

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Yisro

“AND MOSHE TOLD HIS FATHER-IN-LAW ALL THAT HASHEM DID FOR B’NEI YISRAEL...” (SHMOS 18:8)

**When one’s heart is down,
the tongue has the power
to heal it**

YISRO WAS ORIGINALLY a priest for idol-worship. He eventually gave up his respected position and renounced his beliefs. Upon hearing what transpired to the Jewish people and the downfall of Egypt, Yisro came to the desert to visit his son-in-law, Moshe. The above quoted *pasuk* describes Moshe’s encouragement to Yisro, which successfully convinced him to join the Jewish people. At the end of his introduction to this week’s *parasha*, the early commentator Rabbeinu Bechaya discusses the healing power of words. He states that when one’s heart is down, the tongue has the power to heal it. The tongue can bring someone under the “wings of the Shechina.” From where do we see this? Moshe’s tongue – his words – “healed” Yisro, Rabbeinu Bechaya continues, by convincing him to convert and thereby bringing him under the “wings of the Shechina.”

**Were Moshe’s words really
so necessary?**

Let’s step back and reexamine the situation: Yisro, a leader and a priest in Midyan, has already renounced idolatry and discarded all his vessels of idol-worship. He has been steadfast in his beliefs, even though it brought upon him the wrath of his entire community, which excommunicated and shunned him, and mistreated his daughters as they tended their flock (see Rabbeinu Bechaya on 1:38). On his own, Yisro has heard the amazing story of Hashem’s omnipotence, and decided to travel out to the desert to learn more. He was quite self-motivated, having relinquished his power and status in Midyan, and abandoned all his wealth and possessions to seek out spiritual truth. After sacrificing so much, he now hears the news of the miracles Hashem performed for the Jews, and feels compelled to travel out to the desert. It would seem that he was already spiritually “in motion.” If so, were Moshe’s words really so necessary? Furthermore, Moshe merely repeated the facts of what had transpired. How does Rabbeinu Bechaya prove that the tongue has such a great power to “heal”? Yisro was well underway to conversion without Moshe’s words. Why is Rabbeinu Bechaya placing so much importance on Moshe’s words to Yisro?

**In may not even be the
actual facts that convince
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Rabbeinu Bechaya is teaching us that words have a unique power of persuasion. Yisro might have given up all the power and luxuries of Midyan, heard the facts of the miracles, and even made the journey out to the desert, but that alone would not have been sufficient to motivate Yisro to convert to Judaism. Moshe’s persuasive speech, on the other hand, was the critical factor that caused Yisro to seal the deal, and despite the fact that Yisro already knew what Moshe told him.

This is the power of our words, especially our words of Torah and inspiration. We can change lives, just as Avraham did, and bring people under the wings of Hashem’s Shechina. In may not even be the actual facts that convince people, but rather our warmth and conviction that win them over. They may have heard it all before and intellectually know all the details, but our caring and the way we express our feelings, may be the key elements which “heal” the souls of our listeners. Let us appreciate the awesome ability we possess to influence others with our words, both for good and for evil, and may we constantly strive to elevate and uplift the souls of our fellow man, as we use our gift of speech to heal, to sooth, and to inspire others with the spiritual elixir of our holy Torah.