

This is the week of the Big 10 -- This is the pivotal moment for the Jewish people both as a community and as individuals.

Tradition teaches us that everyone was at Sinai. Those not yet born, and even Jews by choice -- everyone's Neshama, soul was at Sinai. There is so much to say about revelation, the sounds and sights, the actual words and their meaning. But this morning, I want to talk about something different - Yitro. The man for whom this parasha is named.

The ancient rabbis were confused by Yitro. Was he this amazing guy who had spent his life immersed in idolatry and later “finds the true God” and throws his lot in with the Jewish people? Is he a father-in-law reuniting his daughter and grandsons with their father? Does he remain a part of the Jewish people in some way, even though the text tells us that he returns to Midyan?

Yitro arrives, is greeted by Moshe. Their major discussion is the establishment of a court system. Yet, it takes another chapter before any laws are revealed. **Yitro arrives before the Big 10**, inspires, suggests and in essence establishes the courts that are going to follow the Jewish people for the next 40 years. But let's hold on to that question for the end.

What do we know about Yitro and his place in the current narrative?

The early story is simple and well known. Moshe runs from Pharaoh after killing an Egyptian taskmaster, meets a family of sisters at a well in

Midyan and is invited to join the family of Yitro, who is a priest and marries Tziporah as his wife.

Already something strange is happening here -- Moshe, the one God will choose to save the Jewish people, marries Tziporah, the daughter of an idolatrous priest. Does this sound Kosher? Perhaps Moshe is so influenced by this life in Egypt that even after it is revealed he is an Israelite himself, he is immersed in idolatry and the family of Yitro felt comfortable to him?

After all he did not run away with the intention of saving the Jewish people, just with the intention of saving his own neck.

Moshe rejoins the Jewish people after his experience at the burning bush. This exceptional and **personal** revelation does not allow Moshe to deny his heritage any longer, and he now knows what he is meant to do and how he is meant to do it.

Moshe leaves Yitro's home with his wife and children, and yet along the way, we learn that his family returns to Midyan. Was Tziporah unable to give up the idolatry of her own childhood? Did she not trust the God of Moshe and his ancestors? Did she want to raise her boys in the tradition of her family? Was it just too dangerous to bring her back to Egypt? We have no idea.

Now let's go forward to perhaps learn about the past. A story told in the Talmud about Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva is one of the greatest sages in

the Talmud. Rabbi Akiva was 40 years old before he learned the Aleph-Bet and began his study of Torah.

Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis offers an interesting understanding of Rabbi Akiva that may help us understand Yitro and his actions.

Rabbi Akiva watched the natural world around him and observed the following. *“If water can erode a stone, then surely Torah can alter a mind or a heart... He therefore embarked upon a life of Torah study. **To be sure, many others had also witnessed the same phenomenon, but only Akiva truly observed and "heard" this message.**”* Yitro perhaps makes a similar observation. Yitro heard it through the grapevine and acted accordingly.

Rabbi Chaim Walder suggests: *“ When Yitro heard of the Exodus and the miracles that were performed for the Jewish People *his happiness was so great that he felt physically elated, like someone who weeps or faints through being overwhelmed with the emotion of unexpected joy. Literally, his flesh started to prickle. He had gooseflesh.* (18:9)*

No such extreme reaction characterizes the response of the Jewish People. They believed in God and Moshe, His servant, sure, but there is no mention of a similar visceral reaction like that of Yitro.

Based on these two modern scholars, Yitro sounds like a pretty great guy, and honoring him with naming the Parasha that includes the big 10 is beautifully appropriate.

The ancient rabbis question what exactly he heard through the ancient grapevine. Was it the story of the splitting of the sea? Was it the victory over Amalek who made war on the Israelites soon after their redemption? **Could it even be that Yitro heard about the 10 commandments and decided, well he had to do something -- after all his daughter and grandsons were still living under his roof.** *It is this last explanation that continues to confuse us. Yitro arrives at the beginning of the parasha before the revelation at Sinai.*

Rashi is less interested in what Yitro heard, but focuses on the difference between passive and active listening. *Yitro heard and then chose to act.* Choosing to act upon what one hears is the lesson Rashi is teaching.

Whether we hear God's call to add mitzvot to our lives, or whether we hear the call of those around us - those in our community and beyond **we should follow the example of Yitro and not just hear, but react!**

So what happens when Yitro finally does arrive at the Israelite camp? He does what any mentor, parent, and person of experience should do in the same situation.

Yitro, a leader in his own right, inherently knows the challenges that Moshe will face as a leader of a large community that up until now has not really had any type of leadership. Yitro visits Moshe not just to reunite him with his family, but because he knows that Moshe is going to need help.

Yitro is mentioned in only 27 of the verses of this week's parasha. Yet in those 27 verses he likely saves Moshe's sanity for the next 40 years. Yitro knows from experience that a single person can not lead alone. Yitro knows that Moshe is already on the verge of burnout. Very little is ever said about Tziporah, Gershom and Eliezer in conjunction to their family life with Moshe -- Moshe had no time for them! He was so busy trying to lead stubborn people, teach them the ways of God and keep them out of trouble. He has almost no homelife. Ask any government leader what it is like to share their homelife with their job responsibilities - almost always, one or the other suffers.

Yitro, **is a man of action**. It does not matter exactly what Yitro heard, it matters that Yitro **acts** quickly because he knows that Moshe is going to need his help.

This mentorship is impressive for a variety of reasons. From their relationship, we learn we are not only mentored by people who are like us. We can learn from people who are different, and we can learn from people who are extremely different. What we know about Yitro at this point in the narrative is that he is still a high priest of an idolatrous nation.

We can have opposing views, and yet somehow **if we are open minded enough, kind enough, accepting enough**, we can forge relationships that bridge our differences and allow us to learn the good from one another.

It is a challenge to listen to people who are different. It is a challenge to say that there is something to learn from people who behave differently

and have different beliefs. Yet Yitro, the father in law of Moses, teaches us that amongst the differences that there is much to learn if we are only open to looking for it.

So is anyone still wondering about the judiciary that was set up before there was a system of law? I personally kept coming back to the idea of the chicken or the egg - which comes first.

I love our sages. They see utterly no problem with the chicken or the egg. They understand the concept “ein mukdam o’ ein muchar batorah.” There is not before or after in the Torah. It does not matter that it seems odd that a judiciary was established before laws were given. The sages focus on the outcome. The Torah is revealed and Moshe has a clear way to be a productive leader of his people.

Shabbat Shalom.