

YITRO

17th of 54 sedras;
5th of 11 in Sh'mot



Written on 138 lines in a Torah (46th)

15 Parshiyot; 4 open, 11 closed

75* p'sukim - ranks 47th
(only 7 sedras have fewer p'sukim)

1105 words, 4022 letters - ranks 46th

Yitro is the smallest sedra in Sh'mot

*Tradition is that Yitro has 72 p'sukim, not 75. If we count DIBROT rather than p'sukim for the Aseret HaDibrot, then the number drops to 72 (from 75) and that probably explains the difference.

HOWEVER... when we read the Aseret haDibrot with TAAMEI HA'ELYON (as Dibrot), there are only 9 p'sukim/ dibrot, since the first two are definitely combined. Total: 71. Go figure.

MITZVOT

Yitro contains 17 of the 613 mitzvot;

3 positive and 14 prohibitions

Note that 14 of the 17 mitzvot in Yitro are within the Aseret HaDibrot. That means that Ten Commandments is not really the best translation for Aseret HaDibrot. The Ten Statements might be a better rendering of Aseret HaDibrot - or Aseret HaD'varim, as the Torah calls them. Also note that a

15th mitzva for the Aseret HaDibrot is counted from Va'etchanan - V'LO TIT-AVEH (unhealthy desire).

Aliya-by-Aliya Sedra Summary

[P> X:Y (Z)] and [S> X:Y (Z)] indicate start of a parsha p'tucha or s'tuma. X:Y is Perek:Pasuk of the beginning of the parsha; (Z) is the number of p'sukim in the parsha.

Numbers in [square brackets] are the Mitzva-count of Sefer HaChinuch AND Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvot. A=ASEI; L=LAV (prohibition). X:Y is the perek & pasuk from which the mitzva comes.

Kohen - First Aliya - 12 p'sukim - 18:1-18

[P> 18:1 (27)] Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, hears "all that has happened" to the Children of Israel and comes to Moshe with Tzipora and Moshe's (actually, Tzipora's - that's how the Torah describes them!) two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Moshe, Aharon, and the Elders welcome Yitro with great honor. Yitro praises G-d for all that He has done for the People.

SDT: The straight reading of this portion is that Yitro heard about the Crossing of the Sea and the battle with Amalek. That's what Rashi says. These are the events recorded in the previous sedra. Other commentaries point to certain textual references about Sinai and are of the opinion

that Yitro came after Matan Torah, sometime during the almost one year that the People were camped at Har Sinai. If this is so, then we have an example of "there is no set order in the Torah's account..." and we can add the events of Sinai to the list of what Yitro "heard and came". Of course, when the Torah does not follow chronological sequence, there are reasons... sometimes we get insights into what those reasons might be.

VAYICHAD YITRO, Yitro was delighted with all of the good that G-d had done for the people of Israel. That's the "plain" meaning of the word. Rashi mentions another possible meaning of the word - of the skin breaking out in "goose-bumps", perhaps a subconscious feeling of mortification for the downfall of his former colleagues. One has to be sensitive and careful with what one says to a convert or potential convert.

Levi - Second Aliya - 11 p'sukim - 18:13-23

On the "following day", Yitro observes Moshe judging the People from morning until night. He offers suggestions for a more efficient system. Moshe should teach the People what G-d requires of them, and he should also handle the most difficult questions and disputes. But the bulk of the daily

judging should be assigned to qualified individuals who will be in charge of groups of ten, fifty, a hundred, and a thousand people. Yitro explains that this new system will not only make things easier for Moshe, but the people too will be benefited.

(This portion of the sedra definitely seems to have occurred after Matan Torah, even if you want to say that Yitro's original arrival was before. But some commentaries say it also was before Matan Torah.)

SDT: "On the following day..." The plain meaning would be, on the day following Yitro's arrival. Rashi, however, quotes the Midrash in saying that the day was the morrow of Yom Kippur, that very first Yom Kippur when Moshe came down from the mountain with the second set of Luchot. This makes an important statement, that not only is building the Mishkan an essential part of the "getting back to life following the Golden Calf disaster" period, but so is the everyday social and civil functioning of the people.

In the big picture, we see that Parshat Yitro with the main description of Matan Torah precedes Mishpatim with its mundane, everyday, down-to-earth laws. Yet at the beginning of Yitro, we find this out-of-sequence portion of the Mishpatim-related concept. And at the end of Mishpatim, we have the rest of the

story of Maamad Har Sinai. So which really comes first - the lofty, spiritual dimensions of Judaism, or everyday life? We can (and should) look at it as a package deal.

With the first part of Parshat Yitro belonging more to Mishpatim.

However you look at the first part of the sedra, the story of Yitro seems to be an interruption between the events of the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea, the Manna, the battle against Amalek on the one hand, and Matan Torah on the other. But it is definitely NOT an interruption - it is a prerequisite for Matan Torah. Moshe's view of the judging process, as he explains to Yitro who asks him what he's doing, is that the people come to him LIDROSH ET HA'ELOKIM, to seek out G-d. Yitro's point is that there is a lack of civility among the disputing individuals which must be handled BEFORE they can pursue Knowledge of G-d. This interlude about civil justice can teach us that good interpersonal relations allows us to really benefit from Matan Torah. Similarly, DERECH ERETZ KODMA LATORAH.

Shlishi - Third Aliya - 4 p'sukim - 18:24-27

Moshe accepts Yitro's suggestions and selects the judges. Commentaries point out that the actual qualifications of the

judges that Moshe selected were more "modest" than Yitro had recommended. In theory, the very highest caliber person should be sought after as judge. In reality, we often have to settle for the best we can find in our society or our particular location. This was especially so for the recently freed slaves. It takes time to develop high-caliber people.

Moshe sends Yitro off on his journey to Midyan (to convert his family, says Rashi).

Notice that the first three Aliyot are all part of a single parsha, the parsha of Yitro (not to be confused with weekly sedra of Yitro). Pull that parsha out of the Torah for a moment (don't worry, we'll put it right back), and the next thing we read about is Israel traveling from Refidim towards Sinai. This follows smoothly from the battle with Amalek which took place in Refidim. Sequentially, the removed parsha of the Yitro episode is not missed at all. Therefore, it seems obvious that the Yitro portion is there for its lesson value alone. Which is fine, and is how we understand the EIN SEDER MUKDAM U'M'UCHAR BATORAH phenomenon. The Torah is not just going to put things out of chronological order for no good reason (as mentioned earlier).

This portion started with Yitro's coming, so it ends with his return to Midyan. That return was in the second year before we left Har Sinai.

R'vi'i - Fourth Aliya - 6 p'sukim - 19:1-6

Here begins the Torah reading for Shavuot morning

[P> 19:1 (25)] The Torah now returns to the sequence of Y'tzi'at Mitzrayim to Matan Torah. On Rosh Chodesh Sivan (six weeks after leaving Egypt) the Children of Israel arrive at Sinai.

Worth reviewing...

In the third month following the Exodus, on THIS day, they (the Children of Israel) arrived at the Sinai Wilderness. Why THIS day; THAT day is how you tell a story. The answer is that Torah isn't a once-upon-a-time, a-long-time-ago story book. The Torah is a living guide for us, to be constantly rediscovered. Every day, each Jew should imagine him- or herself at Sinai receiving the Torah anew. Today we have come out of Egyptian bondage; today we stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai eagerly awaiting Divine Revelation, and today we commit ourselves to G-d and what He asks of us. Today is the first day of the rest of our lives - as the saying goes. The words of Torah which we learn and live should never become stale. They should be in our eyes as if TODAY we have received them. We should learn Torah and do mitzvot with the freshness and enthusiasm of a first-time experience. This too fits well with the "Yitro model". The

challenge: Be a true Torah Jew all your life, for as many years as G-d gives you, but have an enthusiasm that is more common to converts and Baalei T'shuva.

After settling at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moshe ascends to G-d (whatever that really means) and G-d tells him what he is to say to the women and men (sequence is intentional and based on the analysis of the terms Beit Yaakov and then Bnei Yisrael). A clear connection is made between G-d's having taken us out of Egypt and His taking us to Him as His Chosen People - with the condition that we follow Him and His Torah. It is true that a Jew is a Jew regardless of his keeping the Torah or not, but it is clear that G-d has always demanded of us that we be committed to Torah and Mitzvot in order for our relationship with Him to be mutual and actively positive from both sides.

Chamishi - 5th Aliya - 13 p'sukim - 19:7-19

Moshe presents G-d's words to the Elders (and the People), who answer with a resounding "All that G-d says we will do". (Not yet with the famous NAASEH V'NISHMA - that comes in next week's sedra.) Moshe then tells the people to prepare for three days to receive the Torah. During this time, the Mountain was off-limits (to people and to animals). On the morning of the third day, the People gather at the foot

of the mountain to the accompaniment of the supernatural sounds and sights of the Shofar, thunder, lightning, and smoke. G-d will speak to Moshe in such a manner that the People will be witness to this direct communication. When Moshe will speak, G-d will answer with a "voice" (and not just via a vision or spiritual telepathy - so that the people could be part of the experience).

SDT: G-d tells Moshe that the People should "sanctify themselves today AND tomorrow". It is relatively easy to sanctify oneself on the day of the great miraculous events of Matan Torah. The challenge to each of us is to sanctify ourselves on the many tomorrows that follow. The days after the wondrous events... The days when our lives return to "normal". This is what being Jewish is about. Yom Kippur is special and holy. Our additional challenge is to sanctify the day after Yom Kippur. We sanctify the mundane. Therefore, there really is nothing that is actually mundane for us.

Shishi - Sixth Aliya - 20 p'sukim - 19:20-20:14

G-d descends onto Har Sinai (so to speak) and calls to Moshe to join Him. G-d tells Moshe to repeat the warning against approaching the mountain. Moshe then goes down to the people to tell them G-d's words.

[S> 20:1 (1)] G-d (Elokim) speaks all the following things, saying...

What follows is/are Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Commandments. They are comprised of 13 p'sukim which contain 14 mitzvot of the Torah's 613.

[S> 20:2 (5)] What we call the first two commandments (or sayings or statements) are combined in a single parsha of 5 p'sukim. They can be seen as two sides of the same coin. You must believe in G-d; you may not believe in other gods... Some Chumashim consider the ANOCHI pasuk and LO YIHYEH... to be a single pasuk. In Taamei HaElyon they are definitely joined into a single pasuk.

MITZVAnotes

The first commandment sounds like a statement by G-d - an introductory remark, perhaps, to what follows, but is viewed by Rambam, the Chinuch, and others, it is the mitzva to believe in G-d [25, A1 20:2]. (And others do view it as an introductory statement.)

The second commandment contains several prohibitions related to idolatry. Specifically, not to believe in other gods [26, L1 20:3] (this mitzva includes the prohibition of having no belief at all - atheism), not making idols (even if you don't worship them) [27, L2 20:4], nor bowing to them (even without believing in them) [28, L5 20:5], nor worshiping idols in any manner [29,

L6 20:5]. Note that this commandment deals with both the thought and actions of Avoda Zara (idolatry).

[S> 20:7 (1)] The third commandment prohibits swearing in vain **[30, L62 20:7]**.

This is defined as

(1) swearing to the truth of something that is obviously true and well-known - e.g. that the Sun is hot - a oath in vain, because everyone knows it to be true,

(2) to swear in denial of an obvious truth - that the Moon is made of cheese. Interestingly, this is not considered a lie or a false oath, since - hopefully - everyone knows that the Moon is not made of cheese. Only when the truth of a matter is unknown do we use the term lie and false oath. A vain oath is just as serious as a false one, so this distinction is largely academic, but it emphasizes the seriousness of being flippant in regard to swearing;

(3) to swear to violate the Torah - e.g. that one will eat pork. Such an oath is immediately void since we are considered to have taken a prior oath (at Sinai) to not eat pork. Hence, the oath is in vain and is a disrespectful use of G-d's name;

(4) to swear to do something that is impossible - e.g. to stay awake for a full week.

The common denominator of these types of vain oaths is that they all "cheapen" the use of G-d's name and threaten the smooth functioning of society which often must rely on the seriousness of a real oath.

In addition to actual vain oaths, this prohibition is considered by some authorities to include the saying of a B'RACHA L'VATALA (a b'racha in vain), and its partner, a BRACHA SHE-EINO TZ'RICHA (unnecessary b'racha). 'Merely' saying G-d's name in vain is forbidden but is not considered part of this Commandment #3. It falls under one or more other mitzvot.

[P> 20:8 (4)] Commandment #4 deals with Shabbat and contains the positive mitzva to remember the Shabbat with Kiddush **[31, A155 20:8]**, and the prohibition of all manner of Melacha, specific categories of creative activities **[32, L320 20:10]**.

The mitzva of ZACHOR includes saying Kiddush as Shabbat enters, and Havdala as Shabbat leaves. (Officially, K&H are said in davening as a fulfillment of the Torah command, and again with wine, in fulfillment of a Rabbinic command. It's a bit more complicated than that, but this is the basic idea.) Prohibitions of Melacha are divided into 39 categories, each of which contains other related activities, usually with the same goal. E.g., PLANTING is one

of the 39 categories; watering, pruning, fertilizing all help the growth of plants and are TOLADOT of PLANTING, and are also considered Torah violations of equal seriousness to the parent melacha, Planting-ZOREI'A.

Aside from these two mitzvot about Shabbat, there are three others in the Torah - last week's prohibition of T'CHUM SHABBAT, next week's positive command to abstain from melacha (the other side of the prohibition here), and Vayakhel's prohibition of courts carrying out punishments on Shabbat.

[S> 20:12 (1)] The fifth commandment is to honor one's parents [33, A210 20:12].

Grandparents, in-laws, oldest (or possibly older) brother (maybe sister too), and teachers are included in this mitzva, but with different parameters. Honor of parents is usually considered to refer to that which one does for one's parents, in contrast to reverence (fear) of parents which includes that which should not be done because it would be disrespectful.

[S> 20:13 (2/11 of the pasuk)] #6 is the prohibition of MURDER [34, L289 20:13], which is considered the antithesis of Belief in G-d, since murder directly negates creation of humans being created in His image.

[S> 20:13 (2/11)] Commandment #7 against ADULTERY [35, L347 20:13] is the prohibition of having relations with a married woman, but as a "chapter heading" it also points to the other forbidden relations, such as incest.

[S> 20:13 (2/11)] LO TIGNOV, #8 [36, L243 20:13], which is specifically defined as kidnapping, but is also the category header of many mitzvot in the Torah in the category of THEFT.

[S> 20:13 (5/11 of a pasuk)] #9 is the prohibition of "bearing false witness" [37, L285 20:13].

We can see in this mitzva, as well as many others, how important it is to G-d, so to speak, that we be able to function as a society. Both oaths and testimony are necessary for the determination of TRUTH, in the absence of having direct first-hand knowledge. So much of the dealings between people involves the trust we place in each other's word, especially when backed by an oath, and in the confidence we place in the testimony of witnesses. Without these elements of our inter-personal relations, we would be incapable of functioning as a society and each of us might as well look for a cave somewhere and live on our own as a hermit.

[S> 20:14 (4/15 of a pasuk)] #10 is the prohibition of COVETING [38, L265 20:14]. It sums things up in that it focuses on thoughts that can lead to all

types of sins. Being part of The Big 10 points to the significance of thought, in addition to deeds. The second part of this commandment is in its own parsha...

[S> 20:14 (11/15)] specifies the prohibition of coveting one's fellow's wife, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that is his.

Sh'VII - Seventh Aliya - 9 p'sukim - 20:15-23

[S> 20:15 (4)] The People are awe-struck by the supernatural phenomena of the Sinai experience and they keep their distance. They ask Moshe to tell them what G-d wants rather than hearing His Voice directly.

After the second statement, the People panicked and asked Moshe to tell them what G-d wants, so that they would not hear "G-d's voice" directly. G-d agreed, on the condition that we listen to the word of the true prophet who speaks in G-d's name. (There are variant opinions as to how much we heard directly from G-d.)

[S> 20:19 (5)] G-d tells Moshe to remind the People that they heard G-d speak; that they shall make no graven human images (even for art) [39, L4 20:20]; when they will make an altar and offer sacrifices upon it; if the altar be of stone, its stone shall not be cut with metal tools [40, L79 20:22]. The Altar may not be approached with

immodest steps [41, L80 20:23] but rather via its ramp.

The last 5 p'sukim are read for the Maftir.

Haftara - 21 p'sukim - Yeshayahu 6:1-7:6, 9:5-6

Parallel to the Torah's account of the awesome experience at Sinai, this passage from Yeshayahu describes his first awe-inspiring vision of angels proclaiming Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh. Both sedra and haftara present us with "visions" of G-d's awe, majesty, and holiness. Also, in the sedra, G-d tells us that we will be to Him a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation. In the haftara we see a model of K'dusha (the angels), and also a glimpse of a potential Moshiach.