YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT YITRO

Amalek's Attack and Yitro's Trek

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

As the story of the Exodus from Egypt unfolds during the course of last week's Parasha of Beshalach, the people of Israel hurriedly traverse the Sea of Reeds and then hesitantly enter the desolate wilderness. Crying out to God, their needs for food and water are miraculously met, as the quail blanket the camp, the manna begins to fall, and the impervious rock at Chorev yields a living spring. Arriving at Refidim, the people of Israel are suddenly attacked by the marauding tribe of Amalek, who single out the weak and tired Israelites who straggle at the rear of the camp. Inspired by the prayers of Moshe and emboldened by the able leadership of Yehoshua, they astonishingly succeed in repelling the aggressor.

With the beginning of Parashat Yitro, the people of Israel experience a contrasting encounter, when Moshe's father-in-law Yitro journeys to meet them as they encamp in the arid wilderness of Chorev, 'the place of God's mountain' (Shemot 18:5). Although the precise chronology of Yitro's visit is the subject of a lively debate among the commentaries based upon the earlier sources, the primary thrust of the Torah's narrative is not to indicate the strict historical order of the events as much as to highlight the glaring distinction between Yitro's arrival on the one hand, and the dastardly attack of the Amalekites on the other. It may very well be, as Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain) persuasively argues, that Yitro does not journey out to rendezvous with the people of Israel until after they have already received the Torah at Sinai, an event that the text records SUBSEQUENT to his arrival (see Ibn Ezra's commentary to Shemot 18:1). But then, asks Ibn Ezra, why does the Torah choose to relate the particulars of Yitro's visit out of order? "It is to contrast the evil that Amalek perpetrated against Israel with the goodness of Yitro and his kind counsel." Unlike Yitro, the Amalekites seek out Israel not to attach themselves to their exalted destiny, not to embrace the word of God that they journey towards Sinai to receive, and not to pay homage to the paradigm of the Exodus that set moral principles above tyranny and held justice to be infinitely more lasting than mighty monoliths. Quite the contrary, Amalek brutally attacks in order to emphatically dispel those very truths that the people of Israel, reluctantly at times, represent.

DIVINE JUSTICE VS. DIVINE INDIFFERENCE

How different are the motives of Yitro, who undertakes his trek of faith precisely because he has heard of 'all that the Lord had done for Moshe and for His people Israel, for God had taken Israel out of Egypt…Said Yitro: 'Blessed be God Who saved you from the grasp of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh…I now know that God is greater than all of the others gods, for they [the Egyptians] dealt harshly with them [and were therefore punished]'" (Shemot 18:10-11). Considering the events of the Exodus, Yitro perceives not only God's saving hand, but His justice as well. Slavery is wrong, and state-sponsored oppression is especially criminal. Pharaoh and Egypt suffer the consequences of their harsh policy. Unwillingly and unwittingly, by their notorious example they serve to validate the crucial nexus between absolute morality and human accountability. If God cares about justice, then justice must ultimately prevail, and no man, not even a god king, is above the moral law by which He governs the world.

For Amalek, however, a caring and compassionate God Who in turn demands ethical behavior from humanity, is anathema. In the arena of human history, Amalek champions Pharaoh's popular and nasty principle: might makes right. If there is a God in the worldview of Amalek, He is unaware or indifferent, remote and inaccessible. Obviously, there is little practical difference between such a conception of God and no God at all. If God is not absolute, if He is not omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnipresent (unbounded by space or time), then insofar as human destiny is concerned, He is nothing. And if He is nothing, then His demands of responsible and decent conduct can be calmly and confidently ignored. For Yitro, however, the very same conception of the Deity that Amalek so resoundingly rejects, is the foundation of his transformative and new-found conviction.

THE COSMIC DIMENSION - AMALEK

That these two encounters, that of Amalek and that of Yitro, represent not only two wildly divergent occurrences but also two conflicting ideologies, is indicated by their respective eschatological repercussions. Moshe's 'Battle against Amalek,' later waged again by Israel's first King, Saul (see Sefer Shemuel 1, Chapter 15), and revisited once more in the villainous guise of Haman from the story of Purim, clearly assumes cosmic proportions from early on. In the archetypical form of the encounter, the nation of Israel stands reluctantly arrayed against the forces throughout history that seek to destroy it precisely because of its allegiance to the God idea. In traditional sources, this clash of creeds is between Godless and cruel amorality on one hand and compassionate ethical monotheism on the other. Because these two opposing worldviews by definition cannot be reconciled, the matter of their confrontation must therefore remain painfully unresolved until such a day as all humanity comes to acknowledge the compelling truth of Israel's teachings.

Consider the words of Rashi (11th century, France), who perceptively explains Moshe's invocation of the Divine oath that concludes last week's Parasha: "He (Moshe) said: 'the hand is upon God's ('YH') throne ('KeS'), for God shall wage war against Amalek in every generation'" (Shemot 17:16). Rashi comments:

"God's hand is raised to swear by His throne that He shall battle Amalek forever. Why, however, does the Torah's Hebrew text spell 'throne' defectively (instead of employing the far more common 'KiSeE')? Why is the Divine name deficient (instead of the more typical YHVH)? This indicates that God swears that both His name and His throne must remain incomplete until Amalek is destroyed. When the name of Amalek will be obliterated, then the Name and the Throne will both be complete…" (commentary to Shemot 17:16).

THE COSMIC DIMENSION - YITRO

As for Yitro, his profound message of sincere attachment to God continued to reverberate through the lengthy course of Biblical history. His legacy of single-minded devotion was perpetuated by the 'House of Yonadav son of Rechav,' whose patriarch, according to some Rabbinic traditions (Talmud Bavli, Tractate Sanhedrin 104a), was Yitro's descendant. If the identification is correct, then a cohesive link exists between Yitro, who abandons kith and kin in devoted search for the True God, and Yonadav ben Rechav, a tenth century BCE religious leader (see Melakhim 2:10:15-17) whose late First Temple Period descendants were exemplars of loyalty to their ancestors' spiritual legacy. As the Prophet Yirmiyahu relates during the dark days just before the First Temple's destruction, the clan of the Rechavites succeeded in upholding their nomadic and ascetic ways for almost four centuries, in faithful fulfillment of their ancestor's commands. After unsuccessfully attempting to ply the Rechavites with wine at God's behest, the meaning of the matter is communicated to Yirmiyahu:

"…The word of God came to Yirmiyahu, saying: 'Thus says the God of Legions, the Lord of Israel. Go and tell the people of Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to accept My admonishment, says God. The words of Yonadav ben Rechav have been fulfilled! He commanded his children not to drink wine, and they have not done so until this very day, for they listened to the command of their ancestor. Whereas, I have spoken to you from early on continuously, and you have not listened to Me! I sent to you all of My servants the prophets from early on saying: 'Let every person repent from his evil ways, improve your deeds, do not follow other gods to worship them, and you shall dwell on the earth that I gave to you and to your ancestors,' but you have not inclined your ears to listen to Me. The descendants of Yonadav ben Rechav have faithfully fulfilled the command of their father, but this people does not hearken to Me!" (Yirmiyahu Chapter 35).

Thus, the example of the loyal Rechavites, Yitro's descendants, stands in glaring contrast to the conduct of their adoptive people Israel, who failed to demonstrate fidelity to God's teachings and willfully abandoned His commands in catastrophic pursuit of idolatry and immorality.

THE ITINERARY OF YITRO'S VISIT

Not surprisingly then, Yitro's visit is characterized by a series of interconnected episodes. Upon his arrival, he is received by Moshe who recounts to him the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Yitro reacts with joy and expresses his genuine empathy with the freed slaves. He goes on to proclaim his embrace of God the 'Greatest of all the gods' (Shemot 18:11), and in an act of religious devotion, proceeds to offer sacrifices to His name. In generic terms, the story of Yitro thus far describes what might be called the motif of 'the sincere convert' who is impressed with the account of Israel's history, touched by their struggle, and overwhelmed by the majesty and nobility of their God. But there is more to his visit than simply his own spiritual growth and development.

On the morrow, Yitro watches as Moshe single-handedly attempts to address the people's judicial concerns. He must serve as their judge to adjudicate all manner of civil cases, in addition to his onerous responsibilities as prophet and lawgiver. Yitro is quick to point out that the system is detrimental to both Moshe's well-being and to the people's interests: "You shall surely wither away, both you as well as this people that is with you, for the task is too difficult for you, and you will not be able to perform it all by yourself!" (Shemot 18:18). He then offers Moshe sage counsel to appoint a hierarchical judiciary composed of "noble men, who are GOD-FEARING, truthful and haters of improper gains." They will hear the people's grievances and only involve Moshe for the most difficult cases. Thus, Yitro the convert offers an indispensable contribution to the advancement of the very ideal that had initially attracted him to the fold of the Jewish people: the administration of justice.

CONTRASTS

Let us again contrast the narrative of Yitro to that of Amalek's attack. This time, however, it will be instructive to consider Moshe's recalling of Amalek's deed as he describes it in the Book of Devarim 25:17-18:

"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way of your journey out of Egypt. He encountered you on the way and attacked the weak stragglers among you, while you were weak and fatigued, and he DID NOT FEAR GOD…"

In other words, Amalek here reveals himself to be divested of the very qualities that Yitro recognizes as being the critical ones for the establishment of a just society and a righteous world. Preying on the weak and the defenseless, Amalek, who 'does not fear God,' thus represents the antithesis of human decency and goodness, the polar opposite of the eminently reasonable social order that Yitro advocates in his advice to Moshe.

CONCLUSION

How revealing that Yitro's visit, whether chronologically out of place or not, is followed in the Torah's narratives by the 'core event' of the Book of Shemot: the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. God's thundering proclamation of His Ten Principles that are the foundation stone of every functioning society that strives to foster decency and justice, is thus introduced by Yitro's example. It is as if there are two possible models for human conduct and achievement in the world, two contrasting approaches between which each person and every civilization must decide. On the one hand, there is the paradigm of Pharaoh the oppressor and Amalek the marauder, for the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt indicates a cohesive link between the two. On the other hand, there stands Yitro the righteous convert and Israel the people of God, for they also are inextricably bound up in the same matrix of concern for the vulnerable and empathy with the weak. By the very deliberate ordering of the narratives, the Torah makes it crystal clear that only one of these mutually exclusive sets of values can serve as the bedrock for the noble edifice of the Decalogue that follows, and these are the values championed by Yitro.

Shabbat Shalom

For further study: see Divrei Ha-Yamim/Chronicles 1:2:55 with commentary of R. David Kimchi, as well as commentary of Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra to Shemot 18:1 for a more exhaustive treatment of the familial connections between Yitro and Yonadav son of Rechav.