

THE LIMITS OF ONE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

(18:1) "Yisro, Priest of Midian, father in law of Moshe, heard what G-d had done for Moshe and the Bnai Yisroel..."

(18:14) "Moshe's father in law saw everything that he was doing for the nation..."

(18:19-23) "Heed my advice... You be the nation's representative bringing their issues to G-d... You will make known to them the path they should follow... However, you are to find men worthy of being leaders... the burden will be eased for you... you will be able to endure and the entire people will arrive in peace."

There is one G-d, one Torah, one truth, one chosen nation, and each of us is ultimately responsible first and foremost for just one person - ourselves. This week's Parsha and the telling of Matan Torah are all about the power of one and the responsibility of one.

Yisro is singular in his generation. Rashi on Pasuk 18:11 referenced the following Mechiltah. "This teaches us that Yisro was familiar with every form of idol worship. There wasn't a single idol that he had not worshipped."

The Torah's designation of Yisro as the "Priest of Midian" means exactly what the Mechilta said. Yisro had explored every religion in his personal search for truth. Knowing that all religions claim to be divinely mandated but are actually manmade, Yisro did much more than experience each religion. He actually engaged each religion to the point where he became the high-priest of that religion. From that vantage point he was able to evaluate the divine quality of each religion and god. When he realized that the religion had no divine quality and no god and instead he was in the position to do and say whatever he wished under the guise of divinity, he withdrew, debunked the religion, and continued his search for G-d and truth. Because of Yisro's personal odyssey the only proper designation the Torah could use in describing Yisro was, "Priest of Midian." Whatever the religion or the practice, Yisro was the acknowledged although often hated high priest.

(Note: Yisro's manner of seeking truth followed the intended process of the pre-diluvium world. As we have explained in previous issues, the pre-diluvium world was gifted with tremendous longevity so that they would be able to search for truth by living and playing out their assumptions of religion and G-d. Instead of learning from their mistakes and doing it better the next time they used their prodigious number of years to substantiate their own falsehoods and corruptions.)

When Yisro heard of the miracles of the Exodus, he knew that truth existed. As Yisro himself said, (18:11) "... Now I know that G-d is the greatest of all gods." Confronted by the absolute truth of G-d's justice Yisro had no other choice. Taking his daughter and grandsons, Yisro went to join Moshe and the Jews in the desert. However, that was just the beginning.

Yisro was just one person. Granted, Yisro was uniquely gifted with an incisive and challenging intellect and a burning desire to live by absolute truths to the extent that he willingly sacrificed position, fame, and safety to shun falsehood; however, he was still just one person. Arriving at the desert camp he entered an arena of absolutes with an expectation of perfection. How could it be any other way? His whole lifetime had been spent pursuing a G-d whose truth would translate into reality. A whole lifetime had been spent immersed in every possible human avarice hoping that this time or the next he would discover true human nobility and divine proof. Now, truth would soon be his! More so was the expectation that he would discover a utopian society founded on principles of truth and the reality of G-d. Finally he would find the nobility of human spirit he knew existed translated into the workings of families and society.

In truth, Yisro did discover a setting of unequaled intensity and seeking, but it was far from utopian. Observing the interaction between Moshe and the people Yisro realized that of all those present only a very few, and he among them, were in a position to understand the import of the moment.

Let me explain.

The Talmud states that Kriyas Yam Suf (parting of the sea) was a moment of such confrontation between the illusions of human limitations and the reality of divine magnificence that everyone, even the least prepared, was elevated beyond prophecy. In essence, it was the first time in history that a nation of people had no choice but to proclaim, "I see G-d!" The resultant spontaneity of national Shira (song) confirmed that the very fabric of nature resonates with the reality of G-d's existence if only we allow ourselves to see beyond the veil of our own ignorance.

The verse states that, "Yisro, priest of Midian, father in law of Moshe, heard what G-d had done for Moshe and the Bnai Yisroel..." The Talmud argues whether Yisro arrived at the desert camp before or after Matan Torah; however, everyone agrees that he certainly came after Kriyas Yam Suf. The verse also states that, "Yisro rejoiced for all the good that G-d had done..." A man like Yisro did not just hear the events of Yetziat Mitzrayim and Kriyas Yam Suf and extract intellectual evidence of G-d's existence and confirmation of absolute truth. For Yisro, hearing the events propelled him into a level of spiritual ecstasy just short of Shira. The Torah doesn't just say that Yisro was pleased with the miraculous saving of the Jews from Pharaoh's evil clutches. It says that he "rejoiced!" Yisro arrived at the desert camp in a state of elation. The long journey of his search was over! The chances are that he arrived at the camp singing and dancing expecting to be greeted by the same.

However, that is not what he found. Instead, Yisro found a nation of just freed slaves struggling to understand G-d's expectations for them. Instead, he found Moshe engaged from morning to night in

the job of answering questions, settling arguments, establishing compromises and peace, and living lives of relative normalcy. In a flash Yisro realized that for all intents and purposes the nation was like a newborn child. Every moment was new and exciting. Every moment was immediate and all consuming. However, because they were a nation of adults and not children the fascination and newness had to give way to questions, challenges, and struggle. Yisro realized that of all the people gathered he alone was best prepared to accept and deal with the truth. At the same time, Yisro also knew that no one was better equipped than he to help the nation deal with their experiences. If anyone understood questions, challenges, and struggle it was he.

Turning to Moshe Yisro did what he did best. He analyzed the situation, ascertained the deficiencies in the system, and applied his vast experience to correcting the situation.

(18:19-23) "Heed my advice... You (Moshe) be the nation's representative bringing their issues to G-d... You will make known to them the path they should follow... However, you are to find men worthy of being leaders... the burden will be eased for you... you will be able to endure and the entire people will arrive in peace."

"Moshe, like me, you are expecting too much from them! You feel that the miracles and wonders of the past year are enough to guarantee willful subjugation and servitude to G-d. However, that is because you have lived with the hope and struggled with the realities. You were granted years of relative freedom to explore and grow so that when confronted by a burning bush you knew that something unique was about to happen. Not so the rest of the nation. For them, the burning bush would have been a momentary diversion and curiosity. Few if any would have opened themselves to the possibility of prophecy. What the nation needs now is the constancy and availability of leadership. What they need is to find other role models from whom they can learn and to whom they can better relate. Who and what you have become is beyond their capacity to understand and appreciate. They are not yet able to appreciate the level at which you function. Instead, they approach you under the guise of seeking answers to practical issues while really desiring support and understanding. In turn, you give them practical answers and believe that you are doing the job G-d intended for you and giving them what they need. Neither is true! You are not doing the job you are supposed to do and you are not giving them what they really want.

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