

Parashat Yitro 5778, 2018:

*Yitro's Transformation*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first 12 *pasukim* (verses) of our *parasha* relate the story of Yitro's departure from Midian in order to join Moshe and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. The Torah initially gives Yitro three appellations: Yitro, *Kohane Midian* and *chotane Moshe* (Moshe's father-in-law). (*Sefer Shemot* 18:1) Subsequently in the narrative, however, he is no longer known as *Kohane Midian* and is referred to either as "Yitro" (18:9-10) or "Yitro *chotane Moshe*" (18:2, 5, 6 and 12)

Names and titles are very significant in Tanach, since they often encapsulate the very essence of the person who bears them. As such, what does "*Kohane Midian*" mean, and why did Yitro lose this seemingly honorific designation? In his celebrated Torah commentary, Rashi (1040-1105) suggests the following Midrashically-based explanation: "... He [Yitro] was knowledgeable about every type of idolatry in the world, and there was no pagan deity that he did not worship." (*Sefer Shemot* 18:11, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) According to this view, Yitro, in the persona of *Kohane Midian*, begins our *parasha* as the foremost idolatrous Priest of Midian. Yet, for some reason, he abandons this role and lifestyle and transforms himself into someone else entirely, namely, Yitro *chotane Moshe*. What can account for this radical spiritual and existential change? We are fortunate that *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) focus upon this problem in their explication of the first two words of our *parasha*,

“*vayishmah Yitro*” (“And Yitro heard,”) when they ask, “What matter did he [Yitro] hear that caused him to come [to Moshe] and convert?” (*Talmud Bavli, Zevachim* 116a) Their answer informs our understanding of Yitro until the present moment:

Rabbi Yehoshua said: “He heard about the war with Amalek, for as it states in juxtaposition to Yitro’s act of hearing: ‘Joshua weakened Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.’” (*Sefer Shemot* 17:13) Rabbi Eliezer Hamoda’i said: “He heard about the Giving of the Torah and came [to meet Moshe and convert.] This was the case, since when the Torah was given to the Jewish people, its sound [i.e. the sound of the glory of this act] reverberated from one end of the world to the other, and all of the kings of the idol-worshipping nations were overcome with a sense of fear and trembling and broke out in a song [of praise]. As the text states: ‘The voice of the L-rd will frighten the hinds and strip the forests, and in His Temple everyone speaks of His glory.’” (*Sefer Tehillim* 29:9, Talmud translation and brackets my own)

This Talmudic passage emphasizes that Yitro heard something overwhelming - either the war with Amalek or the Giving of the Torah - that caused him to abandon polytheism, join the Jewish people and become a *ger tzedek* (a righteous convert). Rashi underscores this idea in his commentary on the verse, “Moses saw his father-in-law off, and he went away to his land,” wherein he states that Yitro returned to Midian, rather than stay with the Jewish people, in order “to convert the members of his family.” (18:27)

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, describes Yitro’s authentic nature and response to the Giving of the Torah, as the ideal reaction the non-Jewish world should have had toward our acceptance of the Torah:

Jethro was a Gentile; he was, what might be called today, the Archbishop of Midian. He came to the Jews with an open mind. He wanted to observe for himself what the Jews had accomplished and were about to engage in. He stayed with the Jews, and was so overwhelmed by their conduct, that he renounced paganism and embraced Judaism. This is one illustration of a Gentile’s reaction to Jews and *Mattan Torah* (The Giving of the Torah). Chazal did not describe Jethro as one of the *chasidei umot ha’olam* (a saintly Gentile). Rather, they portrayed him as a decent person, whose positive reaction should have been emulated by other Gentiles who witnessed the exhibition of *Mattan Torah*. (*Noraos HaRav*, Volume V, page 81)

According to the Rav, when Yitro stayed with us at Mount Sinai, it was not the wonders and miracles associated with the Exodus or the Torah itself that led him to convert to Judaism. Instead, it was our conduct, the way we behaved toward one another, that convinced Yitro of the falsehood of polytheism and the truth of Judaism.

The Rav's insight is reminiscent of the famous concluding *pasuk* (verse) in chapter three of *Sefer Yonah* concerning the people of Nineveh: "And G-d saw their deeds that they had repented of their evil way..." When Yonah proclaimed his prophecy to Nineveh's citizens, "in another forty days Nineveh shall be overturned," (3:4) they had instantly believed him because "the people of Nineveh believed in G-d." (3:5) Therefore, they immediately realized that there was only one way to nullify Hashem's decree, namely to undertake a positive and comprehensive societal change that would affect everyone, from the king and his courtiers in their magnificent castles to the lowliest peasant in his ramshackle hut.

I believe that Yitro witnessed precisely this kind of G-d-inspired change when he stood in the midst of our nascent nation. It was then that he saw, "the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers," (*Sefer Devarim* 29:9-10) serving Hashem through acts of lovingkindness toward each other. This is exactly what led Yitro to convert to Judaism, and encourage the rest of his family to join him in his spiritual journey.

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may we live lives that serve as models to all humankind so that, as Isaiah the prophet taught us so long ago, we will be a "light unto nations" (49:6) and His "witnesses" to the entire world. (43:10) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.