

# Walk through the Parsha

with Rabbi David Walk



YITRO

## Family Reunion

This week's Torah reading is most famous, of course, for its spectacular presentation of the Ten Commandments, but it begins with a touching family scene: Yitro brings Yocheved and her boys, Gershom and Eliezer, back to Moshe. The Torah seems most interested in the interaction between Moshe and his father in law.

We're informed that Yitro came because of what he heard. But what did he hear? The verse says: Yitro, priest of Midyan, Moshe's father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Yisrael - God's people: how the ETERNAL had brought Yisrael out from Egypt (Sh'mot 18:1).

So, he heard that God had taken the Jews out of Egypt. Is that all he heard? Probably not, because in the Song of the Sea it says that: Peoples heard and they trembled (15:14). I guess that mass of 'peoples' who heard about the splitting of the Sea, included Yitro. This also brings up an important point: The rest of the world heard about God's awesome power and ran for the hills in fear. Yitro, on the other hand, immediately set out to greet and rejoice with the newly freed people.

This brings us back to ask why it was so significant that Yitro heard about the Exodus? Actually, the Ohr HaChayim discusses this issue and points out two important ideas. First, we're told that Yitro was a priest of Midyan. Why would we announce that? As the Ohr HaChayim notes: Being a pagan priest is hardly to someone's credit, why would the Torah tell us this? Well, he answers that perhaps the Torah wanted us to know the greatness of Yitro who converted to Judaism even though he occupied an exalted position, and it would presumably cost him his prominence and wealth.

Also, the Ohr HaChayim notes that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 106) informs us that Yitro had been one of Par'o's advisers, and was thoroughly familiar with the system by which Egypt made sure its prisoners could not escape. When he heard about the Israelites having left Egypt he simply could not believe this. The Torah therefore had to repeat this aspect of God's achievements as the one that Yitro had heard which precipitated his trip to the encampment of B'nei Yisrael.

Okay, Yitro HEARD about the Exodus and, therefore, arrives with Moshe's wife and children in tow to become part of this most significant historical event. This sweet scene must be understood. It is remarkable that this important personality comes to his son-in-law. The Malbim points out

that normal courtesy would dictate the opposite; the son-in-law should come to his wife's father.

The Malbim further notes that Yitro abases himself before Moshe, because he formerly had doubted his son-in-law's sincerity. Moshe seemingly abandons his wife and small children to visit his people in Egypt. Now he recognizes the nobility of Moshe and his motives, the Redemption of the Children of Yisrael. He abases himself before God's representative to the world.

We have this warm and positive feeling towards Yitro and are moved by his reaction to the news of wonders wrought by Moshe on behalf of B'nei Yisrael. When he proclaims "Baruch Hashem!" we are emotionally moved. When he abandons his previous status and belief system, we are truly impressed.

It is the essence of his 'hearing' which should really cause us to be blown away by Yitro and his behavior. But before we get back to Yitro, I feel that I must share an insight about SH'MI'A, 'hearing'.

The S'foro explains that SH'MI'A does not always mean 'hear'. It can also mean becoming aware of something which occurred some time before the 'hearing' of the event. On the other hand, R'IYA, which usually means 'seeing', can sometimes be used to indicate first hand knowledge

of an event. This explains why the Torah tells us that the witnesses at Mount Sinai 'saw the thunder' (KOLOT, 20:15).

Yitro had this delayed and second hand testimony about the amazing events surrounding the Exodus. Then he reacts. However, his reaction is not the expected or common one. What do you do when all the realities of your perceived world are undone and totally overturned? Most people react in shock and dismay. Most of us like and feel comfortable with the norm, the regular and comfortable.

So, the Torah tells us, in the Song of the Sea, that most people were in shock and dismay that their world had been turned topsy turvy. But not Yitro! According to the Midrash, he had studied all of the world's idolatries and knew how corrupt and wrong they were. His reaction to this triumphant introduction of monotheism was to shout 'BARUCH HASHEM!'

I can't help thinking of the scene as the British forces surrendered to the Americans at Yorktown in 1781. The band played 'The World Turned Upside Down'. The sentiment dismayed all royalists, and delighted all those desiring representative government.

How should we feel when the world is turned upside down? We should analyze the situation and decide if the change is for the better or not. Yitro

got it right! He was delighted that paganism was defeated; monotheism triumphed.

There is so much going on in this story of reunion, and we should feel so happy for Moshe and his family. But it's the reaction of Yitro which provides us with the truly significant lesson of the story: Analyze the situation and then choose the proper reaction. Yitro chose very well indeed. 