

The opening twelve verses of this parasha are fascinating. There are two cues that this story is significant. 1) The name **יִתְרוֹ**-Yitro occurs seven times, and 2) the term **מִשֵּׁחַ**-father-in-law occurs five times an extra in the reverse order: **מִשֵּׁחַ לְקִרְאָתוֹ**-Moses (went) towards his father-in-law and **לְמִשֵּׁחַ**-Moses to his father-in-law giving us a total of seven times for Moses' father-in-law. That in itself ought to tell us that we are dealing with an important figure.¹

1	יִשְׁמַע תְּרַכֵּה־מִצְרָיִם נִדְחֵי מִשֵּׁחַ	Yitro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, heard... (18:1)	everything that God did.
2	וַיִּקַּח וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּלֶךְ מִשֵּׁחַ	Yitro, father-in-law of Moses, took... (18:2)	Moses' wife and two sons.
3	וַיָּבֹא וַיֵּלֶךְ מִשֵּׁחַ	Yitro, father-in-law of Moses, came... (18:3)	to the desert, to the mountain of God.
4	וַיֹּאמֶר וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּלֶךְ	He said to Moses: I am your father-in-law, Yitro... (18:6)	coming with your wife and sons to you.
Moses goes out to greet him, and then tells him everything that God did to Pharaoh and Egypt, and all the things that happened to Israel on the journey and how God rescued them.			
5	וַיִּשְׂחַדֵּךְ וַיֵּלֶךְ	Yitro rejoiced... (18:9)	about the good things that God did for Israel.
6	וַיֹּאמֶר וַיֵּלֶךְ	Yitro said... (18:10)	Blessed is God.
7	וַיִּקַּח וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּלֶךְ מִשֵּׁחַ	Yitro, father-in-law of Moses, took... (18:12)	sacrifices to God.

1) Yitro heard. 2) Yitro took. 3) Yitro came. 4) He said...I am...Yitro. 5) Yitro rejoiced. 6) Yitro said. 7) Yitro took. **Interestingly, the fourth phrase is different from the other six verb phrases.** In all the others Yitro is identified as the subject. In the fourth, the middle phrase, we find a different form: **He said, I am your father-in-law, Yitro.** That's a strange thing to say to your son-in-law.² You would think that Yitro wouldn't need to introduce himself to Moses. We are reminded of Joseph who says, **I am Joseph, your brother**,³ after a long period of estrangement. But there is no estrangement here, just a lot of time that has

transpired since the last time they saw each other. Nevertheless, we should read these verses closely. There is, as usual, another story going on here. Yitro is bringing Moses' wife Tzipora and his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer to him. The full dispatch to Moses is: **I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you, and your wife and her two sons are with her.** Oddly, it then tells us that Moses goes out to greet him, bows down to him as a sign of respect, kisses him, ask each other how they are, and then go inside the tent to talk. **But you would think that the Torah would tell us something about Moses seeing his wife and children for the first time in a long time!** But nothing is mentioned! Crickets. Was he not happy to see them? Was he not concerned about them? Are we supposed to focus only on the relationship between Yitro and Moses, and not the relationship between Moses and his family? Something is going on here. Yitro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, is also in the end, a father. His daughter and her family have been staying with him in relative safety during the entire time leading up to the Exodus. Here is the story: when he hears that the Israelites have been freed, he decides to reunite Moses with his family thinking that that would be best for them.¹ He hears. Then he makes a decision: 2) He takes them. Then he decides to continue and not turn back. 3) He goes out to meet him. However, when he sends his message, the exact mid-point of the story (4), he is at a boundary moment, a zone in between his own world of Midian and Moses' world in the desert, **which is why it is at the center of this story.** 5) Yitro then rejoices. 6) Yitro then blesses. 7) And Yitro then sacrifices. But as much as Yitro shares the joy of Israel's redemption with Moses, and as much as Yitro expresses solidarity with Moses, he is and will remain his own man. And what about Moses' family here? The Torah does not place them in the story. It will be a matter of debate as to whether or not they have much of a relationship. In the ensuing scene, when Moses encounters the tremendous logistical problem of having to administer justice to the people by himself, we see that Yitro no longer is referred to as Yitro. He is only called, "father-in-law of Moses". This tells us something interesting: that in this moment, the Torah gives his identity only relative to Moses. He is "father-in-law" and not "Yitro." And Yitro definitely wants to be Yitro. He doesn't want to be known only as Moses' father-in-law. And that's the conflict. He has his own life, his own land, his own set of responsibilities. If he stays with Moses, he will only be identified in relation to Moses.

¹ But interestingly, after this story, the name Yitro does not appear any more in the Torah. A character identified as Moses' father-in-law appears in the book of Numbers as Hovav ben Reu'el (Num. 10:29).

² Commentators believe that Yitro sent this as a message to Moses either by messenger or in writing, which prompts

Moses to come out and greet him. Midrash Tanhuma embellishes this idea: **He (Yitro) was unable to come to Moses. What did he do? He wrote a letter and tied it on an arrow. Then he shot, and the arrow came to Moses. Moses read it and went out to him.**

³ Gen. 45:4.

Moses is deferential to his father-in-law. He listens to him and does what he tells him, and there is no question that Yitro's advice is helpful. But look closely. It comes at a cost. The elders of Israel know that Yitro has been calling the shots for Moses especially in this key area of administering justice. While Moses is very humble and open to taking his advice, if Yitro stays around, everyone is going to think that the real person in charge of Israel is Yitro and not Moses. Keeping Yitro around will raise constant doubts about Moses' leadership. **Keeping Yitro around will undermine Moses.** Moses understands that and Yitro understands that. Which is why, in the end, Yitro parts from Moses, and why Moses *sends him*. **וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה אֶת חֲתָנוּ וְיִתְרוֹ לְאֶרְצוֹ**—*Moses sent his father-in-law off and he went home to his land.* While this is a stock biblical expression for departure, there is a lot of ambiguity that has to be unpacked here.⁴ Moses truly loves Yitro, but also needs him to leave. Moses would love to have him around to give him advice from time to time, but having him around will undermine his leadership. A more conventional explanation is found in the commentaries. Sforno for example, provides a different reason for Yitro's departure:

כִּי לֹא רָצָה לָלוֹךְ עִמָּם בְּמִשְׁרָאֵלָא רַי כְּאֶמְרוּ לֹא־נֵלֵךְ בְּאֶרְצֵי וְאֵל מִלְּדֻחָא לֵךְ וְהָאֵל אִישׁ־לִמְדָּה זָקֵן־נָתַן.	Because he didn't want to go with Israel to the land, as he says (later on in Numbers 10:30) I will not go, but rather to my land and to my kindred I will go. And perhaps this was because he was already quite old at the time.
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The midrash is unambiguous about Yitro's departure. It is a big send-off with respect and honor, albeit with a difference of opinion as to how that was demonstrated:

וַיְהִי שֶׁעָזַב אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּכַבּוּדוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם. אֶל עֶדְ הַמִּדְבָּר אוֹמְרֵי גִּבּוֹר לִדְמִתָּהוּ רַחֲמָנָא. יִלְתָּא דְרֵשְׁבַי יַחֲכוּ:	R. Yehoshua said: They sent him with the honor of the world. R. Elazar Hamodai said: He gave him a lot of gifts. Mekhilta deRabbi Shimon Bar Yochai 18:26
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Comment: What is the difference between *honor of the world* and *gifts*? *Honor* is something intangible. *Gifts* are tangible. Perhaps R. Yehoshua is saying that Moses escorted him and invoked God's presence through prayer and blessings in the manner of people showing respect to one another upon parting. For R. Elazar, parting involved an etiquette of gift-giving. The gift upon departure is a tangible reminder of the visit. But then, the midrash tells us the "real" reason why Yitro is leaving:

אָמַר לְהִתְרִיגֵּהוּ לֵךְ גִּיּוֹרָא אֶת בְּנֵי מִדְיָנוֹת.	He, Yitro, said to Moses, Behold I am going and I will convert my countrymen.
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Yitro has a mission to convert people to Judaism! He is a proselytizer! A missionary! An evangelist! Comment: Yitro

⁴ Compare Abraham sending out Hagar in Gen. 21:14. **וַיִּשְׁכֶּם**
הָאָבִיבָר הֵם בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּקַּח לָחֶם וְחֶמֶת מִיַּם וַיֵּן אֶל הָגָר שָׁם
עַל שֵׁבֶתָה—*Avraham started-early in the morning, and he*
gave her bread and water and sent her away.

is by everyone's estimation a noble figure. The debate about Yitro's future is instructive in terms of how we relate to people who have positive feelings towards our people. Obviously, it is heartwarming and extraordinary when non-Jews relate to us in sympathetic and positive ways. During the course of these last fifteen months, for many of us, the world became divided into people who shared in our trauma and who were genuinely sympathetic towards us, and people who were outspoken in their contempt. Clearly, Yitro is someone who had genuine affection for Israel. The rabbis are convinced that that affection and sympathy led (anachronistically) to his conversion to Judaism. Perhaps they are also implying that the most unambiguous way of expressing solidarity is to convert. But the opposite position is also instructive. God is happy with Yitro the way he is. A person who has genuine sympathy and honor for Israel can remain who they are. Those sentiments are expressed at the very beginning of the Torah when God says to Abraham, **וְאֶבְרָכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ**—*I will bless those who bless you* (Gen. 12:3). Yitro, like people who express solidarity with us, did not need to convert to demonstrate his solidarity with Israel. Suffice it to say, that when he blessed God, and Israel, he himself was blessed. And thus, when he returned to his land, he returned not only with Moses' blessings, but with God's blessings as well. Shabbat Shalom



We recently visited Kikar Ha-Hatufim in Tel Aviv, the Hostage Square where all the activities of the Hostage Family Forum take place. Through a mutual friend we met with Limor and Tzafir Haimi who are members of Kibbutz Nir-Yitzhak, one of the Kibbutzim attacked on October 7. Limor and Tzafir are the aunt and uncle of Tal Haimi, a third-generation member of the kibbutz, who was part of the Nir Yitzhak rapid response team. Tal went out on the morning of October 7 when it appeared that terrorists were infiltrating the kibbutz. He was murdered and his body is being held in the Hostage Family Forum.

Today is Day 498. As more individual hostages are released remain. May God protect them. May God comfort the families whose loved ones will not be coming home. May God heal the wounded and shield Israel from terror.

he took some bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar—placing them upon her shoulder—together with the child and sent her away.