

Parashat Yitro, 5779, 2019:

*Moshe's Greatness*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first *pasuk* of our *parasha* states, “Now Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, the chieftain of Midian, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel His people...” Our Sages’ approach to this *pasuk* focuses primarily on the content of what Yitro heard, which is left unstated in the verse. Rashi’s (1040-1105) celebrated comment is representative of this school of thought: “What news did he hear that [made such an impression that] he came [to the Sinai Desert to meet with Moses]? The splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek.” (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Shemot* 18:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) This interpretation responds to a major gap in our narrative, namely, what motivated Yitro, the leader of Midian, to uproot his entire family and bring them to meet his son-in-law, Moshe, in the howling wasteland of the Sinai Desert? Little wonder, then, that it was embraced by the vast majority of *meforshim* (Torah commentators).

The near-universal acceptance of Rashi’s explanation, however, tends to obscure a second exegetical challenge found in our *pasuk*: “Why does the Torah mention Moshe separately from the Jewish people?” In other words, why does the Torah state, “Jethro...heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel His people,” instead of “Jethro...heard all that G-d had done for Israel His people?” Is it not the case that Moshe, by definition, is included in the expression, “the Jewish people?”

One of the *meforshim* who directly addresses our question is Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein (1753-1823), known as the Me'or Va'Shemesh after the name of his commentary on the Torah. He posits the existence of two types of passionately observant Torah personalities: the *tzadik m'ikaro* — one who is righteous from youth, and the *ba'al teshuvah* — one who returns to the path of Torah and *mitzvot* after having encountered a variety of trials and tribulations:

[The *tzaddikim m'ikaro*] are individuals who serve the Holy One blessed be He in the early days of their youth, and accept the yoke of the Torah upon themselves from that time onwards. They do this because of their love for the Holy One blessed be He, based upon His greatness and His exalted status, may His Name be blessed. (*Sefer Me'or Va'Shemesh*, Introduction to Parashat Yitro, all translations and brackets my own)

And there are those [who become *ba'alei teshuvah*] who, in their formative years, follow the freewheeling desires of their heart, yet, when they encounter a variety of situations wherein they suffer — then they bestir themselves, search and discover [the folly of their ways,] and repent from their [inappropriate] youthful behaviors. Moreover, they reject their negative deeds and [begin] to follow the ways of the Torah and the service [of the Almighty].

According to the Me'or Va'Shemesh, Moshe epitomizes the *tzadik m'ikaro*, whereas the Jews who were enslaved by Pharaoh exemplify *ba'alei teshuvah*. In his estimation, Moshe, at the youngest possible age, “rejected physical desires and all yearnings for the temporary goods of this world, and acted as if he was ‘a stranger in a strange land.’” Instead, of following the prevailing immoral behaviors of his time, Moshe dedicated himself to the pursuit of *kedushah* (holiness) and developing his relationship with the Almighty. In stark contrast, the Jewish people fell to the 49th level of *tumah* (spiritual impurity) as a result of their “assimilation into the non-Jewish culture and emulation of the [Egyptians’ behavior].”

The Me'or Va'Shemesh notes that these dissimilar actions and orientations eventuated in two very different outcomes: “[Moshe] merited Hashem’s, may He be blessed, revelation unto to him, the Almighty’s direct communication with him (*peh el peh*), and [the ability to act as Hashem’s agent in order to perform] all of the wonders and miracles in Egypt and upon the Sea of Reeds.” Based

upon our ancestors' negative trajectory in Egypt, however, their path took a decidedly different course. As a result of the slavery experience, the Me'or Va'Shemesh explains:

...[The Jews] became awakened spiritually and returned in complete *teshuvah* [to the Creator]. As it is written: "Now it came to pass in those many days that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed from the labor, and they cried out, and their cry [of prayer] ascended to G-d from the labor." (*Sefer Shemot* 2:23, brackets my own) Then, [following their *teshuvah shlaimah*,] the Holy One blessed be He, because of His overwhelming mercy and kindness, took them out from under the burdens of Egypt.

Based upon the trenchant analysis of the holy Me'or Va'Shemesh, we can now answer our question, "Why does the Torah state, 'Jethro...heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel His people,' instead of, 'Jethro...heard all that G-d had done for Israel His people?'" Quite simply, while Moshe was a passionately proud member of the Jewish people, he is mentioned separately from his beloved nation in recognition of the unique spiritual heights he achieved, and the unequalled relationship he shared with Hashem. This interpretation is reminiscent of the verse in *Yigdal* sung in most Ashkenazi synagogues every Shabbat evening: "No one amongst the Jewish people has ever risen [to the ultimate spiritual heights] like Moshe — the sole prophet who had the ability to gaze upon the vision of the Almighty." This, perhaps, is the rationale for the prophet Malachi's famous declaration: "Remember the teaching of Moses, My servant, the laws and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel." (*Sefer Malachi* 3:22) May Moshe ever serve as our model as we strive for all that is good and holy. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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