

Yitro – 5782

I have often been troubled by the fact that the giving of the ten commandments at Sinai was found in a parsha named after Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. By the time Moses ascends Mount Sinai to meet with HaShem to hear the awesome words spoken on that day, Moses was already an old man by our standards of today. That meant that his father-in-law was that much older. It is also important to note that he was not, in our modern parlance, a member of the tribe. Remember he was a Midianite who gave Moses refuge when he fled from Egypt after killing the slave driver. The first few verses of the parsha remind us of that fact and point out that when Jethro, Yitro, heard of what HaShem had caused to happen to the Egyptians and their Pharaoh, he took the family of Moses out to meet him and reunite Moses with his nuclear family. What happens next is crucial to what is to follow and teaches several important lessons. First it points out what is involved in the management of a people soon to become a nation. But it also says a great deal about familial relationships as well as the nature of leadership.

First let's look into the lesson about managing the business of running a group of people. Yitro sees how Moses spends all his time adjudicating the cases brought before him by the Israelites. Moses points out to Yitro that he also interprets the word of HaShem for the people that inquire. Yitro correctly points out to his son-in-law that he has to delegate authority and keep himself as the judge of last resort, so to speak, so that he does not get bogged down in the minutiae of the daily life of his people. How fitting that this lesson comes before the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai. We are soon to become a nation of laws and the rule of law, and such a nation needs not

just the laws but the mechanisms for interpreting those laws and managing jurisprudence based on the implementation of those laws and what is to happen if they are broken. This is obviously a very important lesson and on its own could qualify as the reason for the place of honour of Yitro in the title of the parsha. However, there is more still to come.

While we correctly say that these last three parshiot, Bo, Beshallah, and Yitro mark the passage from slavery to freedom and the creation of our national identity, we are reminded subtly at the very beginning of the parsha that our nation is nothing more than a collection of families. Yitro brings Zipporah, the wife of Moses, as well as his children to meet their husband and father in the wilderness of Sinai not just because Yitro is prepared to accept the suzerainty of HaShem over the affairs of man but also because our national ethos is founded upon the idea of family. It is within the bosom of the family that we play out our most cherished customs and it is important that Moses, as the leader of his people, have his family around him to show the nation how crucial family life is but as well how important that strength is in providing sustenance to its leaders.

Finally, however, I come to what I think is the most important message in light of what is to follow. Moses is now going to be privy to the presence of HaShem and the hearing of his message which must be conveyed to the people. Who is this man who will be the leader of his people in the years ahead? What qualities does he possess that would cause the Children of Israel to hearken unto his voice and follow his lead? He is a man who has already listened to the voice of HaShem and followed his commandments, but the Israelite nation is likely not privy to that story of the murdering of a slavedriver and probably not aware of the episode of the burning bush. They will know that he listens to HaShem and that HaShem

has given him special powers. They've seen with their own eyes the parting of the Sea of Reeds and the entrapment of the Egyptians. But the listening to Yitro and the establishment of a system of justice shows them the human side of Moshe, the side that is respectful of his father-in-law and not above listening to the advice of any old man. The Fifth Commandment to come is to Honour Thy Father and Thy Mother. In other words, to remember that our elders as represented to us by our parents have something to teach us about life and living and that we should not be above hearing of those lessons and acting on them.

WE are being given at Sinai and throughout the decades to come before we actually end up in the promised land, a road map to follow that will make of us a holy nation and a light unto the other nations. Although the rabbis remind us that each of us is to think of ourselves as having been led out of bondage to Pharoah at the seder table and having heard the words of HaShem at Sinai, we also know that this image is to be passed down from generation to generation. It will only work if we follow the lead of the generation that precedes us and in our own time, we are witnessing what happens when those traditions are NOT being kept by our children and our grandchildren and what the implications are for our future peoplehood. Moses sets an example of MiDor LeDor, respect for elders and respect for their words and guidance that has been part of the impact of the Ten Commandments on our lives and our world. We need to figure out a way to pass on that message to our own next generation in each and every family and thereby to the nation of Israel so that the next generation can sing Am Yisrael Chai and mean the Am part, not just one segment.