

PARSHAS YISRO 5778

We already know from Parshas Shemos that Yisro was the kohen of Midian and Moshe's father-in-law. Why does the posuk repeat this information here?

To understand this we have to give some background. There is a machlokes in the gemara in Zevachim when this incident in Chumash happened. Rashi is following the opinion that it occurred before Mattan Torah. Yisro heard about Kriyas Yam Suf and Milchemes Amoleik. The gemara records another opinion that he heard about Mattan Torah and came as a result of that.

Who are we talking about?

The posuk tells us that Yisro is coming to the midbor. Isn't that obvious? Rashi explains that the Torah is emphasizing that Yisro is leaving a place of comfort and honor in Midian to come to a wasteland to hear Torah. He is inspired, and he decides to convert. Imagine what that means. He is the head of all the avodo zoros in Midian! He isn't just coming to visit his family, he is leaving everything he has in Midian, coming to a place where he is a stranger and an outsider, and change everything in his life. We should understand what it is he is giving up.

For a person who was in charge of all the avodo zoros in Midian for at least the last forty years, what did he do to deserve to have Moshe Rabbeinu as a son-in-law?

We see from what he says here—Yisro investigated every avodo zoro in the world and did not rest until he found the truth. He had a tremendous drive for seeking out the truth. This led him to investigate every avodo zoro to see if it had any truth. And when he heard about what happened to Klal Yisroel, now he goes to investigate it and discovers that Hashem is the true absolute power.

What convinced Yisro? It was the exquisite middoh kenegged middoh that Hashem executed on the Egyptians. Something he heard woke him up and pushed him to investigate it. He picked himself up and ran after the truth, potentially giving everything up. He didn't wait for the truth to come to him.

Milchemes Amoleik was a peculiar war. Klal Yisroel weren't near Amoleik and they didn't threaten Amoleik. Attacking Klal Yisroel was an act of total evil. The essence of Klal Yisroel represented a total contradiction to the evil of Amoleik. Hitler, yemach shemo, waged a war against the Jews because he wanted to promote the philosophy that man is just a glorified animal. There is one people on planet Earth who represented the opposite—the Jews. The Jews introduced the idea of a conscience, of morality, of a neshomo—of a higher form of living. That existence of Klal Yisroel is a contradiction to his entire approach to life and human society. Hitler writes this very clearly in his book.

A culture based on evil denies there is a higher way of living—that there is a purpose to human existence, and that there is a Ribbono Shel Olam who is involved in this world. They feel threatened by our very essence and existence which represents

these ideas. In every generation there are people and nations who feel threatened by our existence. Hitler and Stalin, the two greatest murderers in modern times, felt this threat and tried to wipe us out.

Yisro saw that without a Torah and without discipline and without absolutes in this world, the human being can sink to the lowest level—because everything can be twisted and distorted. A person will descend to the greatest evil if it's up to the human being to decide what is right and what is wrong.

Who were Amoleik's ancestors? Eliphaz and Timna. Yaakov Ovinu brought up Eliphaz, even though he was the son of Eisov. Some meforshim say he reached nevuah. Eisov, his father, sent him to kill Yaakov but he was incapable of carrying it out. His uncle Yaakov had brought him up.

Timna was a princess from Seir who wanted to join the family of Avrohom Ovinu. She saw the truth in this family's path. But Avrohom turned her away and she preferred to be a pilegesh to Eliphaz as her only chance to join the family. This is striking. She of all people, became the mother of Amoleik?

It shows us that parents can mean well, but unless their good intentions are given a structure of Torah and mitzvos, they can be corrupted and twisted into evil. Iyov and his friends were tzaddikim, but we find no continuity from their families. Only Avrohom Ovinu was chosen because he was able to guarantee a continuity because he accepted the discipline of the system of Torah and Mitzvos.

Who is Yisro as a person? Our first introduction to Yisro is when he asked his daughters who saved them and why he wasn't invited to their home. Yisro had middos tovos, a search for truth and he saw the capacity for absolute evil if these traits are not channelled and disciplined by Torah and Mitzvos.

He heard about Kriyas Yam Suf. But in Oz Yoshir we know that everyone heard of Kriyas Yam Suf. Rochov hazonoh told this to Yehoshua's meraglim. They heard that Hashem controls nature and is above nature. He uses nature as a tool to reward and punish the human being for his actions. But Yisro is unique. He heard and he came to investigate, and found the truth as a result.

Moshe saw the search for truth of Yisro and he tried to convince Yisro to join them.

He told Yisro the inside story of Kriyas Yam Suf and the mon. Hashem takes care of His people and protects them from the strongest empire in the world—Egypt. Yisro heard and was awed by the extreme precision of Hashem's justice. Each Egyptian was punished individually in precisely the way he persecuted the Jews. This, along with everything we spoke about—the capacity for evil and the need for absolutes, convinced Yisro that Torah is truth and he converted.

The other opinion says he heard about kabbolas haTorah. Torah is an incredible system where you can become the total opposite of Amoleik. Amoleik believed the human being is a total animal. Animal drives are idolized by the non-Jews. We say a human being is superior to an animal—but only if he follows the discipline of the Torah. True, human beings have the capacity to make themselves into intelligent, dangerous animals. Amoleik's disciples are threatened by the Torah's capacity to transform the human being into a spiritual being.

But Hashem also cares about what we do and gives us an exact system of reward and punishment down to the finest detail. Moshe told him about mon—that parnossoh is dependent upon Hashem. Hashem is in charge of everything that happens.

Yisro has to convert. He converts and offers korbonos—even a shlomim—and has a feast with the ziknei Yisroel. They perceive the Shechinoh in the midst of their feast.

The gemara has a discussion about the types of korbonos a non-Jew can bring. It is only an oloh and not a shelomim. Why can only a Jew bring a shelomim? A shelomim is an unusual korbon. When you think of a korbon you think of sacrifice—giving up for Hashem. So the oloh is the most natural korbon. Goyim connect to the spirit by denying their body and becoming monks and living in monasteries. The whole culture of the world is dominated by glorification of the body. People in India and the Far East want to escape from this worship of the body and want to connect to something higher. The only way they know how is by disconnecting to the physical.

Taryag mitzvos is an incredible system and gives a unique religion. The Ramban asks why does our religion have all these mitzvos ma'asiyos and not just davening and learning? He answers that a human being is a mixture of body and neshomo. He is unlike an angel who is only spiritual and unlike an animal which is only a body. We serve Hashem with that combination of body and neshomo—we merge our avodo through the proper use of body and neshomo. Halachos allow us to serve Hashem using both in perfect harmony. So a Jew who has been trained to uplift his body can eat a piece of a korbon in kedushoh and taharoh and elevate it through his eating. A goy has no training to make that delicate balance.

Yisro saw how depraved a human being can be, even with the best parents and spiritual yearnings, and how through Torah and mitzvos we can join the body and neshomo to serve Hashem in total balance and harmony. He has to connect to this. As a result of this process of seeking the truth and middos tovos, he was able to participate in a feast with all the zekeinim before Hashem.

He left everything and was worthy to become the father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu. He doesn't care what his position in society is. The parsha begins with this because we need to appreciate a sincere desire to seek the truth. You have to be willing to give up everything.

The next day, he witnessed an incredible scene: Moshe is giving Klal Yisroel all the dinim of Choshen Mishpot. This Ish HoElokim is sitting with each person and listening to each one's personal

financial affairs with his neighbor. Settling petty disputes and disagreements between people.

It is an incredible level of Klal Yisroel—they have the need to bring all the ins and outs of their financial dealings with others to Moshe Rabbeinu himself and have it worked out al pi Torah. This is Klal Yisroel's demonstration of seeking the truth. Nothing is too small to bring to Moshe to find out what is the will of Hashem.

Yisro gives Moshe practical advice.

The gemara Bava Kamma asks who is a chossid—a true eved Hashem? One opinion says it's one who distances himself to the utmost to avoid damaging the body or property of others—total caution. Another opinion says it is by fulfilling Pirkei Ovos—one group of rishonim says it means being mevater on your money. It involves keeping your finances in order and not getting overwhelmed by a pursuit of money. Other say it means achieving middos tovos.

Another opinion in the gemara says being a chossid means being careful in tefilloh.

The first opinions tell us to straighten out our relationships with other human beings—don't allow anyone else to suffer loss because of you, don't worship money, deal with money al pi Torah.

Rabbeinu Yehonoson says you have to fulfil all of these aspects of chassidus. Part of being an odom hasholem means having a healthy, balanced relationship with money and not being reckless with your property, not to cause others to suffer—just being involved in davening and deveikus is not enough. You have to care about the welfare of people around you. Not having middos and not caring about another human being's safety means you aren't a chossid.

This is all part of what Yisro saw which inspired him. He came to a midbor, willing to give everything up, and saw a system which uplifts the human being and allows him to use his body as part of his avodas Hashem.

Why is this parsha put as an introduction—especially if it happened after Mattan Torah? See what it is that motivated Yisro at an advanced age to drop everything he had built up until now to accept the Torah. This should motivate us and drive us towards kabbolas haTorah. This is why this parsha comes before Mattan Torah.

How do we read this parsha? One minhag is to read the parsha of Asseres Hadibros with Ta'am Ho'elyon. We stand up for it in order to re-enact the actual event of kabbolas haTorah every time we read the parsha in shul. We receive every parsha anew every year whenever we read it.

It is a kabbolas haTorah which requires us to understand what it is that underlies a genuine kabbolas haTorah. The Torah offers us a system of absolute right and wrong, to live an uplifted life incorporating the neshomo and the body, and rejecting the opposite—not to descend and become a total animal.

All of this is what Yisro saw, and this is what should inspire us today.