



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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The Seeker

“This is the most shocking and astounding phrase in the entire Torah!” These were the words uttered, in Hebrew, by the aging and ailing rabbi who was visiting Baltimore for medical treatment, where I lived long ago. The rabbi was from Israel, where he was the revered and popular dean of a rather famous yeshiva. The treatment he needed was unavailable in Israel at the time, so he journeyed to the community where I was serving as a young pulpit rabbi.

I had long ago developed the habit of taking advantage of the opportunity to meet visitors of this sort. He was too frail to give a formal lecture, but he found it invigorating to sit with three or four of us and engage in conversation about various religious subjects, his favorite one being the weekly Torah portion. I felt especially privileged to be a part of that small group.

The Torah portion that week was *Parshat Yitro* (*Exodus* 18:1-20:23), which we ourselves will read in the synagogue this Shabbat.

Before identifying the shocking phrase which he wished to discuss, he asked us to participate in the following thought experiment:

“Imagine that you are asked to write a brief biographical sketch of some saintly rabbinic figure, such as Rabbi Yisrael Meyer HaKohen, known as the Chofetz Chaim, and you happened to know that

this man’s father-in-law was some rogue who had a disreputable past. Would you share the nature of the father-in-law’s past in a biography for all to see? Would it not be embarrassing for both the Chofetz Chaim and his father-in-law to publicize the latter’s past misdeeds, especially if he had long repented of them?”

He then launched into a very eloquent and forceful discourse about the ethical prohibitions against publicly disclosing a person’s past, or even reminding him of it in private. To bolster his argument, he quoted the following passage from Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*: “It is a serious sin to say to a penitent, ‘Remember what you once did,’ or even to mention those past actions in his presence, thus embarrassing him... We are admonished by the Torah not to abuse others verbally...” (Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:8)

He then drew our attention to the opening verse in this week’s Torah portion: “And Yitro the High Priest of Midian and the father-in-law of Moses, heard about all that the Almighty had done for Moses and Israel his nation...” (*Exodus* 18:1)

“In the same breath,” he exclaimed, “he is referred to as a pagan priest and as the father-in-law of Moses! What a combination of titles! Yes, he was an idolater and the *zaide* of Moses’ children. This is as unlikely as the witch doctor of some primitive tribe who is also the very close personal advisor of the saintly Chofetz Chaim; or, the Archbishop of Canterbury as the mentor of some

Chassidic sage!! Are not those juxtapositions jarring, astonishing, irreconcilable?"

Now that you have some sense of how graphic and dramatic this honored guest to our community could be, I will identify him by name. His name was Rabbi Simcha Zissel Broida, and he was the dean of the Chevron Yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Broida went on to offer a suggestion as to why Yitro is introduced to us again in this week's Torah portion in terms of his old title, High Priest of Midian. After all, at this point in time he had renounced his idolatrous past, and indeed, according to rabbinic tradition, was about to convert to Judaism.

"You see," taught Rabbi Broida, "our tradition respects the seeker, the person who searches for the truth and never tires of that search, no matter how many blind alleys he encounters and no matter how much frustration he experiences. Yitro is described as an individual who worshiped every idol in the world in search of the truth. As he became disappointed with each faith that he explored and with each religion that he practiced, he rejected that path and renewed his search. He retains the title High Priest of Midian because that title represents the heights he could achieve in the religious hierarchy within which he sought truth. That title is symbolic of the degree to which Yitro was a seeker of truth."

The old man at this point began to show signs of fatigue, and we begged him to stop his discourse and rest. But he told us that he refused to rest until he was convinced that we had learned the lesson he was trying to teach. "That lesson," he whispered hoarsely, "is best conveyed in the words of Talmud in Tractate *Gittin* 43a: 'No man truly achieves Torah knowledge without first experiencing

error.' " When a person's errors in life culminate in his finally making proper choices and correct decisions, then those errors are to be publicized and respected, because they are indicators of the degree to which that person was a seeker.

As far as I can recall, Rabbi Broida did not share with us on that occasion the following *gematria*. As you may know, every Hebrew word has a numeric equivalent, also known as a *gematria*, and often very diverse terms have identical numerical equivalents, suggesting otherwise unpredictable connections. The proper name "Yitro" has the numeric equivalent of 416. Two contradictory Hebrew terms have the exact same numeric equivalent. Those terms are "he was an idolatrous priest (*komer haya lavodah zara*)" and "The Torah (*HaTorah*)", indicating that this one individual combined within himself two diametrically opposed tendencies. One of those tendencies, *HaTorah*, prevailed, but only because of the lessons learned from his experiences with idolatry. For those of you who are intrigued by *gematria*, I suggest you consult the commentary of *Ba'al HaTurim* to corroborate this one.

Every year since I was privileged to first learn Rabbi Broida's lesson, I look forward to the opening verse of the Torah portion which we will all have the opportunity to read this week. Not only must we learn from our mistakes, but it is only by virtue of making those mistakes that we ultimately learn. That is a powerful and practical lesson indeed. ■

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