincts and desires to fulfill Hashem's bidding. By

undergoing bris milah, he demonstrated that he was willing to spill his own blood in order to unite his instincts and life energy to the Divine service. Shmuel notes that at the very same time, hearing of the Egyptians' obliteration at the sea made him aware that an essential part of his very own being was drowned with them, prompting a twinge of grief and loss.

Acknowledging those feelings also contributed to the overall feeling of closure with his past and joy at his new found faith.

*Growing up, we lived in an expansive home that comfortably housed our family together with my father's extensive book collection. As my parents grew older, they were forced to move to a more modest home, single story home. Although their mobility was impaired, they still functioned independently. Yet my father was forced to sell much of his beloved collection of antiques and Hebraica.*

Ten years later my parents became more limited and they were compelled to move into an assisted living home with a small suite. My father sold the remainder of his collection, leaving only his most precious personal effects to be housed in the cramped apartment in which he spent most of the last years of his life. In his final year, being dependent on round-the-clock nurses, he was forced to move into a medical suite in the assisted living home, giving up the few cherished items that he had enjoyed in his suite.

My father imparted to me that he viewed this journey as a gift from Hashem, enabling him to transition from this world to the next. Hashem was affording him the opportunity to first gently take off his overcoat, so to speak, then his jacket, and then his shirt, gently transitioning to a life where material possessions are of no import and spiritual values are all that count. He recognized the painful journey as a rewarding one and thus was spared the sense of loss and grief that normally accompany such a transition.

Our own life journey and growth trajectory often requires us to leave behind some of our cherished connections as we strive for higher levels of spiritual awareness and performance. With hindsight, we realize that these sacrifices are meaningful and worthwhile.

While we may feel a wave of grief and anxiety in passing the knife over our foreskin, so to speak, leaving behind things to which we feel an intimate attachment, true growth and ultimate bliss demands that we follow Yisro's shining example.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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