

## Yitro: Acknowledging The Good

- Rabbi Lau, Past Chief Rabbi of Israel, discusses the reason Yitro came to convert, and that it was because he was impressed by the good qualities of Israel as manifest in three events, Yam Suf, War of Amelake, and giving the Torah. In each Rabbi Lau sees Hakarat Hatov, gratitude by our people which impressed him.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE GOOD by RABBI YISRAEL MEIR LAU, Past Chief Rabbi of Israel

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"And Yitro heard ... everything G-d did for Moshe and for his nation Yisrael, that G-d had taken Yisrael out of Egypt' [Shemot 18:1]. What did he hear that caused him to come and convert? Rabbi Yehoshua says he heard about the war with Amalek and came. Rabbi Eliezer says he heard about the splitting of the Red Sea and came. Rabbi Eliezer Hamoda'i says he heard about the giving of the Torah and came." [Zevachim 116, quoted in the Torah by Rashi]. But this is problematic, since the verse explicitly describes what Yitro heard: "Everything G-d did for Moshe and for Yisrael." Why do our sages single out the war against Amalek and the splitting of the Sea?

It would seem that Yitro was impressed not by G-d's greatness but by the good qualities of Bnei Yisrael, which were demonstrated by these events. Why is it that in the case of Egypt Moshe said, "G-d will wage war for you, and you can remain silent" [Shemot 14:14], while when Amalek appeared he said, "Choose people for us, and go fight against Amalek" [Shemot 17:9]? The explanation may be that we owe Egypt a debt, since they opened their doors to Yaacov and his children in a time of famine. Because of this, we did not repay their evil deeds directly, in spite of the suffering and oppression during our exile in Egypt. This noble behavior is what captured Yitro's heart. As one of Pharaoh's advisors, he was present when the king "who did not know Yosef" [Shemot 1:8] laid his plans, "let us be clever with them" [1:10], and he was acutely aware of the oppression the nation suffered at their hands. But in spite of this, Bnei Yisrael knew to acknowledge their debt to Egypt. There was no such obligation to Amalek, and therefore, "Yehoshua weakened Amalek and his nation with the sword" [Shemot 17:13].

All three sages quoted above had this thought in mind in their commentary about Yitro, with each one emphasizing a different aspect. Rabbi Yehoshua stresses the war with Amalek directly and Rabbi Eliezer notes the parting of the Red Sea. Finally, Rabbi Eliezer Hamoda'i found the principle of repayment of a debt of gratitude in the Torah, where it is written, "Do not despise the Egyptians, for you were strangers in their land" [Devarim 23:8].

Moshe already showed his gratitude in Egypt, in that he did not wave his staff over the land to start the first three plagues - blood, frogs, and lice - because "neither water, which guarded you when you were thrown into the Nile, nor dust, which protected you when you killed the Egyptian, should be struck by your hand" [Tanchuma].

In Yitro's eyes, recognizing a debt of gratitude was the most important characteristic, and it impressed him so greatly that he was proud to bear the title, "Moshe's father-in-law" [Shemot 18:1]. It is this gratitude which led to his daughter's marriage with Moshe, when he was told that

an Egyptian man saved his daughters from the shepherds and gave the sheep water. Yitro himself acknowledged his debt, when he asked, "Where is he? ... Invite him to join us for bread." [Shemot 2:20]. He showed his appreciation by giving "his daughter Tziporah to Moshe" [Shemot 2:21].

The lesson to be learned for all generations is obvious.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)