

YISRO (EXODUS 18:1-20:23)

Divine Patience and Human Acceptance

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

(I would like to thank you all for your prayers and good wishes on behalf of my uncle. This week's message is dedicated in memory of Shmuel ben Zev. May G-d console my mother, my aunts, and my cousins among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.)

When Moses returned to Egypt to lead his nation to freedom, he left his wife and children in Midian. They stayed with Moses' father-in-law Jethro, the retired High Priest of Midian. Now that Moses was traveling in the desert, Jethro brought his daughter and grandsons to be re-united with Moses.

Jethro was impressed by what he saw and heard. *"Now I know that G-d is greater than all the gods, because of the way they had conspired against them (the Israelites.)"* (Exodus, 18:11)

Rashi explains that Jethro saw G-d's greatness in the fact that the Egyptians sinned with water (drowning the newborn boys in the Nile) and were subsequently punished with water (drowning in the Red Sea). This concept is called *"Middah K'negged Middah* – measure for measure.” Whether rewarding or punishing, G-d repays in kind.

Why did Jethro find this so impressive? Perhaps his background had something to do with it. Jethro had given up his belief in idols. He had experimented with every religion; he knew them all. When he said, *"Now I know that G-d is greater than all the gods..."* he was speaking from experience.

Most cultures at that time believed in many gods. There was the sun god, the moon god, the Super Bowl god, etc. Each god's powers were limited to its own domain. Hence, mythology is replete with legends about wars between competing gods.

The Egyptians had thought they could thwart G-d's plans to take the Israelites out of Egypt. They knew that a baby was going to be born who would grow up to lead them to freedom. Therefore, they started drowning Jewish babies in the Nile. Their success at committing this atrocity indicated to them that perhaps the G-d of Israel was powerless to stop them. Perhaps the god of the Nile was stronger than the G-d of Israel. After all, it seemed, He could not stop them from sinning with water.

Once Jethro saw that G-d was able to punish them through water, he understood that G-d is all-powerful. It was not that G-d COULDN'T stop the murders. Rather, in His sometimes-hard-to-understand wisdom, He CHOSE NOT TO stop the murders. He was not being weak; He was being patient, and waited to punish them at the Red Sea.

Sometimes G-d's patience with Evil is difficult to understand.

A famous Jewish author has sold millions of books, claiming to explain why bad things happen to good people. His basic theory is that G-d can't help it. (R"L) This author describes G-d as an impotent, grandfatherly figure who is powerless to save people from disease and other tragedy. The G-d, (or should I say, "god") of this man's theology is there as a shoulder to cry on; someone to turn to for inspiration; little more.

I call this approach "religious atheism." You don't have to be angry at G-d and you don't have to deny His existence. You can believe in Him; just pretend that He is confronted by powers that even He can't overcome, and you can still be a "believer."

It is very comforting. The only problem is that it isn't Judaism. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once wrote (not an exact quote) that anyone who could explain the tribulations of Job would actually be doing a disservice to religious people. Serving G-d requires us to maintain our faith in spite of the questions that gnaw at our souls.

Unlike Jethro, the above-mentioned author prefers to view G-d's silence in the face of tragedy as weakness. That author would be well-advised to have the humility to recognize that G-d sometimes CHOOSES to be silent.

Such an approach does not make faith an easy job. G-d hears every prayer, and He answers every prayer... Sometimes the answer is "No."

The struggle lies in our ability to accept it.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

© 2002 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.