

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Yitro)

There is a story told by Rav Ephraim Oshry, one of the last Rabbis of the Kovno Ghetto, in his monumental work of Holocaust responsum: *Mima'amakim*.

When the Nazis arrived in the small villages of the Ukraine with their accursed Einsatzgruppen units, they followed a specific recipe: the Jews were ordered to assemble, any thought of resistance was crushed, and the entire Jewish community was led out of town away from prying eyes, usually into the forests on the edge of town. The people were made to dig ditches, undress, and pile their belongings in ordered piles, and then to stand in rows one group after another in front of the ditches....

In one small village, as the Jews were assembled in a clearing in the forest outside of town, it was abundantly clear what was about to happen. The remains of the previous day's action for a different nearby village were obvious; the ditches were already dug, the piles of clothing still present, and the machine guns set up on tripods opposite the ditches left no room for doubt.

In the midst of it all, one of the Rabbis of the town stepped forward and addressed the SS officer clearly in charge:

"Sir! Is it not customary for a prisoner to be granted a last request? I should like the opportunity to lead my congregation in one final blessing."

Amused, the SS officer decided to grant the Jew this last request, whereupon the Rabbi turned towards the community and recited out loud the morning blessing:

"Blessed are you oh Lord our G-d, master of the Universe, who did not make me of the Nations of the world ("... shelo' asani Goy."); Then the rabbi led the community in the final Vidui (confessional) prayers.

The SS officer, now curious asked the rabbi what the prayer meant, and the rabbi explained he was thanking G-d for having created them as Jews and not as Germans, whereupon the SS Officer roared with laughter:

"Fool!" he said, "If you had been born a German you would not be standing in front of ditches about to leave this world! Why would you be thankful for being Jewish ...?"

And the Rabbi explained: "For whatever the reason G-d has decreed some will be murdered and some will be murderers; we are blessed not to be murderers..."

How does one explain the incredible sometimes overwhelming faith the Jewish people have displayed through the millennium of exile culminating in that most unspeakable of horrors: the Holocaust? How does one continue to believe when it seems to make no sense at all?

This week's portion of ***Yitro*** suggests a fascinating possibility.

It is interesting to note that our portion is named after Yitro, who according to Jewish tradition was a Midianite Pagan priest. This seems especially puzzling given the fact that it is in this week's portion that the Torah is given and that we read, for the first time, no less than the Ten Commandments.

If this portion, which is the apex of Jewish faith, is named after a non-Jew (notwithstanding that he was the father in-law of Moshe), there must be some incredible lesson of faith we learn from Yitro....

Yitro begins with Yitro's arrival at Sinai.

"Va'Yishma Yitro, Kohen Midian, Kohen Moshe, Et Kol Asher Asah Elo-kim Le'Moshe, U'Le'Yisrael Amo', Ki' Hotzi' Hashem Et Yisrael Mi'Mitzraim."

"And Yitro, (High) Priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and Israel His Nation: that Hashem took Israel out of Egypt." (Shemot 18:1)

The Talmud (*Zevachim* 116a) noting that no-one else outside of the Jewish people is recorded to have made the journey to Sinai, asks:

"Ve'Chi Mah' Shamah Yitro U'Vah'?"

"What did Yitro, who came (to Sinai) hear?" (*Zevachim* 116a)

And the Talmud continues by suggesting a number of possibilities: he heard of the battle of the Jewish people with *Amalek*, (*Amalek* attacked the Jewish people from the rear at the end of last week's portion, *Beshalach*.), or of the imminent giving of the Torah at Sinai, or, according to another opinion, of the splitting of the sea.

One cannot help but wonder: Why did it take the splitting of the sea or the battle of Amalek for Yitro to finally decide to come and see for himself what was going on?

And how could the Talmud suggest that it was actually the battle with Amalek, the nation who attacked the Jewish people *after* the splitting of the sea, that caused Yitro to leave Midian and come to see for himself what was going on?

Why wasn't he motivated by the ten plagues, or the great Exodus from Egypt without a shot fired, or even the splitting of the sea?

The Slonimer Rebbe in his *Netivot Shalom* suggests that while a person's belief can emanate from a logical conclusion often based on the events of the day, a much higher and perhaps purer form of faith is a person's willingness to forgo logic and embrace an absolute and independent faith.

Avraham, the first Jew, represents a classic example of this distinction. The Midrash (Jewish Rabbinic legend) tells us that Avraham's father had an idol store and that when left alone to mind the store he destroyed all the idols and left one large idol with the hammer in his hand. It was impossible that idols which could not defend themselves against a young boy could have created the world. And in much the same spirit the Midrash has Avraham reasoning that the sun which is forced to set cannot be the source of creation either. Eventually based on logic and reasoning, Avraham arrives at the conclusion that the source of our existence is not a physical force within reality but rather Hashem the source of *all* reality.

But Avraham is still subjected to ten challenging tests, and it is only with the story of the binding of Isaac (the *Akedah*) that Avraham achieves an entirely different level, when he accepts Hashem's command even though it is entirely beyond logic; even unreasonable.

Why would G-d want Avraham to offer up his one and only son, given to him miraculously and of whom Hashem (G-d) has already promised by G-d to be Avraham's successor? It makes no sense! Which is precisely the point. If faith is based on logic, as soon as logic dictates otherwise, the faith will not survive.

This is a much higher and deeper level of faith; it is faith that is independent of reason and absolute; based not on reason but rather on recognition of a higher reality. This faith can never await deduction or proof; it cannot be proven, it simply *is*. It is the difference between loving someone because of a logical reason and loving someone simply because you love them. It is the love of a parent for a child: independent of reason, it remains true no matter what the child may ever do; it is the love one sees in prisons on visitors' day. When parents come to see their children despite whatever they may have done. And it is the love we hope our children and all those we love will have for us, no matter what mistakes we may make.

When Yitro sees that the Jewish people still follow G-d in the desert even after being attacked by Amalek, he understands something is happening that is an entirely new experience for the world. After all, paganism is worship based on logic: the Egyptians worshipped the Nile because it provided them with sustenance. But if the Nile stopped overflowing its banks the Egyptians would defer to a different god assuming another force of nature now had the upper hand; pagan gods had to *earn* the peoples' faith.

So even after the splitting of the sea, if Amalek could attack, then where was G-d? It must mean it was time for something else. And yet, the people despite their struggles, still believe. Indeed, Jewish tradition notes that the numeric equivalent (*gematria*) of the word Amalek is equivalent to the word *safek* or doubt. Because the experience with Amalek, attacking the Jews when the entire world trembled before Hashem's miracles, introduced doubt into the world.

And when Moshe hits the rock to bring forth water (itself an experience one might have thought unnecessary: why not just give the people rain to begin with?) he does it from Mount Chorev (Shemot 17:6) which is another name for Mount Sinai (ibid. 3:1 and **Rashi** ad loc.) as if to suggest the Jewish people were meant to learn that Hashem is the source of reality. They were not ready for an absolute and independent faith which would now transpire with the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Torah at Sinai....

Indeed, this is the secret to every meaningful relationship: can we move beyond the initial logic and reason that brings us together, and arrive at a level of faith in each other and ultimately in G-d, that defies reason? Perhaps it is no accident that after the ultimate test of the Jewish people's faith, an experience which defies all logic and undermines all sense of reason, that the Jewish people are finally coming home.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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