

Parashah Fifty-Nine
Exodus 18:1-20:26; Isaiah 61:1-6; Luke 4:16-30

notes by Tim Hegg

Amalekites vs. Kenites

As is typical of Hebrew narrative, our Torah section this Shabbat, if read without thought, might appear to be out of order. 18:5 speaks of Jethro coming to the wilderness, at the mount of God, while 19:1 gives the indication that the camping at the mount of God came later. In fact, the order of the narrative is not strictly chronological, and this is instructive. The order is given to highlight the differences between Amalek, the eternal enemy of Israel, and the Kenites, who befriended God's chosen people (1 Sam 15:6). Jethro, you see, was a Kenite (Judges 4:11). Note the contrasts:

Chapter 17	Chapter 18
Amalek came & fought	Jethro came and brought peace
Chose men (for war)	Chose men to settle disputes
Moses sat on a rock	Moses sits to judge
Moses' hands heavy	Moses' responsibilities heavy
War from gen. to gen.	All people will go in peace

What is more, when Jethro comes, the elders along with Aaron come to offer sacrifices together and to eat a covenant meal.

What is the point? God extends His covenant blessings, as He promised, to those who bless Abraham's seed, but curses those who curse him. In other words, Moses, by arranging the events of the story in the order he does, emphasizes that the Abrahamic covenant is alive and well, being fulfilled because of God's faithfulness to His own word.

Furthermore, the fact that our *parashah* goes through the giving of the Ten Words (ch. 20) shows the desire of the ancient community of Israel to tie the giving of the Torah at Sinai with the Abrahamic promise. Rather than contrasting the two as has often been done by theologians, the biblical text goes to great lengths to show that the two covenants are actually parts of a single whole. To those who participate in Abraham's faith in God, the Torah is given as a light for one's path, a loving *halachah* by which life is to be lived. To those who curse God and His people, however, the Torah is a letter holding a guilty verdict and sentence of condemnation. Subtly, our Torah section brings this contrast before us in the juxtapositioning of the Amalekites and Kenites.

Ordered Leadership

The obvious message of the chapter revolves around the issue of leadership. Moses, in attempting to do God's bidding in leading the people, was actually doing a bad thing (18:17), for unwittingly he was depriving the people of entering into the *mitzvot* of serving. Leadership, however, could not be given out willy-nilly. It was on the basis of personal integrity and demonstrated wisdom that leaders were chosen. "Select ... able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain" Compare the list of qualifications for an overseer or deacon in Paul's epistle to Timothy (1 Tim 3). Leadership requires humility, spiritual strength, and personal integrity. And these qualities cannot be tested in a day, or a week, or a month. This is why leaders should come from within the community, not outside of it. The qualities necessary for leaders are seen in the way they personally live out what they believe and teach, and this can only be discerned in knowing them in the context of life.

It was this issue of what qualified leaders that brought about such a great change in the emerging Christian Church of the 2nd and 3rd Centuries. From a Hebrew perspective, leaders were known through their personal application of Torah. The Greek mindset was different, however. For the Greek society, the realm of ideas could be viewed as disconnected from actions. What one thought

or reasoned was not necessarily connected with one's life. One could "believe" something without this "belief" changing the way he or she lived. As the emerging Christian Church became more and more populated by Gentiles, this Platonic perspective became the norm for selecting leaders and teachers. Those who were educated in the Greek academies were naturally put forward as the leading teachers on the basis of their education. This meant that those with credentials were sought after, regardless of whether they were known within the community. The key issue was that the criteria for leaders had shifted from a demonstration of wisdom in life, to the amount of time one had studied in the academies.

This does not negate that much can be learned from teachers and preachers outside of the community. But one ought to be very careful about making significant decisions and changes in life based upon what an unknown leader says or teaches. One of the fundamental qualities of Jewish community is that one's teacher is part of one's life. This is what is meant by the saying in *Perkei Avot*:

Joshua ben Perachiah and Nittai the Arbelite received the tradition from them (Jose ben Joezer and Jose ben Jochanan). Joshua ben Perachiah said, Procure yourself a teacher, acquire unto yourself an associate, and judge all men in the scale of merit. (1.6).

The Giving of the Torah

Chapter 19 begins with a reference to the time: "In the third month (new moon)... on that very day." Nisan was the month of the exodus, Iyar the intervening month, and now Sivan had arrived, the third month. The Hebrew text begins with *בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי*, emphasizing that what comes now in the narrative is to be seen as significant, as highlighted by a new beginning. As Cassuto writes: "The words *on that day*, which parallel *On the third new moon*, re-emphasize that the Israelites came to this place at the commencement of a new period of time, as though to indicate that the event that is due to take place there was so important that no other happening could precede it in that interval of time. Had this event been second chronologically, it might have been regarded as of secondary importance."

We know that, as far as faith is concerned, a mixed multitude stood at the foot of Sinai. Some came with the faith of Abraham, a faith in the promised Messiah, while others clearly did not. Yet, when Moses announces the covenant words of Adonai, they all respond with "all that the Lord has spoken we will do." Always, until Messiah returns, there remains a mixture of belief and unbelief, of the righteous and the unrighteous, of those who believe in truth and those who confess with the mouth but lack genuine faith.

And so it was at Sinai, proven by the fact that God warned repeatedly that the people and priests not "break through" to see His glory, lest He "break through" to destroy them. Doesn't covenant result in fellowship? Why the harsh warnings to keep the covenant people separate from their covenant God? Because not all Israel is Israel—not all who have a physical standing in the community have a spiritual reality in faith. And God separates on the basis of His Messiah—He is the dividing mark, the touchstone of all righteousness—"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (Jn 3:36). Though the community was to purify itself in a ceremonial way (as indicated by abstaining from sexual relations), only the Lord sees the heart. As long as the people remained sinners, they must approach God through His chosen representative—no other way is possible.

The Fear of God

Why the awesome display at the giving of the Torah? 20:20 gives the answer: "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin." In our modern world of pluralism we have become convinced that fear is fundamentally bad. Yet the Torah teaches us that sometimes God's methods of revelation are chosen to incite fear—a fear that remains—a fear that offers the fruit of peace. Fearing God is

simply recognizing who I am in light of who He is, and recognizing this in the realm of what He has said, not what I feel or wish He had said. Fearing God means loving Him because of Who He is and what He has done.

It is not as though the fear of God is exactly equated with the common emotion of fear alone, as though the “fear of God” could equally be understood as “being afraid of God.” There is, of course, an element of “being afraid” in the whole concept of fearing God, but the fear of God exists in a different realm. While being afraid of someone causes one to distance one’s self from the object of fear, the fear of God does just the opposite. It draws one closer to God. Some theologians have therefore opted for the idea of “reverence” or “being filled with awe” to explain what the “fear of God” is.

But defining the “fear of God” as “reverence” or “being filled with awe” is not entirely sufficient. One can be in awe of a mountain range, or have great reverence for a president or king. Yet in both of these examples there results no necessary relationship. The “fear of God” exists within the confines of a covenant relationship—one in which the greater the fear, the closer the relationship. Rather than separating, the fear of God draws the worshipper closer to Him. Yet in this drawing closer, the realization of His greatness increases, and one’s respect and love grows proportionately greater. And in turn, as one lives life in the realm of a growing and maturing fear of Him, one is inclined to find life more and more lived in accordance with His righteousness. What appears to be opposites actually adhere in the realm of the fear of God. It is in this apparent antinomy that knowledge and wisdom are to be found. For the fear of God is the beginning of both of these (Prov 1:7; 9:10). This reality informs the meaning of Qohelet’s conclusion:

*The conclusion, when all has been heard, is:
fear God and keep His commandments,
because this applies to every person.
Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) 12:13*