

# WHAT DID YISRO HEAR THAT PROMPTED HIM

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

## Parshas Yisro

### What Did Yisro Hear That Prompted Him

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #844 Yisro and Birkas HaGomel. Good Shabbos!*

The pasuk says, "And Yisro heard..." [Shmos 18:1] This alludes to the Talmudic explanation [Zevachim 116a], as Rashi quotes that Yisro heard the events of the splitting of the Sea and the war with Amalek, prompting him to come. We know that "nations heard about it and trembled; fear gripped those who lived in Plashes" [Shmos 15:14]. Everyone had heard about the events surrounding the Jews' exodus from Egypt. Everyone heard about the miraculous splitting of the Red Sea. And yet, we do not see that there was a mass movement to come join the Jews or to convert to Judaism. Somehow, Yisro was unique.

One of the things we mentioned in the past when we discussed this Rashi is that we need to learn from the likes of Yisro that dramatic events should affect us. The real lesson is how obtuse people can be. People can live through their lives seeing miraculous events and mind boggling things without the experiences having any real effect on them. They are not willing to open their eyes and ears, which causes them to be able to continue living their lives as if nothing happened after witnessing such events.

This is a general lesson we've spoken about in the past. This evening, I would like to concentrate on the Talmud's question: "What event did he hear which prompted him to come? (Mah shmua shama u'bah?)" The Gemara could have phrased this question in a simpler form: Mah shmua shama? (What did he hear?) What does the Talmud mean by adding the word "u'bah" (and he came)?

The Gemara is telling us that there are two things that we need to learn from Yisro. Number one, it teaches that we have to be open to stimuli and when events occur, they should have an effect on us. Number two, it teaches us that when this happens, we should take the inspiration and run with it right away. We are charged with seizing the moment. Basically, there are 3 possible reactions to witnessing miraculous events: There are those who witness what happens and it does not begin to

faze them. There are other people who were amazed. It makes a big impression on them, but unfortunately like most of humanity their reaction is "Yeah, takeh, we have to do something about this..." And then they go on with their lives in a business as usual way and the inspiration dissipates.

The novelty of Yisro and indeed the lesson of Yisro is "What did he hear about THAT MADE HIM COME (U'BAH)". Yisro - like many others - became inspired by what he heard, but uniquely, he took that inspiration and ran with it. He came to the Jewish people right away because he saw the Hand of G-d and he said "I am going to do something with it. I am going to actualize it. I am going to put it into deed."

I would like to share with you two stories about what it means to put something into deed.

There was a fellow who used to learn in the great Volozhiner Yeshiva. He was known as having the most encyclopedic knowledge ("biggest baki") in the entire Yeshiva - which is certainly saying a lot. In Volozhin, they did not go through a cycle of 6 or 8 masechtos as is common in many yeshivas today. They began with Brochos (the first tractate of the Babylonian Talmud) and continued through Niddah (the final tractate of Shas). So, someone who was the "biggest baki" in Volozhin really knew his stuff!

This fellow was once sitting at a meal and someone came in and asked him a question. He did not know the answer. Someone else at the table answered, "This is explicitly spelled out in Tosfos". The "baki" was beside himself with dismay. He forgot a Tosfos! What did he do? He got up in the middle of the meal - did not finish his food, did not "bentch" [recite the Grace after meals], ran to the nearest shul and took a vow that he would learn straight for the next 7 years. And that's what he did!

There was only one problem: He did not "bentch". So they asked the Rosh Yeshiva - Rav Chaim Volozhiner: Did he do right or did he do wrong? Rav Chaim Volozhiner answered: He certainly did wrong, by not bentching. But had he stopped to recite the Birkas HaMazon, in the intervening minutes the passion of the moment would have passed. He would have never made the vow and never gone on to learn the next 7 straight years. It is no small matter to walk away from the Biblical command to say Grace after meals, but inevitably, had he waited, the inspiration would have dissipated. This is the lesson of "What did Yisro hear, U'BAH - which caused him to come!"

The other story I saw in the volume Otzros HaTorah. One time, the person who took care of the finances for the Radin Yeshiva came into the Chofetz Chaim carrying a plain envelope sent through the Polish Postal System. The envelope contained 500 rubles in cash. We have to assume that the postal system in Radin circa 1920 was no better than the postal system in the United States 90 years later and yet nobody today would put \$500 cash in uncertified mail and expect to see it arrive at where it is supposed to arrive.

The Chofetz Chaim told his secretary to find out the story behind this envelope. Who puts 500 ruble in an envelope in the mail without even bothering to get it certified?

The story was as follows. A certain business man was trying to make a business deal. He pledged "If this deal is successful, I am going to give 500 rubles to the Chofetz Chaim's Yeshiva." Lo and behold, the deal was successful, but it was late in the afternoon. The post office was already closed. So he figured, alright I'll send it out tomorrow. Then he heard a little voice in his head go off which said "Five hundred ruble? Do you not think the Yeshiva would be happy to receive 50 ruble? Of course they would be happy with 50 ruble! Why do I need to send 500 ruble?"

The man said, "I saw my determination dissipating. I was afraid that if I would wait until tomorrow, it would become 5 ruble. I determined, come what may, I am going to stuff the money into an envelope and drop it into a mail box - no certified mail, no return receipt required, because I saw that if I would wait any longer, the enthusiasm and determination to do the mitzvah would evaporate. This was the lesson from Yisro. What event did he hear THAT CAUSED HIM TO COME?" He was inspired and so he immediately ran with the inspiration.

## **The Importance of Having A Mission To Live Up To**

The pasuk says, "And you shall be for Me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Children of Israel." [Shmos 19:6] This pasuk is recorded on the threshold of Kabbalas HaTorah (Revelation at Sinai). Rashi says on the phrase "These are the words" - "neither less nor more".

What is Rashi telling us here? My good friend Rabbi Yaakov Luban shared the following insight with me, along with a story.

This is perhaps the most auspicious moment in the history of the Jewish people. They are about to receive the Torah. They do not know anything about Torah. Moshe Rabbeinu is about to give them their big charge, right before receiving the Torah. This is going to be the biggest speech of his life. What should he tell them? One would think that he should tell them what Torah is, what mitzvos are, what Torah can do, what mitzvos can do. It could have been an hour long sermon!

HaShem told Moshe, I want you to tell the people: They shall be for me a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy nation. That is it! Seven words, nothing more nothing less. What is this all about?

The following is a true story: There was a family in Yerushalayim with a child who was severely retarded. The parents came to Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach to discuss the institutionalization of their son: Where should they put him, how should they tell him, and so forth. The son did not want to go. Rav Shlomo Zalman asked the parents: Did you discuss this with your son? They said, "We cannot discuss it with him, he is mentally diminished."

Rav Shlomo Zalman insisted. You cannot just drop him off in an institution. You have to discuss it with him first. Rav Shlomo Zalman told the parents, "I want to see the boy." They brought their son to see Rav Shlomo Zalman. The great Rabbi asked the boy, "What's your name." The boy told him his

name. Rav Shlomo Zalman then told the boy, "My name is Shlomo Zalman. I am the Gadol Hador [greatest Torah Sage of the generation]. You are going to go now to a special school. But there is no one in the school to supervise that everything is Kosher and everything is being done properly. I am making you my personal representative to see to it that everything in that school is Kosher and everything is done properly. And I am giving you Semicha and now you are a Rabbi. I want you to tell everyone there that Rav Sholomo Zalman Auerbach, the Gadol Hador, made me his personal emissary to see that everything is right."

They put the boy in the institution. A few weeks later, the parents wanted to take the boy home for Shabbos. The boy said "I cannot leave. Rav Shlomo Zalman told me that I am responsible. I am the Mashgiach here. I have to take care of things." The boy did not want to come home for Shabbos.

What did Rav Shlomo Zalman do? He gave this boy a mission. When the boy received the mission, he said "This is what I have to live up to." He knew his mission and he knew the importance of the mission.

Moshe Rabbeinu tells Klal Yisrael: I am not going to tell you all about Torah and Mitzvos. I am merely going to give you a mission: "You shall be for Me a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation." That is the mission. The way to accomplish this mission is through something called Torah. When you receive the Torah, you will be able to accomplish the mission. But the only thing you need to know for now is the ultimate goal, the ultimate mission. That mission is "You shall be for Me a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation", nothing more and nothing less. This is the introduction to receiving the Torah.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Yisro are provided below:

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