



# Ashreinu | אשרינו

ENHANCING YOUR STUDY OF THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION

## A GENERATION OF YITROS

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**T**his week's parsha centers around Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, a Midianite priest, and a famous convert to Judaism. The details of Yitro's visit to the Jewish camp in the wilderness

are somewhat hazy. A careful reading of the text of Parshat Yitro raises a multitude of questions -- questions our mefarshim have raised and offered answers to throughout the ages:

When did Yitro arrive -- before or after Matan Torah? What prompted Yitro to visit the Jewish camp -- was it Kriyat Yam Suf, the war with Amalek, perhaps Matan Torah itself? Did Yitro join the Jews on their journey towards Israel or did he return to Midian? Perhaps most important, **why is the story of Yitro's journey**

**intertwined with the story of the Jewish experience at Har Sinai?** Why would the Torah distract from the main event of Matan Torah to introduce the confusing and vague story of Yitro?

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin offers an interesting perspective. The parsha introduces us to Yitro, who -- if we consider all the possibilities offered by our mefarshim -- was a real outsider. Yitro was not witness to the ten plagues, did not paint his doorpost with blood, and didn't rush out of Egypt with dough on his shoulder. Yitro did not cross the Yam Suf; he did not look over that same shoulder to see the Egyptians drowning in the waves. Yitro was not present for the miraculous defeat of Amalek. He may have even missed the revelation of God at Har Sinai.

**וישמע יתרו...את כל אשר עשה אלקים למשה ולישראל**

(Shmot 18:1)

Instead, Yitro heard about the miracles of Yetziat Mitzrayim and Ma'amad Har Sinai, but he did not witness them with his own eyes or experience them firsthand.

## Who else does that sound like?

It sounds just like US! Like Yitro, we have heard of the events of the Exodus from Egypt, heard about the Jewish people crossing the sea, heard the story of Moshe's upraised arms during the battle with Amalek -- but we did not see those things with our own eyes. And like Yitro, this puts us at a disadvantage.

Chazal state: "אינו דומה שמיעה לראיה". You cannot compare what you hear secondhand to what you see with your own eyes. For this reason, the Torah describes the incredible experience at Har Sinai with the following pasuk:

**וכל העם רואים את הקולות  
ואת הלפידים ואת קול השופר**

*"And all the people saw the thunder and the lightning,  
and the sound of the shofar"*  
(Shmot 20:15)

Of course, you can't see the sounds of thunder and the shofar blast! But what the Torah is describing is an intensity of revelation, of re'iyah, an unparalleled glimpse of the Divine.

The generation that left Egypt and physically stood at Har Sinai could define themselves by what they witnessed with their own eyes. For them, it was simple. God took them out of Egypt. God led them through the sea. God spoke to them from the mountaintop.

Yitro, however, was an "outsider" -- not because he was from Midian but because every other member of the Jewish nation at that time had stood at Har Sinai. And therefore, Yitro alone struggled with the question of what it meant to be a Jew.

We are a generation of Yitros! We arrived at the party a little too late, and we missed the main event. We didn't witness the miracles of Sefer Shmot with our own eyes. And therefore, like Yitro, we struggle to define ourselves and our Jewish identities. Perhaps this is why the Torah weaves Yitro's experience into the story of Matan Torah: to demonstrate that the struggle to define ourselves as Jews is an integral part of the Jewish experience.



# TAKING THE FIRST STEP

TAMAR TANGIR ('17)

**וישמע יתרו כהן מדין חתן משה את כל אשר עשה  
אלקים למשה ולישראל עמו כי הוציא  
ה' את ישראל ממצרים**

THIS WEEK'S PARSHA BEGINS WITH THE PASUK, "Moshe's father in law, Yitro, the chief of Midian, heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Yisrael, His people, that Hashem had taken Yisrael out of Egypt" (18:1). Rashi asks a simple question regarding the beginning of the pasuk: what did Yitro specifically hear?

Rashi quotes from the gemara that Yitro had heard about Kriyat Yam Suf and the war with Amalek. However, many mefarshim are bothered with the choice of these two specific events: they seem to reflect such contrasting forms of Hashem's involvement in the world.

Rav Shlomo Horowitz looks for a fundamental concept from these two affairs that Yitro heard about, in order to understand why Yitro ultimately decided to join Bnei Yisrael.

Yitro, along with many nations during that time, believed that Hashem indeed was the Creator of the world, but after creation, He remained absent from people's daily lives. We, however, believe that not only did Hashem create the world but He is still involved in the world and has the power to perform miracles in a seemingly natural manner. Our understanding of Hashem's involvement in our daily lives is based off of a partnership between Hashem and Man's hishtadlut (effort).

The war with Amalek was a strategized war, led by Yehoshua and fought by Bnei Yisrael. It seemed like a typical and "natural" war, where there would be a stronger and weaker nation and one who had better strategies or even better weapons to help them win. However, this seemingly natural war reveals the hidden miracles that Hashem performed regularly and His consistent involvement in our lives. When Moshe inspired Bnei Yisrael to have faith in Hashem, they

began winning the war. And when Bnei Yisrael started to lose faith or believe that they were running the show, they began to struggle in the war. We see from here that Hashem indeed is constantly invested in our world, and Man must put in his required effort to contribute to the partnership with Him -- as long as man understands that Hashem is ultimately in charge of our outcomes.

Although the splitting of the sea initially seemed like an overt miracle, a total contrast to the seemingly natural war with Amalek, it truly is another example of Hashem's involvement in Bnei Yisrael's lives. Hashem miraculously made the sea split; however, He only did so after Man put in his effort. Hashem waited until Moshe raised his staff and Nachshon (according to the midrash) stepped foot into the water with full emunah. Nachshon knew it was a risk, but he was confident that if he did his part, Hashem would finish the rest. This is what Hashem wants us all to strive for.

Ultimately, what attracted Yitro to join Moshe and Bnei Yisrael was the concept that Hashem runs the world and is always involved in our daily lives, more specifically that our own lives are run by a combination of our efforts and Hashem's final resolution.

## AN ANALYSIS OF YITRO

JORDAN LANDES ('18)

THE TITLE OF THIS WEEK'S PARSHA -- ONE OF THE most important parshiyot of the Torah, which depicts the spectacular moment of Hashem granting the Torah on Har Sinai -- bears the name of one of the most mysterious figures in the Torah, Yitro. Yitro is the father-in-law of Moshe and a well-respected member of society. The midrash even describes him as one of the main advisers to Pharaoh, who leaves the Egyptian rule as a result of the harsh and cruel treatment of the Jewish nation and becomes the "Priest of Midian."

The midrash also sees Yitro as an idolater at the time. After the exodus from Egypt occurs, the eventual miracles of the kriyat yam suf and the defeat of Amalek cause Yitro to have a change of heart. According to some, Yitro converts to Judaism and helps the Jew-

ish people in the desert. Additionally, it is Yitro's advice to Moshe and Bnei Yisrael that establishes the judicial and governmental system for the Jewish people while they remained in the desert. Yitro does appear again in the Torah when he returns to Midian and ignores Moshe's plea to remain with the Jewish people and help guide them into the land of Israel. Later in Tanach, we read of his descendants who lived in Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Berel Wein provides an interesting take on Yitro. Rabbi Wein believes that it is difficult to fully understand Yitro. He is the paradigm of many non-Jewish friends of the Jewish people who are well meaning and friendly in their support. However, Yitro is not treated as a hero in Jewish tradition. He is a friend, a supporter, and a guide, but he does not seem to understand the Jewish people and their mission and purpose. He loves the Jewish people, but finds it difficult to identify with them.

Rabbi Wein believes that someone like Yitro will find it difficult to cross this type of emotional and mental bridge. Yitro embodies the attitude and support towards the Jewish people that we need in the world. Even though they may not identify with our circumstances and position, we can always use support from others and strive for cordial relationships.

## A BARREL BARRIER

ELI LITWIN ('18)

THE GEMARA (SHABBAT 88A) TEACHES THAT WHEN Bnei Yisrael were encamped at the foot of Har Sinai, Hashem lifted the mountain above them like a barrel and threatened them that if they would not accept the Torah, "שם תהא קבורתכם" - "there will be your burial place." If Hashem's intention was to frighten them so that they would accept the Torah, why did He transform the mountain into a barrel, which is not particularly alarming, instead of simply picking it up and leaving it looming over their heads like the scary mountain that it already was?

Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik explains that an individual who is trapped inside of a barrel is technically capable of surviving for a long period of time. However, his life will be incredibly limited, as he is barely able

to move or experience any variety in his life. Similarly, if the Jews had declined to accept the Torah, they would have theoretically been able to survive in this world just like the other nations of the world. However, just like the person trapped in the barrel, their existence would have been limited to fulfilling mundane needs, without extraordinary growth or spirituality. Hashem transformed the mountain into a barrel to symbolize that if they refused to accept the Torah, they could continue to survive, but their lives would be limited with a feeling of emptiness.

When Hashem said that if they did not accept the Torah they would be buried there, He did not mean that the mountain would crush and bury them, but that they would live as if they were trapped in barrels, which is spiritually tantamount to death.

## TOGETHER AS ONE

SARA DEICHMAN ('19)

THE JEWISH PEOPLE TRAVELING TO HAR SINAI AND RECEIVING THE TORAH IS ONE OF THE most momentous events in all of Tanach. In this episode, the Jews become God's people and receive commandments to follow and perform.

The wording of the pasuk directly before the giving and receiving of the Torah is extremely interesting.

**וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים, וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינִי, וַיַּחֲנוּ  
בְּמִדְבָּר; וַיַּחֲנוּ-שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל, נֹגֵד הָהָר**

*“And they departed from Refidim, and they came to the wilderness of Sinai and they encamped in the desert; and there Yisrael camped before the mountain.”*

(Shmot 19:2)

The entire pasuk is written in the plural, except for one phrase, “וַיַּחֲנוּ-שָׁם” -- “And he encamped there”. Why is this written in the singular? Shouldn't the pasuk use the plural word “they” for all the Jews camping, like the rest of the pasuk?

Rashi brilliantly explains that as the Jews stood together at the foot of Har Sinai, they were not just people, but they were one nation. They were one single unit of 3,000,000 people (see Targum Yonatan – Shmot 12:37). Rashi highlights the phrase, “k'ish echad b'lev echad,” signifying that the Jews were not simply one man, but they also shared one heart. This occasion at Har Sinai is unparalleled, and so is the Jews' connection to one another. Functioning as one man with one heart, the Jews received the Torah at the perfect time.

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