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Shock and Awe and Ignore

By: Rabbi Akiva Stern (Originally Published 2016)

Inertia. Part of Newton's first law of motion states that an object at rest stays at rest, unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. This is more than simply physics. It is a reality that permeates our lives in many ways. We too often procrastinate and avoid making the changes we know we so badly need to make. What does it take to break that inertia and get ourselves moving?

In the beginning of our Torah portion (Yisro 18:1) we are told, "And Yisro heard." Rashi asks, what did Yisro hear that caused him to come join the Jewish Nation in the desert? The answer: He heard about the splitting of the sea and the subsequent war with the nation of Amalek.

The trouble with this approach is that it seems to be at odds with the very verse it comes to explain! The end of the verse actually tells us what Yisro heard – he heard about the Exodus from Egypt. It makes no mention of the tidings Rashi mentions. How can we resolve this contradiction?

My Rebbi, Rabbi Nissan Kaplan, shared a beautiful explanation. At first, Yisro heard the story of the Exodus, as the verse states. He was tremendously moved, yet saw no reason to uproot his life and join the Jewish People. But ultimately, Yisro decided to leave his home and join his son-in-law Moshe in the desert.

Rashi is addressing a second question: What was it that he heard which actually motivated him to get up and leave? What made him realize that if he were to stay at home, his inspiration would most certainly dissipate? The answer, says Rashi, is the news of the splitting of the sea and the war with Amalek.

Initially, Yisro believed, like so many others do, that the powerful inspiration he'd garnered would remain with him, even in his current location. Then came the next set of news, that G-d had performed an incredible and public miracle, the Splitting of the Sea. The entire world became aware that there was a G-d and that He would protect the Jewish People and destroy those who would attack them. Ostensibly, the effect should have been a long-lasting state of peace for the Jews, a new world in which no one would dare attack the Jewish people. Nonetheless, Yisro hears of the astounding brazenness of the nation of Amalek, who, shortly thereafter, attacked the Jewish People. When Yisro reflected on the news, he recognized that the essence of Amalek's dissonance can be found, to some extent, in each and every one of us. Yisro realized that even the most direct and shocking revelation will be attacked and worn down by our inner cynic until it no longer affects us. Yisro's epiphany and the message of our Rashi is that inspiration must be acted upon before it fades away. We must find a way to incorporate it into our lives in a meaningful, active and sustainable fashion. Only then will we succeed in shattering the inertia that binds us and step forward.

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