

PARSHAS YISRO

תש"פ

Part I

At the end of Beshalach, we read that Amoleik came to attack Klal Yisroel. At the beginning of Yisro, we see that Yisro came to Klal Yisroel to convert. Why? Rashi says it was because of Amoleik. How do we understand the impact of this battle with Amoleik on Yisro?

We know that Amoleik went far out of their way—they had to travel across the Sinai desert to attack Klal Yisroel in Refidim. It was clearly ideological—Klal Yisroel represented something that Amoleik simply couldn't tolerate.

Moshe ordered Yehoshua to select yirei cheit as warriors to battle Amoleik. And Moshe went on the hilltop to daven to Hashem. He had Aharon and Chur keep his hands raised the entire time. Why was this needed for victory? The Mishnah in Rosh Hashonoh explains that Moshe's raised hands inspired the warriors on the battlefield to lift their eyes to Heaven and subject their hearts to Hashem. Only then were they successful. If for a minute they started to think victory was in their own hands by their own might, they started to lose.

We defeated Amoleik because of three things: It was the proper attitude, it was tefillah, and it was soldiers who were yirei cheit. In the dinim of waging war in the Torah, any soldier who was afraid of his aveiros was discharged from the Jewish army. The slightest issur could make the difference between victory and defeat.

At the end of the battle, Hashem promised to obliterate any trace of memory of Amoleik. Moshe made a mizbeach to be a banner to remind us of Hashem's victory. Hashem takes a vow against Amoleik in every generation—His throne and His Shem will not be complete until Amoleik is eliminated from the world.

There is an ongoing struggle with Amoleik for all Jewish history. Someone asked Rav Chaim how we can fight Amoleik in every generation if we don't know who Amoleik's descendants are? Rav Chaim answered that we identify Amoleik by whichever nation takes it upon itself as their mission to wipe out Klal Yisroel. In every generation there are such nations. It has nothing to do with Zionism.

Why is this the way it is?

Yisro was a man who was seeking the truth, and he finally discovered it when he saw the battle of Amoleik. Amoleik teaches us that there is such a thing as absolute evil in this world. Hitler, Stalin were absolute evil—not crazy, not insane.

Why is absolute evil always bent on wiping out Jews? Because they want to remove Hashem from the world. We learn from the posuk "veyofutzu oyivechoh veyanusu misanechoh" that the enemies of Hashem are the enemies of Klal Yisroel. Rashi explains that nations like Amoleik hate Klal Yisroel because they hate Hashem. The Torah that Hashem gave to us represents a very dangerous philosophy—there are absolutes in this world. There is morality and the conscience of the neshomo. If you want to live a correct and moral life, you need to subject your baser drives and egos to serving Hashem.

This is what the Jewish people represent to the world and it is a very dangerous idea. Today we rationalize away all evil behavior. We label all criminal behavior as being this syndrome or that mental condition and we don't confront the reality of evil for what it is.

The two biggest murderers in the history of the world were Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Hitler killed 9 million people and Stalin murdered 25

million people. Both of them made it a priority to kill Jews.

Avrohom Ovinu was aware of how dangerous his ideas were. He represented absolute morality in the world and wherever he traveled, he needed to hide his relationship with Soroh as a result. When he confronted Avimelech to explain why he had to fool him, Avrohom told him point-blank: there is no yiras Elokim in this place. Of course there were laws in Gerar against kidnapping and murder. But when you are the king and you feel there are no absolutes, you will change the laws or interpret them to accommodate your whims and desires. If you want a certain woman for yourself, and Hashem is out of the picture, you can twist yourself into pretzels to justify what you want and say it is moral. But Hashem gives absolutes—no twists and turns are possible.

According to Onkelos, Avrohom tells Avimelech that the nations of the world who worship avodo zoro have a very relativistic view of morality. Hashem brought me close in order to worship Him alone and this separates me from the rest of the world. It puts a mark on my head. It is a very threatening idea. They hate Hashem and this is why we are hated and persecuted so viciously by the world.

Recently, the U.S. military took out a very prominent general in the Iranian army. On top of all the atrocities he committed against the United States and other Arab countries, his highest priority was supporting terrorism against Jews.

The posuk says that Moshe should write this in a sefer and place in the ears of Yehoshua—this vow to always fight Amoleik. The throne and the Shem of Hashem isn't complete until Amoleik will be blotted out of memory forever. What does this mean?

The Shem of Hashem is the manner in which Hashem reveals His presence in the world. As long as there is evil in the world which tries to deny Hashem and deny absolute right and wrong, this presence is obscured. The one thing we will never understand is tzaddik verah lo—evil seems to triumph and go unpunished in this world.

In every generation, people who harbor evil automatically hate Klal Yisroel. They can't tolerate our ideas and they have to eliminate us. Yisro saw that Klal Yisroel weren't threatening anyone and yet they were targeted. For what? For the ideas of truth and absolute values of the Torah that we represent. Evil is threatened by these ideas and this is why they try to eliminate us. Yisro realized we must be onto something if the evil ideologies of every generation try to wipe us out. We have the truth, and they can't tolerate the truth of absolute good and evil.

We live in a very confused world where everything is relative and no one assumes blame for their actions. So the truth has to be crystal clear to us. Hashem has two wars. One is against the physical descendants of Amoleik and the other is against those who perpetuate their evil ideology. We represent Hashem and absolute truth in this world and this is why we are a threat to their way of life.

Part II

Rashi sees parshas Yisro as a continuation of the parsha of Amoleik. We see from the pesukim that Klal Yisroel took unusual measures when they fought Amoleik. Although Klal Yisroel fought many battles in Chumash and Tanach against their enemies, we never find this command to recruit specific fighters and for someone to go to a hilltop and daven with his hands stretched up heavenward the entire

time. There is something unique about this battle.

Afterward, Hashem vows that the memory of Amoleik be erased, and that His throne and His Name are not complete as long as the eternal war with Amoleik rages on and the vow is not fulfilled. When the name of Amoleik will be eliminated, then the throne and the Name will be complete.

When Bilaam viewed all the nations and told their future, Amoleik was among them. He said Amoleik is the first nation to make war with Klal Yisroel and because of that they will be utterly destroyed.

Yisro saw this and came to convert. What did he see? The Gemara in Zevachim cites a number of opinions. One is the defeat of Amoleik in the hands of Yehoshua.

Another opinion is that Yisro heard the voice of Hashem at kabbolas haTorah which went from one end of the world to another. The kings of the world trembled and said praise to Hashem as a response of confronting Hashem in His heichal. They all came to Bilaam to ask him what is happening. Maybe another Mabbul is coming? No. Hashem has a wonderful treasure that was hidden 974 generations before the world was created, and He wants to give it to His children. The whole world heard about kabbolas haTorah—Hashem gave His hidden treasure to Klal Yisroel. But the nations responded that is it only good for Klal Yisroel—not for us.

Another opinion says Yisro heard about kriyas yam suf just as the Novi testifies all the nations of Canaan heard about kriyas yam suf and their hearts melted from fear.

Rashi only cites two out of these three opinions.

Who is Yisro? What is his background?

Chazal tell us that when Pharaoh consulted to decide what to do with the Jews in Egypt, he had three advisors. Bilaam supported the plan to throw all the baby boys into the Nile and was eventually killed in battle with Klal Yisroel. Iyov kept silent and was punished with unbelievable suffering. Yisro protested the immoral plan by picking up and leaving the palace—he didn't want to have any part of it and became an outcast. His reward was having Moshe Rabbeinu as a son-in-law. Yisro had worshipped all of the avodo zoros and eventually rejected all of them in search for the truth.

The pattern we see emerging is that Yisro is a person of great personal integrity. He is a distinguished person in society—consulted by Pharaoh himself. He is a high priest. But he cannot tolerate falsehood and immorality. He ran away from it all and was drawn to the truth.

He saw Amoleik as the nation of unadulterated evil attacking Klal Yisroel because they represent Hashem in this world. He saw Klal Yisroel coming out of Egypt and kriyas yam suf. Kriyas yam suf showed Hashem's complete mastery over the natural world. More than that, He is running the world by dispensing justice with infinite precision. Moshe told Yisro how each individual Egyptian was punished in Yam Suf exactly as he deserved—middoh kinegged middoh.

But we know that all the nations heard about kriyas yam suf and kabbolas haTorah. Chazal told us that Hashem even went around to all the nations first, to ask them if they want to accept the Torah. He told them about the prohibitions to murder, steal and commit adultery. But they turned it down. Why? They realized that the Torah doesn't fit with their decadent culture, with their immoral norms of society. What are Chazal telling us?

The nations understood that you can't make the Torah conform to your lifestyle and your value system. The Torah has its own high standards and demands and if you accept it, you have to conform to it and change your lifestyle—not the other way around.

Only Klal Yisroel said "naaseh venishmah"—unconditional acceptance.

Hashem is giving the Torah—it is Hashem's power. The nations said it is good for them, not for us.

The Gemara in Shabbos says that when Moshe Rabbeinu came up to Heaven to receive the Torah, the angels protested. How could a mere flesh and blood try to take the Torah. Humanity needed another 974 generations to perfect themselves.

Rashi explains that the malochim were making the following the argument. The Torah is perfect. You human beings were supposed to first need a thousand generations of self-development and perfection before being worthy of receiving it. But humanity has only been around for 26 generations! You aren't ready!

Moshe Rabbeinu is afraid to respond, so Hashem tells Moshe to grasp the kisei hakavod and give them a response.

Moshe says let's look in the Torah and see who it is more relevant to—malochim? Or human beings? He goes through all the the Asseres Hadibros: "I am Hashem Who took you out of the slavery of Egypt". Were the angels ever slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt? Are they tempted to worship avodo zoro? Do they perform any of the 39 types of mecholoh during the week to refrain from on Shabbos? Do they have parents who they are obligated to give honor? There are prohibitions against murder, theft, jealousy, etc. Do angels have jealousy or yetzer horos that make them want to do any of these things?

The malochim acquiesce and give him gifts.

The real answer is that the Torah gives us a framework for human beings to perfect themselves. We all are human and we all have weaknesses and temptations to do the wrong thing. That has been part of the human condition from the beginning of human history. But we don't have to stay with our weaknesses and our imperfections. When we hold on to the kisei hakavod, we access the power of the Torah to transform us. When we accept the Torah unconditionally, it can teach us how to overcome our temptations and remain strong. The non-Jewish nations weren't willing to challenge themselves. They had their culture and their lifestyle and didn't want to go out of their comfort zone. They didn't want this power to be transformed—they were very happy with their taivos and imperfections.

What did Yisro hear? He heard that the world is capable of absolute evil. Amoleik found out about Klal Yisroel who represent Hashem's power over the world and how He runs it with reward and punishment and His plans to perfect humanity with the power of Torah. They couldn't tolerate that. They tried to do anything they could to stop Klal Yisroel from receiving the Torah—to avoid taking their lives in their hands and make themselves better people. Amoleik was making a statement: this is who I am and I cannot change.

There is a school of psychology which preaches that a person needs to discover his "true inner self". Once he discovers who he truly is, he has to follow that path or he'll create deep internal conflicts. But the Torah says this isn't the way it has to be. You can change who you are. Of course it isn't comfortable—it is a real battle for supremacy of the neshomo over the body. This is why we are called Yisroel. We take on the struggle between our humanity and our Divine spark, and our neshomo prevails.

Yisro understood what Klal Yisroel stood for and why the nations of the world resent us more than any other nation throughout the generations. Our ability to use the Torah to fundamentally change and improve ourselves. See this in practice—kriyas yam suf, mattan Torah—but not just mattan Torah. The Gemara in Zevachim says he heard about the power of the Torah to let you take control over your life—to make you a more perfect human being as long as you grasp the kisei hakavod.

Yisro heard it and he came.

The most impressive thing to Yisro was that Hashem took Klal Yisroel

out of Egypt—which was the most morally corrupt and at the same time the most advanced and sophisticated nation of the ancient world. We see this today—the overlap of moral decadence with advanced technology.

Yisro also heard about the mon and the be'er. Mon was special—it had to be preserved for all generations as a testimony of Hashem's care and protection of Klal Yisroel in a barren desert. Hashem takes care of those who dedicate themselves to Him and take their lives in their hands. This is a lesson for generations.

Rashi explains that Yisro was the high priest of Midian — he was a major personality in his society — yet he picked up and left everything behind to come to a midbor. Why? To hear divrei Torah. He was seeking the truth and he had to find out what this Torah is all about. When he heard, he was shocked. He trembled over the destruction of the Egyptians. We see that Yisro is a conflicted person. He has been a high priest for decades and his origins are in Egypt. Even though he ran away, there was still a sense of identification with the Egyptians. People are complex. Radical change doesn't happen suddenly. It is a process of integrating new ideas and new perspectives. Yisro stayed in the midbor with Klal Yisroel for a year—he experienced everything they experienced and now he has to make a fateful decision: will he permanently abandon everything he had before and totally throw his lot in with Klal Yisroel?

Moshe tried to help him decide by offering him the most fertile place in Eretz Yisroel.

The story of Yisro is a story of a man who looked for the truth, found the truth, tried to understand it and live it. He was startled to realize that the Torah gives human beings tremendous power over their lives—it allows one to break free of one's taivos and one's ego and to perfect ourselves. This is the self-empowerment of the Torah that the nations of the world rejected outright. Yisro realized Hashem, who created the entire world, also runs it in an ongoing manner with s'char ve'onesh. Hashem's malchus is not complete and the manifestation of s'char ve'onesh is not complete until absolute evil of Amoleik is blotted out from the Earth. All this shook him up and he came to understand ideologically, but now it was time to see if he could carry it through till the end. Now he had to decide if he wants to give up all the personal compromises, identification with the non-Jewish world and go all the way.

We find a similar process with Rus and Orpoh. Once Rus saw the truth and was inspired to follow her mother-in-law Nomi, she decided to cut off everything from her past—to go forward and not look back. Orpoh didn't have the strength to do it and she went back to her family in Moav. This is the story of many people who go on a quest for bakoshas hoemes. Each of us who do this run into different obstacles, different nisyonos and inner conflicts along the way. The Torah is a very empowering thing—it lets us take control over our lives. We aren't born perfect—it is a struggle to conquer our baser, darker selves. We have the strength to win that struggle by using the power of the Torah to transform human beings and make ourselves into who we really want to be.