

Parshat Yitro  
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By Perry Davis



"Yitro heard."

Yitro is a complicated character. While he is a priest of Midian – a nation which is a future mortal enemy of the Jewish people – he is also the kindly father of Zipporah, father-in-law of Moshe, and certainly no Lavan. He shelters Moshe after displaying both gratitude and hospitality; traits we have been taught in *Bereishit* – which are truly meritorious and universally acclaimed.

In this week's *parsha* he surfaces again. This time he is a wise counselor to Moshe, leader of the nascent Jewish nation. As a McKinsey & Co. forerunner, he is the management consultant par excellence. He advises Moshe on delegation of authority; this helps Moshe to function more effectively as the CEO of *am Yisrael* for the duration of the trek through the desert.

Amazing as it was that Yitro had the wisdom and the kindness to counsel Moshe, it is perhaps even more startling that Moshe took advice from this Midianite priest.

Rav Soloveitchik teaches us that our involvement with worldly (not necessarily Jewish) knowledge and human advances can be traced back to Avraham's self-description to Ephron in Bereishit 23:4 - "*Ger v'toshav anokhi imakhem*" ['I am a sojourner settled among you.' (Fox)]. The Rav explains, I am not one of you. I have my own faith, values and world view. Nevertheless, here I am living with you. I have obligations and positive experiences as a citizen. I will not debate you on matters of theology, but I may discuss and learn from your worldly knowledge, from the ideas, technologies, and principles which improve my existence.

Moshe's interaction with Yitro benefits from being a friendly, even loving dialogue. There is a comfort when the interaction is one of mutual respect. That means I listen to you, and you listen to me.

"*Vayishma Yitro*" Shmot 18:1 – [Yitro heard] - Ramban tells us that this encounter took place much later (post-Sinai) but is related here. Yitro certainly heard about the miracles of the exodus but, says Ramban, he also heard about our new Torah, he understood its Divine source. He heard Moshe struggling to interpret it to a young recalcitrant rabble. While the Torah captured Yitro's imagination and gained his respect, it was not necessary for him to adopt our ways, or to follow us to our promised land. At this time *he was a ger v'toshav* sojourning among the Jews. So Yitro listened to the Divine guidance we received, and was thus able to impart his own wise counsel which helped Moshe be a better leader.

Yitro "heard" – but more importantly so did Moshe. He listened and he accepted Yitro the priest's advice.

Rabbi Saul Berman once made a memorable analogy. Yitro, he said, was Abraham Joshua Heschel, to Moshe's Martin Luther King. Rabbi Berman knew it well - he marched with both.

May we follow Yitro and Moshe's example. Let us listen carefully to the wisdom of others, and then – remaining steadfast in our faith and practice – we will grow.

Shabbat Shalom