

**YISRO (EXODUS 18:1-20:23)****Ouch!**

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Jethro, the high priest of Midian, was impressed. His son-in-law, Moses, had taken leave of him in Midian to seek out his brethren the Israelites. Moses explained that he was going to see how they were faring under the burdens of Egyptian enslavement. He wanted to see ... *if they are still alive*. (Exodus, 4:18)

They were more than just alive. Now, thanks to the miracles of G-d, and the leadership of Moses, they were free!! Moses had led his People out of Egypt. He had led them triumphantly through the Red Sea, and presided over the defeat of the Amalekites who had attacked them.

Jethro heard about it all, and wanted to join Moses in celebrating G-d's salvation:

*Jethro ... heard all that G-d had done for Moses and Israel when He brought Israel out of Egypt...Jethro rejoiced ...He said "Blessed is G-d, Who saved you...Now I know that G-d is greater than all the idols..." Jethro brought offerings and sacrifices to G-d... (Ibid 18:1, 9-11)*

The miracles of the Exodus changed Jethro's life. He had already given up his life of idol worship, but had not yet found "the true religion." He now embraced Judaism.

*Jethro ... heard all that G-d had done for Moses and Israel...* Rashi asks what it was specifically that Jethro heard. What news report was it that influenced him so profoundly to fully abandon idolatry and choose to accept the G-d of Israel? The answer, says Rashi, is that he heard about the splitting of the Red Sea and the war against Amalek. Once Jethro saw that G-d truly controlled the world, he turned his life around. He became a member of our nation, and brought offerings to the G-d of Israel.

But, something was amiss. Jethro was ill at ease. "*VAYICHAD Yisro – and Jethro rejoiced.*" The Torah uses an unusual word: "*vayiCHAD*" – *he rejoiced.*" Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi (1448-1526) in his commentary on Rashi, points out that a much more common word for the Torah to use in describing joy would be *vayiSMACH* (as in the word, "*SIMCHAH*" – *happy occasion*). The word "*vayiCHAD*" obviously carries an additional connotation.

The word "*CHAD*" means "sharp." The Talmud (Sanhedrin, 94a) offers two interpretations of the word, "*VayiCHAD.*"

“Rav says, ‘He (Jethro) passed a sharp knife over his flesh.’ (I.e., he circumcised himself and converted.) Shmuel says, ‘All of his flesh became prickly’ (literally, sharp, i.e., he developed goose bumps all over, to hear that his old friends the Egyptians had been defeated.)’”

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Jethro had once served, together with Balaam and Job, as an advisor to the Pharaoh. To hear that the Egyptians had drowned in the Red Sea pained him deeply. “*Vayichad*,” yes, Jethro was happy for his son-in-law, and for his new brethren, the Israelites. However, to hear of the downfall of his beloved Egypt cut into him like a knife.

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Jethro’s pain was more than just the appropriate acknowledgment that it is sad even when the wicked suffer. (See “Singing the Red Sea Blues”) This was different. This was personal! The Talmud, cited above, continues, “This is what is meant by the expression, ‘In the presence of a convert, or even a descendant of a convert up to ten generations, one should not disgrace an Aramean. (i.e., a person of the same background as the convert)’” (Some commentaries point out that Jethro was a tenth generation descendent of *Mitzrayim*, the patriarch of the Egyptian nation.)

Jethro had changed! He was no longer Jethro the Midianite idol worshiper! He was Jethro the Jew! He had brought offerings to G-d! He had abandoned his past and accepted the G-d of Israel!

Yet, deep down, he was still an Egyptian. The news of their demise hurt him as much as his circumcision did. While he expressed joy over the fact that his new nation safely crossed the Red Sea, he grieved for his old nation that perished beneath the waves.

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The Talmud advises discretion when speaking with converts. But this is good advice, regardless of whom we are speaking to.

I have discovered, for example, that when speaking to Holocaust survivors about ANYTHING, the pain of their past is barely beneath the surface. You can wish them a good Shabbos, only to see their eyes well with tears as they recall what Shabbos was like in the “old country.”

The example of Jethro’s pain, as well as the one I just cited, illustrate situations that are beyond our control. But sometimes the problem can be avoided.

We are often insensitive in the language we select. I once observed a fellow referring to a particular idea as being “retarded.” Imagine his shock when I later reminded him that the person he was speaking to had a child with Down Syndrome!

A great rabbi I know once contrasted himself with Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the “Alter” (“Elder”) of Slobodka. Rabbi Finkel, he said, was like a surgeon. He could analyze a student and determine exactly what his character weaknesses were. Rabbi Finkel would sometimes reprimand a student, telling him where he needed to improve. He could “cut that student open.”

But, Rabbi Finkel’s talents didn’t end there. It is not good enough for a doctor to cut a patient open. He also needs to be able to sew him back together. After tearing his student apart, Rabbi Finkel was then able build him up with praise and encouragement.

“There,” said the rabbi, “lies the difference between Rabbi Finkel and myself. He was insightful, and, if I may say so myself, so am I. I could analyze a person and determine where his shortcomings lie. I could cut you open. But I wouldn’t know how to put you back together.”

Words can be a scalpel with which to heal. They can also be a sword that is used to destroy. As they say in the medical field, first, do no harm!

Have a great Shabbos.

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