

The Priest of Midian and the Covenant at Sinai

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Yitro* (Exodus 18:1 - 20:23)

By Marc Goodman

“Vayishma Yitro chohein Midyan chotein Moshe eit kol-asher asah Elohim....”
“Jethro, priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard everything that God had done....”

***Parashat Yitro* – a Synopsis**

Parashat Yitro begins with a visit to Moses by his father-in-law, Yitro, the priest of Midian. After hearing about what God has done for Moses and the Israelites, Yitro brings his daughter (Moses’ wife) Zipporah and her sons Gershom and Eliezer to the camp in the wilderness of Sinai where they are reunited with their husband and father. Yitro and Moses go into the tent after the reunion, and Moses tells Yitro about the wonders that God has performed. Yitro blesses “the Lord” and declares that he now knows that “the Lord” is greater than all other gods. The next day Yitro counsels Moses on how to establish a hierarchical chain of command to magistrate to the people. After implementing Yitro’s recommendations, Moses and Yitro bid each other farewell, and Yitro departs for his own land.

Subsequent to its description of the encounter between Moses and Yitro, the parashah describes how God reveals His Covenant with the children of Israel to Moses and instructs him to prepare the people for receiving the Ten Commandments. Following God’s instructions, Moses tells the people to purify themselves and stay away from the mountain (Sinai). God then speaks what have come to be known as the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel. The parashah concludes when, after revealing the Ten Commandments, God instructs Moses how to build an altar and how to approach that altar when making sacrifices.

***Parashat Yitro* – a Question**

The Rabbis organized the text of Torah into the groupings that we now know as the Parashiot. The story of Yitro’s visit to Moses at the Sinai encampment immediately follows *Parashat B’shalach*, in which the people cross the Sea of Reeds, sing songs of praise to the Lord, wander through the wilderness, receive manna from heaven, receive water from the rock at Horeb, and fight Amalek. Why did the Rabbis choose not to include the story of Yitro’s visit in *Parashat B’shalach* but rather to include it in the parashah that describes God’s revelation of the Covenant and the giving of the Ten Commandments? Is there a connection between Yitro’s encounter with Moses and God’s revelation of the Covenant and giving the Ten Commandments to Moses and the children of Israel?

Yitro – Some Background

Our introduction to Yitro occurs in the second half of Exodus 2. After slaying an Egyptian taskmaster at the age of 40¹, Moses flees from Pharaoh to Midian, where he sits by a well and (in a manner reminiscent of Isaac and Jacob) defends the daughters of the priest of Midian, who are trying to draw water for their father's flock. They bring Moses back to their father, who is identified as Reuel. The father invites Moses to break bread, Moses consents, and the father gives Moses his daughter Zipporah as a wife. Zipporah bears a son to Moses, and they name the son Gershom meaning, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land." The text then points out that "a long time after that," the "king of Egypt" (not Pharaoh) died.

Our second encounter with Yitro is indirect. It occurs in Exodus 3:1 when Moses is tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro (Yitro), the priest of Midian. Moses drives the sheep into the wilderness and comes to Horeb, the mountain of God. (Horeb and Mt. Sinai are the same place). Here Moses has the "burning bush" encounter, first with an angel and then with God.

Our final encounter with Yitro prior to his appearance at the camp in the wilderness of Sinai occurs in Exodus 4:18 when Moses asks his father-in-law, "Jether" for permission to return to Egypt, and "Jethro" says to Moses, "Go in peace." At a night encampment on the journey, the Lord seeks to kill him (Moses or Gershom?), but Zipporah circumcises Gershom, touches his foreskin to his (Moses' or Gershom's?) legs, and says, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!", thus staving off the Lord's anger.

What about Yitro?

Is there something special about Yitro that would merit his inclusion in the parashah in which God reveals His Covenant and gives the Ten Commandments? In exploring this question, I would first like to offer some observations about Yitro based on his appearances in Torah and Midrash.

Yitro the Enigma

Yitro at the least is enigmatic. At the Sinai camp, Yitro is described as the priest of Midian, the father of Zipporah, and the grandfather of Gershom and Eliezer. The father of the daughters of the priest of Midian whom Moses defends at the well is identified as Reuel. The man identified as Reuel gives his daughter Zipporah to Moses to wife, and they have a son, Gershom. The text indicates that the king of Egypt dies a long time after the birth of Gershom, so that he might be as old as 39 when Zipporah circumcises him at the inn on the journey to Egypt. But Midrash suggests that the reason God tries to kill him (Moses or Gershom?) on the journey to Egypt is that

¹ Moses is traditionally assumed to have been 40 years old when he slew the Egyptian taskmaster and fled to Midian, but neither Torah nor Tanach offer this information. The only source for Moses' age at the time he slays the taskmaster and flees to Midian is Christian scripture (Acts 7:23), wherein Stephen preaches to the Council (Sanhedrin?).

Gershom was not circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, suggesting that he was eight days old at the time of the attack. Could the previously unmentioned Eliezer have been the son circumcised on the journey? Moses addresses his father-in-law as “Jether” when asking permission to return to Egypt, and receives permission from “Jethro.”

Yitro and, for that matter, Zipporah and her children, are subjects of confusion and apparent contradictions. Modern commentators typically attribute this type of confusion and contradiction to the weaving together of multiple traditions into a single story. But if Yitro appears in multiple traditions, it suggests that he is a central character in biblical narrative.

Yitro and Covenantal Encounters

Yitro appears just prior to covenantal encounters between Moses and God at Mt. Sinai (Horeb). In the case of the burning bush, God makes a covenant with Moses immediately after the text informs us that Moses is shepherding Yitro’s flock in the wilderness. Here the covenant is a promise made by God to Moses at Mt. Horeb to deliver the children of Israel from the land of Egypt. Yitro’s subsequent meeting with Moses occurs while Moses is shepherding God’s flock in the wilderness and precedes the encounter in which God reveals His Covenant with the children of Israel to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

Yitro plays a particularly important role in the revelation at Sinai by helping Moses free himself of the mundane day-to-day tasks of administering justice to the people. If burdened by this task, Moses might not have been able to achieve the spiritual clarity needed to encounter God and hear the Covenant and receive the Ten Commandments on behalf of the children of Israel.

Moses the Leader and Shepherd

Moses’ life was divided into 40-year thirds. He spent the first third as a prince of Egypt, a role in which he would have learned to lead. The second third he spent shepherding his father-in-law’s flock, a role in which (according to Midrash) he learned compassion for the humblest of God’s creatures. He spent the last third leading and shepherding God’s flock, a role that called for the leadership of a prince and the compassion of a shepherd.

We can assume that Moses learned to shepherd sheep in Midian from Yitro [and/or his daughter(s)], but from whom did Moses learn to shepherd God’s flock? God gave laws to instruct the Israelites how to be a holy people, and He gave laws to instruct the priests how to perform holy rites. He commanded Moses to lead, but He did not give Moses instructions on how to conduct the day-to-day shepherding of the people.

Is it possible that the person who instructed Moses concerning the shepherding of sheep also instructed him concerning the shepherding of people? Could the priest of Midian have been an agent of God whose mission was to instruct Moses how to be a shepherd, both of sheep and of

people? Is Yitro included in the parashah about the Covenant and the Ten Commandments because he prepared Moses to shepherd the human flock from a human perspective, which freed him spiritually to receive the Covenant and the Ten Commandments?