

A Taste of Torah

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

A Lesson in Interreligious Dialogue

If one were asked to identify the most central parashah to Israelite identity and to Judaism, one would certainly point to Parashat Yitro, which describes the moment of revelation at Sinai. This experience transforms a band of former slaves into a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” For this reason, it is surprising that this is one of the few parashiyot carrying the name of a non-Israelite. Jethro (Yitro), the esteemed father-in-law of Moses, makes his substantive debut at the opening of this Torah reading. And while we often praise the advice he gives his son-in-law to delegate legal responsibilities, an earlier, more subtle comment often goes unnoticed: while Moses, in recounting the story of leaving Egypt, emphasizes the defeat of the Egyptians (Exod. 18:8), Jethro places his praise elsewhere—the deliverance of the Israelites (Exod. 18:1). How may we learn from Jethro’s words and wisdom?

Professor Ze’ev Falk elaborates,

Parashat Yitro expresses a striking alternative to that which appears in the Song of the Sea: “The nations hear, they tremble” (Exodus 15:14). Here, in this parashah, is described a positive relationship from the angle of non-Israelite nations toward ‘choosing’ Israel . . . Jethro emphasizes “all that God has done for Moses and the Israelites,” while Moses, in his telling of the narrative, underscores what “God has done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.” For Jethro, the priority is that the Israelites were saved; for Moses, his emphasis is on the defeat of the enemy. This response is typical of one that has been saved from a life-threatening situation, delivered out of the hands of the enemy. It is out of his personal suffering that Moses narrates his story . . . even though Jethro’s question is simply with regard to their rescue. (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 155)

While Professor Falk is psychologically astute in acknowledging Moses’s response, he is also exceedingly sensitive in underscoring the import of Jethro’s words and behavior. Defeat of the enemy is crucial, but more important is saving a nation entrusted with a sacred mission. Not only does Jethro bless the Israelite God for having rescued these lives, but he also offers sacrifices (Falk notes, too, that this is tantamount to making a covenant with the Israelites). Simple, wise actions and words by a non-Israelite compel Moses and us to eschew celebrating the destruction of another people and to look forward—affirming life and building (prefiguring the teaching that “one should not rejoice at the downfall of one’s enemy” (Prov. 24:17). Perhaps naming the parashah after a non-Israelite is a deliberate message from the Rabbis. Juxtaposed to the oppressive Egyptians, Jethro presents us with a caring and inspiring model, reminding us that relationships among Jews and non-Jews are a blessing to us and to the world.

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Robert Harris, associate professor of Bible, JTS.

Exodus 18: The Proverbial Visit of the In-Laws

“Come and listen to my story ’bout a man named . . . Jethro!” OK, I will admit it: when as a young teenager and first really learning Torah in my post-bar mitzvah stage, every time I heard the name “Jethro” in the Exodus narrative, I thought first about Jethro Clampett (Jed’s nephew) from *The Beverly Hillbillies*. OK, I will admit it: I still do.

Now that we have cleared that up, what do we actually read about Jethro in this week’s portion, Yitro (the phonetical spelling of Jethro’s name in Hebrew)? While most of us eagerly turn to the Bible’s narrative of God’s Revelation on Mount Sinai (in Exod. 19) or the content of that revelation, the so-called “Ten Commandments” (in Exod. 20), the first thematic third of our parashah contains the story of Jethro’s visit to the Israelite encampment in the wilderness. Precisely when this visit takes place is a matter of some dispute, since certain verses (particularly Exod. 18:13–26; see below) appear as though Moses has already brought the Torah down to the people. In particular, see Exodus 18:15–16: “Moses replied to his father-in-law, ‘ . . . the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God.’” Thus, some commentators (e.g., Rashi) apply the old rabbinic dictum, “there is no ‘early’ or ‘late’ in the Torah” (i.e., the Torah does not narrate events in chronological order): looking at the reference in verse 16 to “the laws and teachings [torot, plural of Torah] of God,” such commentators deduce that Jethro’s visit took place after the narrative of Exodus 19–20 (God’s Revelation on Mount Sinai).

Leaving aside the precise narrative moment when Jethro’s visit took place, let us take up the question of what it was that Jethro advised—and how Moses received his father-in-law’s critique. Here is the relevant text (Exod. 18:13–26):

Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. 14 But when Moses’s father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” 15 Moses replied to his father-in-law, “It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between

one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God.”

Exod 18:17 But Moses’s father-in-law said to him, “The thing you are doing is not right; 18 you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19 Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, 20 and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. 21 You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and 22 let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. 23 If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied.”

Exod 18:24 Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said. 25 Moses chose capable men out of all Israel, and appointed them heads over the people—chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens; 26 and they judged the people at all times: the difficult matters they would bring to Moses, and all the minor matters they would decide themselves. (New Jewish Publication Society translation)

We have broken this “act” into three “scenes”: the first scene (verses 13–16) narrates Jethro witnessing Moses acting as judge; the second scene (verses 17–23) narrates Jethro’s evaluation of what he sees as Moses’s ill-advised behavior; finally, the third scene (verses 24–26) relates how Moses heeds his father-in-law’s instructions. A question I would like to raise is, while it’s true that Moses followed his father-in-law’s advice, how did this make Moses feel?

Let us closely read the final verse in the chapter (Exod. 18:27). Our New Jewish Publication Society translation renders the verse as, “Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way to his own land.” The translated words “bade his father-in-law farewell” represent the single Hebrew word *וַיִּשְׁלַח* take great issue with this translation, as it may obscure the answer to the very question I am raising. Note that this verb is not *וַיִּשְׁלַח*, say, in Genesis 32:4 (“*And Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau*”). This latter verb, in Genesis, is frequently found in biblical narrative, appearing in the *Qal* conjugation over 500 times. Our verb, in Exodus 18:27, represents the identical verbal root, but in the much-less-frequently found *Piel* conjugation. Our verb has a different valence when it is found in the *Piel* conjugation, one that mostly intensifies the “sending,” and should be understood more along the lines of “to send forth,” “to send away,” “to dismiss,” or even “to cast out.” Strangely enough, most traditional Jewish exegetes do not even remark on the word.

Alone among the commentators found in a typical Mikraot Gedolot, or rabbinic Bible, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra states that the verb here should be understood as “[Moses] sent him forth respectfully,” as is found in Genesis 18:16. There, the Torah relates that Abraham accompanied the angels who had visited him, walking with them for a while to “see them off.” Nonetheless, it is not clear to me that Ibn Ezra is correct here; he may see “respect” in this passage because he is primed by tradition to see it. From a strictly philological point of view, it seems equally plausible to conclude that Moses was wise enough to accept Jethro’s advice—but, having received it, decided that his father-in-law’s visit had lasted just about long enough.

To be sure, this is a most unconventional interpretation, and there is much in the history of biblical interpretation that argues against it. In fact, if one regards the narrative in Numbers 10:29–32 as an alternative ending to our narrative here in Exodus 18, it would seem that the Torah itself mitigates my proposal. Nonetheless, it has been said that unsolicited advice is criticism: if we are to give credence to the Torah’s choice of the *Piel* verb *וַיִּשְׁלַח* at the conclusion of the narrative in Exodus 18, we may see this as an example of a proverbial visit of the in-laws. And while Moses certainly welcomed the visit (Exod. 18:7), cordially if not overflowing with enthusiasm or emotion (contrast, for example, Gen. 33:4 or Gen. 45:14), it also seems that Moses determined Jethro’s day of departure (even Ibn Ezra would have to agree to that).

The moral of this particular reading of the story? Perhaps Jethro should have taken a page from Solomon (Prov. 17:28): “Even a fool, if he keeps silent, is deemed wise; intelligent, if he seals his lips.” Jethro was no fool, to be sure, but a wise man possessed of a certain critical insight; Moses certainly saw the wisdom he purveyed, and made Jethro’s advice his own (see Deut. 1:9–18). But, if Jethro had held back a little, and had found another way to share this particular wisdom, perhaps his visit with his in-laws would have lasted a little bit longer.

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