

PARASHAS YISRO

To Capture a Feeling

What would have convinced George Washington to drop everything and go study Torah in a synagogue in Rhode Island? Would spectacular Jewish victories and miraculous deliverance from their enemies have inspired him to walk away from the White House and his palatial estates in Monticello?

In this week's portion, we encounter one of the George Washingtons of the ancient world - Jethro, prince and high priest of Midian. While ancient Midian was no world power like Egypt or Babylon, it was quite a prosperous nation, and Jethro was its master. Still, when Jethro "heard all the Lord had done for Moses and his people Israel," he left the luxuries and comforts of Midian and joined the Jewish people in the desert.

What prompted Jethro to give up his royal honors, his power, his estates, his luxurious lifestyle, his wealth? What had he "heard" that so transformed him? Our Sages tell us that he heard about the miraculous splitting of the sea followed immediately by the war against Amalek. The Ten Plagues and the Exodus had apparently not been sufficiently impressive to make Jethro leave the comforts and privileges of Midian.

The commentators explain that the splitting of the sea was a most phenomenal miracle. Our Sages tell us that the spectacles witnessed by a maidservant at the sea were greater than the visions of the exalted prophet Ezekiel. It is, thus, quite understandable that hearing of this miracle would motivate Jethro to join the Jewish people. But what was so inspiring about the war against Amalek? Was the victory in this war more miraculous than the Ten Plagues and the Exodus?

In actuality, however, the stunning miracles of the Ten Plagues and the Exodus had indeed engendered in Jethro's heart a profound belief in Hashem and recognition of His mastery of the world. But they did not motivate him to uproot himself and seek an inspired life. Despite his newfound understanding of divinity, he was content to live as a "righteous gentile" in Midian for the rest of his life. But the unprovoked attack by Amalek, coming as it did immediately after the splitting of the sea, shook him to his very core.

How could such a thing happen? How could the tremendous miracles Hashem performed for the Jewish people have had so little effect on Amalek? The prophet (Joshua 5:1) assures us that the

surrounding nations had heard about the splitting of the sea. Surely, Amalek had not missed this major news event. And yet, for no logical reason but pure malice, they chose to attack the Jewish people in the desert. Clearly, the overwhelming evidence of miracles was not enough to transform people and turn them away from evil. If there was a will to deny the miracles, a way would always be found. Barbarism and immorality would continue to exist despite the revelation of the awesome power of Hashem.

The war with Amalek had shown Jethro that the discovery of the existence of the Creator could not be expected to have a lasting effect - if any effect at all. Only by translating that discovery, and the accompanying thrill of inspiration, into a concrete commitment could he transform his life. Only breaking with the familiar patterns of his life and going into the desert to join the Jewish people could guarantee a transformation. The forfeiture of his royal privileges in Midian was but a small price to pay.

A king summoned the two finest painters in the realm. "I want a portrait of my son," he said. "This will be a contest. The winner receives wealth beyond his wildest dreams, the other nothing." The king then gave a passionate description of the prince's wonderful qualities. "Come back in a week!" he concluded.

A week later, they returned with the portraits, and to the king's astonishment, one was far superior to the other. "How can this be," he asked the winner, "if the two of you are equally talented?"

"It is really quite simple, your majesty. The moment you finished giving us that inspiring description, I ran to paint the portrait immediately. My friend waited two days. By then, the inspiration was gone."

In our own lives, we encounter moments of inspiration that lift us above the mundane routine of our everyday lives, moments when we experience a mystical joy that changes our entire perspective. But how do we capture that momentary feeling? How can we make it a permanent part of our lives? Only by concrete commitment. Only by taking a step forward can we anchor these transcendent feelings in our hearts and enrich our lives forever.