

Yitro: I Don't Know

- Nisson Shulman.

Everyone seems to know everything. But the Torah lesson is that we must teach ourselves to say "I don't know" and ask questions. That is the only way to knowledge. That lesson was taught to Moshe by the daughters of Tzefachad who publicly asked a question he could not answer. He had to bring the question to the Almighty Himself.

Everybody seems to know everything. News commentators and editorial writers give the impression that they are experts on all the world's problems. They engage in belligerent confrontations, again, giving the impression that they have true knowledge. Politicians know exactly how to solve the country's woes. Until a very short time ago, the Middle East was clearly an open book to everyone except those most familiar with it and immersed in its problems and anguish on the scene; and they had solutions pat and fancy, while those most deeply suffering from the bitter conflict, don't have solutions at all, and are baffled about how to proceed.

In nature, too, scientists give the impression that the world of knowledge is growing by great leaps, geometrically increasing, until immense catastrophe, like the totally unexpected Tsunami made them aware that their previous answers were not answers at all and all their knowledge cannot save millions from being dislocated, and worse, by a moment's unexpected act of nature.

So-called "Men of God" are sure they know God's will. The very name, "Man of God" is a terrible name. The Bible refers to only one man as a "man of God". Hanoch, who walked with God and was not! He disappeared! It is as if he never existed! Apparently it is not so easy to know God's will. Yet many are certain they know it, and only the truly pious man doesn't really know it, as King David lamented, Baruch Ata Adoshem, Lamdenu Hukecha, Blessed Lord, teach me Thy law...

There was a time when the Rabbi's work was a continuous flow of Sheelot, questions brought to him. But that was a truly pious time. Today, we are not so pious. And so we stop asking questions. The paradox is that those who studied and knew most, asked most, and felt they knew least.

We who know so much less than previous generations, think we know it all. They say knowledge is power. There is a kind of mastery implied by the subject who knows the object. It is mentioned in the Torah, when man gave names to all the animals, thus showing that he was their master. To fool oneself, think you know when you don't, is dangerous as it is foolish. Therefore the Rabbis declared, "Teach your mouth to say, 'I don't know.'"

In fact that is a lesson we learn from our Torah reading today. Yitro was an efficiency expert. He was a business engineer, or industrial psychologist. He had a trained eye and mind to detect flaws in a system. He knew how to cut waste, streamline the production line. He was able to get maximum results. So Yitro was concerned, not with the principles of justice, but in its administration. He saw an admirable article going to waste because of an inefficient system. He made a proposal, which was instantly accepted. "And it shall be that every great matter shall be

brought to thee, but every small matter they shall judge.”

Almost 40 years later, Moshe repeats the plan, and pays tribute to its simplicity and workability. There, in his farewell address, which comprises a large part of Devarim, he refers to this reorganization, and with some instructive differences.

There we learn that Moshe was at the verge of collapse when this great plan was proposed. It came in the nick-of-time! There, Moshe added that he stressed wisdom and understanding, not only moral character, in selecting judges. There, Moshe stressed principles of justice, the law itself, not only the procedure of judging, as Yitro did.

These are the obvious differences any reader would notice, and they are all to Moshe's credit. But there is one more subtle difference our rabbis noted, which they did not consider to Moshe's credit. Yitro had said, kol hadavar hagadol yeviun elecha. Moshe said instead, kol hadavar hakashe. Everything too hard for you, bring to me. What is the difference? It is a great difference. For when Moshe said, "Bring the hard things to me", our rabbis detected a subtle claim to infallibility, and even with Moshe that must not be!

Another faith claims its leader is infallible because of a certain divine power inherent in him. It reflects their notion that God can be corporeal; that God can become a man, and man can become a god. If this can be so in entirety, it can be so in part, hence they say their Pope is infallible. Not so, says Judaism. Man is man. He can be more pious and more learned than another, but he remains fallible and is certainly not omniscient! And when Moshe made a statement that could conceivably be interpreted in this way, he was punished for it!

According to our rabbis, because of this claim, Moshe was forced to publicly confess his inability to answer the question of whether daughters can inherit, which Zelafchad's daughters had brought before him. Had not Moshe said, “The more difficult cases are to be brought to me”? Well, Zelafchad's daughters did so publicly, and Moshe found himself unable to answer, and so he had to bring their case before the Almighty Himself. In this way our rabbis teach that only God knows everything, and that no man, not even Moshe himself, can claim infallibility.

And in this way they also taught that it is no shame to say, "I don't know". Moshe himself did it! Lo habayeshan lamed. If you are ashamed to ask, then you will never learn. Lamed leshoncha lomar eyni yodea. The words are deliberate. "Teach your mouth". Without the teaching, there is a natural tendency to say, "I do know". Only the truly wise man, said Socrates, rare as he is, recognizes how little one knows, how much there is to learn.

The greatest Torah and Talmud commentator is Rashi. He seems to solve all difficulties. His comments are brief, brilliant, and illuminating. Yet, in nothing does Rashi show his greatness, his nobility, and his intellectual integrity, more than in his frank confession from time to time, "I do not know the meaning of this verse."

In a time like ours when everyone claims to know all the answers, it is indeed refreshing and helpful to remember that the wisest and greatest of all time taught us the great lesson to “teach yourself to admit, 'I don't know'”. I don't know. Let's find out together. Let's ask sheelot. That is

the way of our people. That is the way to wisdom.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)