

A Muse: Yitro

The two significant themes of Parshat Yitro is the meeting between Moshe and his father-in-law, Yitro, and the giving of the Tern Commandments. Parshat Yitro is also the segue between the Hebrews leaving Egypt as freed slaves, refugees without a homeland, stateless and on the road to becoming a nation.

One of the most dramatic moments in human history is about to occur; the giving of the Law, the Ten Commandments. Yet in the midst of preparing for this epiphany, this most holy of moments we are introduced at great length and detail to the visit of Yitro. No mention is made of Moshe's relationship with his wife or two sons. All we are provided with is a somewhat cordial meeting of these two men which ultimately centered on a discussion of Moshe's challenge in governing the Hebrews.

In their conversation Moshe explains to Yitro that he is governing his people according to the laws of God and the Torah. However, the Law has still not been give! So it would appear that the visit between the two men is out of chronological order. Perhaps the visit was after the Law was given. Yet the Torah places the meeting prior to the Sinaitic experience.

Another observation which this text presents is the relationship that God exhibits with the Hebrews as discussed in an earlier muse: the exodus from Egypt was as a result of God's election and not the choice or by consensus of the Hebrews. God acted b'chipazon and out of concern in order to prevent the Hebrews from slipping down to the 49th rung of spiritual contamination. The Hebrews, if anything were reluctant and resistant to leave Egypt. The four terms of redemption as symbolized by the four cups of wine on Passover suggests this. However, when it came to the giving of the Law God insisted that there had to be consensus and agreement of the Hebrews as evident by the fact that the Hebrews said "naaseh v'nishma".

Oftentimes the contrast is made between the exodus from Egypt and the trek in the desert. Leaving the urban culture for a desert life of forty years was the method by which the national character of the Hebrews would be forged. Perhaps instead we ought to contrast the pyramids of Egypt with the epiphany at Sinai. The pyramids were sophisticated towers of Babel; linear geometric lines defining its space as well as outlining its limitations. Sinai on the other hand is a low lying mountain with a circle of people surrounding its contours. Unlike a linear geometric configuration defining its space the circle around Sinai wasn't defined with a beginning or end point, with no gradations of height. All the people are on the same level, all with the same access to holiness. The midrash comments that while the tablets were etched the word "charoot" can easily be read as "cherut", freedom; that is, freedom tablets. Those tablets, the law, were intended as a gift not only to the Hebrews but to humanity. And so it would appear that Yitro, representing the greater civilized world was invited to witness that most holy of moments.