

Fright, Fight or Unite

PARSHA INSIGHTS - YISRO (5759)

HOW YISRO MADE IT BIG - IN TWO PARTS

ARE WE EQUIPPED TO REACT PROPERLY?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin observes that three people or groups heard about the exodus and the parting of the *Yam Suf* [Red Sea] waters, but the conclusions they reached varied greatly. **The nations of the region** trembled and were horrified at the news. This is clear from the “Song at the Sea”, recited jubilantly by *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel] after their foes had been defeated. “Nations heard and shuddered, terror gripped those who dwell in Philistia. Edom’s chiefs then panicked, Moav’s heroes were seized with trembling; Canaan’s residents melted away. Fear and dread fell upon them...” (*Beshalach* 15:14-16). They did not immediately act on this fear one way or another. They chose not to attack us; neither did they wish to cling to the G-d Who had wrought all these miracles. This was one way to react.

The Amaleki nation learned of our emancipation from Egypt as well. Their impulse was to attack us (end of *Beshalach*). We all know that Hashem aided us in defeating them. This aggression led to their eternal condemnation, as explained in the end of *Parshas Ki Saitzai* in *Sefer Devarim* [the Book of Deuteronomy].

The third way to behave was exhibited by **Yisro**, Moshe’s father-in-law. Instead of remaining passive like the local kingdoms and countries, or harming us like Amalek, he approached matters differently. He came to embrace Torah Judaism. At that time, being a MONOTHEIST was unheard of in the paganistic world. All the more so, accepting all 613 *mitzvos* [commandments] in their full detail was totally “outrageous”. Still, this gem of a human being overcame all obstacles, spiritual and otherwise, to join *Klal Yisroel* [the Jewish people].

Oznaim L'Torah derives a relevant lesson from this. A miracle alone does NOT determine people’s reactions to it. There is no guarantee that any person will act a certain way as the result of any particular event caused by Hashem, however cataclysmic it may be. This is left to the free will of every human being. If one works hard enough, he can convince himself of anything, even if his opinion defies logic. As a result, there are those who classify Hashem’s doings as “coincidences”. How can we predict the reaction of an individual to a heavenly wonder? It depends on that person’s preparedness to witness and digest miracles in the proper way. This is true concerning the daily miracles of life. Some try to explain away conspicuous deeds of G-d with scientific rationale. They “train themselves” to be incapable of noticing Hashem’s overt involvement in every event on earth.

Since Yisro was a seeker of the unadulterated truth, he was well prepared for the exodus and the splitting of the Red Sea. His spiritual endeavors equipped him with the tools necessary to react appropriately. He extracted from these miracles the genuine message, that there is none but Hashem. Consequently, he hastened to join his son-in-law and his holy nation. This should remind us to react as we should to Hashem’s perpetual miracles.

Many questions might remain, but one stands forth. What gave this extraordinary man the self-confidence to venture into the Jewish nation and become a part of it? The next piece will shed some light on this.

WHAT GAVE HIM THE COURAGE TO CONVERT? AND WHY NOT SOONER?

Rashi at the beginning of our *parsha* [Torah portion] explains that Yisro heard about the splitting of the sea and the war with Amalek. As a result, he decided to convert totally to Judaism. We might think this means that the miraculous triumphs of the Jews genuinely inspired him. We will soon see that it is not so simple. What really transpired? The *Ksav Sofer* will give us more insight.

Yisro was hesitant about becoming a *gair* [convert] because he knew that insincere converts are harmful to *Bnai Yisroel*. (Please see this year’s *d’var Torah* [lesson] on *Bo* for more details.)

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The *airev rav* [mixed multitude of hypocritical converts], can attest to this fact.)

He, of course, planned to keep Torah meticulously, but his humility caused him much trepidation in this regard. He figured that compared to *Bnai Yisroel*, who had actually witnessed open miracles, he was unworthy of converting. He had only HEARD about these Divine wonders, not seen them with his eyes. His assumption was that people who experienced such things were definitely more firm in their faith. Yisro had arrived at his belief in a manner different from *Bnai Yisroel*. He had painstakingly researched other religions. His quest for truth led to the accurate conclusion that Torah Judaism was the only one that made total sense. Because of this, Yisro felt that his faith in Hashem could not measure up to that of the Jews, and he might not be as diligent in *mitzvah* [commandment] performance. **Not having witnessed the ten plagues, splitting of the *Yam Suf*, and victory over Amalek, how could he be “*frum*” [religious]?**

So what led Moshe’s father-in-law to take the big step? What made him overcome his feelings of inadequacy? *Ksav Sofer* explains that even after explicit miracles, there were still some Jewish “skeptics”, as we unfortunately know from *Chumash* [the Five Books of the Torah]. Even after the ten *maccos* [plagues] and the dramatic departure from Egypt, some Jews lashed out against Moshe as Paroh’s army began to corner them at the Red Sea. “Weren’t there enough graves in Egypt? Why did you have to bring us out here to die in the desert?” (*Beshalach* 14:11). Only after the Egyptian army was decimated, the Torah testifies that “THEY BELIEVED IN HASHEM AND IN HIS SERVANT MOSHE” (14:31). This implies that until that point, there were still some whose belief was not well established.

Surprisingly, there were Jews who questioned Divine Providence even after these events. Right before Amalek attacked, Moshe was instructed to hit the famous rock and draw water from it. (Yes, this first time, in *Beshalach* 17:6, he was COMMANDED to strike it for water. Only in the fortieth year, in *Chukas* 20, hitting it was considered a sin because he was supposed to utter words instead, according to some.) The water incident happened in Refidim (17:1), and Moshe called the place “*Masa Umeriva*” [Testing and Argument] (17:7). The reason? “Because the people had argued and tested Hashem. They had asked, ‘Is Hashem in our midst, or not?’” In other words, when water seemed to be unavailable, before the hitting of the rock, the people had expressed violent displeasure. This was considered provocative to Hashem. We see that there were some unbelieving Jews even after the Red Sea had been parted for us! They expressed doubt about Hashem’s involvement in fate. The Amaleki attack served to remind them that Hashem IS with us, and we DO need him for everything.

Yisro took all this into account. He suddenly realized that witnessing miracles firsthand is NOT a firm guarantee that someone will believe. In fact, his own level of *emuna* [faith in Hashem] WAS a match for that of *Bnai Yisroel*. His was even stronger than theirs! He had utilized his intellect and personal research, and this led to his conclusion that Hashem is THE ONE. His *emuna* surpassed that of the Jewish people, or at least some of them.

This explains *Rashi* on 18:1. The *pasuk* [verse] says that “Yisro heard”. *Rashi* asks, “What report did he hear and come?” *Ksav Sofer* clarifies *Rashi*’s question: What news did he hear which caused him to come now, AND NOT SOONER? *Rashi* concludes that the splitting of the sea and war with Amalek inspired him to come. *Ksav Sofer* has shown us the true interpretation - even after these episodes, there were still some Jews whose faith was shaky. Yisro judged from this that he WAS fitting to join them, since his own *emuna* was at least as steadfast, if not better.

Putting both segments of today’s discussion together, we see at least two messages. We should learn Torah and keep *mitzvos* with all our energy. This will prepare us to recognize the miracles that happen all the time. In turn, our faith will constantly be strengthened. In addition, we must never feel inadequate when it comes to serving our Creator. If Yisro did it, so can we.

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