

THE DANGER OF HARBORING DOUBT

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard..." (Shemot 18:1).

Here Rashi states, "What news did he hear that he came? The splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the war with Amalek."

Even at that point, when Jethro took the decision to leave his land and venture into the desert to cleave to the people of G-d, the Torah still describes him as "the priest of Midian." This requires an explanation, for it is particularly difficult to understand given the fact that already long beforehand, Jethro had abandoned his faith and left his priesthood aside, as the Midrash states: "Jethro was initially an idolatrous priest. Yet when he saw that there was no truth to it, he despised it and thought of repenting even before Moshe arrived. He summoned his townsmen and said: 'I have ministered to you until now, but now I have become old. Choose another priest.' He returned all the emblems of his priesthood to them, at which point they excommunicated him" (Shemot Rabba 1:32).

We also need to understand what there was in the fact that the sea split, as well as in the war with Amalek, that led Jethro to draw closer to G-d and cleave to the people of Israel, as opposed to all the other miracles that took place, foremost being the ten plagues and various other wonders that occurred in the land of Egypt. Jethro had surely heard of these, as the Torah testifies: "[Jethro] heard...that Hashem had brought Israel out of Egypt" (Shemot 18:1). The main reason for our surprise concerns the war with Amalek and its decisive role in Jethro's decision to venture into the desert, since it was a war like any other, with one side winning and the other losing. It's clear that the great miracles of Egypt were much more impressive than the military victory of the Jewish people in their war with Amalek, especially since they did not emerge from it unscathed. Israel's victory was not complete, for Amalek struck the weak among them. That being the case, why did Jethro believe that this war demonstrated the greatness of Israel more than their stunning triumph over Pharaoh and his servants in Egypt?

Wavering

To explain all this, we may say that Jethro had actually recognized the falsehood of idolatry much earlier. The Sages say that he was familiar with all forms of idol worship in the world (see Rashi on Shemot 18:11), but eventually he renounced both his idolatrous faith and its priesthood. Nevertheless, Jethro did not yet recognize the truth, meaning that Hashem is G-d and that man should serve Him. Jethro therefore remained in his land until this time, not having joined his son-in-law Moshe. Jethro wavered between two things, for he already recognized falsehood and had distanced himself from it. However his heart wavered because he was not yet certain of where the truth lay.

He was familiar with the religion of his son-in-law, but had not yet joined it because he was uncertain of its truthfulness.

This is why the Torah still describes him as "the priest of Midian," for he was not yet completely detached from his entourage and had remained in his own land. Although he had already distanced himself from idolatry, it was still possible for him to return, in which case he would have served as "the priest of Midian" with even greater authority. This demonstrates the influence of one's entourage and an evil society, which are liable to attract even tzaddikim who are on the right path. However the Torah does not detract in any way from Jethro's spiritual awakening, which pushed him into venturing into the desert to seek the truth. The Torah also gives him the dignified title, "the father-in-law of Moshe," like a disciple who cleaves to his teacher in order to learn wisdom and understanding from him. Nevertheless, since Jethro seemed to waver, believing yet not really believing, the two expressions are used together: "the priest of Midian" and "the father-in-law of Moshe." Even after Jethro's arrival in the desert, he wavered and doubted once again, to the point that Moshe was forced to convince him of the truth of Hashem's kingdom and the holy Torah, as the Midrash states on the verse, "Moshe told his father-in-law" (Shemot 18:8): "In order to draw his heart to bring him closer to Torah" (Yalkut Shimoni). It was only afterwards the Jethro arose and said, "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all gods" (Shemot 18:11). This "knowing" marks the beginning of moral laws and cleaving to them. Faith alone was now implanted in Jethro, for doubt had left his heart, he recognized the greatness of Hashem and His kingdom, and from now on the Torah describes him uniquely as "the father-in-law of Moshe," as it is written: "Jethro, the father-in-law of Moshe, took a burnt-offering" (v.12). At that point Jethro rid himself of the descriptive "the priest of Midian," and clearly decided to join Hashem's people.

According to what we have said, we can fully explain why Jethro was amazed primarily by Israel's passage through the Sea of Reeds and their war with Amalek, these being the two things which finally made him decide to venture into the desert and cleave to the Jewish people. Indeed, we have already explained that although Jethro had heard about and seen Hashem's hand in Egypt, he still had doubts as to where the truth lay. Yet when the sea split, the light of truth radiated outwards in a brilliant way, as the Sages have said: "A maidservant at the sea saw what the prophet Ezekiel did not see, and one could point with a finger and say, 'This is my G-d, and I will glorify Him.'" When the sea split, all doubts disappeared. All veils were torn and the kingdom of Hashem revealed itself before the eyes of everyone. By the power of this revelation, the Jewish people reached for the first time the level, "They believed in Hashem and in Moshe His servant" (Shemot 14:31), a level of faith that was complete and tangible. This revelation reached all the way to Midian,



Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO

Under the Direction of
**Rabbi David Hanania
Pinto Shlita**

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forcing Jethro to leave his doubts behind. It pushed him into venturing into the desert to verify the truth, and to experience it from up close.

Amalek – Doubt Personified

The war with Amalek also contributed to tilting the balance between belief and doubt in Jethro's mind. We know that Amalek attacked the Children of Israel in order to infuse doubt into them, so as to shake the truths which they held. In fact Amalek only attacked the Children of Israel when doubt crept into their heart and they asked: "Is Hashem among us or not" (Shemot 17:7). Hence Amalek attacked the weak among them, meaning the sinners

whom the Cloud of Glory had rejected, only those into whom doubt could weave its way and diminish their faith. In fact the Sages have said that the term Amalek has the same numerical value as safek ("doubt"). This is the root of his name, his main characteristic and his essence. Thus Jethro saw just how dangerous doubt really is, for the Jewish people were safe from all the kings of the earth, who trembled and were powerless before them. Yet when Amalek arose, he was able by the power of doubt to cool the "boiling bath." That is, Amalek was able to diminish the fear which the nations had of Israel, and to make victims of its stragglers. Thus Jethro understood the power of doubt and its dangers, and he decided to eliminate it on his own.

The Words of the Sages

Prudence in Financial Matters

The gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Dushnitzer Zatzal, who served as the mashgiach of the Lomza yeshiva, was extremely scrupulous in financial matters so as to avoid every possible error, even on as much as a penny. The yeshiva took responsibility for the electrical costs of lighting his home (which was nothing but a crude shack whose floor was made of sand, and which was devoid of furniture). He used electricity in a very sparing way. When he sat down for a meal at night, he would use a lantern and switch off all the electric lights, for he said: "I have enough light to eat." During his final years, he did the same even when he stayed up late to learn, saying: "At an advanced age, I have reason to fear that sleep will overtake me and I'll fall asleep while learning. In that case, I will have wasted the electricity this is paid by the yeshiva!"

The wife of Rabbi Eliyahu used to sell chickens. She owned a stall at the marketplace, and one day the Rav noticed that there was a certain cat that lingered by the chicken stall, eating whatever scraps it could find. With the passing of his wife, Rav Eliyahu worried that he had halachically inherited the cat, in which case he was responsible for all the damages it caused. He therefore summoned three of his students, took the cat in his hands, and declared it hefker (an act by which one renounces ownership of an object and leaves it to others), and then he sent it on its way.

He once entrusted his Shabbat coat to a tailor for some repairs. On Friday, he went to pick up the coat and paid the tailor. Upon returning home, he noticed that the tailor had sewn an additional button on his coat, something that he had not requested. Given that he had not paid for this work, he didn't use the coat on Shabbat for fear that he would be breaking the prohibition against theft.

One day, between Mincha and Arvit, he gave an electrician a bedside lamp for a minor repair. The electrician normally prayed at the yeshiva, and when he arrived on that night for Arvit, he brought the repaired lamp with him, having decided not to charge for such a minor repair. Rabbi Eliyahu had prolonged his prayers that night, and so the electrician did not wait for him. Instead he went to the Rav's home, which was near the yeshiva, and left the lamp there.

Being among those who rise before dawn, the electrician went to learn at the yeshiva during the third watch of the night. To his great surprise, he found Rabbi Eliyahu standing there, waiting for him with his wallet in hand. "Why the rush?" he asked in astonishment. Rabbi Eliyahu calmly replied, "Is the prohibition, 'The wages of a worker shall not remain with you overnight' [Vayikra 19:13] small in your eyes?"

Another story goes as follows: One Shabbat, Rabbi Eliyahu went to a reception organized by a Jew at his home, which was attended by many guests. When the time came to leave, Rabbi Eliyahu addressed the lady of the house, gave her a generous blessing, and added in a friendly way: "I may have spilled a little wine on the tablecloth as I made Kiddush. Please forgive me. Others may have made the same mistake. Allow me to apologize for them as well." When the woman replied, "That's alright. It's nothing," his eyes sparkled with joy and cheerfulness.

One last story illustrates this great virtue of Rav Eliyahu: A resident of Petah Tikva, a former student of the Lomza yeshiva, came to ask the Rav for a blessing before leaving for Poland. Rav Eliyahu asked if he was going to be passing by the city of Lomza during his visit. When he said that he was, the Rav asked him to kindly verify something for him in regards to a widow who worked in a bookshop. A few years earlier, the Rav had purchased a certain book from her, but he was still bothered by doubts as to its cost: He was afraid that he had not paid enough for it, since it seemed very valuable to him and it didn't seem probable that its price was so low. If a mistake had occurred, the Rav wanted this former student to express his regret and pay the price difference, for which the Rav would reimburse him upon his return. When the former student reached Lomza, he went to see the widow and asked her about the book in question. She then explained, "What does Rabbi Eliyahu want from me? He's already sent several people to talk to me about this subject. They all told the tzaddik that he paid the correct price for this book and that he doesn't owe me a cent!"

Who Knows What the Future Holds?

The scrupulously honest attitude of Rabbi Yehuda Tsadka Zatzal, the director of the Porat Yosef yeshiva, in regards to money is also remarkable. Very large sums of money passed through his hands, donations and dedications meant for tzedakah. However he never personally benefited from them, not even for a speck of dust's worth. In his pocket, he always carried a booklet with two columns: "Debits" and "Credits." In this booklet he wrote every amount that he received in order to use it judiciously, as best he saw fit. The same applied to each sum of money that he spent and shared among the needy, or for other causes.

Each time that he had to borrow money from someone – which in general was connected to religious matters – he was very meticulous in stipulating a prerequisite to his creditor: "You must remind me to pay this debt. If you don't remind me, then I am exempt." Yet in reality, he never forgot about a debt.

We should add that for numerous years, he was a "monthly subscriber" to the mikveh of the Satmar chassidim, which was located near his home. Contrary to other men, who paid for the costs of registering at the end of every month, he was very careful to pay the amount owed in advance, immediately at the start of the month. In fact he would say, "Who knows what the future holds? May G-d protect us! If I don't pay this debt at the beginning, who will pay it for me?"

Distance Yourself from Doubt

Because of his great concern for holy places, even when he attended a funeral and went to a nearby synagogue in order to wash his hands in the courtyard, he would take out a few coins from his pocket and put them into the synagogue donation box for the water that he used. (Otherwise, he said, there was a suspicion of theft.)

He would often say, "When someone has a doubt about a financial matter, he should never decide on it himself, G-d forbid, for a person always seeks his own benefit. Let him find a Rav and distance himself from doubt!"

One is Enough

It is written, “When they have an issue, one comes to me” (Shemot 18:16).

The verse begins in the plural (“When they have an issue”), and ends in the singular (“one comes to me”). The Malbim states that in the past in Israel, when someone had a doubt regarding an issue of money, it was as important to him as a question of kashrut for a pot of meat or other such prohibitions. It was therefore natural for him to go see a Rav, for such a doubt was connected to a fear of having transgressed the prohibition against theft. Hence there was no need for two litigants to come before Moshe, since both parties were afraid to the same degree of having taken money that belonged to the other, and they were both looking for the correct verdict. Therefore only one of them would go and present his arguments and those of the other party, without any trace of self-interest, and the other party completely trusted him.

Along the same lines, when someone caused another person financial loss, the one who suffered the loss did not need to bring the other to court, for he himself would go before a judge to ask how much the Torah obligated him to pay, and he would return and pay the wronged party. The latter completely trusted that the money he was repaying him was the amount stipulated, meaning that he did not owe him more.

This is what the verse is saying: “When they have an issue, one comes to me” – in the singular, since it was enough for just one of the parties to go.

Even If Hur Had Been Alive

It is written, “You will surely become worn out, you as well as this people” (Shemot 18:18).

Rashi explains: “You – this includes Aaron and Hur, and the 70 elders.” Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi objects to this, saying that Hur was no longer alive at that point, since he was killed during the sin of the golden calf. As Rashi himself says in commenting on the verse, “Aaron saw and built an altar” (Shemot 32:5): “He saw that when his nephew Hur reprimanded them, they killed him.”

The conversation between Jethro and Moshe took place after the breaking of the Ten Commandments. Therefore how can we say “this includes Aaron and Hur”?

In his book *Divrei David*, the Turei Zahav explains this in a straightforward way: “You will surely become worn out, you – this includes Aaron and Hur, for even if Hur had been alive at that point, he would have helped you along with Aaron and the 70 elders, and they too would have become worn out.”

G-d Will Be With You

It is written, “I shall advise you, and G-d will be with you” (Shemot 18:19).

“I advise you,” explains Rabbi Mikhal Malkovitz, “that in all which you do, you should put an effort for G-d to be with you. In other words, all your actions should bring you closer to G-d, and you should pray for His help and rely on His great kindness.”

Men of Valor

It is written, “And you shall discern from among the entire people, men of valor, fearing G-d” (Shemot 18:21).

Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (the author of *Noda B’Yehuda*) was surprised by this: Why did judges need to be men of valor? Were they going out to battle? They were only chosen to render Torah judgments!

The *Noda B’Yehuda* explains that it is disastrous for the people when their judges are so gentle and weak that they cannot confront the offenders which they must punish. Hence they need to be men of valor in order to

defeat their own sense of compassion when faced with various criminals, and to punish them appropriately so that people hear and fear.

Sneh

It is written, “They arrived at the desert of Sinai” (Shemot 19:1).

The desert is called “Sinai” because Mount Sinai is found within it. Mount Sinai was given this name because the image of a sneh (“bush”) appears on its stones. Even when these stones are broken into several pieces, we can see the image of a bush on each piece.

– Nahar Shalom by Rabbi Shalom HaCohen Zatzal

In the Light of the Parsha

G-d's Sanctuary Cannot be Built with a Suspicion of Theft

It is written, “It was on the next day that Moshe sat to judge the people” (Shemot 18:13).

Rashi explains: “It was the day following Yom Kippur. This we have learned in the Sifrei. What does ‘the next day’ refer to? The day following his descent from the mountain.”

Commenting on Parsha Vayakhel, the Kli Yakar states: “Moshe gathered the entire community of the Children of Israel...” In Parsha Yitro we read: “It was on the next day that Moshe sat to judge the people,” and there Rashi explains that it was the day after Yom Kippur.

We may explain this by saying that it is known that the purpose of this gathering was to transmit to them the mitzvot dealing with the Sanctuary and the offerings, as stated immediately afterwards. Moshe was afraid that one of them would offer to the Sanctuary something that did not belong to him, thinking that he had obtained it legally. However it was impossible to construct this sacred Sanctuary with money that stemmed from theft. The place of justice cannot originate from something unjust. Hence Moshe began by proclaiming: “When they have an issue, one comes to me” (Shemot 18:16) – for a verdict, in such a way that everything is in order among the people. Everyone will then know what rightfully belongs to him or does not belong to him, for I will have decided between them. Next, Moshe spoke to them in regards to voluntary offerings, saying: “Take from yourselves an offering for Hashem” (Shemot 35:5) – “from yourselves,” meaning “from what belongs to you,” not from what belongs to others. Otherwise the expression “from yourselves” becomes redundant.

We must point out that during the sin of the golden calf, it is written: “They got up to revel” (Shemot 32:6). Rashi explains that this includes immorality and murder, for Hur was murdered during this incident. We also note what Rashi states on the verse, “Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, reveling” (Bereshith 21:9): “This is a reference to idolatry, as it is said: ‘They got up to revel.’ Another explanation: A reference to illicit relations.... Another explanation: A reference to murder.” The Midrash sees an allusion to murder in the verse, “Like someone who wears himself out throwing firebrands, arrows, and lethal objects, so is a man who deceives his fellow and says, ‘I was only joking!’” (Mishlei 26:18-19). (Note: The Metzudot compares it to someone throwing firebrands that will be extinguished in midair. His efforts are not in vain, for he is practicing how to throw lethal arrows and murderous words. The same applies to a person who deceives others, and upon being discovered he replies: “I was only joking! I was going to tell you about it.” Know that this is not true, and watch out for him, for his intention is to deceive you as much as he can.) According to this, the fact that in the account of the golden calf it is stated: “They got up to revel,” teaches us that the Children of Israel also stole. This nicely explains what the Kli Yakar wrote, namely that Moshe was afraid that they possessed money which stemmed from theft.

The Eruv - Part I

This week, we will examine one of the 39 categories of work that are prohibited on Shabbat: “Transferring an object from one domain to another.” Shabbat is mentioned near the middle of the Ten Commandment, which is found in this week’s parsha: “The seventh day is Shabbat to Hashem your G-d. You shall not do any work – you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, your animal, and your convert within your gates” (Shemot 20:10). The mitzvah of the eruv is a decree of the Sages which allows one to carry in the public domain on Shabbat without fear of transporting something from one domain to another.

The Eruv as a Segula for Observing Shabbat

As a result of municipal elections that took place this year, tremendous pressure was placed on the Jerusalem Religious Council against one of the symbols that represents the fortification of Shabbat. We are speaking about the eruv, which has existed for a long time, and which encircles the city in order to transform it into a single domain for the needs of Shabbat. As a result, the city’s residents can carry outside and bring personal objects from one domain to another on Shabbat, in keeping with Jewish law.

A small group of residents, incited by people who were looking for trouble, saw the eruv’s very existence as an attack on their way of life, despite the fact that the eruv in no way intruded upon life in the city’s districts. As a result, they organized a provocative march against Orthodox Judaism and the residents of a district who had asked for permission to merit the special mitzvah of setting up an eruv in their neighborhood.

Following this march, we had a talk with Rabbi Avraham Moshe Katzenelbogen Shlita (the Rav of Neot Yerushalayim), who is responsible for the eruv of Jerusalem and its suburbs. We wanted to examine the state of mind among the residents in the area, and from his words it emerges that the majority of residents in fact had a favorable view of the city being surrounded by an eruv, even making sure to safeguard its integrity. In this regard, he told us the following story:

“After the great fire that broke out in 5753 among the forests of the Jerusalem hills, during which time thousands of trees burned near the entrance of Jerusalem as you approach from Moshav Shores, I received an urgent call from Moshav Shores asking me to come and reestablish their eruv after the fire.

“I went there, where at first I thought that avrechim, bnei Torah, or at least a group of religious or traditional people would be living. That would have explained why it was so important for them that the eruv should conform to Halachah. To my great astonishment, however, I did not find people who were close to religion. In that case, why their desire to have an eruv? To the surprise of all the residents, something truly astonishing had taken place. Every area that had been enclosed by the eruv in Moshav Shores was not touched by the great fire. It was not damaged at all by the flames, which had devoured entire homes like wisps of straw. The inhabitants of the region had clearly seen, like a segula and a protective barrier for them, that the existence of an eruv conforming to Halachah was something that safeguarded their community from the fire, which is why they had contacted me with such urgency.

“While I was there, I met a secular man who owned a workshop in the moshav. With great emotion, he recounted his own personal miracle: ‘I was a few kilometers away when I saw the fire advancing, quickly consuming homes in the moshav. Everything that the fire encountered, it destroyed in its fury. I had no doubt that all my possessions in the workshop would go up in flames, and that I would have nothing left to save. All my friends and surrounding neighbors could do nothing to help. All they could do was offer me words of consolation. As it happened, when the fire burned out a few

hours later, I ran back to see what remained of my workshop. It was there that I witnessed a spectacular sight, something I had never before seen: Some sort of protective wall had stood next to the posts upon which the eruv was strung. It had prevented the fire from coming within the eruv’s domain, and had dispersed it to the sides. Everything that I possessed within the eruv wasn’t damaged.’ ”

Rav Katzenelbogen Shlita continued his account: “I said to them, ‘You have a particularly beautiful eruv! It’s the best eruv you could have. Furthermore, there is a security check made several times a day to ensure that the fence is set up and closed. So what’s the problem? You were given a budget to rearrange and strengthen the eruv...so open a Torah study center here. The Torah protects and saves!’ ”

(Continued in Next Week’s Issue)

Massive “Joint Ownership”

“The eruv has been around since the time of King Solomon, who enacted it with the goal of allowing objects to be moved from the home to the courtyard and to the street, as we refer to it today,” Rav Katzenelbogen explains. As we have said, he is the head of the Jerusalem Religious Council that oversees the eruv of Jerusalem and its suburbs.

“In fact the Torah prohibits us on Shabbat from bringing objects from the ‘private domain’ to the ‘public domain,’ and from one domain to another, even if both are considered by Halachah as being a ‘private domain.’

“The eruv is actually a fence surrounding an area, one that we wish to define as a single, encircled domain. To it we join the eruv chatzerot by placing food for a meal that is available to all the residents of the city together.

“Today we surround the city with posts in the shape of a door, meaning posts between which a wire is strung so that it encircles the areas that we seek to define as a ‘single domain.’ This situation places all the residents in a kind of massive ‘joint ownership,’ so that it becomes permitted to bring objects from the home to the street, objects from one home to another, and to carry objects on the street like a carmelit.

“The eruv must be completely continuous, something that we call efes likuim, having zero gaps. A single gap, a solitary wire which has torn, renders the entire eruv invalid. Naturally, an immense eruv like the one surrounding Jerusalem means that we need contingency measures to avoid tremendous pitfalls for the residents of the city, which is why the Jerusalem Religious Council put a great effort into creating two or three contingency measures for the general eruv.”

Nevertheless, those who deal with this great mitzvah explain that there exists almost no eruv in the world whose kashrut is complete! There are always doubts and questions, with numerous approaches and diverse opinions among the laws dealing with the eruv, to the point that it is truly very difficult to create one that conforms to all existing opinions. The conclusion? “One who is strict and does not carry at all will bring a blessing upon himself.”

Guard Your Tongue

A Lack of Discretion

There are other things which are forbidden due to the “dust” of Rechilut, such as telling someone what so-and-so said about him, even if it wasn’t something negative, but rather something which most people avoid mentioning in the presence of the subject.

It is also appropriate not to reveal a secret that has been entrusted to you, even if revealing such a secret would not be Rechilut. This is because revealing secrets may cause the subject harm, and it demonstrates a lack of discretion, which will greatly irritate the subject.