

Parshas Yisro – Rabbi M Taubman

ח"י שבט תשע"ה – 6 February 2015 – פ' יתרושב

What motivated Yisro to come to the camp at Sinai?

The Sidra opens with the verse “Yisro, the chief of *Midyan*, Moshe’s father-in-law, heard all that **Elokim** had done for *Moshe* and *Yisrael* his people for **Hashem** had brought out *Yisrael* from *Mitzrayim*. [Exodus 18:1]

Rashi on this verse quotes a Midrash: “Yisro heard: What episode did he hear [that] he came, the splitting of the Reed Sea and the War with Amalek.” Midrash

One question that we should deal with straightaway is, doesn’t the Torah explicitly tell us what Yisro heard? The verse states clearly, that he “heard all that **Elokim** had done for *Moshe* and *Yisrael* his people for **Hashem** had brought out *Yisrael* from *Mitzrayim*.”

The Torah tells us **what** he heard. The Midrash tells us **why** he came:

[Midrash Mishlei 21:5 and Mechilta Yisro Ch 1, both have the quote as above: The Gemara Zevachim 116a quotes a similar aggadah and adds the word “VeNitgayer”. “What did Yisro hear that he came [to Sinai] **and converted?**”]

The Midrashim all focus on the issue(s) that motivated a man like Yisro to leave his land and come to the desert (and perhaps convert) to experience a new way of life. In Egypt the Jewish people had experienced slavery; the 10 Makkos; and the actual leaving from Egypt. What was it concerning the above episodes - splitting of the Reed Sea and the war with Amalek - that motivated Yisro come to the Sinai desert to be with the Jewish people?

Another question that we should also deal is why Rashi chooses the above two episodes as Yisro’s motivating factors and not the third one as presented by R Eliezer HaModai in the Midrash that Yisro heard “the giving of the Torah”. [See Sifsei Chachamim who present s the view of the Re’em on this matter]

Yisro, the chief of Midyan heard... What episode did he hear [that] he came?

R’ Yehoshua says he heard about the war with Amalek...

R’ Eliezer HaModai says he heard about the giving of the Torah...

R’ Elazar b Yaakov says he heard about the splitting of the Reed Sea... [Midrash Mishlei 21:5 and Mechilta Yisro Ch 1]

Rashi often presents his commentary as one that explains the plain meaning of the Torah. In the opening verse to Sidra Yisro the Torah uses 2 different ways of referring to G-d, **Elokim** and **Hashem**. **Elokim** is usually used when referring to G-d as a power in nature and **Hashem** is used when referring to G-d’s mercy in helping people. Since there were two appellations of G-d used in the above verse, the Midrash that explains the meaning best, is one where G-d is shown to rule nature (Reed Sea) and one where G-d shows his mercy in aiding Israel in war (war with Amalek). Rashi therefore limits his commentary to those two aspects.

Now that we know that there are 3 opinions as to what motivated Yisro to come - what do they represent? Continuing the above thought, “the giving of the Torah” would represent both aspects of G-d. G-d rules nature in that the Torah was given at a time of great atmospheric disturbances as well as the actual giving of the Torah being an act representing G-d’s mercy and love of the Jewish people.

Motivation through an all encompassing G-d

Perhaps these events represent **3** aspects of G-d’s approach to the world that may have motivated a thinking person like Yisro to decide to come to the desert and become part of this new nation.

- The battle against Amalek shows that through trust in G-d one can overcome the enemy through ones **own efforts**.
- The giving of the Torah shows that **G-d both provides rules to guide his people** and gives them **freedom to accept his laws**.
- The splitting of the Reed Sea shows G-d’s power to destroy an enemy through his **control of nature**.

Yisro saw different qualities in each miracle/event and so wanted to join a people whose G-d exhibited absolute power yet was also able to allow the people to retain their independence.

See also Torah Temimah (Sidra Yisro) & Maharsha (Zevachim 116a) & Maharal (Chiddushei Aggadot Vol 4 p71)