

Parshat Yitro 5781

The new phase of our national history began with G-d proving that he would accompany us in the desert providing for us with everything we could need. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin explains that on reaching Marah, 3 days after leaving the Sea of Reeds, the People of Israel still had ample water with them, but that they were feeling the inevitable anti-climax after the parting of the sea and they required a top-up dose of miracle to assure them that G-d was still with them. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Yehoshua in the Mekhilta says that the waters were originally drinkable and only became bitter after they had arrived, making the event feel like a slightly tongue-in-cheek miracle, designed to demonstrate the need to be careful what one asks for. The Manna and the water at Rephidim are also part of establishing the people of Israel's desert phase, providing them with constant, reliable sources of food and drink (provided that they follow the rules and place their faith in G-d). Finally, at the end of last week's portion G-d shows us that He can and will help us fight our wars, though once again this is incumbent on us trusting and looking to Him.

Next stop, the giving of the Torah. The oral and written laws which would preoccupy and define every waking minute of the Jewish way of life. The tablets which would change the world more than all the tablets Teva and Apple have produced combined. Much has been written explaining why the giving of the Torah could not have preceded any of the events I have discussed so far. It is clear that the physical and spiritual freedom and self-sufficiency of the nation had to be established before they were ready to receive the full details of how they would lead their lives. However, despite my lengthy preamble, this week's portion is Jethro. The natural flow of the story is disturbed by the visit and advice of Jethro (despite the fact that according to some authorities this episode actually occurred after the giving of the Torah). The detailed description of this episode is presented as a necessary prologue to the giving of the Torah.

There are a number of clear messages to be learnt from Jethro, and it would appear that these messages must be grasped before attempting to learn the Torah.

1) Jethro had an open mind. He was a relatively objective observer, unlike the people of Israel themselves who may have been too distracted by the frogs, fleas, death, fleeing, and vivid prophecy to rationally question the experience that they were witnessing. Jethro had the time and peace of spirit to consider and evaluate

what he heard. His conclusion was that G-d had extracted Israel from Egypt, a concept which, while we are used to, the Israelites were still coming to terms with. The external validation was valuable.

2) Jethro called out injustice where he saw it. Any celebrity or large public institution runs the risk of complacency. A just society is not merely one in which 'no one is above the law', but one where 'the law itself is not above the law'. Would the average Israelite of the time have been able to criticise Moshe? Moshe was trying to make himself accessible for absolutely everyone but was actually distancing many people. If people were before Moshe from morning until evening (18:13), there must have been those who could not afford to wait in line and were thereby cut off from their only source of divinity. As Moshe says in 18:15, *'because the people come to me to seek G-d'*. By serving as the sole religious authority, Moshe was making it impossible for the majority of the people to feel any sense of connection to their religion. However, he was also making it impossible that he would ever hear the actual spiritual needs of the people. But Jethro was undaunted. He had worshipped all the gods of the day and had seen every possible societal hierarchy. He knew a bad thing when he saw it.

3) Moshe listened. Fully aware of the fact that my own father-in-law is going to be reading this dvar Torah prior to publication, I hesitate before fully condoning the idea of criticising one's son-in-law, but Moshe fully took on board the criticism, and didn't even reply! Our ultimate leader and teacher, Moshe Rabbenu, understood the value of an external opinion, not contaminated with over familiarity or a vested interest. One imagines that it was with great sadness that Moshe informed the people that he would no longer constantly be available to every one of them, and he very possibly missed being involved with the less important disputes and queries. But he understood the importance of listening to others, and realised that not all of the good ideas in his life would be handed to him on a platter/tablet by G-d.

And then it was time for the Torah. Once it had been shown that intense religious experiences should also be evaluated rationally before they are triumphed, that no one is above reproof, that everyone is fallible, that we all need to take advice seriously, and that every institution requires checks and balances to connect the leadership to the people, we were ready to receive the Torah.