

In Case You Missed It the First Time

By Rabbi Joshua (repetitively known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In the beginning of this week's parsha, we are told that Yisro came out to the desert to visit with Moshe and join the Jewish people. He brought his daughter Zipporah, Moshe's wife, and their two children with him. The Torah, at this point, proceeds to tell us the reasons that Moshe gave for giving his children the names that he did : " 'Ä¶ the name of one of them was Gershom, for he said, "I was a stranger (ger) in a strange land.' And the name of the other was Eliezer, for ' the God of my father came to my aid, and He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh." (**Shemos 18 : 4-5**). Ramban points out that the Torah did not give mention the name of his son Eliezer in parshas Shemos, when we first encounter him, because at that time the angel was attacking him. Moshe did not have a chance to name him until he was safe from his enemies so the Torah waited until this point, when Yisro brought the family back to Moshe, to mention his name and the reason Moshe chose. However, we need to understand why the Torah repeats the reason for Moshe naming his first son Gershom, since the reason was already given in parshas Shemos, when his birth is mentioned. It is not likely that the Torah assumes that we didn't notice it the first time. Perhaps, though, it is merely a question of symmetry. Since the Torah needs to mention the reason Moshe gave for Eliezer's name, it also mentions the reason he gave for naming Gershom, even though it was already mentioned in parshas Shemos. However, I believe that there is a more fundamental reason for repeating the reason for Gershom's name, that relates to the events recorded in our parsha.

The Torah tells us that Yisro heard and then he came to see Moshe. What did he hear? There are many opinions in then midrash, but Rashi mentions the splitting of the sea and the battle with Amalek. These miracles motivated Yisro to come and join the Jewish people. Actually, the same events could very easily have had the opposite effect since the enemies of the Jews were defeated in each instance, and we know that the nations were in fear of the Jews after the splitting of the sea and avoided any contact. Amalek ignored the miracle and set out to destroy the nation, but to no avail. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra writes that Yisro's visit to Moshe and the Jewish people is mentioned immediately after the battle of Amalek in order to contrast Yisro's reaction to the splitting of the sea to that of Amalek. They both heard of the same event, yet reacted in totally opposite ways. The Torah is thus praising Yisro for being moved by God's miracles to join the nation that was the direct beneficiary of them.

The rescue of the Jewish nation, however, had another side to it - the downfall of its enemies. The Torah tells us that after Moshe told Yisro of all that God had done for His people, Yisro rejoiced. The word used for 'rejoiced' is ' vayichad,' which, as rashi points out, comes for the word 'chad,' or sharp. Rashi explains that despite the fact that Yisro was happy that the Jewish nation was saved, his flesh became sharp like gooseflesh when he heard that the Egyptians had suffered so much. Rashi continues that the rabbis derive from here that one should not denigrate a non - Jew in the presence of a convert up to ten generations after the conversion. Rabbi Moshe Chaifetz, in his commentary Meleches Machsheves, points out that, at this point, Yisro is still identified by his original name, although he is no longer called 'kohein Midian,' a priest of Midian. Further on he is referred to simply as

'chosein Moshe,' Moshe's father-in-law. The more he became part of the Jewish nation, he explains, the more he left behind his former identity. However when Moshe told him about the miracles that occurred during the redemption, Yisro still identified with the suffering of the Egyptians, as we have seen from the midrash cited by Rashi.

In this context, of Yisro's sensitivity to the suffering and defeat of non - Jews, we can understand why the reason for Moshe giving Gershom his name is repeated here. Yisro knew that Moshe retained his experience as a ger, a stranger, in a strange land, and perpetuated that memory in the name of his first son. Thus even though the name of Moshe's second son memorialized his being saved from Pharaoh, he still remembered what it is like to be a stranger, and therefore he understood the feelings of someone who wished to convert. The Torah teaches us that sensitivity as well by repeatedly admonishing us to act properly toward the stranger. For example, in parshas Kedoshim, in speaking of the ger, the Torah says, "and you shall love him like yourself, for you have been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Vayikra 19 : 34). Rashi there cites the Talmud which explains that one should not disparage someone else with regard to a trait that he has within himself. The Jews were strangers in Egypt, and therefore should have a sensitivity to the feelings of others who have joined their nation. It was Yisro's knowledge that Moshe himself had this sensitivity that helped him adjust to his new status as a member of the Jewish nation.

Please address all correspondence to the author (Rabbi Hoffman) at the following address - JoshHoff @ AOL .com.

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