

Faith Matters: Spiritual transformation: Father-in-law of Moses reshaped by what he heard

Spiritual transformation often reflects a process of inner change.

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Tuesday, June 27, 2023



The Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, are read using a pointer called a "yad" (literally means hand in Hebrew) to follow the words from right to left. Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, mirrors a spiritual rebirth where we read in the opening words of Exodus 18:1 "Vayishma-and he heard," a verb exposing the core of Jethro's religious experience, writes Rabbi Moshe Meirovich. Mirko Petricevic / Torstar file photo

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Case in point: Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, mirrors a spiritual rebirth where we read in the opening words of Exodus 18:1 "Vayishma-and he heard," a verb exposing the core of Jethro's religious experience.

Rabbinic commentary sheds light on his spiritual awakening.

"And Jethro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, heard all that God had done for Moses and to his people that the Lord had brought them out of Egypt."

What report did Jethro *hear*? Rabbi Joshua declared: "He heard of the victory against Amalek and he came ..." (Exodus 17: 8-16)

"He heard of the Revelation of the Torah at Sinai and he came ..." (Exodus 20: 1-14)

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov asserted: "He heard about the splitting of the sea and he came ..." (Exodus 15: 1-21)

What is self-evident, Jethro's auditory response reshapes his spiritual identity with God, Moses and the sacred community of the Israelites. How so?

The Torah first identifies him as "Jethro, priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law." (Exodus 18:1)

In the next verse, the Torah drops Jethro's title where he is now described as "Jethro, Moses' father-in-law."

Lastly, several verses later (18:17) his name is eliminated completely and he is simply referred to as "Moses' father-in-law." With the erasure of his name and priestly title, Jethro's religious transformation nears completion. (18: 10-11)

He is now motivated to a new level of engagement.

As Nachmanides (1194-1270) points out, God can often test us to activate our potential in order to achieve what may seem a most challenging task. Yes, whatever Jethro heard and internalized, it 'jump-started' his spiritual renewal but that was not sufficient.

What he does with this newfound knowledge is absolutely crucial. Jethro is now motivated to guide and strengthen Moses' leadership. "*Mei-hakoach el Hapoeil!*"

He is compelled to actualize his potential. Jethro imparts his wisdom as elder statesman, guiding his son-in-law Moses how to better adjudicate disputes with the establishment of courts of law.

Jethro's rebirth is now complete.