

WHAT PROMPTED YISRO TO COME?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Yisro

What Prompted Yisro To Come?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #888 What Should It Be - Hello or Shalom? Good Shabbos!

The first pasuk of the parsha states: "Yisro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe, heard all that the Almighty did for Moshe and for Israel his nation, for Hashem took Israel out of Egypt." [Shemos 18:1] Rashi quotes a Talmudic teaching [Zevachim 116a] (cited in Mechilta as well) which asks: Specifically what was it that Yisro heard that prompted him to come? The answer Rashi quotes is that he heard about "the Splitting of the Red Sea and about the war with Amalek".

There are several difficulties with this question and answer. First, the question (what did Yisro hear?) is superfluous. The pasuk already tells us what he heard - "he heard all that the Almighty did for Moshe and for Israel his nation, for Hashem took Israel out of Egypt!" Rashi answer this by adding a key word to his question: "What did Yisro hear THAT PROMPTED HIM TO COME (u'ba)?"

What does Rashi mean to add by this added word "u'ba"? It is also noteworthy that Rashi does not say that Yisro was prompted to come when he heard "the Splitting of the Red Sea and the VICTORY over Amalek." Rather, Yisro came because he heard about "the WAR with Amalek" (milchemes Amalek). Why the WAR with Amalek?

There is also another question: The Medrash Rabbah equates the pasuk "And Yisro heard..." here at the start of the parsha with a pasuk in Mishlei: "Don't abandon your friend and the friend of your father." [Mishlei 27:10]. The Medrash interprets that pasuk: "'Your friend' refers to the Almighty; 'the friend of your father' refers to Avraham as it is written 'the seed of Avraham my beloved' [Yeshaya 41:8]". What is this equation teaching us? What in the world does the pasuk about Yisro hearing have to do with the Almighty and the Almighty's friend and not abandoning them?

I saw the following thought in the Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni from the Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim:

Yisro heard about the Exodus from Egypt - as the pasuk states - but that is not what impressed him. What had an impact on him and what prompted him to come was something else, namely "the Splitting of the Red Sea and the war of Amalek". Yisro could not figure out how it could happen that a nation that witnessed the Splitting of the Red Sea and came to such an exalted spiritual level at that time (As Rashi cites elsewhere [Shemos 15:2], the handmaidens at the time of the splitting of the sea 'saw more' than the greatest prophets.) could in such a short amount of time later have slackened off in their attachment to the Almighty to such an extent that they were attacked by Amalek. (Chazal comment on the symbolism of the name of the place where Amalek attacked them. The attack took place in Refidim, which hints at the idea that Bnai Yisroel's attachment to Torah became "softened" (rafu). Bnai Yisroel asked the question there, "Is G-d in our midst or not?")

Yisro said, "There is something I do not understand here. How could people who were granted such an intense understanding of the Almighty turn around such a short time later - and throw it all away?"

Yisro was a believer and a searcher. Chazal tell us that Yisro had investigated all the "religions" of the world and had independently come to the conclusion that the G-d of Israel was the true G-d. He did not need an Exodus from Egypt to convince him thereof. However, what perplexed him - to the extent that it prompted him to come and investigate for himself - was the combination of 'Krias Yam Suf' (the pinnacle of spiritual experience) on the one hand and 'Milchemes Amalek' (which was the result of spiritual laxity) on the other, in such close proximity.

In short, Yisro was not aroused by the victory over Amalek; his curiosity was aroused by the very fact that such a war took place at all - a war that took place in Refidim, symbolic of the fact that "rafu yedeihem min haTorah" (their hands loosened from its attachment to Torah). This was a war that was precipitated by the question "Is there a G-d in our midst or not?" Yisro could not understand how such a question could be asked by the nation that witnessed the miraculous splitting of the Red Sea just weeks before.

The answer to Yisro's question is that 'ruchniyus' and spirituality is not like climbing a mountain. When one climbs a mountain and reaches the summit - the mission is accomplished! It's done. It's over. Maybe one can climb another mountain, but the first mountain has now been conquered! Judaism is not like that. There are two separate challenges: There is the challenge of "Who will climb the mountain of G-d?" and then there is the secondary challenge -- equally important and almost more difficult -- of "Who will stand firm in His holy place?" [Tehillim 24:3].

This is what Yisro did not understand. The lesson of the combination of "Krias Yam Suf" and "Milchemes Amalek" is that if one does not do constant battle and maintain vigilance after having "climbed up the mountain of G-d" then one will inevitably slip. A person can achieve the greatest heights of spirituality -- he can see a 'Krias Yam Suf' - but if he does not maintain it and does not work at it, he will slip right back to where he was originally, if not worse.

This explains the Medrash's linkage between Yisro and "not abandoning one's Friend's father" (Avraham). Who is the paradigm of the person who achieved spiritual greatness but did not rest on his laurels and kept taking and meeting spiritual challenge after spiritual challenge throughout his life? Certainly this was Avraham Avinu, who faced 10 major spiritual challenges in his life and met them all. The lesson which must be learned from Avraham's example is "al ta'azov" - do not abandon the struggle to achieve and grow spiritually. One must always keep at it! If one does not keep at it on a daily basis, then it will all fall by the wayside. Maintaining one's spiritual status and safeguarding past accomplishments requires constant vigilance.

This also explains something else. There is a Biblical commandment to read the paragraphs of 'Krias Shma' every morning and evening. 'Krias Shma' is basically our Pledge of Allegiance. Those in the audience of my age or older no doubt remember there was a time when it was part of the daily routine in classrooms throughout the country to begin the school day by placing one's hand on their heart and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, etc."

Today, this is much less common and the law does not even allow saying it to be mandatory. On the day when people become citizens of the United States, they raise their right hand and swear or affirm their loyalty to the country. But they do that just once. How many people, after they have become citizens, get up every single day and repeat that oath of allegiance? Even the biggest patriot does not say it every day. Because of that, one's allegiance and loyalty and devotion to the constitution and the country can wane from time to time.

But every single morning, we get up and say "Shma Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad". Likewise, the Kohen Gadol, who is chosen because of his wisdom and fear of Heaven (Yiras Shamayim), does not just bring one sacrifice of allegiance when he first becomes a Kohen Gadol (as is the case with a regular priest who only brings a special offering when he is first initiated to Divine Service). Twice a day, the Kohen Gadol offers a Minchas Chavitin (specially prepared flour offering) to remind himself that he attained that position because of his Yiras Shamayim and closeness to Torah. He must keep doing this every single day because if he does not re-emphasize and recommit himself to this dedication to the Almighty on a daily basis, he will lose it. There is no standing still or resting on laurels in Judaism.

We see the same lesson from the end of the parsha: "And when you build an Altar of stone for Me, do not build them of hewn stones, lest you wield your sword upon it and desecrate it." [Shemos 20:22] We may not make this Altar from a single stone. Such a structure is known as a 'Matzevah' and its use in the Divine Service was forbidden. A single stone altar was actually declared detestable for worship. [Devorim 16:22] The altar of stone referred to at the end of the parsha has to consist of a multi-stoned structure, joining layer upon layer of individual stones. This is the case, despite the fact that in the time of the Patriarchs, a Matzevah altar was perfectly acceptable. Yaakov Avinu himself made a Matzevah. It was only after the Torah was given that this form of worship was proscribed.

Why was that the case? What is the difference between the time of the Avos and the time of the Mishkan / Bais HaMikdash after the Torah was given?

Rav Moshe Feinstein writes in Parshas Shoftim that before Matan Torah, a person had to observe the Seven Noachide laws, but beyond that he was "not commanded" (ayno metzueh). A person could be rewarded for whatever mitzvos he did during that era (as one who is "not commanded but does"), but at any time he could go before the Almighty and announce "I resign. I want to cash in my reward for mitzvos done until this point and I do not intend to do any more mitzvos beyond what I am commanded in the future." This approach, Rav Moshe said, is symbolized by the Matzevah (single-stone altar).

The Matzevah is a memorial of what had been accomplished in the past. Before the Giving of Torah, a person had that option of saying "I did what I did, now I want my payment and am suspending my participation in the club." After the Torah was given, this option is no longer possible. One must now work and grow every single day. This is the message of the multi-stone altar. Divine Service involves building one stone upon another, one day after another - each day building on the level and accomplishments of the previous day. Now, there is only one occasion in life when a person can make a 'Matzevah' and rest on his previous accomplishments. That is the tombstone (which is also called a Matzevah, being a single stone slab) that is erected when a person is already deceased. At that point and only at that point can a person say to the Almighty - as it were - "This is what I did; look at what I have accomplished.

Several things stick in my mind from the funeral of Rav Moshe Feinstein, which is now quite a few years ago. One thing that I remember clearly is the comment of one of the eulogizers that when Rav Moshe was near death and was being taken by ambulance to the hospital where he eventually died, he said while being put into the ambulance "Ich hub mer nisht kein koach" (I have no more strength.) That is saying, in effect, "I have done what I can do in this world; now I am finished." Only at that point in life is one allowed to say such a thing. That is when one can erect a Matzevah, and say to the Almighty "This is what I have done." Until then, Matzevahs are hated by the Almighty. The only acceptable approach in Divine Service is piling stone on top of stone, constant growth without resting upon one's laurels.

This was symbolized by "Avraham my beloved," who never stopped growing and this is the lesson that Yisro learned from "Krias Yam Suf" and "Milchemes Amalek."

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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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