

Parshas Yisro – Henry Keller

כ שבט תשע"ו – 30th January 2016 – שבת פ' יתרו

There is a well known disagreement, initially in the Gemora (Zevachim 116 a) and subsequently amongst the Rishonim, about whether Yisro joined Bnei Yisroel before or after Matan Torah .

Ibn Ezra, who was of the view that Yisro arrived after Matan Torah, poses the question that if that was the case why is the episode of Yisro's arrival placed before Matan Torah.

He answers that the episode of Yisro's arrival was placed directly after the episode of Amalek, which is at the end of Parshas Beshalach, to contrast the kindness that Yisro showed to Bnei Yisroel with the harm that Amalek did to Bnei Yisroel.

Just as we are required not to forget the harm that Amalek did to our ancestors and indeed to destroy any remnant of Amalek should the opportunity arise, we are also required to remember and genuinely appreciate the kindness done to us by non Jews and repay them should the opportunity arise.

Therefore when King Shaul is about to attack Amalek (Shmuel 1, chapter 15) he warns the Kenites, a tribe descended from Yisro, who were living in close proximity to Amalek, to separate themselves from Amalek so as to avoid being destroyed with them.

Yisro's major contribution to the welfare of Bnei Yisroel was convincing Moshe to delegate his judicial duties, thereby improving the quality of life for both himself and Bnei Yisroel.

The Or Hachayim¹ points out that it is surprising that it required Yisro to suggest the system of judicial delegation and indeed it would seem to be a slight on Bnei Yisroel that a Midianite Priest had to advise them on this matter.

The Or Hachayim suggests that the reason this was the case was that Hashem wanted to show Bnei Yisroel in that generation and their descendants in subsequent generations that amongst other nations there are people of ingenuity and intellect who contribute to the welfare of the world .

Moreover Hashem wanted Bnei Yisroel to be aware that they were not chosen by Hashem to receive the Torah because of any intellectual prowess that they have, but rather because of a Chesed from Hashem and his love for the Avos.

Rabbi Sacks in Covenant and Conversations (Parshas Yisro 5769/ 2009) explains regarding this Or Hachayim that intellect "which is a universal heritage of mankind..flows from the definition of humanity as the image and likeness of G-d" whereas "Torah flows from the highly specific historical experience of the Patriarchs and their descendants".

The Or Hachayim suggests that, according to those opinions that Yisro arrived after Matan Torah, the reason his arrival was placed before Matan Torah in the text was to highlight that Bnei Yisroel and their descendants do not have greater intellect than other nations and therefore this could not have been the reason they merited to receive the Torah.

Hence we have two reasons which explain why, according to those opinions that Yisro arrived after Matan Torah, the episode of Yisro's arrival was placed in the text prior to Matan Torah. First we have Ibn Ezra's view that it teaches us to appreciate the kindness extended to us by non Jews and secondly the Or Hachayim's view that it is to teach us why we were chosen by G-d to receive the Torah.

¹This Or Hachayim was shown to me by David Kahn