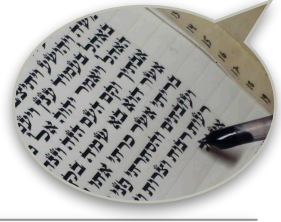




# The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



**Sefer Shemot**

**Parshat Yitro**

**Shevat 5784 / February 2024**

## Parshat Yitro — What's In A Name?

*By Jeff Kapelus*

At this point in *Sefer Shemot*, the Torah is in the middle of telling a great story. The previous parshiot read like a movie script, recounting several epic events: the ten plagues, Yetziat Mitzrayim, the parting of the sea, and the attack by Amalek. Now as we eagerly anticipate the climactic epic events in this week's parsha—the Revelation and Matan Torah—our story is interrupted by Yitro's family visit.

Why does the opening of this parsha tell the story of Yitro's visit to Moshe? Moreover, why is the parsha named after Moshe's father-in-law, a non-Jewish Midianite priest? Wouldn't it be more fitting if the parsha were called Revelation or Matan Torah? Even the 1956 movie with Charlton Heston was called *The Ten Commandments*!

To address these questions, let's start by briefly reviewing Yitro's visit:

Upon hearing of the great miracles that Hashem performed for the Israelites, Yitro journeyed from Midian to the desert to visit Moshe. Moshe greeted him with a bow and kisses, signs of great respect.

Yitro saw the burden Moshe carried in governing and administering justice to the people and advised him to establish a hierarchy of intermediaries and judges to ease the load.

*What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me, and I will give you advice, and may God be with you (Shemot 18:17–19).*

Reviewing what Yitro did doesn't answer our questions. What is the reason the parsha is named after Yitro? Why does his visit delay our story of Matan Torah?

Let's get down to business—here are my TOP FIVE reasons:

### 1. *We need hierarchy—such as the rabbinate—to pass along the teachings of the Torah*

Yitro's contribution was instrumental to the giving of the Torah. Yitro invented the idea of having a rabbinate, i.e., of having someone available when a question is beyond someone's knowledge. If it weren't for Yitro, there would be no chain of experts to teach and pass the torch of the Oral Torah.

### 2. *Hashem wanted the “king” and “priest” to accept Him before He would give the Torah to Am Yisrael*

The Zohar (vol. 2, 67b) states that Yitro's recognition of Hashem was a necessary prerequisite for the Torah to be given: The supreme king and priest of unholiness had to accept Hashem's masterful rule over the world in order for the Torah to be given. The king was Pharaoh, who initially said, “I don't know Hashem,” but eventually recognized Him; the priest was Yitro, who declared, “Now I know that Hashem is greater than all other powers.”

It is fitting that the parsha in which Matan Torah is recounted is named after Yitro, whose acceptance of Hashem made it attainable.

### *3. People who seek the truth and the right path are worthy of receiving the Torah*

Yitro converted to Judaism after recognizing the greatness of Hashem. The sages say that before Yitro visited Am Yisrael in the desert, he was busy seeking truth. He was a priest who yearned to find the right way of life. When he became disappointed with each faith that he explored and with each religion that he practiced, he rejected that path and renewed his search.

It is, therefore, appropriate that a Torah portion that is filled with law and instruction be named for a man who changed his life and his belief once he was exposed to the truth. Only if we search and don't give up, will we also be worthy of receiving the Torah.

### *4. The Torah is our blueprint and our foundation, but it is not our sole source of knowledge*

Just before the epic moment of Revelation, the parsha stops to teach a lesson: Torah is the axis around which Jewish life should rotate. But Torah is not our only source of wisdom and insight. By telling us the story of Yitro, and by placing it exactly where it is in the narrative structure, the Torah here endorses and emphasizes that very point.

### *5. Criticizing is in't enough, it needs to come with a solution*

The true greatness of an individual is not their ability to find problems and criticize but in the ability to match the criticism with solutions. Had Yitro approached Moshe only to criticize the current system as flawed without offering a viable alternative, he wouldn't have merited his name on the parsha.

Anyone can focus on finding faults, a true leader focuses on proposing constructive solutions.

So, what do we learn from this?

*Parashat Yitro* is often described as a source of lessons and leadership. It is a story about giving and, more importantly, taking, advice. Yitro advised Moshe to delegate, proposing a model that has been emulated in judicial systems and institutional structuring ever since—what seems natural to us was first introduced in our parsha. Moshe demonstrated how to bring together a people as one society, committed to shared ideals and values. The parsha imparts lessons about giving and receiving feedback, implementing change, solving problems, and building a nation or organization.

Another lesson gleaned from *Parashat Yitro* is this: Listen to others who are different from us. Hayim Ben Alter, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century rabbi, offered this: Naming this parasha after a non-Jewish priest reaffirms our need to consider the wisdom of other people in our lives, even when those people are different from ourselves. Moshe could have rejected Yitro's advice. After all, what does an outsider know about our community that gives him the credibility to weigh in? Moses teaches us that encounters with "outsiders" can be an asset, not an obstacle. This interfaith encounter made Moshe a better Jewish leader. Sometimes, we need insight from the outside.

Finally, there is one more lesson, as my wife has repeatedly advised me: respect your inlaws.

**Jeff** can be seen at various venues throughout the County lobbying for a kosher sports bar.

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