

Selected Shorts: Yitro
Rabbi Eliot Malomet 24 Shvat 5781 February 6, 2021

שמות י"ח:א'
(א) וישמעו יתרו כהן מדין חתן משה את כל אשר עשה אלהים למשה ולישראל עמו כי יצא את ישראל ממצרים:

Exodus 18:1

Jethro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out from Egypt. The Talmud asks, "What was it that Yitro heard that motivated him to meet Moses in the desert?" The rabbis are divided: R. Joshua: the victory over Amalek; R. Elazar Hamodai: the giving of the Torah (the Torah doesn't report events in chronological order); R. Eliezer: the splitting of the Sea. Was Yitro's solidarity motivated by God's military might, God's message, or God's miraculous intervention at the Sea? Or did he simply want to reunite his family and share in their joy?

שמות י"ח:ז'
(ז) ויצא משה לקראת חתנו וישתחו וישקלו וישאלו איש לרעהו לשלום ויבאו האהלה:

Exodus 18:7

(7) Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent. The text overwhelmingly emphasizes the family relationship between Yitro (family man) and Moses, (national leader) but clearly there is a deeper bond here. The two men like each other, and Yitro is more than a father-in-law to Moses: he becomes Moses' mentor.

(ט) ויחד יתרו על כל הטובה...

Exodus 18:9

(9) And Jethro rejoiced over all the kindness... Considering the range of reactions Yitro could have had, (jealousy, indifference, sarcasm) it is remarkable that the Torah tells us he is joyful. Yitro, a model for philo-semites, is a true mensch! Interesting that the parasha containing Torah's central moral blueprint for humanity, the Ten Commandments, is named for a Gentile who loved Israel.

(יב) וישלח יתרו חתן משה עלה וזבחים לאלהים ויבא אהרן וכל זקני ישראל לאכול לחם עם חתנו משה לפני האלהים:

Exodus 18:12

(12) And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law.

This is a wonderful snapshot of solidarity. The Gentile priest makes a sacred feast and the breaks bread with the elite of the Israelites. Could this be a "quasi" Passover, a vicarious commemoration?

שמות י"ח:י"ז

(יז) ויאמר חתן משה אליו לא טוב הדבר אשר אתה עשה:

Exodus 18:17

(17) But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not good..."

There is only one other place in the Torah where the expression לא טוב (not good) appears and that is just prior to Eve's appearance in Genesis 2. It's obvious that these two stories have one thing in common: solitude. Here Moses is the solitary leader, trying to solve everyone's problem and micro-manage political life. There Adam was the solitary individual, aimless and destitute without companionship and the partnership necessary to navigate the basic challenges of survival. Yitro's motivations here are more than just time-management and logistics. He's concerned for his daughter! If Moses spends all day and night administering to the people, his political and personal lives will be a living hell.

שמות י"ח:כ"א

(כא) ואתה תחנה מפלועם אנשי חיל / וראי אלהים / אנשי אמת / שונאי בצע / ושמת עליהם / שרי אלים / שרי מאות / שרי חמשים / ושרי עשרות:

Exodus 18:21

(21) but you, you are to have the vision (to select) from all the people/ men of caliber/ holding God in awe/ men of truth/ hating gain/ you should set (them) over them as chiefs of thousands/ chiefs of hundred/ chiefs of fifties/ and chiefs of tens. Yitro gives his words added weight by delivering them to Moses poetically. A close reading reveals compact parallelistic elements: the moral and the administrative. It's not good enough to have good people; it's insufficient to have an efficient power structure. A well-functioning society requires both good people and an efficient system.

שמות י"ח:כ"ז

(כז) וישלח משה את חתנו בגד לו אל ארצו: (פ)

Exodus 18:27

(27) Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way to his own land. Why does Moses send him? Why does he not stay?

שמות י"ט:ג-ר'
(ג) ומשה עלה אל־האלהים ויקרא אליו ה מִן־הַהָר לֵאמֹר

כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יְעֻקֵּב (ד) אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם
וְאַשָּׂא אֶתְכֶם וְאַבֵּא אֶתְכֶם
וְתִגִּיד לְבִנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם
עַל־כַּנְפֵי נְשׂוּרִים
אֵלַי:

(ה) וְעַתָּה
אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ
וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם
וְהִיְתָם לִי
מִכְּלֵה־עַמִּים
(ו) וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי
מִמְלַכֶת כְּהַנִּים
בְּקִלְי
אֶת־בְּרִיתִי
סִגְלָה
כִּי־לִי כְּלֵה־אֲרָץ:
וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Exodus 19:3-6

(3) Now Moshe went up to God, and God called out to him from the mountain saying:

Say thus to the House of Yaakov: Tell the Children of Israel:

(4) **You yourselves** have seen *What I did to Egypt, on eagles' wings and brought you to me.*

(5) So now, *If you will hearken, yes, hearken to my voice And you keep my covenant, You shall be to me a special-treasure*

from among all peoples/ for to me belongs the whole earth (6) but you, you shall be to me A kingdom of priests, A holy nation.

These are the words that you are to speak to the Children of Israel.

It's impossible to adequately convey the poetic texture of this crucial passage, but let's at least highlight the repetition of **you/your** and **Me/Mine** in Hebrew by the words and suffixes **כֶּם/תֶּם** and **תִּי/לִי**. In the first half of the text, there are 4 "you's" and 2 "Me's"; in the second half there are 3 "you's" and 5 "Me's". Total: 7 you's and 7 Me's. 7 is the foundational number of Scripture. Message: Me and you are in a relationship that is foundational for the world. The core of that relationship is found in the core of this text: *if you keep My covenant, you will be Mine*. Note that: **וְהִיְתָם לִי** is the one phrase in this text where both elements **תם (you)** and **לי (Me)** are conjoined. Some more poetics: Note the parallelism of Say/Tell; House of Yaakov/Children of Israel. Note the assonance of YisraEL and ELai (end of v. 4). Note the significance of "you saw" *what I did; now "you hear" my voice*. And note also the proximity of "carrying" (אָשָׂא) and "covenant" (בְּרִית). God "carried" Israel from Egypt on the

wings of eagles and the Priests will "carry" the two tablets of the "covenant" through the desert in the Ark of the Covenant, which is adorned with the cherubim: symbolic creatures that have the faces of humans and...the wings of eagles!

שמות י"ט:י"ח

(יח) וְהָרַס יְיָ עֶשֶׂן כָּל־ו

מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו הַ(אדו-נ) בָּאֵשׁ

וַיַּעַל עֶשֶׂנוּ כַּעֲשֵׁן הַכֹּכַבִּי

וַיִּתְרַד כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד:

Exodus 19:18

(18) Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

And while we're on poetics, we couldn't resist this verse! What's amazing here is that the verse presents a stunning visual image of the billowing smoke with incredible sonorousness. (sin-shan; nay-she/nay-esh; shan-shen-shan) And what about the H,R,Y and D sounds?

HaR-sinaY-YaRaD-aDonaY-vaYa'al-YeHeRaD-HaHaRmeoD and let's include a shout out for the "throat" letters, *Aleph, Heh, Het, Ayin, Resh: veHar-'Ashan-AsheR-'Alav-Adonai-baEsh-vaya'Al-'Ashano-'Eshen-Hakivshan-vayeHeRad-HaHaR-meOd.*

שמות כ"ז:

(ז) לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקָה ה' אֶת אִשְׁרְךָ־יִשָּׂא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוּא: (פ)

Exodus 20:7

(7) You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name. Most people will recognize this as the most common translation of this commandment. It obviously conveys the seriousness of oaths. But an arguably more compelling way to understand the seriousness of this command is to translate it as, "Do not 'carry' the name of God," following the meaning of שָׂא that we saw above in 19:4. This would mean *do not carry God's name for purposes that are wrongful/wicked/unjust/unethical/improper/evil, or more simply, do not do evil in God's name*. When a person does evil in God's name, ie. commits acts of terror or murder as a religious imperative, one does irreparable damage to God. For this reason, violating this commandment is, as the often overlooked part of the commandment states, unforgivable. We observe that evil committed by religious people is the worst form of evil. It defames God, delegitimizes religion, and denigrates the truly religious. שבת שלום!