



ALIYA-BY-ALIYA SEDRA SUMMARY

RABBI REUVEN TRADBURKS
RCA ISRAEL REGION

PARSHAT YITRO

Yitro joins Moshe. He advises Moshe to delegate to judges. At Mt. Sinai, G-d offers the Jewish people to be a treasured people. The Ten Commandments are given at Sinai. The people quake in response.



1ST ALIYA (18:1-12)

Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, moved by the exodus from Egypt, travels to meet Moshe, bringing Tzipora and the 2 sons. Moshe greets them and tells of all that has happened. Yitro blesses G-d, affirming that now he knows G-d is great, and offers offerings to Him.

Rashi claims that this story of Yitro occurs after the giving of the Torah – meaning, the Torah plucked it from its proper chronology and stuck it here.

That is striking. We are in the midst of a dramatic narrative of the journey from Egypt into the desert. Mt. Sinai is the destination. Yet this story has nothing to do with that journey.

Yitro, a non-Jewish leader of Midian comes to identify with the story of the Jewish people and to offer Moshe advice on how to manage his multiple responsibilities. An interesting story to be sure, but why interrupt the drama of the journey to Sinai with this story of court systems?

We can hear of it later in the Torah where it actually occurs.

A variety of answers can be offered. Perhaps this story of a non-Jew who is our friend is to contrast the last story we read of Amalek, a non-Jew who hated us.

There are different types of non-Jews that we will encounter in history; there are Amaleks. And Yitros. Amalek seeks our harm. Yitro seeks our G-d. Amalek sees our weakness. Yitro sees our greatness. Amalek fights us. Yitro partners with us.

This was a powerful lesson then and a powerful lesson now. We have enemies amongst the non-Jews, to be sure. And we have friends. Be discerning. Acknowledge the reality of our enemies. But also recognize our true friends.



2ND ALIYA (18:13-23)

Yitro observes the people standing and waiting all day for Moshe to adjudicate. Yitro questions this. Moshe responds: the people come seeking G-d; seeking adjudication; and I teach them G-d's laws. Yitro criticizes Moshe. And suggests: You inquire of G-d on their behalf. And teach them G-d's laws. But in addition, choose Judges who can adjudicate in your stead. Judges who are substantive, G-d fearing, men of truth and abhorring inappropriate gain.

Yitro offers good advice to Moshe; delegate authority to judges. But while he proposes delegating authority in the court system, he does *not* suggest delegating authority in Moshe's other roles. Because in those Moshe is simply irreplaceable.

Moshe told Yitro that he has 3 functions: aiding those seeking G-d, adjudicating disputes, and teaching G-d's commands. Now, we know what

In loving memory of
RABBI DR. O. ASHER REICHEL זצ"ל
on his 14th yahrzeit - י"ט שבט

*From the Bronner
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dealing with disputes means. But when Moshe says that people come to him seeking G-d, what he means is: I have access to G-d. He speaks to me. (Speaking to G-d isn't the trick; the trick is when He answers back.) Similarly, when Moshe says that he teaches G-d's law, what he means is that G-d communicates those laws to him and to no one else.

Yitro tells him: Moshe, you are telling me two things. You help the people communicate with G-d. No one else can do that. Keep that job.

But as for settling disputes, others can settle disputes. That's not G-d work, that is man work. People get into disagreements all the time. You have smart people of integrity who can help you settle those disagreements.



3RD ALIYA (18:24-27)

Moshe heard. He chose judges, with only the most difficult cases brought to him. Moshe sent Yitro home.

It could be that the insertion of this story of Yitro's suggestions concerning the court system is actually communicating a powerful comment on the nature of man. Because it finds its place in the series of events leading to Sinai.

It could be that the Torah is offering a statement concerning the development of man.

It is noticeable that following the splitting of the sea there is a series of very earthy stories. And they are, in order: no water, no food, manna and its rules, Amalek, Yitro and courts. Then, Mt. Sinai.

These are the stages in man's spiritual development.

First, we need the basics of food and water. But that is no different than animals.

Then the manna, with rules. Don't leave until tomorrow, gather double on Friday. Man, you have choice and it is that choice that distinguishes you from animals. You are an ethical being, a being of choice. A higher being.

Then conflict. We can settle our interpersonal conflicts in two ways. War. Or Courts. Power and aggression. Or submission to authority. That is the story of Amalek. Power. And Yitro, man expressing submission to authority.

This is the story of the stages of human development. We take care of our physical needs, exercise ethical choice, protect our security, and govern man to live in peace, with laws.

But. That does not suffice for the majesty of man. For man seeks meaning higher than his needs, his security and living in peace. He seeks a taste of the beyond, the spiritual, the ultimate, communication with the Infinite.

And that is Sinai. All of these stories were to teach us the necessary. But not the sufficient. Our needs, our security and our peaceful existence in society are all necessary. But they fall short of the Torah's definition of man. They are insufficient. Man needs a connection with the Divine, with ultimate meaning, with hyper-significance.

And that is Mt. Sinai, the touch of the Divine to man.



4TH ALIYA (19:1-6)

The people camped in the Sinai desert opposite the mountain. Moshe ascended the mountain. G-d told him: tell the people. If you will listen to Me, keep My covenant, then you will be a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation. Tell that to the Jewish people.

This short aliya is transformative. Up until now we know we have a covenant with G-d. He has drawn us to Him as His people.

But here He introduces the consequence of

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this covenant: you will be transformed as people. You will become something that you are not yet. You will become holy. Kohanim. Your loyalty to the mitzvot that I am about to give you will transform you into holy people.

That is exactly what we say in every bracha before we do any mitzvah – asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav – G-d made us holy through mitzvot. Mitzvot change us, alter us, elevate us, transform us into holy people.

This is an introduction to not only the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai but the entire rest of the Torah, the hundreds of mitzvot. Mitzvot are holy-ers. They will make you holy.



5TH ALIYA (19:7-19)

Moshe presents G-d's words to the people. They respond: all that G-d says we will do. G-d says: I will come to you in a cloud, so the people shall hear that I speak with you. Prepare them for 3 days for on the 3rd day I will descend in the view of all the people. No one shall touch the mountain. Moshe prepared the people. On the third day there was lightning and thunder, a thick cloud

and a powerful shofar sound. The people in the camp were afraid. Moshe brought them out to the mountain. It was all in smoke for G-d descended in fire. The mountain shook. The shofar increased in power. Moshe spoke; G-d's voice emanated.

The revelation of Sinai is the culmination of G-d's reach for man. He promises, He redeems us, and now He speaks, communicates.

And look at the unity. Are these the same Jewish people who complained 4 times in Parshat Beshalach? And who have so many disputes in the beginning of our parsha that Moshe adjudicates all day long? They are a cantankerous lot; yet here they all answer in unison. We are all in with this covenant.

Because there is a difference between our aspirations and our human foibles. We are at the same time great people, holy people, reacting with zeal to the offer of a covenant with God. We all want that. And yet, people we remain, with all our complaints, pettiness and disagreements. The complaints don't define us; our zeal for the covenant does.



6TH ALIYA (19:20-20:14)

G-d descended onto the mountain and called Moshe up the mountain. He warned him to again instruct the people to not touch the mountain for they would die. The Ten Commandments: I am G-d, no idols before Me, don't use G-d's name in vain, Shabbat, honor parents, don't murder, adultery, theft, false testimony, covet.

The profound significance of the Ten Commandments is not the particular commands; the commands are important but so are others. Rather, it is the notion that G-d descended onto the mountain to speak to mankind.

The descent of G-d onto the mountain is jarring. Dramatic. Unprecedented.

This is the culmination of G-d's reach for man.

In loving memory of

Ruth Fogelman a"h

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on her 1st Yahrtzeit - כ"ג בשבט

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There was Creation, then reaching for Avraham, then redeeming us from Egypt. He now descends to communicate with mankind. The story of the Torah is not the Jewish people discovering G-d. It is G-d reaching for man.

That is powerfully empowering. He wants us? We must be worthy partners, holy, elevated, worthy of His reach.



7TH ALIYA (20:15-23)

The people recoiled from seeing the thunder and lightning, the shofar sound and the smoking mountain. They said to Moshe: let G-d speak with you, but not to us, for we do not want to die. Moshe assured them that G-d came so they would fear Him. G-d commanded: You saw that I spoke with you from heaven. Therefore, have no other gods; rather make an earthen altar.

The people wanted to hear G-d's voice. Now they change their mind. It is too much.

Modern skeptics would reject the notion of Divine communication with man. After all, we moderns have never seen it. But that is exactly what the Torah says here. Of course you haven't seen it. Because man cannot tolerate it. It was done once in history. No more.

And it is for us to learn its lesson. Once. That G-d desires man. Speaks to man. Instructs man. But it will never occur again. Because man can't tolerate it. ■

May the Torah learned
from this issue
be in loving memory of and לע"נ

Debbie Markowitz a"h

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