

Imagining Community: Yitro

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(Based on class by Prof. Christine Hayes, Hartman Institute 2020)

Exodus 18

¹Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt.

²After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her ³and her two sons...⁵Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, came to him in the wilderness, where he was camped near the mountain of God. ⁶Jethro had sent word to him, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons."

⁷So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent. ⁸Moses told his father-in-law about everything the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the Lord had saved them.

⁹Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the Lord had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. ¹⁰He said, "Praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. ¹¹Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly." ¹²Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God.

¹³The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening...¹⁷Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. ¹⁹Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you... ²³If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

²⁴Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. ²⁵He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. ²⁶They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

²⁷Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country: *veyelekh lo el-artzo*.

Family Tree

Yitro/Hobav (?) (a Kenite and father-in-law of Moses)



Hobav (?)



Ḥammath



Rechav
(progenitor of Rechabites)

Tiratites, Shimeatites, Sukkatites (scribes)



Yehonadav

(teetotaler; zealous for the Lord, with Yehu against Baal priests)



Malchiyah

(helped rebuild Jerusalem with Nehemiah)



*Moses farewell to Jethro by Jan Victors (Dutch painter, 1619
–December 1679)*

Numbers 10:29-33.

29 And Moses said to Hobav the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which Adonai said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us, and we will do good to you, for Adonai has promised good to Israel." 30 But he said to him, "I will not go. I will depart to my own land and to my kindred." 31 And he said, "Please do not leave us, for you

know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will serve as eyes for us. 32 And if you do go with us, whatever good Adonai will do to us, the same will we do to you." 33 So they set out from the mount of Adonai three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of Adonai went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them.

2 Chronicles 2:55

... and the clans of scribes who lived at Yaabetz: the Tiratites, Shimeatites and Sukkatites. These are the Kenites who came from Hammath, the father of the Rechabites.

2 Kings 10:15-16, 23

¹⁵He (Yehu) went on from there and he met Yonadav son of Rechav coming toward him. He greeted him and said to him, "Are you as wholehearted with me as I am with you?" "I am," Yonadav replied. "If so," [said Yehu], "give me your hand." He gave him his hand and [Yehu] helped him into the Chariot. ¹⁶"Come with me" he said, "and see my zeal for Adonai...

²³Then Yehu and Yonadav son of Rechav came into the Temple of Baal, and they said to the worshippers of Baal, "Search and make sure that there are no worshippers of Adonai among you, but only worshipers of Baal..."

Judges 5:24-27

Blessed above women shall Jael be,
The wife of Heber the Kenite,
Above women in the tent shall she
be blessed.

Water he asked, milk she gave him;
In a lordly bowl she brought him
curd.

Her hand she put to the tent-pin,
And her right hand to the
workmen's hammer;
And with the hammer she smote
Sisera, she smote through his head,
Yea, she pierced and struck through
his temples.

At her feet he sunk, he fell, he lay; At
her feet he sunk, he fell; Where he
sunk, there he fell down dead.



*Jael (Dressed as a Venetian aristocrat)
around 1500, by Bartolomeo Veneto*

Nehemiah 3:14

Malchiyah son of Rechab,
chief of the district of
Beth-haKerem,
repaired the Dung Gate;
he rebuilt it and set up
its doors, locks, and bars.

Jeremiah 35

¹The word which came unto Jeremiah from Adonai in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, saying, ²Go unto the house of the Rechabites, and speak unto them, and bring them into the house of Adonai, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink. ³Then I took Yaazaniah the son of Jeremiah, the son of Habaziah, and his brethren, and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rechabites; ⁴And I brought them into the house of Adonai, into the chamber of the sons of Hanan... ⁵And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them, Drink wine. ⁶But they said, "We will drink no wine: for Yonadav the son of Rechav our father commanded us, saying, 'You shall drink no wine, neither you, nor your sons forever: ⁷Neither shall you build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days you shall dwell in tents; that you may live many days in the land where you are strangers.'

⁸Thus have we obeyed the voice of Yonadav the son of Rechav our father in all that he hath charged us, to drink no wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons, nor our daughters; ⁹ Nor to build houses for us to dwell in: neither have we vineyard, nor field, nor seed: ¹⁰But we have dwelt in tents, and have obeyed, and done according to all that Yonadav our father commanded us. ¹¹But it came to pass, when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon came up into the land, that we said, Come, let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans, and for fear of the army of the Syrians: so we dwell at Jerusalem."

¹²Then came the word of the Lord unto Jeremiah, saying, ¹³"Thus says Adonai of hosts, the God of Israel; Go and tell the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, 'Will you not receive instruction to obey my words?' says the Lord. ¹⁴The words of Yonadav the son of Rechav, that he commanded his sons not to drink wine, are performed; for to this day they drink none, but obey their father's commandment: notwithstanding I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking; but you have not obeyed me...'

¹⁶Because the sons of Yonadav the son of Rechav have performed the commandment of their father, which he commanded them; but this people has not obeyed me:

¹⁷Therefore thus says the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will bring upon Judah and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the evil that I have pronounced against them: because I have spoken to them, but they have not heard; and I have called to them, but they have not answered." ¹⁸And Jeremiah said to the Rechabites, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Because you have obeyed the commandment of Yonadav your father, and kept all his precepts, and done according unto all that he has commanded you: ¹⁹Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: There will not be cut off a man of (the descendants of) Yonadav the son of Rechav standing before Me forever."

Yalkut Shimoni 323


Rabbi Yonatan says: But do resident aliens enter the Sanctuary? Rather they had seats in the Sanhedrin and they taught words of Torah. But others say, their daughters married into the priesthood and their grandsons offered sacrifices on the altar. And how do we know that the sons of Yonadav the son of Rechav are descended from Yitro? As it is said, "these are the Kenites who came from Hammath, father of the house of Rechav" (1 Chronicles 2:55), and if these who brought themselves near were brought even nearer by God, then Israel, who do the will of God, how much the more so!

Mekhilta Yitro to Exod 18:24

"And Moses sent his father-in-law": R.

Yehoshua says: He sent him with gifts. R.

Elazar Hamoda'i says: He sent him with all the honor in the world, as is seen in his (Moses') response to him, as it is written (Numbers 10:30) "I pray you, do not leave us," telling him: You gave us good and beautiful counsel, and the Lord consented to your words. "I pray you, do not leave us." Yitro replied: Is a candle of benefit other than in a place of darkness? Can sun and moon benefit from a candle? You are the sun and Aaron your brother is the moon. What can a candle do between you? Let me go to my land and I will cause my countrymen to reside with you and bring them to the study of Torah and under the wings of the Shekhinah.



הרני הולך לארצי ואגיד לכל בני
מדינתי ואביאם לתלמוד תורה ואקרבתם
תחת כנפי השכינה

One might think that he went but did not do so. It is, therefore, written (Judges 1:16) "And the children of Keni, the father-in-law of Moses, went up from the city of date-palms," and (ibid.) "and they went and settled with the people," ... They went and settled with Yaabetz... "and the clans of scribes who lived at Yaabetz: the Tiratites, Shimeatites and Sukkatites. These are the Kenites who came from Hammath, the father of the Rechabites" (1 Chronicles 2:55)...

It once happened that one of the water drinkers (the descendants of Rechav, viz. Jeremiah 35:6) sacrificed an offering and a Heavenly voice issued forth from the holy of holies, saying: "He who accepted your sacrifices in the desert, He will accept your sacrifices at this time!" R. Nathan says: Great is the covenant that was made with Yonadav the son of Rechav than that made with David. For that made with David was conditional, viz. "If your sons keep My covenant, etc." (Psalms 132:12), and if not, "then I will punish their offense with the rod," (Ibid. 89:33), but the covenant with Yonadav the son of Rechav was unconditional, viz. "There will not be cut off a man of (the descendants of) Yonadav the son of Rechav standing before Me all of the days" (Jeremiah 35:19).