

# PARSHAS YISRO

תשפ"ד

Parshas Yisro is full of things to talk about. But I have always personally been fascinated by the personality of Yisro.

The Torah talks about different personalities in order for us to be able to learn from them. Yisro had a tremendous zechus to have a son-in-law as great as Moshe Rabbeinu. But one would imagine that this just happened because of circumstance. After all, Moshe was on the run, fleeing from Egypt for his life, and he wound up in Midian. One could imagine that Yisro simply had pity and took him in, and eventually, Yisro kind of passively allowed him to marry one of his daughters. But that isn't what happened. Yisro made a conscious decision to give one of his daughters to Moshe because he realized Moshe belongs in his family.

Who was Yisro?

The midrash tells us that Yisro was a member of Pharaoh's royal court. He was originally an Egyptian. When Pharaoh conceived his strategy to persecute the Jews, he consulted with his advisers. Yisro was a member of Pharaoh's inner circle – along with Iyov and Bilaam. Bilaam wholeheartedly endorsed the plan, and his end was that he was killed by Moshe Rabbeinu. Iyov remained silent, and he was punished with tremendous suffering. Yisro protested the plan and ran away. Seeing that Pharaoh was going ahead with his plan, he couldn't be complicit in it and he left his prestigious position. He had principles of good and evil that he wasn't willing to compromise for, and he paid a price.

In this week's parsha, Yisro says now he realizes that Hashem is the true ultimate power. Yisro was searching for the truth the whole time. He investigated every avodo zoro in the world and realized they were all false. Somehow Moshe wasn't able to convince him, but now, after hearing about all these events, he gets shaken up and draws the correct conclusion.

Which events did he hear about?

Rashi quotes two-thirds of the midrash: He heard about kriyas Yam Suf and the war with Amoleik.

What is so special about the battle with Amoleik? Why did it impress Yisro so much?

Amoleik came from afar, they were not in any danger when Klal Yisroel left Egypt. The reason they came to attack us without any provocation is because of what it says in Tehillim – they don't want a nation like Klal Yisroel to exist altogether. The existence of the Jewish people was a threat – but not a military or economic threat. Rather, it was a threat to their entire ideology. Amoleik and Hitler's ideology were identical: human beings are animals and it is natural that the strong dominate the weak. Klal Yisroel introduced the idea of a conscience – to follow moral principles of right and wrong and not the law of the jungle.

We represent Hashem in the world. We declare that there is absolute good and absolute evil, and Hashem demands that everyone keep the laws of morality. You can't twist them and turn them to your liking and to fit your taivos. Avrohom Ovinu brought this idea to the world and this put him in mortal danger.

So Amoleik saw that Klal Yisroel represents Hashem and they must be destroyed.

The other thing Amoleik heard about was the 10 makkos and kriyas Yam Suf. They were so upset with this idea that a nation was being selected by Hashem and given special protection and guidance.

Yisro saw that Hashem is dedicated to justice and He will defeat evil. Kriyas Yam Suf was known throughout the region. Rochov told the spies who visited her that the people of Canaan were so overwhelmed when they heard about it – not only that the waters split, but that the surface became totally dry and easy to walk upon. Hashem not only protects them from harm, but even cares for their needs and makes them comfortable.

Another thing is that Yisro saw the dikduk hadin of kriyas Yam Suf – that every Egyptian who made a Jew suffer was punished measure for measure. He is looking for justice and morality and he finds it in kriyas Yam Suf.

The third event listed in the midrash is Maamad Har Sinai. Rashi leaves it out because there is a machlokes when Yisro arrived to join the Jewish people. Why does the midrash include it? Because not only does Hashem tell us to be moral, but He gave us step-by-step instructions about how to implement these lofty ideals of morality in the real world.

So even though Yisro certainly heard about the idea of Hashem from Moshe, it didn't make him change. He needed to know about these events from first-hand accounts in order to get shaken up. Some people don't change even after they are shaken up. But Yisro heard the message in what was happening, and he made a change.

וַיְהִי יוֹם הַשְּׂמֵחַ. This phrase has two meanings. One is that he was happy. The other was that he was pained by all the suffering of the Egyptians. He was still connected to his roots in Egypt. These were his friends, his peers. True, he ran away because they chose an evil path, but he still had an emotional connection to these people. He didn't completely sever his ties. We learn from this that we may not curse a non-Jewish nation in the presence of a ger – even after ten generations of separation – because it is natural to still have a strong psychological attachment to one's roots.

Many people realize the truth, but not everyone who realizes the truth is able to sever those deep ties with their past. Hogor is an example of this. She was an Egyptian princess, and she left the royal household to become a maidservant in Avrohom Ovinu's house. She was clearly a great tzadekes chosen by Yitzchok for Avrohom to remarry after Soroh's death. She merited to have many children with Avrohom. But not one of these children followed the path of Avrohom. Why? Rashi explains that when Hogor was banished from Avrohom's house with Yishmoel, she went back to Egypt to get a wife for her son. She never severed ties with her past. She was always referred to by the Torah as "the Egyptian maidservant" because this was always an integral part of her identity.

When Hashem tells Avrohom to go to Canaan, He told Avrohom to first sever all his ties to his family and his birthplace. This was the prerequisite for starting a new path of avodas Hashem.

When Nomi was leaving Moav to return to Eretz Yehudah, both Rus and Orpoh initially escorted her. Orpoh eventually stayed behind in Moav, because she couldn't really leave her identity as the daughter of the king of Moav. But Rus made a complete break. She converted and threw her destiny entirely with Nomi's people no matter what. She didn't leave behind any attachments to her previous life, and this is why she merited to become the mother of malchus Beis Dovid. Hogor and Orpoh couldn't make that break.

Here we have Yisro. He came all the way to the midbar because he was searching for the truth all his life and he finally found it in what he heard about Hashem's dikduk hadin and sechar v'onesh.

In Parshas Behaalos'cho, after Klal Yisroel get the Torah and build the Mishkon and they are finally on their way to Eretz Yisroel, Moshe offers Yisro to come along. But Yisro refuses. He wants to go back to his homeland. As much as he sees the greatness of Klal Yisroel, he can't just jettison everything he has back in Midian and join the Jewish people. He has a whole family there. He has property there. His ties are still very strong.

Moshe pleads with Yisro to come along because if he doesn't, people might think he is leaving for ulterior motives – you didn't get a portion in Eretz Yisroel. Even though Yisro sees Klal Yisroel living with the Shechinoh in completely supernatural conditions, Moshe sees this isn't going to work. So Moshe has to bribe Yisro with offering to give him Yericho – the most fertile land you can imagine.

But in the end, Yisro goes back – to convert his family.

Yisro is like many people. They perceive the truth, but when it comes to living with the truth, and making a radical shift in your whole social and psychological makeup, it takes a different kind of level of commitment.

Orpoh couldn't do it, and Hogor couldn't do it. Orpoh had a very prominent descendant – Goliyas. But he was killed by Dovid, the grandson of Rus. Rus was able to make a change in her core identity because she realized Klal Yisroel represents Hashem in this world, but

Orpoh and Hogor could not. They came from royal households and couldn't graduate. Rus graduated.

This is a question of identity that everyone has to face. Who are you? Which society, which community do you most closely identify with? With those who put avodas Hashem at the center of everything in their life? Or with those who have avodas Hashem on the periphery and have other cultural things as part of their core identity?

In the end, Yisro joined the Jewish people, but was worried about his family and his property. Until Moshe Rabbeinu took care of the money aspect, he wasn't ready to convert his family.

We have grown up in many different cultures, and they have made an impact on us. We have to ask ourselves, how much of these cultures are going to be a part of our identity? We are living in very strange times where the non-Jewish cultures we grew up in are telling us to our face: "You don't belong in our society. We sympathize with those who want to murder each and every one of you."

We have to understand that our core identity is Torah, and it has to filter down to our social identity and our psychological identity. Some can do it – like Avrohom and Rus. Some can't – like Hogor and Orpoh. And some equivocate and float somewhere in the middle like Yisro.

Yisro heard, he got shaken up, but then he needed to take that final leap to move into a radically different, Torah-centered society, and it was very difficult.