



PROBING THE PROPHETS

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“Lo BaShamayim He”

Our parasha this week is truly the climax of the Yetziat Mitzrayim story and of the entire Sefer Shmot. From Hashem's initial demand of Par'oh to release B'nai Yisrael until Moshe Rabbeinu's final insistence that the king free the people, there was repetition of the purpose of that liberation, i.e., to allow the Israelites to worship Hashem. Indeed, the fact that our holiday of freedom, Pesach, is connected to the celebration of Matan Torah of Shavuot through sefirat ha'omer, has been explained as being a lesson for us to know that the ultimate goal of the exodus was not freedom per se but freedom to be able to worship G-d as He desires. Hashem's revelation at Har Sinai that we read in the parasha, His pronouncement of the Aseret Hadibrot, the basis of our divinely commanded legal system, is, therefore, the culmination of the exodus. The rest of the entire Torah can be regarded simply as an expansion and clarification of that system.

But it is the first episodes in the parasha that are puzzling. The precise timing of the arrival

of Yitro and his advice in establishing a judicial system is a matter of disagreement between our Rabbis in the Talmud (Zevachim 116a). One view contends that the story takes place AFTER the Dibrot were given, for only then was there a need for judges to clarify ritual law to the people and adjudicate conflicts according to the Torah's legal standards. The other view however, argues that there is no reason to “cut and paste” the Yitro story for it did take place exactly as the Torah situated it- BEFORE Matan Torah. Moshe's father-in-law, they argue, joined B'nai Yisra'el having heard of the miracles wrought for them by Hashem, including the victory over Amalek, which immediately precedes the story of his arrival. But this view fails to resolve the question of what laws would they teach, what cases could they adjudicate, if the commandments were not yet given?

I would like to suggest an approach that would resolve this problem and would give us insight into the connection of this parasha to this week's haftarah.

The story of Yitro indeed took place before Matan Torah, for there was a need to form a judicial system even before the laws would be given. A legal system whose laws would not be understood or could not be enforced is no system at all. Even when given by G-d Himself, these laws would remain only in heaven and never become a practical system for humankind. Indeed, this very thought is expressed by

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Moshe at the end of his life: “Lo Bashamayim He” [D’varim 24:12] -the laws of the Torah are not to remain in heaven. The judicial system as explained by Yitro would be made up of men who would judge the people, teach the laws and enforce them. There would be a partnership of sorts: Hashem as the law-giver and Shofetim as those who would bring the laws down to earth and make them practical for mankind.

The haftarah this week tells of Hashem’s first revelation to Yishayahu through a vision of Hashem’s heavenly retinue and His throne, a vision that ties the haftarah to the vision seen by Bnai Yisrael at Har Sinai of which we read in the parasha. But the focus of the reading is the mission upon which the navi was sent, that is, to warn the nation of the consequences of their actions if they refuse to repent. As the selection details the corruption and sinfulness of the people, we may feel that it is not a fitting selection for a parasha that is positive and uplifting. But I submit that Yishayahu’s first vision of the heavenly throne and its glory was shown to him to underscore his prophetic mission. Yes, Hashem’s glory was in heaven, where no human being could tread. But the holiness of Hashem could not remain in heaven-as his laws could not. There was a need for an individual to inspire G-d’s sanctity and communicate His expectations to the nation on earth. This was the mission of the navi, Yishayahu. In effect, the prophet was to do what Yitro did: bring heaven down to earth, or, perhaps more correctly, to bring earth dwellers up to heavenly standards.

This has always been the mission of the holy prophets and the Holy Nation. We are charged with a mission to see that Hashem, His laws and His lessons, will never be left in heaven. ■

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