YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat YITRO**

### Sicha of HarAV Ezra Bick

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**In loving memory of
Yitzchak and Sheva Shayndel Schwartz z"l
whose yahrzeit is 13 Shvat.
By Avi and Sarah Schwartz**

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**"Now I Know That the Lord Is Greater Than All the Gods"**

Summarized by Hadar Horowitz

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

*Chazal* raise a well-known question:by what virtue did Yitro merit to have a *parasha* named after him? The question is intensified by the fact that the *parasha* bearing his name also describes the giving of the Torah: how is it that the *parasha* is named after Yitro, rather than after the singular and exalted event that occurs in it? We might also ask more generally about the Torah’s attitude to Yitro: Every character appearing in the Bible is significant – so why is Yitro mentioned? What does he contribute to our understanding of the unfolding of events?

The section about Yitro at the beginning of our *parasha* is divided into two parts. In the first part, we are told of his arrival at the Israelite camp with his daughter Tzippora, who was Moshe’s wife, and their sons Gershom and Eliezer. This story seems superfluous: many fathers-in-law have visited their sons-in-law, and the Torah did not bother to tell us about each and every one of them! The second part takes place the next day, when Yitro sees Moshe counseling the people from morning to night and suggests that he appoint judges for them. Perhaps, then, we can answer our question of why Yitro is mentioned: perhaps it is in order to commend him for his advice and to thank him for having assisted Moshe.

There is a valuable educational message conveyed here – but this answer seems only partially correct. After all, Moshe's appointment of the judges is described again at the beginning of the book of *Devarim*, and Yitro is not mentioned there at all:

So I took the heads of your tribes, wise men, and full of knowledge, and made them heads over you, captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, and captains of fifties, and captains of tens, and officers, tribe by tribe. And I charged your judges at that time, saying: Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. (*Devarim* 1:15-16)

If the story of the appointment of the judges could be told in *Sefer Devarim* without mentioning Yitro, presumably it could have been told without him in our *parasha* as well. And yet, Yitro is mentioned many times in our *parasha*, beginning with the phrases: "And Yitro heard... And Yitro took... And Yitro came" (*Shemot* 18:1, 2, 5), and more.

Thus, we return to the question with which we began: Why is the *parasha* named after Yitro? Why is it important to describe his actions at all?

**Yitro's Blessing**

So far, we have focused on the second part of the Yitro story – his advice to Moshe to appoint judges – and have not found a solution to our difficulty. In my opinion, the emphasis should be placed instead on the first part of the story of Yitro – his arrival at the camp of Israel.

Anyone who pays attention can sense the drama in the Biblical account of Yitro. After Moshe relates the miracles that God performed for Israel, Yitro responds:

And Yitro said: **Blessed be the Lord**, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of Pharaoh; who has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that **the Lord is greater than all gods**…. (*Shemot* 18:10-11)

The Gemara in tractate *Sanhedrin* praises Yitro for these words:

A *Tanna* taught in the name of Rabbi Pappias: It was a reproach to Moshe and the six hundred thousand [Israelites] that they did not bless [the Lord] until Yitro came and did so. (*Sanhedrin* 94a)

The criticism of the Jewish people for not having thanked God until then is understandable; but why were they contrasted specifically to Yitro? It is difficult to say that what is unique about Yitro is that he was the first to use the term "blessed," for this is simply not true. We find much earlier that Eliezer blessed God, saying: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Avraham, who has not forsaken His mercy and His truth toward my master" (*Bereishit* 24:27); even before him, Malkitzedek proclaimed: "And blessed be God the Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (*Bereishit* 14:20); and before that, Noach said: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem" (*Bereishit* 9:26). If so, what was so special about Yitro's blessing?

The answer to this is that Yitro’s blessing was different because he recited it over a miracle. The Mishna in the last chapter of *Berakhot* teaches that one recites a blessing over a miracle:

If one sees a place where miracles have been wrought for Israel, he should say: "Blessed be He who wrought miracles for our ancestors in this place." (Mishna *Berakhot* 9:1)

The Gemara clarifies the source of this blessing:

From where is this derived? Rabbi Yochanan said: From the verse that states: "And Yitro said: Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you, etc." (*Berakhot* 54a)

There are various blessings recited when seeing certain phenomena (*birkot re'iya*), but this is the only one for which the Gemara seeks a source. A blessing at its essence is seeing the hand of God in nature. For example, when one recites a blessing upon seeing the sea, lightning, or a rainbow, he acknowledges that these are all the work of God.

In contrast, Yitro blesses God not for His revelation in nature, but for the *miracle* He performed for the people of Israel; that is why the Gemara learns from him the blessing that is recited when seeing the place of a miracle. Yitro proclaims: "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods," that is to say, God is beyond the world and nature. Not only does Yitro acknowledge God in his blessing, but he expresses his awe in the face of God's breaking of the laws of nature. He recognizes that God is the supreme, sole power, and that nature is subservient to Him.

So far, in the book of *Shemot*, a "war" has been fought between God and the gods of Egypt, as expressed in the magicians' counter-miracles to the plagues inflicted by God: "And the magicians of Egypt did in like manner with their secret arts" (*Shemot* 7:22). Yitro proclaims that God is greater "than all gods," that now, after the exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the sea, God has "won" and proven to all that He is the supreme power in the world. Yitro could see this because he was looking at the situation from the outside, as an observer: while the Israelites had been immersed in a terrible situation and experienced the exodus as their salvation from it, Yitro understood the broader significance of the miracles involved. Often, "the person for whom a miracle is performed is unaware of the miracle" (*Nidda* 31a).

This is also how we can understand the words of the Midrash that Yitro was tainted with idolatry:

"That the Lord, He is God" (*Devarim* 4:35) – The Rabbis said: Yitro ascribed reality to idolatry, as it is stated: "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods [implying there *are* other gods]”… Moshe set Him even in the hollow of the earth, as it is stated: "That the Lord, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth; there is no other" (*Devarim* 4:39). What is "there is no other"? Even in the hollow of the earth. (*Devarim Rabba Va-etchanan* 2)

While Yitro perhaps initially thought that idolatry had some significance, ultimately, it was Yitro who came to recognize that the God of Israel is the supreme power above and beyond nature. In light of this, it is clear what is special about his blessing, and we can understand why the Torah saw fit to relate his story and especially his blessing.

**The Torah and the Covenant**

Now that we understand what was so special about Yitro's blessing that it merited that the *parasha* be named after him, a further question arises: Why was it necessary for the story of Yitro take place precisely at this juncture, before the giving of the Torah?

A possible answer to this is found in a midrashic exposition about the silence at Sinai:

Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah, no bird tweeted, no fowl flew, no bull lowed, no wheels flew, seraphs did not say: "Holy, holy," the sea did not tremble, people did not speak; rather, the entire world was quiet and silent, and the voice issued forth: "I am the Lord your God"…

If you are astonished by this, behold, Eliyahu, when he came to Carmel, assembled all the priests [of Ba’al] and said to them: "Call in a great voice… as he is a god…” (I *Melakhim* 18:27). What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He muted the entire world and silenced the heavenly and earthly beings. The world was emptiness and disorder as though there was no creature in the world, as it is stated: "There was no voice, no respondent, and no listener" (I *Melakhim* 18:29). Had anyone spoken, they would have said that Ba’al responded. All the more so, when the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke on Mount Sinai, He silenced the entire world, **so the people would know that there is no one other than He**, and He said: "I am the Lord your God." And regarding the future, it is written: "I, it is I who is your Comforter" (*Yeshayahu* 51:12). (*Shemot Rabba Yitro* 29)

This *midrash* describes a total silence at two occasions: at the gathering at Mount Carmel, when the prophets of Ba’al attempted to summon their god, God silenced all the worlds so not a sound would be heard that the prophets of Ba’al could claim was a response from their god. That is, the purpose of the silencing was to show that there is no other power in the world but the Creator. So too beforehand, when the Torah was given at Sinai, there was a total silencing of the entire world, and only the voice of the Creator was heard. The world was hushed to such an extent that even the angels ceased from saying "Holy…" – to express the fact that from the moment the Torah was given, the Jewish people are the only entity in our world that represents God.

This is precisely what God said to the people of Israel before the giving of the Torah:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed hearken to My voice, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own treasure from among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel. (*Shemot* 19:4-6)

This message – that there is no power in the world but God, which is expressed by that silence – is identical to the message expressed by Yitro in his blessing. Yitro teaches us that "there is no other beside Him" (*Devarim* 4:35), that is, that God is the only power in the world.

This insight must be applied to our daily lives: There is a widespread religious perception today, to our sorrow, that we live our own lives, and alongside this we must be careful to observe the Torah's laws by not transgressing prohibitions and by doing what we are obligated to do. Within this framework, the individual strives to live his personal life so that the Torah's legal system will interfere with him as little as possible. The words of Yitro come to teach us the exact opposite: there is nothing else in the world but God, to whom one should be subservient. Torah should be the entire content of life itself, and it is the true path of our lives. The Torah is not merely a code of law, but a covenant between the Jewish people and God.

We might have thought otherwise, and understood from the verses that describe "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" that it was a deal – God saved us from Egypt, and we in return serve Him and fulfill what He commanded us. But this is not so: we fulfill the *mitzvot* because serving God is our life and our purpose.

In the past, the problem was different. People would keep only some of the *mitzvot*. For example, there were people who would go to shul on Shabbat morning and then go to work; it was told of people who were honored with lifting up the Torah that they would bend over and coins would fall out of their pockets. Today, the primary challenge is not in the full observance of the *mitzvot*, but rather in the perception of the *mitzvot* as the content of our lives and in the internalization of a profound emotional connection to them.

This position has implications for the halakhic process. In the past, people would take on stringencies because they perceived the *mitzvot* as their way of life and therefore wanted to observe them in the most complete way, whereas today, the expression "the power of leniency is preferable" is commonplace, and people seek to find a way to be lenient wherever possible. We should strive to perceive the service of God as the content of our lives, and in our day, this is the message that is most important to emphasize.

To conclude, Onkelos renders the words "and I will bring you to Me" (*Shemot* 10:4) as "and I will bring you to My service." But the Ramban criticizes Onkelos for his interpretation, explaining that God does not want the Jewish people to serve Him exclusively through observance of His commandments; He brought the Jewish people close to *Himself*, not just to His service. In light of his words, it is clear why Yitro’s actions are described prior to the giving of the Torah: Yitro introduces the idea that there is nothing besides Him and that all of reality is nullified before the Creator, and therefore we must accept the Torah as a covenant that brings us closer to God, and that it should be the content of our lives. Only now, based on this this deep understanding, can we accept the Torah.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Rav Ezra Bick on Shabbat *Parashat Yitro* 5779.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)