

MOSHE VS. YISRO

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Two great moral luminaries and teachers confronted each other in this week's Parsha: Moshe Rabbeinu and his father-in-law, Yisro. Moshe Rabbeinu invited Yisro to remain with the Jewish people and settle in Eretz Yisroel. Yisro, according to the Siforno, declined Moshe's invitation and returned to his homeland Midian. Rashi explains that Yisro's refusal had to do with his being a convert. As a Ger, Yisro would not have had a legal claim on the Promised Land. He would not have received a designated ancestral portion along with the other Tribes. His children and grandchildren would eventually have married into the main body of the nation, as had his daughter Tziporah, and been incorporated into the nation's eternal claim on the land; however, Yisro himself wouldn't have had a portion.

Moshe offered two related arguments in response to Yisro's concerns. 1) Your personal mission is to help the Jewish people attain their national goal. 2) Your personal destiny can only be fully realized as a part of the Jewish nation's destiny. The Torah does not record whether or not Yisro conceded to Moshe's argument. The Ramban says that Yisro and his family stayed with the Jewish people. The Siforno says that Yisro himself returned to Midian, but left the rest of his family with Moshe.

Why was a legal claim on the land so important to Yisro? Every convert to Judaism accepts the inherent limitation of being a Ger. A convert can not become king. A convert can not marry a Kohain. A convert does not inherit a portion of the land of Israel. The assumption is that the convert desires closeness with G-d that can only be attained through Torah and Mitzvos. The fundamental challenge to a Bais Din in accepting a candidate for conversion is to ascertain whether or not the applicant has any ulterior motive in becoming Jewish. If the candidate is unwilling to accept the imposed limitations of Halacha, he or she is not a worthy candidate. Yisro is considered to have been a true and proper convert. Why then was he disturbed by not receiving a portion in the land of Israel?

In what manner did Moshe's argument respond to Yisro's concern? Moshe should have answered that: a) Yisro could always purchase or rent a piece of land. It's not as if Yisro would be homeless and unsettled if he remained with the nation! b) Yisro himself was restricted as a convert, but his other six daughters (besides Tziporah) could each marry into a family that had an ancestral claim on the land. How did Moshe's response regarding Yisro's individual mission and destiny address Yisro's concerns?

At the end of the Parsha, the Torah pays Moshe the greatest accolades possible for a human to receive. In 12:3 Moshe is described as "exceedingly humble, more so than any other person." In 12:7

he is described as, "My servant Moshe, the most trusted in all G-d's home." The two attributes of humility and trustworthiness are closely linked to each other. Because Moshe was so humble, therefore, he was G-d's most trusted servant. As our ultimate "teacher," we attempt to emulate Moshe's trait of humility and aspire to the level of being G-d's servant. Humility is knowing what makes each of us unique and special and developing those talents in the service of G-d. Servitude is accepting that our true worth is only in relation to how we use those talents to serve G-d.

The most gifted individual and the least gifted are equal to each other if they both use their G-d given talents to serve G-d. In fact, someone who is less gifted but fully committed to serving G-d is far greater than the more gifted individual who doesn't fully serve G-d. Therefore, Moshe is the most trusted servant of G-d because he was the most humble of all men. Moshe's understanding of his own unique talents and his acceptance that his sole value and justification as an individual was in proportion to the degree of his service to G-d, earned him his accolades as the most humble and the most trusted of all men.

Talent comes with a price. Bright and talented people often struggle with issues of ego and self-worth. On the one hand they are acutely aware of their abilities. On the other hand, it is difficult for them to accept direction as how to best utilize those abilities. On the one hand, they trust their own intelligence in formulating their own opinions and decisions, and present their plans with a degree of confidence and bravado. On the other hand, they are just as fearful as anyone else of failure and rejection, but far less prepared to deal with either.

Yisro was a very talented and intelligent man. So much so, that he was chosen by G-d to help in Moshe Rabbeinu's development and education. His life's ambition to understand the truth of good and bad reward and punishment made it possible for him to recognize the truth of G-d's divinity and to willfully accept the yoke of Torah and Mitzvos. Yisro was not a first hand witness to the great miracles of Exodus. Yisro heard about them, studied them and recognized through them the revealed manifestation of G-d's divine justice and control. In many ways he was far more advanced in his understanding of G-d than the rest of the Jews who had witnessed the overt revelation of G-d in Egypt and the desert.

Yisro's personal dream was to use his monumental intellect and vast life experiences in teaching the non-Jews of the world to believe in G-d. Who better than Yisro to explain the shortcomings and fallacies of other beliefs and religions. Who better than Yisro to encourage the spiritual journeys of an awakening spiritual conscience, and point that soul in the right direction?

Within the system of Torah education and training, the Rebbi - Talmid (teacher - student) relationship is of singularly paramount importance. It is the Rebbi who trains the Talmid in the attributes of humility and servitude. It is the Rebbi who does battle with the emerging egos of his bright, yet immature students and forces them to honestly confront their individual motives and agendas in relation to serving G-d.

Moshe, in regard to humility and service to G-d, was Yisro's teacher, no different than he was a Rebbe to every other Jew. Yisro, in regard to intellect and critical thinking, had been Moshe's teacher. Moshe's invitation to Yisro to stay with the Jewish people and settle in Eretz Yisroel forced a confrontation between Yisro's own opinion as to his personal mission and destiny and Moshe's understanding of G-d's plans for Yisro's mission and destiny. In any other situation, the student would have felt obliged to concede his personal agenda in favor of Moshe's invitation. However, Yisro was different. Yisro had lived his entire life making decisions on the basis of his unique intellect and integrity. He knew with absolute certainty what his mission in life was. It was to be a Jew; and as a Jew, teach the non-Jewish world to recognize and believe in G-d.

Historically, there have been two ways for the Jew to teach the non-Jew. 1. invite the non-Jew to visit in Eretz Yisroel and witness first hand how G-d intended humans to live and act (as it was in the times of Shlomo Hamelech). 2. Have the Jew to go out to the non-Jewish countries and homes and teach them to believe in G-d (as it has been throughout our exile).

As soon as Yisro heard that as a convert he would not receive a parcel of land, Yisro understood that his personal mission was not tied directly to the land. Therefore, his mission was to go back out to the non-Jewish world and teach them in their homes. This approach was further substantiated by the fact that he knew the people of his own birthplace and could understand and relate to their issues, helping them to recognize and integrate G-d into their thoughts and actions. It also explains why even according to the Siforno, only Yisro returned to Midian. The rest of his children were all destined to be connected to the land and therefore their method for teaching the world about G-d had to involve, if at all possible, living in Eretz Yisroel.

Moshe's response to Yisro was that he was wrong. First of all, a convert in relation to the land is no different than a Kohain or Layvie in relation to the land. Neither of them receives a portion of Eretz Yisroel! "G-d is their portion!". The reason why the tribe of Layvie was not given a portion in the land was to show the great intimacy and trust that they enjoyed with G-d. They served Him in His home and through teaching the rest of the nation, and He cared for them in a manner that freed them from doing any other work, except His service. So too the convert. The ger's singular devotion and commitment in willfully electing to serve G-d rendered him like the Layvie. Like the Layvie, he is a role model to the rest of the nation of total commitment and devotion to G-d; and like the tribe of Layvie, he doesn't have a portion in the land of Israel. "G-d is his portion."

Secondly, the intended way for the Jewish nation, not the individual, to influence the non-Jewish world was through the medium of Eretz Yisroel. (Just think how much more prominent we have become on the world scene, in the minds of the non-Jewish world, ever since the State of Israel was founded). The fact that we have had to do our work of educating the world in a setting of exile and persecution is a punishment, not an alternate educational lifestyle!

The job of each and every Jew, including each and every convert regardless of their unique talents

and abilities, is to function as a cohesive whole within the boundaries of Eretz Yisroel, serving G-d and modeling His values. No one individual can do it alone. Moshe argued with Yisro that his personal mission and destiny was intimately linked to the body of the nation and the land, even if Yisro himself didn't have his own portion! He was to be a teacher to the teachers (the Jews), just like the tribe of Layvie were teachers to the rest of the nation. He was to be our "eyes", showing us the proper way in which to teach the rest of the world, and our teacher in the meaning of devotion and commitment, regardless of the sacrifice.

According to the Ramban, Moshe convinced Yisro, and he stayed with the nation. According to the Siforno, Yisro differed with Moshe and, given his unique intellectual abilities and relationship with Moshe, was unwilling to subject his own understanding to that of his teachers.

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