

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## Yitro

Exodus 18:1-20:23

In the Parshah of *Yitro* ("Jethro"), the purpose of the Exodus is achieved when, seven weeks after their liberation from Egypt, the people of Israel gather at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from G-d.

But first the Parshah describes the arrival in the Israelite camp of Moses' father-in-law,

Jethro the priest of Midian, who has heard of the miracles of the Exodus. Jethro brings with him Moses' wife, Zipporah, and Moses' two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (whom Moses had earlier sent back to Midian), and proclaims:

"Now I know that G-d is greater than all gods..."

The next day, Jethro observes Moses administering justice to the people. "Why do you sit alone," he asks his son-in-law, "and all the people stand by you from morning to evening?"

Moses explains:

"The people come to me to seek G-d.

## Commentary

AND JETHRO, THE PRIEST OF MIDIAN, THE FATHER-IN-LAW OF MOSES, HEARD OF ALL THAT G-D DID FOR MOSES AND HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL; THAT G-D HAD TAKEN ISRAEL OUT OF EGYPT (18:1)

Of what did he hear that he came? Of the splitting of the Red Sea and the war against Amalek.

(Rashi)

AND JETHRO HEARD... AND JETHRO CAME... (EXODUS 18:1)

This is the meaning of the verse (Proverbs 27:10), "Better a close neighbor than a distant brother." "A close neighbor"—this is Jethro; "a distant brother" refers to Esau.

(Midrash Rabbah)

JETHRO TOOK ZIPPORAH, MOSES' WIFE, AFTER HE HAD SENT HER BACK (18:2)

When G-d said to Moses in Midian, "Go, return to Egypt" (Exodus 4:19), "Moses took his wife and sons..." (ibid., v. 20). When Aaron later met with him "at the mountain of G-d" (v. 27), he said to him: "Who are these?" Said Moses: "This is my wife whom I married in Midian and these are my children" "Where are you taking them?" asked Aaron. "To Egypt," said Moses. Said Aaron to Moses: "We are grieving over the ones already in Egypt, and you propose to add to their number!" So Moses said to Zipporah, "Return to your father's house," and she took her two sons and went away.

(Mechilta; Rashi)

NOW I KNOW THAT G-D IS GREATER THAN ALL GODS (18:11)

This tells us that he had full knowledge of every idol in the world, for he had worshipped them all.

(Mechilta; Rashi)

The Torah could not be given to Israel until Jethro, the great and supreme priest of the all pagan world, and confessed his faith in the Holy One, saying, "Now I know that G-d is greater than all the gods."

(Zohar)

AND IT CAME TO PASS ON THE MORROW, THAT MOSES SAT TO JUDGE THE PEOPLE... FROM THE MORNING TO THE EVENING (18:13)

Every judge who judges with utter truthfulness even for a single hour, the Torah regards it as though he had become a partner with G-d in the work of creation. For here it is written, "And the people stood by Moses from the morning to the evening," and [regarding G-d's creation of the world] it is written, "And there was evening, and there was morning, one day."

(Talmud, Shabbat 10a)

AND MOSES' FATHER-IN-LAW SAID TO HIM... "HEarken NOW TO MY VOICE, I WILL GIVE YOU COUNSEL" (18:17-19)

Why was Jethro called (in Exodus 4:18) *Yeter*? Because he added (*yiteir*) a chapter to the Torah.

(Rashi)

IN THE THIRD MONTH... THAT SAME DAY THEY CAME INTO THE WILDERNESS OF SINAI (19:1)

On the first of the month [of Sivan] they arrived in the Sinai... and on that day Moses did not say anything at all to them, on account of their exhaustion from the journey.

On the second day, he said to them, "And you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests..."

On the third day, he informed them of G-d's command to set boundaries [around Mount Sinai]...

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*When they have a matter, they come to me and I judge between one and another, and I do make them know the decrees of G-d and His instructions."*

Says Jethro:

*"It is not good, this what you are doing. You will surely wear away, both you and this people that is with you; for this thing is too heavy for you—you are not able to perform it yourself alone."*

Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates to share the burden:

*"You be the link between the people and G-d... You shall show them the way in which they must walk, and the work that they must do.*

*"But you must also seek out, from amongst all the people, able, G-d fearing men, men of truth, hating unjust gain; and appoint them over the [people] to be leaders of thousands, and leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens.*

*"Let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they shall judge themselves... and they shall bear the bur-*

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On the fourth day, he commanded them to "Sanctify [yourselves today and tomorrow]" (Exodus 19:10); following which the Torah was given on the sixth day of Sivan].

Rabbi Jose says that the Torah was given on the seventh day of the month... Moses having added a third day of sanctification out of his own understanding.

All agree that the Torah was given on Shabbat. They differ only in that Rabbi Jose says that the first of the month was a Sunday, while the other rabbis hold that the first of the month was a Monday.

*(Talmud, Shabbat 86b)*

A most puzzling thing in the Talmud's account is the fact that on the first day of Sivan—the day on which the people of Israel arrived at the place where they would receive the Torah—"Moses did not say anything at all to them, on account of their exhaustion from the journey." For six weeks the children of Israel had been eagerly awaiting the most important event in their history—their receiving of the Torah from G-d. Our sages tell us that they literally counted the days (hence our annual practice of "counting the omer" during the weeks that connect Passover to Shavuot). Does it make sense that on the very day they arrived at Mount Sinai they would do *nothing at all* in preparation for the great day?

At Sinai, the divine wisdom was revealed to man. Obviously, the human mind cannot attain the divine wisdom on its own—it that must be *given* to it by G-d Himself. So although G-d instructed us to *study* His Torah, desiring that human intellect should serve as the vehicle by which we apprehend His truth, a crucial prerequisite to Torah study is the mind's total abnegation

of its ego. Only after it has voided itself of all pretension that it is capable of attaining the truth of truths on its own, can the mind become a "fit vessel" to receive it. In the words of the Sages, "An empty vessel can receive; a full vessel cannot receive."

So the day on which "Moses did not say anything at all to them" was an integral part of their preparations for receiving the Torah. This was the day on which they undertook the most "exhausting journey" of emptying their souls of intellectual vanity and make themselves fit receptacles of the divine truth.

*(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)*

## AND THEY CAMPED IN THE DESERT (19:2)

In the ownerless wilderness was the Torah given to the people of Israel. For if it were given in the Land of Israel, the residents of the Land of Israel would say, "It is ours"; and if it were given in some other place, the residents of that place would say, "It is ours." Therefore it was given in the wilderness, so that anyone who wishes to acquire it may acquire it.

*(Mechilta D'Rashbi)*

Why was the Torah given in the desert? To teach us that if a person does not surrender himself to it like the desert, he cannot merit the words of Torah. And to teach us that just as the desert is endless, so is the Torah without end.

*(Pesikta D'Rav Kahana)*

## AND THERE ISRAEL CAMPED OPPOSITE THE MOUNTAIN (19:2)

At all their other encampments, the verse says *vayachanu* ("and they

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den with you.”

Moses accepts Jethro's advice and does as he suggests, following which "Moses sent off his father-in-law, and he went his way to his own land."

### A People are Chosen

In the third month following the children of

*Israel's exodus from the land of Egypt; that same day they came into the wilderness of Sinai... and there Israel camped opposite the mountain.*

Moses is summoned to the top of Mount Sinai, where G-d tells him that He is taking the children of Israel as His own chosen nation:

*"Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel:*

*"You have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice, and keep*

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camped," in the plural); here it says *vayichan* ("and he camped," in the singular). For all other encampments were in argument and dissent, whereas here they camped as one man, with one heart.

*(Mechilta; Rashi)*

THUS SHALL YOU SAY TO THE HOUSE OF JACOB, AND TELL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (19:3)

"The house of Jacob" are the women; the "children of Israel" are the men.

Why did He command the women first? Because they are the more diligent in the fulfillment of the commandments. Another explanation is: So that they should introduce their children to the study of the Torah.

Rabbi Tachlifa of Caesarea says: G-d said, "When I created the world, I commanded Adam first, and only then Eve was commanded, with the result that she transgressed and upset the world. If I do not now call upon the women first, they will nullify the Torah."

*(Midrash Rabbah)*

AND ALL THE PEOPLE ANSWERED TOGETHER, AND SAID: "ALL THAT G-D HAS SPOKEN WE WILL DO" (19:8)

Said G-d to them: "I require guarantors."

Said the people of Israel: "The heaven and the earth shall be our guarantors."

Said G-d: "They won't last forever."

Said they: "Our fathers will guarantee it."

Said He: "They are busy."

Said they: "Our children will guarantee it."

Said He: "These are excellent guarantors."

*(Mechilta D'Rashbi)*

AND IT CAME TO PASS ON THE THIRD DAY (19:16)

A Galilean scholar lectured before Rabbi Chisda: "Blessed be the Merciful One who gave a three-fold Torah (consisting of Torah, Prophets and Scriptures) to a three-fold people (comprised of Kohanim, Levites and Israelites) through a third-born (Moses, the third child of Amram and Jocheved) on the third day in the third month.

*(Talmud, Shabbat 88a)*

The Torah is associated with the number "3" because the ultimate function of Torah is "to make peace in the world" and "3" represents the concept of peace.

Peace is unity in diversity. The number "1" implies exclusivity and singularity; the number "2" connotes diversity and plurality; the number "3" represents a state in which the diversity of "2" is superceded by a third, encompassing truth, within whose context differences no longer divide but rather unite diverse components into a harmonious whole.

This is the function to Torah: to introduce a unity of purpose to the diverse objects, forces and peoples of creation, uniting them all in the harmonious endeavor of serving the divine objective in creation.

*(The Chassidic Masters)*

At the Torah's conclusion of its account of the creation of the world, it is written (Genesis 1:31): "And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." What is the purpose of the additional "the" (*hashishi*)?

(Regarding the other days of creation, the Torah simply says, "And it was evening and it was morning, one day... a second day.. a third day, etc.": "the sixth day" implies that the verse is referring to a certain famous "sixth

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*My covenant, you shall be My own treasure from among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine*

*"And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."*

Moses descends from the mountain and

"called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which G-d had commanded him."

*And all the people answered together, and said: "All that G-d has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to G-d.*

G-d instructs that the people should purify and sanctify themselves for two days, "Because on the third day G-d shall descend upon Mount Sinai before the eyes of the entire people." The mountain itself should be fenced in, and all should be warned against ascending the mountain or even "touching its

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day").

This teaches that G-d stipulated with the works of creation and said to them: "If Israel accepts the Torah (on the sixth of Sivan), you shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness."

*(Talmud, Shabbat 88a)*

## AND THEY STOOD UNDER THE MOUNTAIN (19:17)

This teaches that G-d overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them: "If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, there shall be your burial."

Rabbi Acha ben Yaakov observed: This resulted in a strong legal contest against the Torah (since it was a contract entered into under duress). Said Raba: But they re-accepted it (out of their own, un-compelled choice) in the days of Ahasuerus, as it is written (Esther 9:27): "The Jews confirmed, and accepted"—on that occasion they confirmed what they had accepted long before..

*(Talmud, Shabbat 88a)*

## MOSES SPEAKS, AND G-D ANSWERS HIM BY A VOICE (19:19)

"The voice of G-d is in power" (Psalms 29:4). If it would have said, "The voice of G-d is in His power," the world could not survive it; rather it says, "The voice of G-d is in power"—in accordance to the individual strength of each and every one of them. To the old, according to their strength, and to the young, according to theirs; to the children, to the babes and to the women, according to their strength; and even to Moses according to his strength, as it is said: "Moses spoke, and G-d answered him by a voice."

*(Midrash Rabbah)*

## AND G-D CAME DOWN ON MOUNT SINAI... AND G-D CALLED TO MOSES TO

## THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN, AND MOSES WENT UP (19:20)

Once there was a king who decreed: "The people of Rome are forbidden to go down to Syria, and the people of Syria are forbidden to go up to Rome." Likewise, when G-d created the world, He decreed and said: "The heavens are G-d's, and the earth is given to man" (Psalms 115:16). But when He wished to give the Torah to Israel, He rescinded His original decree, and declared: "The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms. And I, Myself, will begin" as it is written, "And G-d descended on Mount Sinai," and then it says, "And to Moses He said: Go up to G-d."

*(Midrash Tanchuma)*

Our Sages tell us that the Patriarchs studied the Torah and fulfilled its precepts many centuries before the Torah was "officially" given at Sinai. Since no "new information" was revealed on the sixth of Sivan, what is the significance of the "giving of the Torah" on that occasion?

The answer lies in the above-quoted Midrash: at Sinai G-d abolished the decree which had consigned the physical and the spiritual to two separate domains. Thus, at Sinai was introduced a new phenomenon—the *cheftza shel kedushah* or "holy object." After Sinai, when physical man takes a physical coin, earned by his physical toil and talents, and gives it to charity; or when he forms a piece of leather to a specified shape and dimensions and binds them to his head and arm as *tefillin*—the object with which he has performed his "mitzvah" is transformed. A finite, physical thing becomes "holy," as its very substance and form become the actualization of a divine desire and command..

The mitzvot could be, and were, performed before the revelation at Sinai, and had the power to achieve great things *within* the spiritual realm (by elevating the soul of the one who performed them and effecting "unions" (*yichudim*) and "revelations" (*giluyim*) in the supernal worlds) and *within* the physical realm (by refining the object with which it was performed, within the limits of its natural potential). But because the mitzvot had not yet been *commanded* by G-d, they lacked the power to bridge the great divide between matter and spirit. Only as a command of G-d, creator and

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edge.”

**The Revelation**

*And it came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of a shofar exceeding loud; so that all the people in*

*the camp trembled.*

*Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with G-d; and they stood under the mountain.*

*And Mount Sinai smoked in every part, because G-d descended upon it in fire: and the smoke of it ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.*

*The voice of the shofar sounded louder and louder; Moses speaks, and G-d answers him by a voice.*

*And G-d came down upon Mount Sinai, on*

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delineator of both the spiritual and the physical, could the mitzvah supersede the natural definitions of these two realms. Only after Sinai could the mitzvah actualize the spiritual and sanctify the material.

*(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)*

**AND G-D SPOKE ALL THESE WORDS (20:1)**

When G-d gave the Torah no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, none of the angels stirred a wing, the seraphim did not say “Holy, Holy,” the sea did not roar, the creatures spoke not, the whole world was hushed into breathless silence and the voice went forth: “I am G-d your G-d.”

*(Midrash Rabbah)*

With each and every utterance that issued forth from the mouth of G-d, the souls of Israel flew from their bodies, as it is written (Song of Songs 5:6), “My soul went out when He spoke.” But since their souls departed at the first utterance, how could they receive the second one? G-d brought down the dew with which He will resurrect the dead and revived them.

*(Talmud, Shabbat 88a)*

In other words, even after they were revived by the divine “dew” following the first utterance, this did not suffice to keep body and soul together at the second utterance; and the “dew” which enabled them to absorb the second utterance, did not suffice for the third; and so on “with each and every utterance.” This means that each utterance involved a greater revelation of divinity than the previous one. Thus the commandment “Do not murder,” for example, expresses an even loftier divine truth than “Remember the Shabbat” or “I am G-d your G-d.”

*(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)*

**I AM G-D YOUR G-D (20:2)**

Because G-d appeared to them at the Red Sea as a mighty warrior, at Sinai

as a sage teaching Torah, in the days of Solomon as a handsome lad and in the times of Daniel as a compassionate old man, G-d said to them: Just because you perceive Me in many guises, do not think that there are many gods; rather, it is I who was at the sea, I who was at Sinai, I who is in every place—”I am G-d your G-d.”

*(Midrash Tanchuma)*

**I AM G-D YOUR G-D, WHO HAS BROUGHT YOU OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT (20:2)**

Would it not have been more appropriate for G-d to say, “I am G-d... who created the heavens and the earth?”

But G-d the creator is the G-d that Israel shares with the rest of creation. At Sinai, G-d did not speak to us as the author of nature, but as the executor of the miraculous Exodus. For at Sinai we forged a covenant with G-d in which we pledged to surpass all bounds of nature and convention in our commitment to Him, and He pledged to supercede all laws of nature and convention in His providence over us.

*(The Chassidic Masters)*

**REMEMBER THE SHABBAT DAY (20:8)**

In Deuteronomy 5 (where the Ten Commandments are repeated), it says, “Safeguard the Shabbat day.” “Remember” and “safeguard” (which represent the imperative and prohibitive aspects of Shabbat) were expressed in a single utterance—something which the human mouth cannot articulate and the human ear cannot hear.

*(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 27a)*

**SIX DAYS SHALL YOU LABOR... (20:9)**

This, too, is a divine decree. Just as the people of Israel were commanded to rest on Shabbat, so, too, were they commanded to work on the other days of the week.

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*the top of the mountain. And G-d called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up....*

**The Ten Commandments**

*And G-d spoke all these words, saying:*

*I am G-d your G-d, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.*

*You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself any carved idol, or any likeness of any thing... you shall not bow down to them, nor serve them...*

*You shall not take the name of G-d your G-d in vain...*

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to G-d... For in six days G-d made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore G-d blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.*

*Honor your father and your mother...*

**Commentary***(Mechilta D'Rashbi)***SIX DAYS SHALL YOU LABOR, AND DO ALL YOUR WORK (20:9)**

Is it then possible for a person to do "all his work" in six days? But rest on Shabbat as if all your work is done.

*(Mechilta)***HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER (20:12)**

There are three partners in man: G-d, his father, and his mother. When a man honors his father and his mother, G-d says: "I consider it though I had dwelt among them and they had honored Me."

*(Talmud, Kiddushin 30b)*

(The commentaries point out that the Ten Commandments were engraved on two tablets—five on the first and five on the second. The first tablet contains mitzvot that are "between man and G-d," while the commandments on the second tablet govern the relationship "between man and man." This means that as the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," belongs to the category of "between G-d and man"!)

**HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER (20:12)**

And in Leviticus 19:3 it says, "Every man, his mother and father should fear." For it is revealed and known to G-d that a person adores his mother more than his father, and that he fears his father more than his mother. G-d therefore set the honor of one's father first, and the fear of one's mother first, to emphasize that one must honor and fear them both equally.

*(Talmud, Kiddushin 31a)***DO NOT MURDER (20:13)**

How were the Ten Commandments given? Five on one tablet and five on a second tablet. This means that "Do not murder" corresponds to "I am G-d your G-d." The Torah is telling us that one who sheds blood it is as if he has reduced the image of the King.

What is this analogous to? To a king of flesh and blood who entered a country and put up portraits of himself, and made statues of himself, and minted coins with his image. After a while, the people of the country overturned his portraits, broke his statues and invalidated his coins, thereby reducing the image of the king. So, too, one who sheds blood reduces the image of the King, as it is written (Genesis 9:6): "One who spills a man's blood... for in the image of G-d He made man."

*(Mechilta)***DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL (20:13)**

When Moses ascended to heaven, the angels protested to G-d: "What is a human being doing amongst us?"

Said He to them: "He has come to receive the Torah."

Said they to Him: "This esoteric treasure, which was hidden with You for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created, You wish to give to flesh and blood?... 'What is man, that You are mindful of him, and the son of man, that You take notice of him? ... Place Your glory upon the heavens!' (Psalms 8:2-5)"

Said G-d to Moses: "Answer them."

Said Moses: "Master of the Universe! I fear lest they consume me with the breath of their mouths."

Said G-d: "Hold on to the Throne of Glory, and return them an answer."

Said Moses: "Master of the Universe! This Torah that You are giving to me,

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*You shall not murder.**You shall not commit adultery.**You shall not steal.**You shall not bear false witness against your fellow.**You shall not covet... anything that is your fellow's.*

The people are overwhelmed by all that they see and hear, and beg Moses: "You speak

with us, and we shall hear; but let not G-d speak with us, lest we die." So "the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near to the thick darkness where G-d was."

The Parshah concludes with a number of additional laws communicated at Sinai, including the prohibition to use any iron tools in constructing an altar to G-d.

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what is written in it? 'I am the L-rd Your G-d, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt.'"

"Have you descended to Egypt?" asked Moses of the angels. "Have you been enslaved to Pharaoh? So why should the Torah be yours?"

"What else does it say? 'You shall have no other gods.' Do you dwell amongst idol-worshipping nations? What else does it say? 'Remember the Shabbat day.' Do you work? ... What else does it say? 'Do not swear falsely.' Do you do business? What else does it say? 'Honor your father and your mother.' Do you have parents? What else does it say? 'Do not murder,' 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not steal.' Is there jealousy among you? Do you have an evil inclination?"

Straightway the angels conceded to G-d... and each one was moved to befriend Moses and transmit something to him. Even the Angel of Death too confided his secret to him...

*(Talmud, Shabbat 88b)*

## AND ALL THE PEOPLE SAW THE VOICES (20:15)

They saw what is ordinarily heard and they heard what is ordinarily seen.

*(Midrash Lekach Tov; Rashi)*

As physical beings, we "see" physical reality. On the other hand, G-dliness and spirituality is only something that is "heard"—it can be discussed, perhaps even understood to some extent, but not experienced first hand..

At the revelation at Sinai, we saw what is ordinarily heard—we experienced

the divine as an immediate, tangible reality. On the other hand, what is ordinarily "seen"—the material world—was something merely "heard," to be accepted or rejected at will.

*(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)*

## AND MOSES DREW NEAR TO THE THICK DARKNESS WHERE G-D WAS (20:18)

There are three types of darkness: the "heavy darkness" of the Covenant Between the Pieces (Genesis 15:17); the "tangible darkness" of the ninth plague in Egypt (Exodus 10:22); and the "thick darkness" at the giving of the Torah.

*(Rabbeinu Bechayei)*

AND WHEN YOU MAKE ME AN ALTAR OF STONE, YOU SHALL NOT BUILD IT OF HEWN STONE: FOR IF YOU LIFT UP YOUR SWORD UPON IT, YOU HAVE DEFILED IT (20:22)

Iron was created to shorten the life of man, and the Altar was created to lengthen the life of man; so it is not fitting that that which shortens should be lifted upon that which lengthens.

*(Talmud, Middot 3:4)*



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## FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

## JETHRO'S PLAN

*Why was he called Yitro ("his addition")? Because he added a chapter to the Torah — [the chapter] "And you should see [to choose] from the people..."*

Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 27:7

If you see more deeply into me than I am capable of seeing in myself, which is the real me? The deeper, truer me that you see, or my me? This was the essence of a debate between Moses and the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, and between Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro, in the aftermath of the Revelation.

The Torah was communicated to us through Moses; indeed, the prophet (Malachi 3:22) goes so far as to refer to the word of G-d as "Moses' Torah." On several occasions, however, other individuals are given credit for the revelation of a particular section.

Thus we are told that the section dealing with laws of the "Second Passover" (Numbers 9:6-14), which came as G-d's response to a group of Jews who were ritually impure yet refused to reconcile themselves with the fact that they could not participate in the Passover offering, "ought to have been related by Moses, like the rest of the Torah, but these people merited that it be revealed by their initiative." The same is said regarding the laws of inheritance (Numbers 27:6-11) whose revelation was prompted by the daughters of Tzelaafchad, the penalty for desecrating Shabbat (Numbers 15:35-36) prompted by the "wood gatherer," etc.

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, is also credited with a section of Torah. Indeed, his name (Yitro, in the Hebrew, meaning "his addition") was given him "because he added a chapter to the Torah."

In this, the case of Jethro is unique. In all other instances, nothing was "added" to the Torah—these were laws that would have been included in the Torah in any case, for without them the Torah is not complete; it was only that instead of being communicated directly to Moses as was the rest of the Torah, certain individuals had the merit to be

involved in the process of their revelation. Only Jethro's section is referred to as an "addition"—something that would not have been part of the Torah were it not for his initiative. In other words, the Torah was complete without this section, and Jethro added something to it.

What was Jethro's addition? What did it contribute to our understanding of the divine wisdom?

**Delegated Authority**

When Jethro arrived in the Israelite camp, he was shocked to discover that Moses was serving as a one-man educational and judicial system for a community of several million souls. "Why do you sit alone," he asked his son-in-law, "and the entire people stand about you from morning till evening?"

Moses replied: "The people come to me to seek G-d. When they have a matter of dispute they come to me, and I judge between a man and his fellow. I teach them the laws of G-d and His instructions."

Said Jethro: "It is not good, this thing that you are doing. You will wither away, both you and this people who are with you... you cannot do this alone." Jethro went on to suggest that Moses select from among the people "able men, those that fear G-d, men of truth, who abhor profit" and appoint them as arbiters and judges.

According to Jethro's plan, Moses would continue to teach the people "the laws and the instructions ... the path they should follow and the deeds they should do." But the application of these laws to the daily life of the camp, the resolution of questions and the settlement of disputes, should be delegated to these men. "They shall judge the people at all times: the great matters they shall present to you, and the minor things they shall arbitrate themselves."

Moses accepted and implemented Jethro's plan, appointing "captains of thousand, captains of hundred, captains of fifty and captains of ten." The people were themselves entrusted with the application of the divine law to their daily lives, while Moses confined his role to teaching them the laws and deciding the most difficult issues.

**A Reluctant Mouthpiece**

A similar thing occurred when the people of Israel assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the



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Torah from G-d.

The divine voice pronounced the first two of the Ten Commandments (“I am G-d...” and “You shall have no other gods...”). But the people felt that they were incapable of receiving a direct communication from G-d. “You approach,” they begged Moses, “and hear all that the L-rd our G-d will say. You tell us all that the L-rd our G-d will say to you, and we will listen and do.”

Moses was deeply disappointed to hear this: it was his desire that the people should receive the entire Torah directly from the mouth of G-d. But G-d said to him: “I have heard the words that the people have spoken to you; they have spoken well... Go say to them: ‘Return to your tents.’ And you remain here with Me, and I shall relate to you the commandment, the statutes and the laws which you shall teach them...” (Deuteronomy 5:20-28; Rashi, *ibid.*, v. 24; cf. Exodus 20:16).

A simple reading of the exchange between G-d and Moses may lead to the conclusion that Moses was overestimating his people, expecting from them something that was beyond their capacity. This, however, does not fit in with what we know about Moses’ leadership. Our sages describe Moses as a “faithful shepherd” sensitive to the individual needs of every member of his flock.

The Chassidic masters therefore understand what happened at Sinai as far more complex than a simple “overestimation” on Moses’ part. On the contrary—Moses perceived their true and ultimate potential, and as a true leader, his deepest desire was to actualize it. In Moses’ eyes, the people of Israel were capable of assimilating the highest revelations; under his leadership, they could actually have achieved this.

But the people did not want to relate to G-d on this level. They wanted to receive the Torah with their own, self-actualized, faculties, not with the sublime powers that Moses could summon forth from the depths of their souls. They wanted that their experience of Torah should be true to how they are to themselves, rather than how Moses sees them—even if what Moses saw in them was their “deeper” and

“truer” self..

G-d agreed with the people. After having been exposed to the divine essence of Torah (as contained within the first two commandments), they would receive the Torah not as a supernal “voice” from Heaven, but as ideas formulated in a human mind, as words articulated by a human mouth and put in writing by a human hand. They would receive the Torah via the mind, mouth and pen of Moses.

### The Outsider

In light of this, we can understand the difference between Moses’ approach and that of Jethro, which is the same debate between Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai—but on a different level..

[There are different opinions among the sages and commentaries as to whether Jethro’s arrival in the Israelite camp was before or after the Revelation at Sinai; however, the exchange between Moses and Jethro regarding the administration of Torah law in the Israelite camp appears to have taken place after Sinai—see Mechilta on Exodus 18:13; Rashi, *ibid.*; Talmud, Zevachim 116a; *ibid.*, Pesachim 6b; see, however, Daat Zekeinim MiBaalei HaTosafot on Exodus 18:13.]

The dialogue between Moses and the people at Mount Sinai centered on the question of how the people of Israel should receive the divine communication; in that debate, G-d decided that they should receive it via a human teacher—Moses—rather than as a direct divine revelation. The issue between Moses and Jethro was: Having learned the divine laws from Moses, how were the people to be implement them in their daily lives? How were these divine laws to be translated into guidance for raising a child, righting a troubled marriage or resolving a dispute between neighbors’s?

One might go to Moses. He received these laws from G-d; his knowledge and understanding of them is absolute. His application of them is certain to be the clearest, most unequivocal rendition of the divine law.

It is true that Moses is a million miles away from the petty neighbors’ dispute he is being troubled to resolve. But it is also true that the two litigants standing before him are certain to be elevated by the experience. In the presence of Moses, they, too, are capa-

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ble of rising above the pettiness of their conflict. In the presence of Moses, they, too, are capable of relating to the pure principle being expounded, and of applying it to their relations back in their neighborhood.

This was how it was done until Jethro arrived in the Israelite camp.

Jethro was an outsider—a convert to Judaism. According to some opinions, he was not even present at the revelation at Mount Sinai. Moses saw the people of Israel from the inside—in the light of their highest potentials, from the perspective of the inner core of their souls as they are one with his in the singular soul of Israel. Jethro saw them from the outside—their everyday selves, their petty cares and conflicts. He saw them as they are apart from Moses, while Moses saw them only as they are in the presence of Moses.

So he suggested to Moses that the people of Israel learn to govern themselves, to arbitrate their disputes, to apply the laws of Torah to their lives. Moses was to remain the sole source of these laws, but their implementation was to be achieved by a multi-tiered body of magistrates and counselors at every level of the community (“captains of ten, captains of hundred,” etc.). This way, the divine law would permeate their lives on every level, not only at the apogee of their being.

This is what Jethro “added” to the Torah. Without his addition, the Torah was complete. Indeed, there was no real need for Jethro’s system—at least not for as long as Moses lived in their midst—for Moses could always be counted on to raise the lives of his people to the level on which he expounded the word of G-d. But their understanding and practice of Torah would have remained something that Moses had empowered them to attain, not something they had attained on their own. Jethro’s system made the Torah the personal achievement of every Jew.

More significantly, Jethro’s initiative was accepted and implemented by Moses, and written into the Torah. Were it not for Jethro, the Torah would have remained “Moses’ Torah”—a guide to life for Moses, and for Moses-elevated Jews. After

Moses’ passing, a system such as Jethro’s would have been established, to “bring down” Moses’ Torah to a lesser generation. But Jethro insisted that Moses delegate of his capacity to interpret the Torah to the sages of his generation, and by extension, to the sages of all generations.

Because it was *Moses* who established this system, it was incorporated as a section in Torah, making it an integral part of the divine communication to man.

Therein lies the enormity of Jethro’s contribution. Because he *added this chapter into the Torah*, the Jew who studies and lives Torah today is relating to the divine “original” rather than to a human interpretation.

Thus the Talmud states: “Everything that a qualified student of Torah is destined to originate was already given to Moses at Sinai.” The Talmud refers to the student’s achievement as original (a “chid-dush”), yet says that it was already given to Moses! In other words, for an interpretation to be an authentic part of Torah, it must derive from the authority of Moses. Yet Moses—having accepted Jethro’s approach—transmitted the Torah to us in such a way that enables our understanding of it to be our “own” achievement and, at the same time, the unadulterated word of G-d.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe; rendered by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com*