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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

YITRO AND AMALEK AT THE BORDER

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The Torah seems to make every effort to ensure that we take a holistic view of Yitro's decision to come join the Jewish encampment. "*Yitro, kohen of Midyan, heard ALL that Elokim had done for Mosheh AND for Israel his nation when/ that Hashem had taken Israel out of Mitzrayim.*" But Chazal seem to undo that holism by understanding the basis of Yitro's decision granularly. "*What "bearing" did he bear, and therefore come to convert?*" (Zevachim 116a).

How can we reconcile these opposing perspectives? Perhaps Yitro's desire to convert was holistically motivated, but he put that desire into practice only after a specific event. This phenomenon is common, but often hard for born Jews to understand; if you recognize the truth of Judaism, and yearn for the relationship with G-d it enables, how can you allow delay? Yet we all see recognizably parallel phenomena regularly with regard to shiddukhim, and in other spheres of life.

The Talmud offers three contestants for final catalyst. Rabbi Yehoshua suggests that the Torah is in psychochronological order – Yitro heard the event that the Torah narrates immediately preceding his arrival, namely the War with Amalek. Rabbi Eliezer HaModai suggests that the Torah is foreshadowing – Yitro heard the immediately following episode, namely the Giving of the Torah. Rabbi Eliezer suggests that the Torah is in actual chronological order – Yitro heard the Splitting of the Reed Sea, and the remaining episodes of last week's parashah happened while he was en route.

Singling out the Splitting of the Reed Sea makes sense, as it represents Divine Power. The Giving of the Torah similarly represents ultimate Revelation. But why would Yitro be uniquely catalyzed by the War with Amalek, especially after the Splitting of the Sea failed to move him in the same way?

My usual answer is that Yitro wanted to make a contribution. The drowning of the Mitzrim seemed to place the Jews as mere spectators in history, the audience for dazzling Divine displays: "G-d will battle for you, and you will be silent." But the War with Amalek, and especially the vulnerability it revealed, showed that the Jews were expected to become actors in their own right, and to eventually solve their own problems. So Yitro showed up, ready to dispense administrative wisdom.

Rabbi Abraham Braude of Chicago, my wife's maternal great-great-grandfather, took a different approach. (I am in the process of deciphering his manuscript in the hope of eventual publication.) Rabbi Braude suggests that if Yitro comes in response to Amalek's coming, then his motivation and theirs must be connected. They respond differently to the same stimulus.

What stimulated Amalek's attack? Midrash Tanchuma answers via a pun. Amalek battled with the Jews in a place called RFYDYM, which can be revocalized (almost) as *RaFu Y'DaYbeM*, which translates as "their hands weakened," which the Tanchuma understands as saying that the Jews' grip on Torah weakened. (In other versions it is their grip on mitzvot that weakens.)

This is plainly not a compelling textual basis. Moreover, it denies Amalek any agency at all. They are utterly inauthentic; they can only react to what the Jews do. Like predators, they are ineluctably attracted to the scent of Jewish spiritual weakness. But why does it attract them?

The Rabbis emphasize that Amalek has no material quarrel with the Jews. Amalek is defined by having no border with the Jewish camp, and no homestead in the Jewish homeland, yet they travel a long way through others' territory to engage the Jews in battle. Why?

As in superhero thrillers, or Citizen Kane, contemporary motivations are rooted in an origin story. Genesis 36:12 informs us that the mother of the original Amalek was Timna, the concubine of Esav's son Eliphaz, and in 36:22 that Timna was the sister of the chieftain Lotan. Why would a noble woman become a concubine rather than a primary wife? Sanhedrin 99b suggests that Timna sought to convert to Judaism, but was rejected by Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. She turned to Eliphaz in despair, even accepting a lesser position, just so as to have some relationship with a member of Avraham's family. She accepted her fate with great humility. But she could not prevent her memory of rejection from scarring her children. The more impressive she became, the more they hated the people who had despised her. "Amalek came from her, that troubled Israel. Why? Because they should not have distanced her."

So Amalek attacks to avenge a wrongly rejected conversion, and Yitro responds by converting.

This explains why Yitro comes now, rather than later. But why not immediately after the Exodus? Similarly, why doesn't Amalek attack immediately after the Exodus?

One might cite practical logistics in each case. Rabbi Braude develops a much more involved and classically Rabbinic approach.

He starts with a fundamental theological question about the Biblical story: Did the Jews deserve to be enslaved in Egypt, and if yes, why? My usual suspects include Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Yosef's apparent enslavement of the Mitzrim to their Pharaohs. Nedarim 32a contends, however, that the Covenant Between the Pieces makes clear that the fault must be specifically laid at Avraham's feet.

Said Rabbi Abahu said Rabbi El'azar:

Why was Avraham our Forefather punished by having his descendants enslaved to Mitzrayim for 210 years?

Because he drafted Torah scholars, as Scripture says (Genesis 14:14)

"He armed his acolytes/chanikhav."

Shmuel said:

Because he overstepped the boundaries of Hashem's attributes, as

Scripture says: "What will let me know that I will inherit it?"

Rabbi Yochanan said:

Because he separated people from entering under the Wings of the Presence, as Scripture says: "Give me the living souls, and take the property for yourself."

How could Avraham not have recognized the prohibition of drafting Torah scholars? Perhaps he was taking cognizance of a Talmudic conversation on Taanit 10b.

"Do not quarrel on the way" (Genesis 24:24) –

Said Rabbi El'azar:

Yosef said to his brothers: Do not become engaged in balakbic discussion, lest the road quarrel with you (-lest you get lost).

Is that so?! But Rabbi El'ai son of Berakhyah said: Two scholars who walk on the way with no Torah discussion among them deserve to be burnt . . .

That is no difficulty – one speaks of surface study, the other of analysis.

If scholars are exempt from study while traveling, which the Talmud initially understands to be the implication of Yosef's caution, then Avraham in fact took his acolytes away from study (when they pursued Lot's captors all the way to Dan). But if scholars are required to study even while traveling, then why would Avraham be punished for drafting them?! Surely they met their responsibility to at least review their Torah knowledge while engaged in hot pursuit?

This issue is finally resolved when Amalek is drawn to attack by sensing a vulnerability rooted in weakened Torah study among the Jews. This vulnerability demonstrates that the Jews were obligated in Torah study while traveling. If so, Avraham did nothing wrong by drafting scholars. If so, Avraham must have been punished for turning Timna away (Rabbi Braude discounts without comment the suggestion of Shmuel that he was punished for asking an inappropriate question). If so, conversion must be possible. So Yitro sets out to join the Jews.

In Rabbi Braude's reading, Yitro was always motivated to convert, but needed to know that he would be welcomed before taking the plunge. This rings true to me. There are many things we know we ought to do, and even desperately want to do, and yet find ourselves not doing because they make us vulnerable to rejection.

Perhaps Timna was never formally rejected. She came to shul for a while, and no one befriended her; or perhaps multiple people each took it upon themselves to discourage her three times, with gusto. Conversion needs standards, and the Jewish people need borders. But the Timna story reminds us that immigration policies always have costs both ways.