

About the Attack in the Synagogue in Texas

I think it only fair to give you a warning about today's sermon. I begin with a bit more exegesis and textual analysis than usual. But please stick with it because in the end, you will see how it all ties together and relates to what happened in Texas last week.

It is interesting to note that this Torah portion which contains the Ten Commandments is known not as "Parashat Moshe", after the name of the one who led us to Mt. Sinai and who went up the mountain to receive the law, but rather it is called "Yitro", which is the name of Moses' wife's father. In fact, Yitro is not just Moses' father in law, he is a Kohen, a priest of the Midianites.

As we all know, the Torah portions derive their names not from what happens in the weekly portion, but from the first significant word in the text, and this week's sidrah opens with the words "*Vayishma Yitro, Kohen Midian hoten Moshe: Yitro, a Midianite priest, father in law of Moshe heard.*" Since the first significant word in the verse is Yitro, is why it is known as Parashat Yitro.

But when it tells us he heard something, and does not indicate what he heard, our sages were intrigued and wonder – what did he hear?! What did he hear that made such an impression on him that the next thing we read is that, without specifying what he heard, he praises and says a blessing for the God of the Israelites, expressing his admiration and recognizing the power of Adonai.

So our rabbis want to know – what was it that he heard that made such a major impression on him?

And on this, there is no agreement.

Some of our rabbis, whom we call *hazal*, say that he had heard about the miraculous splitting of the Sea of Reeds and was amazed that God could do such a thing, while others maintain that he was impressed by the victory of the Israelites in their battle with the Amalekites. A third opinion contends that Yitro heard about and was moved by God bringing the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. And just to prove the truth of the old saying – two Jews – three opinions, a fourth opinion states that he heard about the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

The rabbis are trying to explain what motivated Yitro because many of them go so far as to say that as a result of what he heard he stopped being a Midianite priest, converted, and became Jewish!

While all of these options are valid and plausible explanations, the reason there are so many possibilities is because of an inconsistency in the text. Without going into too much detail, the problem is that we read that he came to Moses prior to the giving of the Torah, yet a few verses later, we read that he came to Moses after the Torah was given.

The commentators debate throughout the ages – is it possible that somehow things are out of chronological order -- that he came to Moses, but only after Revelation, after the Ten Commandments were given on Mt. Sinai.

Assuming that the opening sentence is out of sequence, then it leads to the question – why is this verse about Yitro hearing of God’s power placed where it is, at the beginning of the Torah portion? In other words, they ponder they ponder why is it mentioned here if it actually happens later?

The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra explains that it is here at the beginning, even though it happened later, in order to follow on the heels of the previous chapter, the chapter that tells of the attack by the Amalekites on the Israelites upon their departure from Egypt. And here comes the point and conclusion of this brief summation of the controversy. He writes:

“The Torah does this because placing Yitro’s reaction to news of what he heard here at the beginning, provides a direct contrast to the previous section describing the unprovoked hostility of the Amalekites to the people of Israel.”

In this manner the Torah is showing shows us that, even several thousand years ago, there are two very different ways that the non-Jewish world responds to the Jews.

There are those who are like Amalek, those who embody and characterize the enemies of the Jewish people, who attack and who seek our demise or destruction, and there are those non-Jews like Yitro, who respect, honor and appreciate the Jewish people.

Last Saturday, in a small town in Texas, we saw the face of one such approach to the Jewish people, when a Muslim terrorist entered a House of Prayer, a *beit kenesset*, on

Shabbat, spewed out hateful things about Jews, took hostages and demanded the release of a fellow terrorist being held in a United States prison.

The prisoner whose release he sought is serving a sentence of 86 years for being an Al Qaeda agent and attempting to shoot and kill American soldiers in Afghanistan when she grabbed the rifle of an army officer and fired on the soldiers interrogating her. Married to a nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, the mastermind of the 9-11 attacks, and educated in the United States, at Brandeis, when she was arrested she was carrying explosive materials and notes she had written that mentioned a mass casualty attack, dirty bombs, and monuments in New York.

During her trial, and when she was found guilty in a federal court in 2010 she ranted about Jews and Zionists controlling the trial, the media and the world, wanted Jews banned from the jury and courtroom and blamed Israel and Jews for her conviction.

Yes, there are those like Amalek who buy into the malicious conspiracy theories about Jews. And she and the one who wanted to liberate her are not the only ones who are more aligned with Amalek than Yitro.

CAIR, the Council on American Islamic Relations, an organization which tries to hide its anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist bend and to pass itself off as a respectable, mainstream civil rights group, has organized rallies on behalf of the woman known as “Lady Al Qaeda”, calling the proceedings “one of the greatest examples of injustice in US history” and portraying her as an innocent victim of the war on terror. Anti-Jewish activist Linda Sarsour is part of CAIR’s effort to free this vicious and dangerous Jew hater, by demonstrating for her release and helping to raise money for her defense.

But just as ibn Ezra states, then as now, or now as then, depending on your perspective, there are those who attack Jews and there are those who are kind to us. Throughout history, there have been righteous gentiles who have protected and sheltered us. There are those today who malign Israel and the Jewish people and make all kinds of false, harmful unbalanced accusations about the nature and actions of the Jewish state.

And there are those, such as evangelical Christians, the country of Guatemala and others, who express their love, solidarity and support for the state of Israel. And we need to recognize the difference and appreciate and embrace those who embrace us.

When Israel comes to Mt. Sinai and is about to receive the Torah, the verb that is used to tell us that they encamped there is not plural. Although there are thousands of people

who are gathered together, nevertheless, the verb is in the singular. The midrash says this is because they were united at that time – and this is why they were able to receive the Torah then.

19th century Rabbi Moshe of Kovrin takes it in a different direction and points out that they were one as they stood before the mountain, as the Torah says, “*vayahon sham Yisrael neged hahar* – they encamped before the mountain” because the word *har*, meaning mountain is referring not just to Mt. Sinai, but to the *har*, the mountain of enmity and hatred which encompassed them. He writes, “Only through the power of unity, of being one, is the Jewish people able to confront the *har*, the mountain of hostility that we face.”

So let us be united in confronting the Amalekites of our world, and let us not fear them, for in the word of Moses’ father-in-law, “*Baruch HaShem*, thank God”, there also are Yitros, those who love us in the world as well.

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