

"THE THRILL OF A LIFETIME"

Our Sidra this morning tells us of the reunion of Moses with his father-in-law, Jethro, and with his wife Tziporah and his children who had remained behind in Midian while Moses was experiencing the adventure of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. After Moses tells Jethro of all that had happened to him and his people, we read that va-yihad Yitro, Jethro rejoiced for all the goodness which the Lord had done to Israel. Now, the word va-yihad means more than "rejoice." I would translate that, "and Jethro was thrilled." Both words, va-yihad and "thrilled," mean joy to the point where you feel your skin being pierced with sharp pleasure. The Hebrew va-yihad comes from the word had, to feel sharp sensation, and the word "thrill" comes from the Middle English "thrillen," which also means to be pierced or "drilled" with joy. So that Jethro experienced great, almost ecstatic joy.

Why was he so happy? What was so thrilling about his experience? A reading of Rashi leaves us with the feeling that Jethro's joy was not unqualified. A non-Jew himself, he could not gloat over Pharaoh's downfall. ^{Why, then, va-yihad?} I believe that we may find the answer to this question by a psychological analysis, which yields morally instructive results. In order to appreciate it, we must pick up, as it were, stray hints that the Torah leaves for us in order to build from them a perspective on the attitudes and lives of the protagonists in this great story.

In the beginning,

~~After~~ ^{After} Moses takes his family from Midian to Egypt, a trip that Jethro ^{does} ~~did~~ not find to his liking (see Abarbanel on Ex. 4:18), ^{Later,} ~~Jethro finds that~~ Moses ~~has~~ ^{has} sent his wife Tziporah and his two children back to Midian, to stay with his father-in-law Jethro while he, Moses, continues with his work. We, who read the Bible, know the real reason for this separation. Moses was now involved in perhaps the greatest single enterprise in all of history. He was the father of all prophets of all the ages, and as such experienced constant and uninterrupted

gilui Shekhinah (revelation). In order to be at all times prepared for the revelation of G-d, he could not live in the normal manner of most human beings. His mind and heart and soul had to be free from all private entanglements. He was the public figure par excellence, and therefore, in order to do justice ^{both} to his mission and to his wife and children, he was forced to send them back to his father-in-law Jethro for the duration of this great historical operation of the Exodus from Egypt.

But Jethro did not know this. One must put oneself in Jethro's position and imagine how he felt. Here was this young man Moses, who had come fleeing from the Egyptian police and had found a home with Jethro, the High Priest of Midian. Jethro gave the young fugitive a home, gave him his daughter for a wife, put him into business tending his sheep. And then young Moses goes off to Egypt, for he has an itching ambition to succeed. And now that he has succeeded, he seems to have shirked all his duties, and abandoned all his obligations. How bitter must have been the heart of old Jethro. Thus, does our Sidra open: va-yishma Yitro, "now Jethro, the Priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard of all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt." Moses has reached the climax of his ambition. Yet his family has not heard a word from him. He has forgotten that he left a wife and two little children ^{behind} ~~with me~~. And Jethro thinks to himself: this Moses has ~~probably~~ probably developed the psychology of a conqueror. He probably thinks he has outgrown me, my daughter, and his children. Now that he has beaten Pharaoh, he has no doubt adopted the attitude of Pharaoh, who was able to say with such bloated arrogance, li yeori v'ani asitini, the Nile is mine, and I am a self-made man -- no one can tell my ^{yth} ~~anything~~. Perhaps Jethro attributed to Moses the kind of arrogance that comes ^{naturally} to conquerors and that we know existed later in the Roman Empire, when the Romans' most solemn mystery was the Festival of Triumph, with its manic excitement, its blood-thirstiness, its corruption.

No wonder the Torah tells us, just before the reunion, that when Jethro brought along Tziporah and the two children, ^{that} ~~and~~ the children's names were Eliezer and

Gershon. The Torah explains why Moses gave them these names. The older one was called Gershon, because ki ger hayiti be'ereetz nakhriah - I was a stranger in a foreign land. The younger one he called Eliezer because Elohei avi be'ezri, the G-d of my father helped me. Why this information at this late date? It is an insight into Jethro's feelings, a clue to his innermost thoughts. Jethro remembers that Moses was once a humble, human personality, who tasted the bitterness of loneliness, of being an unknown and unwanted alien. He once knew that he has not only a G-d, but a father. Now the same individual, thinks Jethro to himself, is sitting on top of the world - no longer remembering that he himself was a "Gershon", an alien, and probably forgetting both father and father-in-law.

And so, the old man Jethro, broken in spirit and heavy in heart, takes his hat in hand and proceeds to the confrontation with proud, Ungrateful, successful Moses. Jethro is ready to accept humiliation, to crawl before his triumphant and haughty son-in-law and plead with him to take back his wife and children. This is the pathetic message that Jethro sends to Moses: ani hotenkha yitro ba elekha, ve'ishtekha u-shnei vaneha imah, "Moses, I, your old father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, and I am bringing along your wife and your two young children." Remember us, Moses, voices out of your past? We are here again, pleading with your Excellency to take us back.

But then - a remarkable thing happens. When Moses receives the message, he surprisingly does not act like a triumphant, supercilious, egomaniac conqueror. Rather, he runs out towards Jethro, bows low before him, kisses him, greets him, and brings him into his own tent. And there, he tells him the story of all that had happened since they last met: va-yesaper Mosheh le'hotno et kol asher asah ha-Shem le'faroh u-lemitzrayim. Moses relates to his father-in-law all that G-d had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt. How shocked Jethro must have been - Moses does not gloat over what he had done to Pharaoh as a result of his superior mind and military skill and shrewdness and wisdom. He tells him, rather, what G-d had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians: al odot Yisrael, "for the sake of Israel!"

Moses does not say, G-d has done this because of me, but because of -- Israel.

What a jolt this must have given to Jethro's preconceptions. For when he came, it was because va-yishma Yitro, Jethro heard all that God had done le'Mosheh v-le'yisrael, for Moses and Israel. The reports that had come to him were not only concerning Israel, but primarily concerning the great successes and triumphs of their leader Moses. And now that Moses himself tells the story - there is no mention of Moses's name! It is only al odot Yisrael, for the sake of Israel! (see Malbim ad. loc.)

And so Jethro realized: how terribly wrong I was, how dreadfully mistaken - this man is not only not arrogant, but he is a genuine human being, a profound anav; not only is he not coldly sub-human, but he has such marvelous qualities they are almost superhuman! This is a man who possesses greatness, warmth, a golden character. How lucky I am to be his father-in-law. And Jethro was so overcome with emotion, so deliriously happy at discovering his mistake, that va-yihad Yitro, Jethro was thrilled - goose pimples begin to form on his flesh and a shiver runs down his spine because he now finds himself face to face with the greatest individual he had ever met in all his life. This is a thrill - the thrill of a lifetime. It is the high point of his, Jethro's life - the discovery that there was such superb greatness in a man who was close to him and in whom he had never detected it, to such an extent.

What a remarkable character this Moses was. He had a total lack of self-consciousness. He did not even act "modestly," telling Jethro, "it wasn't really my doing." He had a fantastic ability to forget himself. Only one possessed of this kind of character, this utter lack of self-consciousness, could by himself write out the words spoken by the Lord, 've'ha-ish Mosheh anav me'od, "the man Moses was very meek," and not even be aware of the fact that these words are describing him. For anivut, ^m meekness, the quality of Moses, is much greater and more difficult to achieve than shiflut, lowliness or humility. The shafel may be virtuous in that he is always painfully aware of his inadequacies and limitations - but he is still concerned with himself, whether positively or

negatively. Whereas the anav, the man who is un-self-conscious, is not even aware of a self that is inferior. His ego has been subdued to the point of forgetfulness. What a thrilling experience to meet an individual of this kind!

If we now turn to the Sidra we have a new understanding of the first words Jethro uttered after his thrilling experience. Jethro said, barukh ha-Shem asher hitzil etkhem mi-yad Paroh u-miyad Mitzrayim, "blessed is the Lord who has saved you from the hand of Pharoah and from the hand of Egypt," asher hitzil et ha-am mi-tahat yad mitzrayim, and who has saved the people from under the hand of Egypt. Why the redundance, the repetitiveness? ~~are~~ There are two things Jethro thanks God for. The last half of this verse refers to the political and military deliverance of the people of Israel, ^{their physical redemption!} "Who has saved the people from the hand of Egypt." ~~That~~ But the first half refers to a yet greater miracle: blessed the Lord who has saved you mi-yad Paroh u-miyad Mitzrayim, from the hand of Pharoah and the hand of Egypt - who has delivered the people of Israel from the plague of leaders like Pharoah, from the tragedy and misfortune of being led by people who are obsessed with their own importance, who become intoxicated with their own egos and own power, and who rapidly degenerate in character and personality to the point where they become inconsiderate, ungrateful, and insensitive megalomaniacs. The Jews were saved not only from the Egyptians; they were also spared the excruciating burden of a Pharoah-type leader.

This, then, is the thrill of a lifetime. Not everyone, of course, can attain such sustained heights of character as Moses did. Assuredly not. But the fact remains, that some of it is not only desirable but indispensable for civilized living. We cannot be human unless we experience moments of self-forgetfulness, of utter selflessness and even altruism. When we meet it, unexpectedly, in other people - we too experience the va-yihad, the thrill. Therefore we must try to develop such traits in ourselves. If a man is always out for himself, he becomes coarse to the point of inner vulgarity. ~~So that~~

We must make special effort to develop, at least on special occasions, the quality of Moses's lack of self-consciousness.

How is that done? How can such heights be attained, even temporarily?

The best way to forget yourself is to keep someone else in mind.

That means to do things for others in a completely selfless manner. In Hebrew we call this gemillat hasadim, the doing of favors. I do not mean merely the objective act of hessed, of generosity. Rather, I refer to gemillat hessed, the subjective act of losing yourself in an act of helpfulness for someone else. ^{This does} ~~It~~ not mean that it is wrong to give charity for personal popularity and wide acclaim -- if not for these factors, Jewish philanthropy in America would probably collapse. But there ought to be special moments when we ignore our egos and immerse ourselves only in the act of hessed. Perhaps this is the real meaning of gemillat hessed -- the word gemillat coming from the same root as the word va-yigamel, "and he was weaned." The selfless act of kindness is one that is weaned from ubiquitous egotism, it is a mature act of hessed, the kind given whole-heartedly, without expectation or desire for thanks or a favor in return.

Try that sometimes. Secretly make somebody happy - without intruding with your own personality. Perhaps do it anonymously. Make it possible for someone to experience that change of view that Jethro did, help him grow from a feeling of frustration, bitterness, and disappointment in life, ^{having lost his faith in his fellow men,} to the point where he will be thrilled by your helpfulness without egotism. No greater joy exists than that.

This, then, was the thrill of Jethro: to learn that it is possible for a man who has every excuse for being arrogant, and yet find that he is incredibly meek and compassionate.

With man as with G-d, Kol makom she'ata motzei anvatanuto ata motzei gedulato - wherever you find his meekness, you find his greatness. The greatness of man consists in transcending his own petty involvements with his self. This is

true greatness. For it is a paradox, yet true: the more you think of yourself, the less there is to think of; the more you forget yourself, the more you will find the real and enduring value of your self.

For the way to find yourself, is first to lose yourself in something worthy. And it is by losing yourself in a noble mission, in loyalty to Israel, in prayer to G-d, in extending mature kindness to your fellow men -- that each of us can experience the thrill of a lifetime.