



**Partners In Torah**

**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**

**Take home Dvar Torah**

**תשפ"ה Parshat Yitro**

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***Hello, Welcome!***

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

***Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.***

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.**

Yitro, the person for whom this week's portion is named, should have been the very last person in the world to have a portion in the Torah named for him. After all, he spent most of his life serving idols. And not only did he serve every idol that he could get his hands on, he became its high priest and taught its tenets to his followers! Such a person you would expect to find respectfully spoken about in Hashem's Torah with an entire portion named after him? Hardly! So what is so special about this man that made him worthy of this honor?

The answer lies in the first word of the portion, *וישמע* - *and he heard*. Here is the first verse in this week's portion (Exodus 18:1).

(א) וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה וְלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ בְּיַצֵּאת אֱת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם

1) **Yitro**, the minister of Midyan, Moshe's father-in-law, **heard** everything that Hashem did to Moshe and to Israel, his people – that Hashem had taken Israel out of Egypt.

Inspired by what he heard, Yitro immediately took Tzipporah, Moshe's wife, and their two children, and came out to the desert to join Moshe and the Jewish people. He did not take the time to liquidate his assets or finish off a few last items that needed to be taken care of; he instead seized the moment of inspiration, took Tzipporah and the boys, and went to greet Moshe and the Jewish people. (After the burning bush, Moshe went to Egypt alone, leaving his wife and children with his father-in-law.) With this, the Torah has revealed to us one of the things that Hashem found so special about Yitro. As we will see, there is much that we can learn from him.

Yitro has a long history in our Torah.

Our first encounter with him is in the Midrash as one of Pharaoh's three top advisors. Along with Bilam, and Job, he was present when

Pharaoh came up with his plan to exterminate the Jews. The deliberations covered the method they would use to kill the Jewish baby boys, and it was decided that since Hashem had promised never to destroy the world with a flood, throwing the babies into the river would be the best option. When the vote was called, Bilam was in favor, Job did not express an opinion, and Yitro opposed it, resulting in his need to flee for his life to escape Pharaoh's ire.

Yet this privileged knowledge of Pharaoh's plans to exterminate the Jews gave Yitro a deeper appreciation of the events that befell the Egyptians. In his description of what had impressed him, Yitro said, (Verse 11),

יֵאָדָעַתִּי כִּי גָדוֹל יְדֹדֵךְ מִכָּל הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי בִדְבַר אֲשֶׁר זָדוּ עֲלֵיהֶם

*11) Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the gods, for in the matter in which the Egyptians had conspired against them (Hashem punished them).*

Pharaoh killed the babies in the river, and Pharaoh and his army met their end in the sea. Hashem's method of punishment is measure for measure, and Yitro was able to see the correlation between Pharaoh's evil plans and the punishments that he ultimately received for them. This knowledge played an important role in Yitro seeing that Hashem was in control. *Coincidences like these, don't happen in real life.* There was a plan and a method to what Hashem did to Pharaoh, and Yitro perceived how the pieces fit together perfectly.

This verse reveals another facet of Yitro's life. He proclaimed, *"Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the other gods!"* How would he know? Because he had served them all! And after serving each one with his heart and soul until he rose in the ranks to become its high priest, he discovered their respective fatal flaws and left it to try the next one. He

spent his entire life searching for the truth, going from one “god” to the next, until he found the truth with Hashem and the Torah.

Yitro suffered scorn and rejection from the adherents to all the false gods that he rejected, but that didn’t bother him. He stood strong in his pursuit of the truth and did not allow social pressure to deter him. This happened time and again, but Yitro remained committed to finding the true religion and the true G-d to serve.

When Moshe, to save his life, ran away from Pharaoh to Midyan, he met Yitro’s daughters at the well. They were banned from taking water because their father was excommunicated as a result of his “different” beliefs, which is why Moshe needed to rescue them from the hands of the other shepherds.

What further distinguished Yitro from the millions of others who also heard of the miracles that Hashem performed for the Jews in Egypt, as well as the blow that Hashem dealt the Egyptians in the sea, was that he internalized what he heard. Everyone else lifted their eyebrows and said to himself, “Wow! That’s amazing!” and then just went back to life as usual. What they heard did not affect them at all.

But when Yitro heard of these miraculous events, he felt them deeply, realized their significance, and took them to heart. “This must be the creator of the world and *my* creator! He created me for a reason, and I can finally find out the purpose for my existence, and what I am here to accomplish!” He gathered his family and belongings, left everything else behind him, and went out to the desert to join the true religion, Judaism.

Thus, we have the great complement that Hashem bestowed on Yitro with the first word of this parsha. **“Yitro heard!”** He absorbed, and made a part of himself, what he heard.

The Torah's most important verse for a Jew is "***Shma Yisroel ...***" **Hear O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.** With these words we proclaim Hashem as the one and only G-d in the world, and our G-d.

The *Rashba* (Rabbi **Shlomo Ben Aderet** 1235-1310) was once asked. "What should a person be thinking when he says the word שמע - *shma* - Listen , when reciting the Shma Yisroel prayer?"

The Rashba answers that the word "*shma*" has three different meanings in scripture.

1. Simply to listen carefully to the words being spoken so you know the message being conveyed.

2. King Solomon asked Hashem for a לב שומע - translated as "*a listening heart.*" What King Solomon was requesting was an *understanding heart*, one that would be sensitive to his subjects' needs. Hence, the word שמע (*shema*) also means to understand. This is the second meaning of שמע - *understand*.

3. In Proverbs (1:8) King Solomon says: שמע בני מוסר אביך - *Listen my son to the discipline of your father.* The word שמע - *listen*- here, means to obey or accept to do. This is the third meaning of the word שמע - *obey*.

שו"ת הרשב"א חלק ה סימן נה

באומרו שמע ישראל, כולל ג' ענינים שנצטוינו לשמוע וללמוד כי לולי שנשמע ונלמוד לא נתבונן אליו. ואחרי השמיעה והלימוד וחיקור היטב אם יש ראייה סותרת ח"ו ואחר שנבא מתוך השמיעה אל החקירה באמת תביאנו החקירה ותכריחנו הכרח אמת לקבל ולהאמין כי הוא ית' נמצא וכן הוא משגיח על פרטי מעשנו

Hence, the Rashba answers.

*Therefore, saying the word Shema includes three ideas. 1. To listen and learn about Hashem, because if we don't learn, we can't know Him.*

2. Then, we have to make Hashem a reality to ourselves through proofs and critical thinking. 3. This will bring us to live our lives with the realization that Hashem exists and that He is in control of everything in our lives.

This is what we are saying when say the Shema and we proclaim our belief in the one and only Hashem, Creator and Master of the universe. שמע - 1, 2 & 3 above, O Israel! Hashem Elokeinu is the Master of all that transpires in the world and He is One.

Only Yitro *heard* with all three meanings, therefore, he was the only one to join Moshe and the Jewish people in the wilderness and convert to Judaism.

Rashi's very first comment on this portion delves deeper into the matter. Rashi says:

(א) וישמע יתרו - מה שמועה שמע ובא קריעת ים סוף ומלחמת עמלק

1) *What exactly did he hear that compelled him to come? The splitting of the Reed Sea and the war with Amalek.*

In last week's portion, *Beshalach*, we read how the entire Jewish nation crossed through the Reed Sea on dry land, with the water standing erect and giving them passage. When the pursuing Egyptians entered the very same dry channels, the waters came crashing down upon them and drowned them. It is easy to understand how such a miracle would impress Yitro and make him want to join a nation whose G-d is so powerful.

The final episode recorded in the previous parsha was the war with Amalek. Our Sages note that Rashi did not say, "The victory over Amalek," but, rather, "**the war with Amalek.**" Amalek merely having instigated a war with the Jewish people sufficed to influence Yitro to come. How was that?

Yitro was struck with the following question: How could Amalek possibly start a war with the Jewish people? After seeing the amazing miracles demonstrating Hashem's might and dominion over every aspect of creation, did they think they could defeat the nation of such a powerful G-d? Indeed, Hashem had just turned the world upside down to free the Jews from Egypt! It would be suicidal to start up with them, and they knew that very well. But they had a slightly more insidious agenda: they were out to dampen and diminish the awe that the Jewish people held in the eyes of the world, and this goal would be achieved even if they were decimated. They were so evil that they were prepared to give their lives to diminish the image of the Jewish nation.

The Midrash illustrates this with the following parable.

מדרש תנחומא כי תצא - פרק ט

אמר רבי חוניא: מלה"ד לאמבטי רותחת שלא היתה בריה יכולה לירד בתוכה. בא בן בליעל אחד וקפץ לתוכה. אע"פ שנכוה, הקירה לפני אחרים. אף כאן כיון שיצאו ישראל ממצרים הקב"ה קרע הים לפניהם ונשתקעו המצרים לתוכו נפל פחדן על כל האומות שנא' (שמות טז) אז נבהלו אלופי אדום וגו' כיון שבא עמלק ונדדווג להם אע"פ שנטל את שלו מתחת ידן הקירו לפני או"ה.

*Rabbi Chunya said, "It's like a tub filled with boiling water that no one would dare enter. Some jerk came along and jumped in. Even though he was burned in the process, he, nevertheless, cooled the water off for everyone else. In the same sense, when the Jewish people exited Egypt, and Hashem split the sea for them drowning the Egyptians, the fear of the Jews fell upon all the nations. Once Amalek warred with them, even though they got burned, they still succeeded in cooling off the fear that the nations had towards the Jewish people."*

Yitro was struck by the fact that people could be so evil that they would even sacrifice their lives to hurt others. He realized that people,



left on their own, without a connection to the Divine, can sink to the lowest possible level. He had to go and join the Jewish nation and connect himself to Hashem so he would not fall prey to depravity.

Harav Eliyahu Lopian זצ"ל writes (שב"י לב קד) that after hearing of all the atrocities committed by the Nazis י"ש in the Holocaust, a group of well-known atheists in London became religious. They explained their change of heart. "Now that we have seen that without a connection to the Divine, a human being can turn into something more malicious and evil than wild animals, we realize that we need to have a connection to Hashem to remain good."

The following is the transcription of part of a lecture given by the late Lord Johnathan Sacks ז"ל.

*The Holocaust is in and of itself is not a new challenge to faith. Exactly the same question could have been asked about the first two human children, Cain and Abel. Why did Hashem let Cain kill Abel? He knew that Cain was angry with Able. He knew that Cain was harboring murderous thoughts. He asked Cain, "Why are you angry? You know that sin is crouching at the door. You can dominate it, but it wants to dominate you. Why did G-d let Cain kill Abel? And the truth is, that that is the Jewish equation. We believe that G-d gave us freedom. It is the most fateful decision He made in the entire universe. Freedom means that if we do well, we are a little lower than the angels, but if we do bad, we are lower even than the beasts. That is our world. G-d teaches us what is good and what is evil, what we should do and what we should not do. But He does not intervene to force us to do good or to prevent us from doing evil.*

*In 1995, the BBC asked me to make a film at Auschwitz for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War. I had never*

*been to Auschwitz before; I didn't want to go. I went, and I stood there in the middle of Auschwitz Birkenau for the first time. And I suddenly knew where G-d was at Auschwitz. He was there in the words - לא תרצח - You shall not murder. In the words, וגר לא תונו - Do not oppress the stranger. In the words דמי אחיך צועקים אלי מן האדמה - Your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.*

*But in one sense the Holocaust changed the whole human equation. Let me explain why.*

*The culture that produced the Holocaust was not at some distant place or time. It took place in the heart of the most sophisticated culture the world has ever known. A culture that had reached the very heights of human achievement in science, in philosophy, in rationalism, in democracy. This was the culture of Kant and Hegel and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The Culture of Goethe and Schiller and Bach and Beethoven. The people who signed the Bonze declaration in January 1942, the final solution aimed at the elimination רחמנא ליצלן of all of Europe's 11 million Jews, of the people sitting around that table resolving on that plan, half of them, more than half of them carried the title "Doctor." They were either medical doctors or they had doctorates.*

*And that was just Germany. France the country that gave us the revolution in 1789 the universal declaration of human rights... That country was the country that produced Edouard Drumont who wrote one of the most antisemitic books ever written, La France Juive, in the 1880's which went through 200 editions between then and 1945. It was a bestseller for 60 years. France was the country of the Dreyfus trial. France was the country that actively collaborated with the Nazis and rounded up Jews for deportation without even being asked by the Nazis.*

*As for Vienna. Vienna, the cultural capital of Europe, was the epicenter of antisemitism. Its Mayor Karl Lueger in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was the man who turned Adolf Hitler into an antisemite.*

*When the Austrians voted on the Anschluss, (the annexation of the Federal State of Austria into the German Reich, March 12, 1938) 97% of the population voted in favor of Hitler. And that was the country that made its chief Rabbi, Rabbi Dr. Teitelbaum get down on his knees and scrub the pavements of Vienna while the Viennese stood and laughed. Austria was the country where in March 1938 at the time of the Anschluss, 500 Jews committed suicide knowing what was going to happen.*

*They played string quartets at Auschwitz Birkenau, as one and a quarter million Jews, and Gypsies and homosexuals were gassed and burned and turned to ash.*

*After the Holocaust some people lost their faith, some people kept their faith and some people found faith in G-d, but after the Holocaust it is morally impossible to believe in man. (I say this not like) The Holocaust is the final decisive refutation of the idea that you can have a humane civilization without יראת שמים - without the fear of Heaven - and without a belief in sanctity of life. The Holocaust may make some people lose their faith in G-d, but it must make all people lose their faith in humankind. Without יראת שמים – homo homini lupus est - man is like a wild animal to man. After Auschwitz you have to be either very ignorant, or very naïve to believe in secular humanism. The real challenge of the Shoa is not to faith, but to lack of faith.”*

Looking back at Yitro, we realize that there is really much that we can learn from him. He is most worthy of having a portion of the Torah named after him because he is a shining example of how we should be.

Yitro was someone who spent his entire life in pursuit of the truth. He did not care about the effort and time invested in all the false gods that he tried. When he discovered the fatal flaw in the idol, he cast it off and set off to find the next candidate. And when the real thing came along, he didn't flinch and went for it at great sacrifice.

He was also someone who took the events that transpired around him to heart. He "heard" the message, and listened to it. When he heard that after all that they saw, Amalek went to war with the Jewish nation, he realized that a person without fear of Heaven can be more cruel and sadistic than a beast. He had to join the Jewish nation to connect himself to Hashem.

This lesson applies today as well. Society has drifted so far from the Torah's morals and values, which have always provided a stable framework for life. Simple values like family, integrity, and honesty are rare qualities in today's society. These are the core values of the Torah and form the basis for a minimal quality of life. We must reconnect to the Torah in a very deep way to restore our compass of what is important and critical for living an upstanding and fulfilling life. Our search for the truth and the proper foundations upon which to build our lives should lead us to the true and tried values of the Torah, which have endured unchanged for thousands of years have created the framework within which the Jewish nation have flourished and thrived, and have become a beacon for what is good and proper in the world. There is no nation like the Jewish nation, and we must do everything within our power to keep it that way.