

## Parshat Yitro,

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There are only a handful (six, if I counted correctly) of Torah portions which are named for people. Three after people who were Jewish, three non-Jews. This week's *parsha* is named after a non-Jew: *Yitro*. Our ancient sages, who divided the Torah into its portions, certainly had their reasons for arranging each of these *parshiot* in order that they would begin with a person's name. Some of their reasoning is obvious. But here we must ask: Why Yitro?

Yitro himself was the beloved father-in-law of Moses. We know of the respect and reverence which Moses had for Yitro. But that alone cannot explain why Yitro's name is associated with this Torah reading. Moreover, included in this week's *parsha* is, arguably, the most important passage in the Torah, "The Ten Commandments" / *Aseret HaDibrot*. There is no *parsha* whose message is more important than this. No portion recalls a more stirring and powerful revelation of God than that described in Yitro. My question, therefore, is not just: Why is this named after Yitro? But: Why is this quintessentially Jewish text not named after a Jew, Moses, for example? And the answer, I suspect, relates not only to the message of the Ten Commandments but to the message and meaning of the entire Torah.

The midrashim connected to the very first words was first (*Mechilta, Masechta D'Amalek, Parash 3*) fill in some crucial details about Yitro. These *midrashim* provide us with hints, as well, into the messages which our Sages, z"l, wanted to convey to us by naming this *parsha* after Yitro. :

*Vayishma Yitro*: Our *parsha* begins with the words (Ex. 18:1): "Yitro heard" (Yitro heard all that God had done for Moses...) and the Midrash asks, "What did he hear?" In this particular *midrashic* passage, our Rabbis suggest that he heard one of three things:

1. According to Rabbi Joshua, he heard about the war which **Amalek waged against the Children of Israel in the desert.**
2. Rabbi Elazar suggest that Yitro heard about **the giving of the Torah and Ten Commandments.**
3. Rabbi Eliezer contends that he heard of **the miracle performed by God, splitting the Red Sea, saving the Children of Egypt and defeating the Egyptians.**

Let us look more carefully at what Yitro heard, according to the Midrash and ask: why does the Midrash suggest that this is what he heard?

### **Rabbi Joshua: The War waged by Amalek.**

What happened with Amalek? Amalekites attacked the stragglers, the weak, the innocent civilians the elderly and the infirmed, those who were unable to protect themselves. This was not a glorious moment in the history of the Children of Israel in the desert. This was a vicious attack which resulted in the deaths of innocent people, unable to defend themselves (think: a random act of terror in a market or on

a bus). As a result of this attack the Amalakites became known as the arch-enemy of the Children of Israel.

Why do the rabbis suggest that it was this event, this crushing experience which Yitro heard about?

1. This story is fundamental, a foundational story of Jewish history. This had been the experience endured by his beloved son-in-law Moses, an experience which was certainly one of profound significance for Moses. One which would help Yitro understand Moses, but I think there is more.
2. True, this happened to the Children of Israel but the fact is that it is not a Jewish with meaning only for Jews. This is the story of how depraved indifference to human life is identified in this world. This happened to the Jewish People but Yitro heard here a story to which every person might relate. It makes no difference if one is Jewish or not. This event represents the universal experience of man's inhumanity to man.

Remember that Yitro is not just Moses' father-in-law. He is a priest, a Leader of the Midianites. But this isn't about war in general. This story contains a warning. It is a cautionary tale. This story is heard by Yitro not in order to steer him away from Amalek's line of fire. It is a story which suggests that any nation, if left without moral leadership and without a set of values which include the sanctity of all human life, any nation could become Amalek. And Yitro, the leader of the Midianites needed to hear that. He needed to be reminded that his role as a religious leader of his people his message must reinforce the sanctity of all of life, whether or not that are Midianites.

If you listen to the rhetoric and messages conveyed by certain Imams to radicalized young Moslems, or listen to the messages conveyed to some young settlers by their rabbis, it is clear why religious leaders need to hear this lesson. That is why Rabbi Joshua thought this is what Yitro heard and learned from the Jewish People. But Rabbi Elazar disagrees.

### **Rabbi Elazar suggests that Yitro heard the Ten Commandments**

In a world of violence, Rabbi Elazar postulates that a story of war is not the story which will inspire all people, not just Jews, to act properly. What will make that impression is a clear outline of the rudiments, the essential guidelines for living a moral and upright life in the context of a community. The Ten Commandments are not specific to the Jewish People. All people, no matter their religion, must hear, understand and internalize the timeless messages of the Ten Commandments:

1. That there is only one God, that God wants us to acknowledge and revere the God of creation.
2. That a moral and just society, any society, Jewish or not, must follow this basic outline, these basic rules regarding how to live in a family, in a community, in a society.
3. God also wants us to treat parents with *kavod* / respect and, by extension, to acknowledge and be aware of boundaries between people, respect for each other's lives and property.

Rabbi Elazar suggests that this was the message which Yitro needed to hear: that society must be built and sustained in accordance with morals and values which require respect of our fellow person and pay homage to the God who created the world. That's Rabbi Elazar.

### **Rabbi Eliezer suggests that Yitro heard the miraculous story of the Crossing of the Sea**

Rabbi Eliezer here, I believe, is saying something quite deep and profound. One might think that he heard this story because God wanted Yitro to know that God was the God of the Jewish People and, that this is proof that the Jewish People are cherished by God. I don't believe, however, that this is correct. It doesn't make sense. This reasoning suggests that the splitting of the sea is a triumphalist tale. That this is the story about how the Jewish People have defeated even the strongest of enemies. But that's not it.

Yitro hears about the sea splitting to let him know that God answers the prayers of all people. God is the God of all people. When someone cries out from the depths, God hears their plea. Yitro hears this story not because it is specific to the Jew. He hears it, for the same reason the other rabbis suggested that he heard about the Amalakites and about the Ten Commandments: Ours is a universal God, a God of all people and a God for all people. And this is a message which we too often forget.

When the Pope was in Philadelphia, he spoke of a God who hears us all. That's a huge statement. It means that the God of Christianity is the same God who is the God of the Jews. That statement means that the Pope, and by extension, the Church acknowledges that their God is not exclusively theirs. That their God is our God and that persecution against any person, Jewish or not, is an affront to God! And this must be true for those who believe in Allah, the God of Moslems, as well.

If the message that God speaks to all people of faith extends to Islam. What if the God, Allah, "who is great" for Moslems is the same God to whom we pray? What would it mean if we were able to all agree that the fighting and pain inflicted on this world by ruthless and radical thinkers is not a reflection of their God, but a perversion of their religion and simply an excuse to act without regard to human life?

What if we could agree that the God of the Splitting Sea, the God of the Ten Commandments, the God who condemned the Amalakites' actions, was the same God to whom Christians appeal and to whom Moslems of good faith pray? Perhaps, then naming this *parsha* after Yitro is meant to be a powerful, universal reminder that, at their cores, all legitimate religions possess principles of truth, goodness and humanity. All religions must possess these basic notions in order to claim that it is a religion of God. And perhaps that is why this *parsha* needed to name itself after a non-Jewish religious leader.

The *Sfat Emet*, the first and great Chassidic leader the *Gerer Chassidim*, made an unexpected observation speaking in the context of *Parshat Yitro* about the nature of the relationship between God and the Jewish People. He writes (The Language of Truth, pp. 106 – 107):

God has chosen Israel as his own portion. One might, therefore think that there would be a closer and more intimate relationship between God and the Jewish People, a greater distance between God and other nations. But actually, he says, it is exactly the opposite: God's plan is deeper. This was God's deeper plan: Israel is charged with the mandate of bringing all people closer to God. Only the wicked, like Amalek (says the Sfat Emet), interfere with this mission. But when Yitro came out to greet Moses, Moses and the Israelites embraced him. This is the meaning of the verse

“The Lord gives strength to his people”.

God gives strength to the Jews who, in turn, must embrace and lead non-Jews closer to God. Whatever one's manner of worship, belief and observance, as Christians, Moslems or as Jews, God is God for all people.

This past week International Holocaust Memorial Day was observed. And, when Pres. Obama spoke, he referenced several stories, one of which I close with:

Master Sargent Roddie Edmonds was captured as an American soldier by the Nazis and imprisoned in a Concentration Camp. When the Commandant entered Sgt. Edmonds barrack, he asked the Sgt. to identify the Jews, who would be taken to slaughter. Without hesitating Sgt. Edmonds responded: We are all Jews. Pres. Obama, in response to this story said, I cannot imagine a greater expression of Christianity than to say that we are all Jews.

Perhaps we are all Jews... and Christian. Yes, of course, we have our own practices, but our common belief in one God, in the God of Creation and the God who expects us to live moral and upright lives, that is the God we revere. Perhaps we are also Moslem, not the distortion of Islam proclaimed by Radical Moslems who exploit Islam and distort its message in order to wage “Amalakite” wars. But maybe there is within us the message of the true religion of Islam, which grew from Christianity, which grew from Judaism. We share common roots, values and beliefs.

Perhaps we need to see ourselves, not just as Jews but as People living in God's world, helping to bring all closer to God. And perhaps, if we have the strength to bring others to God, maybe that is the same strength we must use in order create the world for which we pray three times each day:

*Bayom HaHu....*

On that day, God shall reign over all creation. On that day God shall be one and his name, One.