

A GUEST FOR A WHILE SEES FOR A MILE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

There is an old adage in Yiddish that says a guest for a while sees for a mile - a guest for a while sees for a mile. In this week's Torah reading we are told that Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe and a Midianite priest, visits the camp of the Israelites in the desert of Sinai. There he observes Moshe's procedure in judging the disputes of the people. He sees that the system of Moshe being the sole judge, selfless and noble as that may be, is doomed to break down. He therefore suggests to Moshe a system of many different levels of judges - if you will, a type of governmental civil service program. Even though, like all good government programs, it creates a large bureaucracy, Yitro's plan is adopted and confirmed by God Himself. The guest, the outsider, has greater vision than the internal leader of the people.

There is a natural tendency amongst all peoples and individuals (especially sons-in-law) to resent advice from the outside. Somehow we feel threatened and inferior when the outsider points out to us where improvements can be made. I have a friend who is a consultant in business management problems. He has told me that in the majority of cases, the recommendations and advice he proffers are never acted upon. This is in spite of the fact that the consultant has been paid a major fee and met with the client to explain all of the recommendations. We just don't like other opinions than ours, especially if they are from outsiders who do not share our particular point of vantage and life experience.

We Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, are an insular people. Persecuted and demonized over the centuries by outsiders we have erected a wall that bars outsiders from looking in and us from looking out. We are therefore unwilling to hear what the guest, the outsider, has to say and what recommendations from the outside are worthy of study and adoption. But in our age of instant and universal communication, this type of insularity can be dangerous to the survival of the very lifestyle and values that we are so valiantly attempting to guard. The outsider has a great deal to teach us, if we are willing to learn from him and coolly assess his view and advice. Methods, appearances, systems, and practical know-how are all part of the gift package that the outsider can bring to us.

Later in the Torah, Moshe will beg Yitro not to leave the Jewish camp to return to Midian, his home. Moshe says to Yitro: "for you have been our eyes." Yitro, you helped us see things more clearly, you granted us perspective and sage counsel. Moshe realizes how valuable it will be for Israel to have an objective view of itself as it prepares to enter its homeland, the Land of Israel. It will need all of the good advice and clear perspective that it can muster. That will be the outsider's contribution to

raising the banner of Godliness in the world. Our Jewish world can also benefit from Yitro's view and perspective. We have to be open to receive it, study it and implement its positive aspects. It will be of enormous benefit to us in our struggle to remain God's "treasure among the nations."

Shabat Shalom.

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