



לקוטי שיחות
PROJECT
LIKKUTEI
SICHOS

Likkutei Sichos

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Yisro -- Priest of Midian

A note on the translation: Great effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while at the same time striving for readability. However, the translation carries no official authority. As in all translations, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists. Feedback is always appreciated!

1. In connection with the *pasuk* in our *parsha*, “Yisro said, ‘Blessed is Hashem who rescued you,’”¹ our sages state: “It was shameful that Moshe and the 600,000 Jews did not proclaim ‘blessed’ until Yisro who came and declared ‘blessed is Hashem.’”² This statement of the sages is puzzling, for Moshe and the Jewish People **did** say *shira*, the Song at the Sea, after the miracle of the splitting of the Reed Sea!^{3, 4}

It cannot be argued this Song was in fact a valid form of blessing Hashem, and that their shame was in neglecting to say “blessed” upon the exodus from Egypt. If that were the case, the sages should have explicitly tied their reproach to the time of the Exodus. Instead, they make a blanket statement that Moshe and the Jewish people did not proclaim “blessed” until Yisro did so.

The comment of the sages can be understood in the context of a teaching of the Zohar, which states that until Yisro acknowledged Hashem, the Torah could not have been given to the Jewish people. When Yisro stated, “Blessed is Hashem who rescued you... now I know that Hashem is greater than all the deities...”⁵, he caused “the glory of the Holy One blessed be He to spread above and below; and only then did Hashem give the Torah in its entirety.”⁶

This seems difficult to understand. How could it be that the great spiritual potency of Moshe, Aharon, and the 600,000 Jews was not powerful enough to bring about the giving of the Torah until Yisro’s arrival? Why was Yisro’s acknowledgment, “that Hashem is greater than all the deities” so special that its merit outweighed that of Jewish people?

2. This dilemma can be resolved by first introducing another question. Our *parsha* opens with the words, “Yisro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe, heard of all Hashem had done....”⁷ Why does the Torah emphasize that Yisro was the “priest of Midian”? The Torah could have written simply, “Yisro, father-in-law of Moshe, heard.”

¹ Shemos 18:10

² Sanhedrin 94a, Mechilta on Shemos 18:10

³ If the intention of the rabbinic statement is that Moshe and the Jewish people did not say the actual word “blessed”, it is unclear what advantage that word has over the words recited in the Song at the Sea.

⁴ Often translated as “Red Sea,” our translation follows the literal translation of *suf* as “reed”.

⁵ Shemos 18:10-11

⁶ Zohar II 67b, 88a

⁷ Shemos 18:1

Additionally, describing Yisro as “priest of Midian” seems quite inappropriate in light of his role in our *parsha*. The term “priest” (and more particularly the term *kohen* in the Hebrew original) has two connotations: (a) a minister, that is, Yisro was a government minister in Midian; (b) a priest in the service of idolatry. (See Rashi, later in our *parsha*, who notes that Yisro “was familiar with every form of idolatry in the world...”⁸). According to the second definition, the Torah’s description of Yisro is very odd. Why would the Torah denigrate Yisro as a priest of idolatry, while the intent of this passage is to praise him?

The explanation is as follows: The Torah’s actual intent in describing Yisro as “priest of Midian” is not to denigrate him, but to recount his former greatness and prestige. His esteemed role as minister in Midian underscores Yisro’s virtue in coming to convert. “His heart prompted him to go forth into the desert, a wasteland, to hear words of Torah.”⁹

Even according to the second connotation of the term *priest*, the description of Yisro as a priest in the service of idolatry apprises us of his great knowledge and understanding, insight and discernment. The error of those originally drawn to idolatry was (primarily) an error of understanding and discernment. As Rambam writes: “They said, ‘Since Hashem created the stars and spheres with which to control the world... it is fitting to praise and glorify them and treat them with honour. And this is the will of G-d....’”¹⁰

While it is true that G-dly life-force is drawn down into this physical world through the agency of the stars and constellations -- as the sages teach, “There is no blade of grass down below that does not have a *mazal* up above striking it and telling it: ‘grow!’”¹¹ -- we are prohibited from honouring the heavenly bodies for their role in the functioning of the world. The rationale for this prohibition is because the stars and constellations lack free will, and are simply, “like an axe in the hand of the chopper,” fulfilling the will of Hashem.

Just as the stars and constellations are intermediaries through which life-force is drawn down into this world, so too there are angels who act as intermediaries in the supernal worlds of *yetzirah* and *beriah*, as connoted in the *pasuk*, “for he that

⁸ Rashi on Shemos 18:11

⁹ Rashi on Shemos 18:5

¹⁰ Rambam M.T. Laws of Idolatry 1:1

¹¹ Bereishis Rabbah 10:6, Zohar I 251a

is higher watches over him that is high, and there be higher ones over them.”¹² And just as the stars and constellations are utterly null¹³ before Hashem (and so one who ascribes power to them is guilty of idolatry), so too we are cautioned to realize that the angels are like an axe in the hand of the chopper.¹⁴ The higher the rank of the intermediary, the greater the risk of error, and consequently the more caution that must be exercised.

Rashi's statement that “Yisro was familiar with **every sort** of idolatry in the world...,”¹⁵ implies that Yisro had knowledge and understanding of all the intermediaries, in all of the worlds, including the highest spiritual world. When he was the priest of Midian, he erred, and considered them as intermediaries having power and control, which is idolatry. But now, when he joined the Jewish people, he understood that the intermediaries were powerless. This demonstrates to us the greatness of Yisro's intellectual understanding.

This clearly demonstrates that the Torah's description of Yisro as “priest of Midian” was intended as praise. In spite of his position of honour at the pinnacle of worldly achievement as Minister of Midian (according to the first definition of “priest”), and in spite of being a priest, familiar with all forms of idolatry (according to the second definition), Yisro abandoned his position of honour and greatness, and converted to Judaism.

3. Based on this explanation, that Yisro was great in wisdom and discernment, we can understand the statement in the Zohar that the giving of the Torah was contingent upon Yisro's acknowledgement of Hashem. On the *pasuk*, “I have seen that there is an advantage of wisdom over (literally ‘from’) folly,”¹⁶ the Zohar comments that the **advantage of wisdom**¹⁷ of the *side of holiness*, is **drawn from folly**, by refining the wisdom of *the other side*,¹⁸ referred to, in the Zohar, as **folly**. When Yisro, a great scholar of the wisdom of *the other side*, came to learn Torah, and declared, “that Hashem is greater than all the deities” (according to Rashi's commentary above), *the other side* was refined, to the extent that it was

¹² Koheles 5:7

¹³ *Beteilim bimtzi'usam*

¹⁴ Note the teaching of the sages, “We are to pray to Hashem and not to his attributes”, which was taught in relation to the world of *Azilus* and higher. See Likkutei Torah, additions to Vayikra 51c

¹⁵ Rashi on Shemos 18:11

¹⁶ Koheles 2:13

¹⁷ The divine attribute of *chochma*.

¹⁸ Zohar II 47b *le'umas zeh* in the original. Chassidus explains that the side of holiness refers to the spiritual levels that draw their vitality from Hashem in a revealed manner, and the *other side* refers to entities that conceal their G-dly source, and thus stand in opposition to the side of holiness.

transformed into wisdom of *the side of holiness*. The inevitable result was an **advantage**, or increase¹⁹ of light²⁰, into the wisdom of *the side of holiness*. Accordingly, it was precisely Yisro's acknowledgement of Hashem that precipitated the giving of the Torah, which is Hashem's supernal wisdom, down here on earth. This could only be attained by drawing down divine influence from a very lofty level. Only Yisro, who was able to draw down an increase of light into the wisdom of *the side of holiness*, was able to achieve this.

How was Yisro's transformation an appropriate preparation for the giving of the Torah? As known, preparation undertaken for an event must correspond to the nature of the event itself. For the preparation to be effective, it must be similar to the event for which one is preparing. Yet refining the wisdom of *the other side*, as accomplished by Yisro, seems unrelated to the giving of the Torah.

In fact, though, with his transformation, Yisro accomplished a feat quite similar to that accomplished by the giving of the Torah. The sages have taught in several places that prior to the giving of the Torah, "Hashem decreed, 'The heavens are the heavens of Hashem, and the earth He has given to mankind.'"²¹ Heaven and earth were decreed to remain separate realms. "Upon the giving of the Torah, He nullified this decree, and said, 'What is below will be elevated to the heavens, and the heavens will descend below.'"²² The giving of the Torah initiated a connection between heaven and earth, elevating the earthly and integrating it into the heavenly. A similar elevation was brought about by Yisro. His transformation refined the wisdom of *the other side*, taking the very lowest level of earthliness and elevating it, integrating it into Hashem's supernal wisdom. This was indeed the ideal preparation for the giving of the Torah.

4. Refining the wisdom of *the other side* had an advantage even over the splitting of the Reed Sea, as a preparation for the giving of the Torah. In several places,²³ Chassidus teaches that the splitting of the Reed Sea is emblematic of the joining of upper and lower realms. The Splitting of the Sea brought about the union between *the concealed world*²⁴ (the sea), and *the revealed world*²⁵ (dry land). As

¹⁹ The term *yisron* in the Hebrew original connotes both an advantage and an increase, and is also etymologically related to the name Yisro.

²⁰ The term "light" is used in Chassidus to refer to a revelation of G-dly influence. Yisro thus was able to effect a powerful revelation of G-dliness.

²¹ Tehillim 115:16

²² Shemos Rabbah 12:3, Tanchuma Va'era 18

²³ See the index to Torah Or and Likutei Torah, entry on *keri'as yam suf*

²⁴ Chassidus explains that the beings inhabiting *the concealed world* (*alma d'iskasya*) are perpetually united with and cleave to G-dliness, and the source of their life-force is from the name *Havaya*. The sea is

well, the union between these two worlds took effect in the same two modes as the union described above between heaven and earth at Sinai: top-down, and bottom-up. *The concealed world* was drawn down into *the revealed world*, and *the revealed world* was elevated into *the concealed world*. Thus, the splitting of the Reed Sea served as a preparation for the giving of the Torah, although it did not suffice. Yisro had to first come and acknowledge Hashem, refining the wisdom of *the other side*, and only then could the Torah be given.

At the splitting of the Reed Sea, the upper and lower in all worlds were united “from the highest of all ranks to the lowest.”²⁶ Why did this not suffice to enable the giving of the Torah? It is because this union happened only in the realm of holiness -- lower ranks of holiness became integrated with upper ranks of holiness. However the *other side* was not yet refined. (This can be seen in the drowning of the Egyptians in the Reed Sea. They were not refined and elevated, rather, they were utterly destroyed, and ceased to exist).

The fact that *the other side* was not refined at the splitting of the Reed Sea enabled Amalek to attack the Jewish people. That is not to say that there was no revelation of Hashem in the world at the time of the splitting of the Reed Sea. The Torah teaches us that “nations heard”²⁷ of this event from one side of the world to the other²⁸. They even saw the miracle with their own eyes, as the sages teach, “All waters in the world split.”²⁹ This revelation even caused them to become *batel* and broken to the extent that they were afraid to wage war against the Jewish people, as the pasuk states, “Nations heard and trembled... all the inhabitants of Canaan melted.”³⁰ Yet in spite of all this, Amalek came to fight against the Jewish people. What empowered them to attack? It was because *the other side* was not refined at the splitting of the Reed Sea. (Although the outward

symbolic of the *concealed world* because sea creatures are concealed and submerged in water, the source of their life-force, and are unable to exist if they are removed from the sea.

²⁵ Chassidus explains that the beings inhabiting *the revealed world* (*alma d'isgalya*) have an independent existence, yet they still receive their life-force from G-dliness. The source of their life-force is from the name *Elokim*, which conceals the name *Havaya*. Dry land is symbolic of *the revealed world* because plants and animals live “revealed” on earth (unlike sea creatures who are submerged in water), and although the source of their life is drawn from the land, they exist separately from it.

²⁶ This terminology is taken from Tanya, ch. 2

²⁷ Shemos 15:14

²⁸ Mechilsa Yisro (beginning)

²⁹ Mechilsa Shemos 14:21

³⁰ Shemos 15:14-15

influence of *kelipa*'s³¹ powers over the nations of the world was shattered and nullified, *kelipa*'s essence remained intact in its opposition to G-dliness, as *kelipa* itself was not refined, nor was it nullified.) As a result, Amalek was able to wage war against the Jewish people.

We now understand why the Torah was not given until Yisro acknowledged that "Hashem is greater than all the deities." Neither the splitting of the Reed Sea nor the distinction and holiness of Moshe and the Jewish people were sufficient preparation. It was only through Yisro refining the "folly" of *the other side*, causing an *increase* into the wisdom of *the side of holiness*, joining the very lowest rank (of *kelipa*) to the very highest rank (of holiness), that paved the way for the giving of the Torah.

5. Based on the above, we can now extract *the wine of Torah*³² from Rashi's commentary on the opening words of our *parsha*, "Yisro heard...", after which Yisro came to join the Jewish people.³³ Rashi explains, "What did Yisro hear that motivated him to come? He heard of the splitting of the Reed Sea and the war of Amalek." There is a well-known question: Surely, Yisro must have heard of all the great miracles of the Exodus. Why specifically did the miracles of the splitting of the Reed Sea and the war of Amalek motivate Yisro to join the Jewish people, and not the great miracles of the Exodus? Additionally, why does Rashi refer to the incident as "the war of Amalek," emphasizing Amalek's war, rather than the victory of the Jewish people? It would seem more appropriate for Rashi to describe this incident as "the salvation of the Jewish people," or "the fall of Amalek," or a similar description emphasizing the greatness of the miracle?

Based on the above, we can understand Rashi's commentary. Specifically these two events, the splitting of the Reed Sea (emblematic of the potential union of upper and lower materializing), and the war of Amalek (demonstrating that the union between upper and lower was not yet complete, for *kelipa* continued to oppose G-dliness) caused Yisro to come and acknowledge Hashem. Yisro's role was to repair and consummate the connection, by refining and purifying *the other side*, which had not yet been perfected. Now we understand the use of the term

³¹ *Kelipa* literally translates as "a shell" or "a peel". The term refers to anything that conceals, and thus opposes G-dliness, just as a shell or a peel conceals the fruit within. *Kelipa* is often used to refer to evil or impurity, and has a similar connotation to *the other side* used up to this point in the *sicha*.

³² *The wine of Torah* refers to the teachings of Chassidus

³³ Shemos 18:1-5

“the **war** of Amalek”, for it was that war that brought Yisro to join the Jewish people, and **not** the victory of the Jewish people.

6. The above helps to understand another issue. There is a well-known Talmudic principle that we increase in matters of holiness, and do not decrease.³⁴ Certainly this principle applies to the Jewish people throughout the time of the Exodus and the giving of the Torah; surely their journey from Egypt was a constant ascent. They emerged from the forty-nine gates of impurity³⁵ and ascended level after level until they were fit to receive the Torah. Yet it would seem that the war with Amalek was **not** an ascent, but rather a **descent**, affecting the Jewish people “from generation to generation.”³⁶

This apparent incongruity can be resolved based on the role that the war with Amalek had in Yisro joining the Jewish people, and ultimately in the giving of the Torah, as discussed above. Since the war with Amalek motivated Yisro to refine *the other side*, a greater elevation bringing about a greater revelation than the splitting of the Reed Sea, the war with Amalek served ultimately as a part of the Jewish people’s **ascent**. This was an ascent of the greatest order, and thereby served as the ideal preparation for the giving of the Torah.

7. On this basis, we can now understand why the sages taught, “It was shameful that Moshe and the 600,000 Jews did not proclaim ‘blessed’ until Yisro came along and said ‘blessed is Hashem.’”³⁷ The deeper meaning of “blessed” (*baruch*) is drawing down from above. This definition is evident in the statement of the sages, “one who draws down (*hamavrich*) a vine.”³⁸ “Blessed is Hashem” denotes drawing G-dliness downwards. Despite the lofty spiritual level and the great divine revelation brought about by Moshe and the 600,000 Jews by means of the Song of the Sea, they still did not approach Yisro’s accomplishment. His declaration of, “Blessed is Hashem... greater than all the deities” drew G-dliness down to the very lowest of levels, refining the *other side*, a feat unattained by the divine service of Moshe and the Jewish people (which reflected the level of the divine service of the righteous). As such, the giving of the Torah was delayed, “until Yisro came and said ‘blessed is Hashem,’” for through Yisro, a supernal

³⁴ Tractate Berachos 28a

³⁵ Zohar Chadash, Yisro, beginning; Tikkunei Zohar 432

³⁶ Shemos 17:16

³⁷ Tractate Sanhedrin 94a, Mechilta on Shemos 18:10

³⁸ Mishna Tractate Kilayim 7:1 The Mishna refers to one who bends down a branch of a vine into the soil to take root, and thus produce a new vine. The Hebrew words for blessing, *beracha*, and drawing down a vine, *hamavrich*, share the same etymological root.

revelation of Hashem's light³⁹ was drawn down in the most ultimate descent to the very lowest level. Consequently, that lowest level was refined by Yisro's acknowledgment of Hashem. Only then was the Torah given, which was the ultimate union of the higher worlds and the lower worlds.

8. There is a lesson in this for each one of us in our service of Hashem. The giving of the Torah must be, and in fact is, a daily occurrence. The blessing said daily over Torah learning, "Blessed are you Hashem...giver of the Torah," is in the present tense. We also must serve Hashem as we prepare to receive the Torah on a daily, by fulfilling the *pasuk*, "Know Him **in all your ways**,"⁴⁰ binding ourselves and cleaving to Hashem ("know him") not only in matters of holiness, but in **all** of our ways, even when we are involved in discretionary activities not commanded by Torah. This applies not only to discretionary activities that are adjacent to holiness, but even to discretionary activities **far** from holiness, such as the war against Amalek, which was ultimately, by its consequences, a preparation for the giving of the Torah.

The divine service at the splitting of the Reed Sea was in the realm of **holiness**. This preceded, empowered and enabled the war against Amalek, which denotes the refinement of **discretionary** activities. Similarly, in our daily activities, the realm of **holiness** must precede, and serves to empower and enable our **discretionary** activities which follow. We pray promptly upon arising, going directly from the synagogue to the study hall, and only then proceeding to earn a livelihood.⁴¹

The order of daily conduct is this: A person's primary service of Hashem "immediately upon awakening"⁴² is the soul's general acknowledgement of Hashem, "*Modeh ani lifane'cha...*," followed by the order of prayer and Torah study (matters of **holiness**), and only afterwards comes one's breakfast. (Except that one who is accustomed to doing so eats before going to the study hall, so that he will be healthy and strong to serve his Creator learning in the house of study, which has no limit, in contrast to prayer in the synagogue.)⁴³ Prior to engaging in **discretionary** activities one must first evoke a revelation of the

³⁹ =revelation

⁴⁰ Mishlei 3:6

⁴¹ Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim ch. 155

⁴² Alter Rebbe's siddur, beginning

⁴³ Alter Rebbe's Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim ch. 155

soul's light, through prayer and Torah study. Only afterwards, may one draw down the light of holiness into physical matters. ⁴⁴

The above sequence is appropriate for the vast majority of people (and the Torah speaks of the majority). Throughout the course of the day, all of one's free time should be spent in the study of Torah. This is not considered "extra" learning, but on the contrary, it is considered to be a person's **primary** Torah study, (for the essential attribute of Torah is to increase in quality or quantity, and not to restrict oneself to a fixed daily portion of study.)

In addition to the general standards of Torah study described above, there are various distinctions among scholars⁴⁵ and working people.⁴⁶ There are those for whom their daily "giving of the Torah" consists of one chapter studied in the morning (in the study hall), the "order of *kedusha*" recited at the conclusion of the morning prayers, the recitation of *shema* and the daily sacrificial offering in the course of prayer services, and the recitation of the portion of the *priestly blessing* (including the prayers included in their recitation) which are recited after the morning blessings.

Serving Hashem through one of the above methods prepares us for the revelation inherent in the giving of the Torah, "I Hashem" become "your G-d"⁴⁷ -- your strength and your life-force.

-From a *sicha* delivered Shabbos *parshas Yisro* 5765

⁴⁴ The Rebbe notes that this is the reason for the prohibition of eating before prayer, "for how can he elevate the food if he is still bound below?" Likkutei Torah Tzav 5a

⁴⁵ "Yisachar" in the original, as the members of this tribe were known for their Torah study.

⁴⁶ "Zevulun" in the original, as members of this tribe were known for engaging in commerce, and they supported the members of the tribe of Yisachar, so they could devote themselves to Torah study.

⁴⁷ Shemos 20:2, the opening words of the Ten "Commandments" heard by the Jewish people at the giving of the Torah at Sinai.