

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

ZACHOR 5786

Although we are in the week of Parshat T'tzaveh, for an important message about Parshat Zachor, let us revisit the first verse in Parshat Yitro.

Sh'mot 18:1 reads, "And Yitro, priest of Midyan, Moshe's father-in-law, heard all that Gd had done for Moshe and for Yisrael, His people, that HaShem had brought Israel out of Egypt."

The question, of course, is what exactly did Yitro hear? The simple reading of the text would indicate that he heard how an entire slave people were liberated from a land whose regime prided itself on never allowing anyone to escape. Yet the Talmud (Zevachim 116a) still asks the same question, seemingly ignoring the p'shat meaning.

The answer is in one phrase mentioned in the Talmudic text: "What did Yitro hear that inspired him to come and want to convert?" In other words, unquestionably, the Exodus from Egypt was a spectacular event, one that would have fascinated anyone and impelled a person to investigate the event. But to actually abandon one's previous belief system and life-style would require a more powerful motivator. Yet, why wasn't the Exodus story

sufficient? Why was something else necessary to convince Yitro to leave everything behind and come?

To answer this question, we must first understand who Yitro was. Far from being some ordinary desert sheik, Yitro was quite an impressive figure. He was among the three advisors to Pharoah (Sota 11a). In addition, there was not a deity in the world that he did not worship, and an idolatry with which he was not familiar (Mechita, Yitro 1:1, D'varim Rabba 2:28). In Midyan, he was a revered and respected leader (Mishnat R. Eliezer 16). Thus, Yitro was a sophisticated, highly knowledgeable, political head of state who clearly was no one's fool. No wonder, Moshe and the Elders accord Yitro great honor when he arrives (Sh'mot Rabba 27:2). Therefore, for Yitro to give all this up: the prestige and position, the influence and power - all to join up with a raggedly mass of freshly redeemed slaves begs the question: What made him do it?

Thus, the Talmud is constrained to offer three different opinions to explain Yitro's motivation.

The opinion of R. Eliezer that the motivating event was the miracle of the Splitting of the Sea, and that of R. Eliezer HaModai that what inspired Yitro was the Giving of the Torah, are both easy to understand. What, however, is difficult is the explana-

tion of R. Yehoshua who asserts that it was Amalek's war with Israel that convinced Yitro to leave all behind and join the Jewish people. First, Amalek was far from the most powerful nation in the ancient world at that time, at most a backward, second-rate power. The fact that Israel won this skirmish against them was not at all so remarkable. Second, Israel did not even defeat Amalek. As the Torah testifies (Sh'mot 17:13), "And Yehoshua [simply] weakened Amalek and its people..." What then was so impressive about this battle that so influenced and persuaded Yitro to convert?

To begin to appreciate the significance of this event, we must first appreciate who Amalek was: his ideology and objective. Only then can we understand why, upon hearing about this clash, Yitro was won over to the Jewish people.

Both our classic and modern commentators have remarked that Amalek's hatred for Israel was the first instance of pure antisemitism. To explain: Generally, when one hates another, the enmity can usually be traced to some underlying reason: envy, revenge, anger, etc. However, when the hatred is without any cause, when it is unprovoked and insidious, it can only mean one thing: that the object of the hatred is intolerable in the extreme, so much so that its very

existence is called into question with the result that it must be eliminated.

Amalek had no reason whatsoever to attack the Jewish people. Neither their land nor wealth were threatened. Likewise, they had no unresolved grievances against Israel. Their assault was driven by one malicious obsession: to exterminate every last one of the people of Israel. The toxic venom of their pure antisemitism would call into question the very existence of the Jew. Much like Haman, a descendent of Amalek, who could not help but bemoan upon simply seeing Mordechai (Esther 5:13), for Amalek, the very presence of the Jew was unbearable.

In the wake of K'ri'at Yam Suf and the complete destruction of the Egyptian forces, the Jewish people appeared invincible. Who would dare engage them in battle? When Amalek attacked, even knowing they could never achieve total victory, they nevertheless sought to demonstrate that Israel was not all that supreme. They could be bloodied. They were vulnerable. This is exactly how the Midrash (Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei 9) portrayed their diabolical scheme: "[Amalek] made you cold and lukewarm after the boiling heat you [Israel] had before. For all the nations were afraid to war against you and this one [Amalek] came and began to point out the way for others. A

parable! It may be compared to a boiling hot bath into which no living creature could descend. A good-for-nothing came, and sprang down into it; although he scalded himself, he made it appear cold to others."

But what was at play here was something far more consequential and ominous. When the Torah states that Amalek was V'LO YAREI ELOKIM - that they had no fear of Gd (D'varim 25:18), the characterization was not to underscore Amalek's atheism. Quite to the contrary, Amalek believed that there was a Gd, but - and this is critical, they were convinced He could be fought along with those allied with Him, namely, the Jewish people. What was it, though, that Amalek schemed to fight against? The answer to this question brings us to the very root of the perennial conflict between HaShem and Amalek. "There shall be a war of HaShem against Amalek from generation to generation" (Sh'mot 17:16).

Amalek was more than a people; it was indicative of an ideology, one radically different and at complete and absolute odds with our Jewish weltanschauung. When we delve more deeply into the basics of that ideology, we turn to the Zohar (I, 39b on B'reishit 1:2) where we read, as Rav Soloveitchik summarizes the text (Before HaShem, p. 77), "When Gd created the earth from TOHU VA'VOHU, chaos and void (B'reishit

1:2), He did not replace the chaos entirely. Some of this primordial entropy was allowed to remain, so that man, through his own effort, could strive to eliminate it. Amalek represents this leftover chaos... " In this atmosphere of radical confusion and emptiness, of mayhem and vacuity, Amalek enters to restore order and stability. How? Through the raw wielding and execution of power.

To define Amalek in modern terms, we would depict as their motto with "might makes right" insignia. If the philosophy of Social Darwinism espoused the belief that only the fittest in society are entitled to rule, and if by "the fittest", much like in the jungle - the most powerful is meant, then indeed, "might makes right!" If, as the Greek Thucydides asserted that in a society where, "... the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (History of the Peloponnesian War), then in the face of "might", the "right" is at best compromised and at worst, silenced! In more recent times, pure antisemitism metastasized into the Machiavellian amoral doctrine of Nazism of which Hitler's Mein Kampf was its best and infamous "bible".

Now consider: This Amalekian doctrine was the polar opposite of the then revolutionary ethical/political/religious system as legislated and championed by Gd at Sinai and given to the Jewish people to implement.

To believe that power had to submit to truth and virtue, that "might" had to bow to compassion and forgiveness was an anathema to the Amalek worldview of the supremacy of power. As such, this nascent moral enterprise had to be weakened if not utterly destroyed, which is exactly what Amalek set out to do. All contemporary counterparts of Amalek attempted to do the very same. Driven by a worldview which maliciously rejected any and all value systems which promoted "soft" ethical ideas - those which protected the weak and sick, had compassion for the underdog, and placed morality above strength as the highest virtue - the Amaleks of the world elevated the traits of crushing power and force as the sole and ultimate determining factors to ensure what is best for the world. Mastery not equality, dictatorship not theocracy are emblazoned upon the marque of Amalek.

And our hashkafa: all in one beautiful and eternal principle. OLAM CHESED YIBANEH, "Forever will the world be built upon chesed!" (T'hilim 89:3)

Therefore, when Yitro heard about this battle between Amalek and Israel, he was smart and perceptive enough to see what was behind this relatively small and local fight. His personality and ethical attributes had already predisposed him to recognize the superiority of the sacred ideology and mission that HaShem was

entrusting to Israel. When he heard about Amalek's brazen attack on Israel, he quickly became aware of the presence of a far more momentous and far-reaching dynamic taking place. What he realized, writ small at this juncture in history, was nothing short of the epic struggle between good and evil. And with the stakes that high, Yitro wisely chose to align himself with the good - with Israel (Sh'mot Rabba 27:6).

The war between the Almighty and Amalek rages still. As the Torah predicted (Sh'mot 17:16), MILCHAMA LASHEM BAAMALEIK MIDOR DOR, HaShem will battle against Amalek from generation to generation." And in the end, as the Torah also promises, we will be vindicated and triumph! ASHRECHA YISRAEL MI CHAMOCHA... "Fortunate are you, O Israel! Who is like you, O people whose salvation is through the Lord, whose Shield is your help, your majestic Sword! Your enemies will betray you, but you will tread upon their heights" (D'varim 33:29).

V'CHEIN Y'HI RATZON. 🙌