

What a Miracle! Now What?

Contrasting Responses to Miraculous Events

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Now Yitro, the priest of Midyan, Moshe's father-in-law, heard about all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel his people, that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. (Exodus 18:1; SB)

The beginning of this week's portion describes Yitro's coming to Moshe, to the wilderness. There is a difference of opinion that persists from as early as the time of the Tanaaim and the Amoraim (and perhaps earlier) until today. The disputed issue is whether Yitro came to the wilderness before or after the revelation at Sinai.

The Tanaaim expressed the issue in this way:

"And [Yitro] heard" — What "sound" did he hear and come? The war with Amaleq, as it is written immediately preceding, said R. Yehoshua. R. Elazar of Modi'in says he heard the revelation at Sinai and he came.... R. Eliezer says that he heard splitting of Yam Suf.

The first and third opinions speak about events that preceded Yitro's advent to the wilderness in the Torah. Whereas, R. Elazar's opinion shows that he believed that the Torah inserted Yitro's story out of chronological order. [Incidentally, the second and third opinion do not say that Yitro heard about these events, but that he actually heard them—as their sounds "reached from one end of the earth to the other."]¹

The Amoraim argue the issue directly.

The sons of R. Hiyya and R. Yehosua son of Levi [disputed.] One said Yitro came before the giving of the Torah and the other said that Yitro came after the giving of the Torah. (B. Zebahhim 116a; see also Y. Megila 1:11;72b)

In medieval times, the classical Torah commentators continued the dispute. According to Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, the story of Yitro's arrival occurred after the revelation at Mount Sinai. One support for their opinion is the fact that Yitro comes to the "place where [Moshe] was encamped at the mountain of God" (18:5) — yet, Israel only arrives there at the beginning of chapter 19. (See Ibn Ezra's commentary for further support for this position.)

Ramban believed that the Yitro narrative is written in its chronological location and that Yitro initially came to Israel before the events at Sinai. He rejected Ibn Ezra's position primarily because the Torah does not report that Moshe told Yitro about that most astounding event. Ramban assumes that if Yitro had come after the revelation at Sinai, that the Torah would report Moshe's certain recounting of that event. Yet, perhaps the Torah could not have had Moshe speak about the revelation at Mount Sinai to Yitro without diluting the impact of the account of the revelation at Mount Sinai to be written later.

If the Torah presented the story not in its chronological order, it is legitimate to inquire why the Torah inserted the story of Yitro at this specific point.

Rashbam (on Exodus 18:13) explained that the literary consideration of not interrupting sections of commandments with narrative, forced the placement of Yitro's story here. Yet, in other places this does not seem to be a consideration of the Torah.

Ibn Ezra proposed a practical reason for the story's location. When it comes time to avenge the attack, God wanted Israel to remember to differentiate between `Amaleq and Yitro's descendants, the Qenites. That is what actually happened. Before king Saul attacked `Amaleq he warned the Qenites to leave `Amaleq in order to spare them (1 Samuel 15:6.)

Cassuto explained that the Torah, using a keen literary sense, placed the story of Yitro's praise of God and his recognition and appreciation of God's providence over Israel, before the giving of the Torah. This prepares the reader for the exalted story that the Torah wrote later. Cassuto proposed that the Torah juxtaposed the stories of `Amaleq and Yitro in order to show the contrast between the two nations in their relationship to Israel. Cassuto also pointed out the conceptual and semantic associations between the stories. (Commentary to Exodus p.145)

Our answer to the question of the location the Yitro narrative, which combines both literary elements and those of contrast, also relates to the continuation of the story of the revelation at Mount Sinai.

Both `Amaleq and Yitro came to Israel's camp (both stories contain the word "vayabo"), but they came for different reasons. It is this contrasting reaction to a historical event that the Torah wants to point out, denigrating `Amaleq's reaction and pointing out how Yitro's reaction leads to further developments that help create a more just society. This is also the main message of the Decalogue. Israel's reaction to the event of the Exodus must be the establishment of a society based upon justice.

`Amaleq came to Israel to take advantage of them. `Amaleq saw an unavoidable opportunity in this weak and tired nation of escaped slaves, laden with gold and silver taken from Egypt. `Amaleq attacked the stragglers from behind (Deuteronomy 25:17-19), thinking that this strategy would lead to a quick victory. His plans were thwarted because such behavior of unjustly attacking the weak and exploiting the disadvantaged is antithetical to God's paramount principle of justice. God fights and will continue to fight against the `Amaleq attitude. This is the basic principle that is raised as a standard for Israel. These last two statements are the upshot of the `Amaleq story.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua :I will utterly blot out the memory of `Amaleq from under heaven!" And Moses built an altar and named it Adonai-nissi (the Lord is my standard). He said, "It means, Hand upon the throne of Yah! The Lord will be at war with `Amaleq throughout the ages." (Exodus 17:14-16 SB)

`Amaleq's reaction to the Exodus then, was to see it as an opportunity to exploit the weak. This attitude is subject to God's extreme censure.

By contrast, Yitro came for a different reason altogether. He came because he had heard “about all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel his people, that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt.” This was his primary reason for coming to Moshe. He wanted to hear first-hand about God's saving Israel from affliction. True, Yitro also brought Moshe's wife and children, but lest we consider that as the main purpose of his coming, the Torah details the message that Yitro sent to Moshe.

I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you, and your wife and your two sons with her.
(18:6)

He is not merely bringing Moshe's wife and children. He is coming. He would have come anyway, even if Moshe's wife and children did not need an escort. Yitro's coming was independently motivated. Yitro was attracted to the divine justice that was manifested when Israel was taken out of their oppressive slavery.

Yitro's reaction upon hearing the news in greater detail shows to what degree he was affected spiritually.

Yitro said: Blessed be the Lord who has rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh, who has rescued the people from under the hand of Egypt! (So) now I know: yes, the Lord is greater than all gods--yes, in just that matter in which they were presumptuous against them! (18:10-11; SB)

Yitro, according to many commentators, was convinced of God's supremacy by the fact that the very malicious intent of the Egyptians to decimate the Israelites by drowning them, was turned against them and that they were punished in a measure for measure fashion. The meting out of the fitting punishment to those so deserving is the ultimate sign of justice. God's ability to carry out complete justice and ensure a complete salvation led to Yitro's conclusion that God is greater than all gods. It is Yitro's recognition and appreciation of God's justice that led to his “conversion.”

Amaleq, came to take advantage of the weak, the greatest form of injustice. Yitro, by contrast, came, to share in the miraculous manifestation of justice in history — in order to be inspired by it.

Yitro's heightened sense of justice forced him to speak out when he noticed a situation that could lead to injustice or the delaying of justice. His sensitivity to the needs of the people and their leader caused Yitro to propose a reform to the judicial system in Israel that Moshe accepted. Yitro reacted to the historical event by recognizing that a God of justice rules the world, he then increased the peace and justice in the world by reforming Israel's judicial system.

It is this very recognition and reaction that God expects Israel to undergo. God, who redeemed the oppressed Israel from the hand of their oppressor, enjoined Israel to set up a society founded on justice--the protection of the rights of the weak. The laws found in the Decalogue and in chapters 20-23 become the basis of the covenant between God and Israel. It is the way Israel becomes God's people.

God's redeeming Israel from Egypt prefaces both the pre-covenant negotiations (chapter 19:4-6 - “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt... so now if you will hearken to my voice

and keep my covenant...”) and the Decalogue (chapter 20-21-- “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves.”)

The Torah placed the story of Yitro's arrival before the events of chapter 19 not only to contrast Yitro's reason for coming to Israel with `Amaleq's, but to provide the Torah's readers with a model of the type of reaction to the miraculous events of the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai that God expects Israel (then and now) to have.

Israel's powerful and inescapable recognition that a God of justice rules the world imposes upon Israel the obligation to create a just society and to believe in the ultimately just foundation of the world. This recognition also gives Israel the ability to wait for the God of justice to appear eventually and “give the arrogant their deserts” (Psalms 94:2).² This is Israel's mission.

Returning to the `Amaleq story the Torah tells how the battle was won because Moshe raised his hands which were holding the staff of God. Rashbam connects that staff to the practice of having the flag-bearer amongst the troops and the rallying effect that he has on the soldiers. In the battle against `Amaleq there was nothing on the staff, neither flag, nor snake. The flag was pointed toward heaven. Moshe named the altar constructed to commemorate the victory “the Lord is my banner.” The holding up of a plain staff to the heavens emphasized the point to the people that it is God, who cannot be depicted, who is fighting for them.³ As the sages have phrased it:

Is it possible that the hands of Moshe strengthen Israel or that his hands break `Amaleq? Rather when he would raise his hands Israel would see it and believe in He who had commanded Moshe to do that and He would do wondrous miracles for them. (Mekhilta; also Mishnah Rosh Hashannah 3:8)

The soldiers, when they were reminded that the God of justice who had just saved them from Egypt's oppression, rallied around the justness of their cause and fought with more resolve and determination. They knew that ultimately right and, therefore, God was on their side. This is the only flag of Israel that Moshe held up; the staff of the God of Justice--who protects the weak and is in constant battle against those who would trample on justice and exploit the vulnerable.

It is this standard that attracted Yitro and will attract other nations to the nation that upholds God's teaching of Morality and Justice. This is Isaiah's messianic vision:

And the many peoples shall go and say: “Come let us go up to the Mount of the Lord ...That He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.” For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, ...They shall never again know war. (Isaiah 2:3-5)

But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Yishai,... thus he shall judge the poor with equity and decide with justice for the lowly of the land. He shall strike down a land with the rod of his mouth and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips. Justice shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his waist. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb....In that day the stock of Yishai that has remained standing shall become a standard (*nes*) to peoples--nations shall seek his counsel and his abode shall be honored. (Isaiah 11:1-10)

This is the flag of Israel that cannot be replaced with any nationalistic flag of military successes (or achievements in high-tech industry, for that matter). This is the flag that attracted Yitro. This is Israel's standard to raise high—the standard of justice and truth—of defeat of the wicked and protection of the rights of the weak; the standard of the Torah.⁴

Endnotes

¹ The medieval sage known as “Tashbess” wrote that although the continuation of the verse explains why Yitro came, it only spoke in a general way. These sages were disputing which specific event caused Yitro to come.

² The overwhelming effect of the Exodus and the revelation on the people, “forcing” them to accept the covenant is reflected in the following midrash:

...And they stationed themselves beneath the mountain--Said R. Abdimi bar Hama this teaches that the holy One, blessed be He arched the mount over them like a barrel and said to them, "If you accept the Torah fine, and if not there will be your burial..." Rabba said that even so, they returned and accepted it in the time of Ahashverosh. "The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves... " (Esther 9:27.) They undertook to fulfill what they had already accepted. (B. Shabbat 88a.)

Although the straightforward meaning of the first verse is that Israel was stationed at the foot of the mountain, R. Abdimi uses the word "beneath" to convey the idea of Israel being coerced into accepting the Torah. God's protection of the weak and redeeming of the oppressed was so apparent and miraculous that not to agree to establish a society on God's just teachings, the Torah, was tantamount to death.

In the time of Ahashverosh, when the salvation was much more hidden and "natural" (God's name is absent from the book of Esther) the decision to continue to follow the Torah is a much more freely willed non-coerced event. The overwhelming event of the Exodus allows Israel to wait for God's justice and see it even when it is not obvious.

³ The winged figures that were atop the ark cover (the kerubim) were often identified in ancient Near Eastern iconography as symbolizing the throne or carriage of the god who was also depicted above it. The uniqueness of this symbol in Israel was that there was no image above the throne--as it is impossible to make an image of God. There was just emptiness above--as in the case with Moshe's staff in the battle of 'Amaleq.

⁴ The Mekhilta quoted above brings the opinion of R. Eliezer who explained Israel's success as dependent upon Israel's success in the words of Torah that will be given by Moshe's hands.