

A QUESTION OF JUSTICE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Yisro, the High Priest of Midian and the Father-in-law of Moshe, is an enigma. Who was this individual whose destiny was intricately linked with our own? Why did he merit to have his daughter marry Moshe Rabbeinu, and why did he merit to have 27 verses in the Torah devoted to his organizational and judicious wisdom? Why was a Parsha named for him?

In order to appreciate the importance of Yisro, we must first put into perspective this week's Parsha of Mattan Torah - the Giving of the Torah, with regards to last week's story of the Exodus, and next week's Parsha, Mishpatim, which deals with the basic tenants of social law.

In last week's Parsha, G-d revealed to the Jews why He had saved them from slavery, and why they had been named to be the Chosen People. G-d told them, "And you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." It is important to understand the meaning of this verse because it states what our national mission is in relations to the other nations.

"Priests" are usually appointed to administer a religion to a constituent population. "Holiness" means an exclusive designation of purpose and function. For example, the words spoken by a man to his intended bride are, "Behold you are made holy unto me." The word "holy" means, designated to me as my wife to the exclusion of all other men. It emphasizes the designation of exclusive purpose and function within the intimacy of marriage. Therefore, we need to understand for what purpose and function were the Jews chosen to be "a holy nation," and for which constituency were they supposed to function as "a kingdom of priests."

The population for whom the Jews were chosen to be Kohanim - priests were the rest of humanity. The designated purpose of this "kingdom of Kohanim" was to teach the rest of humanity to recognize G-d's presence in the universe, and what G-d expects from all of us. Of course, this was the very job which Avraham and Sarah had originally undertaken to do, without being specifically chosen to be priests to the world. As a reward for Avraham and Sarah's singular devotion to G-d, their children merited to carry on their life's commitment and serve humanity in their spiritual quest for purpose and meaning. However, there was a fundamental difference between Avraham and Sarah's self-appointed task and the assigned job of the Jews at the time of the Exodus.

Avraham and Sarah administered to their constituency through the attribute of Chesed - kindness. They graciously and generously served the needs of the weary traveler, introducing their "guests" to the loving bounty of G-d's ever-present benevolence. On the other hand, the Jew's exodus from

Egypt heralded G-d as the G-d of Justice - the power that saves the persecuted and the righteous, while at the very same time, punishing the oppressor and the wicked. It is far easier to teach about G-d's actuality through kindness and generosity than it is to reveal G-d as the Dayan Haemes - the Truthful Judge.

Teaching about G-d through deed and action presents an immediate benefit to the "student." Teaching about G-d through ideas, concepts, and philosophy, often leaves the student with far more questions than answers.

"If G-d is truly just, why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?"

If G-d functions on the basis of reward and punishment, what was the terrible sin of the Bnai Yisroel that they had to suffer 210 years of slavery and oppression?

How do you reconcile the conflict between G-d's knowledge of all things, including humankind's intentions, and the proclaimed divinity of free will?

If G-d knows all things then the Egyptians had no other choice but to persecute the Jews. Why then were they punished?

In fact, this was Moshe's concern at the time that G-d first appeared to him at the Burning Bush.

Moshe's first response to the mission of "take my children out of Egypt" was, "Who am I, and why them?" Rashi explained that Moshe wanted to understand why the Jews deserved to be freed from slavery. What great merit did they possess that made them worthy of G-d's direct intervention? G-d basically answered, "I am G-d and I have my reasons!"

When the Bnai Yisroel had to cross the Yam Suf, the sea asked G-d, "Why should I part? Why should I save the Jews and punish the Egyptians? Both the Egyptian and the Jew are idol worshipers?" G-d basically answered, "I am the creator of heaven and earth and I have my reasons!"

The question of divine justice is the single greatest question when it comes to trusting G-d and agreeing to follow his commandments. No other question is as personal and no other question makes as great a difference in our relationship with G-d. Therefore, the assigned job of the Jews as priests teaching the world about G-d through ideas, concepts, and philosophy was far more difficult a job than Avraham and Sarah's self appointed ministry.

In preparation for the Jews becoming a "kingdom of Kohanim", G-d performed additional miracles in the desert, such as, giving them food from heaven and water from rocks. G-d further showed His judicial power by defending the Bnai Yisroel from the unprovoked and wicked attack of Amalek.

When He gave them the Torah, G-d introduced Himself in a singularly non- philosophical manner. "I am G-d Who took you out of Mitzrayim!" He didn't introduce Himself as the "Creator of Heaven and Earth." Instead he established his relationship with the Jews on the basis of action, not just words.

Yisro, Moshe's Father-in-law, was presented to the Jewish nation in preparation for accomplishing their mission as a "Kingdom of Priests." He would help them to understand the issues they would confront in teaching the world about G-d. From the start, we are told that Yisro was a seeker of justice. He was the only advisor of Pharaoh's to challenge his plan to enslave and persecute the Jews. As a result, he was forced to flee from Egypt and return to his country Midian. In Midian he continued his own spiritual quest by exploring and exposing the falsehoods of all religions. As a result, he and his family were ostracized and persecuted.

The incident of Moshe's saving Yisro's daughters accomplished two things. First of all, it introduced Moshe to Yisro. Secondly, it underscored Yisro's personal sacrifices of in questing for truth. Moshe's selfless act of Chesed and generosity in saving Yisro's daughters identified him to Yisro as a man of moral integrity and action. In Yisro's mind, Moshe had to be a "son of Avraham and Sarah." Yisro immediately said, "Bring home this unique man. He is one of us!"

The outcome of that encounter was that Moshe married Yisro's daughter Tziporah and became both Yisro's student and teacher. Yisro was Moshe's teacher because he could teach the meaning of search and sacrifice in seeking out the meaning of truth and justice. Moshe was Yisro's teacher because he could teach about the one and only true G-d. However, Moshe could only talk conceptually and philosophically with Yisro about his belief in G-d. Moshe could not prove his trust in G-d through any of G-d's actions.

In this week's Parsha, Yisro came to the desert to join his son-in-law. Yisro, the courageous and self-sacrificing seeker of truth and G-d, came to convert to Judaism. Yisro "rejoiced for all the good that Hashem had done for the Bnai Yisroel in taking them out of Egypt." (18:9) And he said to Moshe, "Now I know that G-d is the only true G-d, because through their very plots He rose above them." (18:11) Rashi explained the second half of the verse to mean, "Because the Egyptians were punished in the same manner that they sinned." The Egyptians oppressed the Jews by drowning their sons in the Nile, so too were they punished by having their sons drown in the Yam Suf.

G-d functions on the basis of "measure for a measure;" meaning, G-d makes sure that the punishment fits the crime. The very way that the crime was done will be the manner in which G-d punishes.

G-d is a G-d of justice. For Yisro, this was the proof he needed to substantiate G-d's actuality. No longer was it mere concept and philosophy. The manner in which G-d had revealed Himself to the Jews, and at the same time had punished the wicked, proved that there was a G-d who controlled the working of nature on a bedrock of justice. Once Yisro had found the truth he had to convert.

Following Mattan Torah, in next week's Parsha, G-d introduced the Bnai Yisroel to the tenants of social justice. G-d's message was clear. If the Jews are to carry on the mission of Avraham and Sarah, they must live their lives on a bedrock of justice. The example of Yisro's search and discovery was to remain foremost in their minds. Yisro had been a non-Jew. He had been a seeker of truth.

However, in the final analysis it was the display of divine justice that made him a believer. So too, our success as a "kingdom of Priests and a holy nation" will be in direct response to our lifestyle of active, social justice. In the end, our Torah mandated social justice will have the greatest influence upon the non-Jewish world and teach them to believe in G-d.

Good Shabbos.

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