

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...

some thoughts on Yitro's blessing that is found in v. 10, "Blessed be the Lord..." It shouldn't be a surprise that Yitro's blessing is seen as a paradigm for the future:

"From where are these matters [derived that one is required to recite a blessing on a miracle]? Rabbi Yoḥanan said: The verse states: "And Jethro said: Blessed be the Lord, Who delivered..." (B. Berachot 54a)

While other sources also praise Yitro, at the same time they criticize Moshe and the Children of Israel, focusing on the use by Yitro of the word *barukh*:

"And Yitro said: 'Blessed (*barukh*) is the Lord!": R. Pappis said: Scripture speaks to the discredit of Israel, six hundred thousand men having been there and not one of them having stood up to bless the Lord until Yithro came and did so, viz. "And Yitro said: Blessed is the Lord, who rescued you, etc." (Mekhilta Tractate Amalek, chapter 3, see also B. Sandhedrin 94a)

While Moshe and the Children of Israel did sing praise to God after crossing the Reed Sea, they didn't use the word *barukh*.

Rabbi Natan Tzvi Friedman, a Hungarian rabbi and Holocaust survivor who later became a rabbi in Bnei Brak, understood Yitro as an example of someone from the outside who was able to see the importance and glory of something that insiders, the Children of Israel, were unable to see and appreciate. (*Parperaoṯ LaTorah*, 96-97) Rabbi Friedman also saw this phenomenon in relation to the founding of the State of Israel. He felt that sometimes it takes someone from outside of the community, for Rabbi Friedman, outside of the *Jewish* community specifically, to fully appreciate the monumental importance of the establishment of the State of Israel.

Let us all learn how to put on a different pair of lenses from time to time, to maybe see and appreciate those things around us that we have been unable to see until now. Not only that, but let us be open to outsiders who may be able to understand things about ourselves and our communities that we haven't been able to before.

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# TORAH SPARKS

## Parashat Yitro

February 15, 2020 | 20 Shevat 5780

Annual | Exodus 18:1-20:22 (Etz Hayim p. 432-450; Hertz p. 288-301)  
Triennial | Exodus 18:1-20:22 (Etz Hayim p. 432-450; Hertz p. 288-290)  
Haftarah | Isaiah 6:1-7:6; 9:5-6 (Etz Hayim p.451-455; Hertz p. 302-305)

## D'var Torah: Yitro, Blesser of the Israelite God

**Rabbi Dr. Menachem Pitkowsky**, *Rabbinics Curriculum Coordinator & Lecturer, The Academy for Jewish Religion & Conservative Yeshiva Alumnus*

Much has been written by commentators about Yitro, the Midianite priest who is the eponymous character of our *parashah*. This should come as no surprise as Yitro was not only Moshe's father-in-law, but also someone who had a lasting influence on the organizational and judicial structure of Israel. I would like to focus on a different aspect of Yitro's interaction with Moshe and the Children of Israel that can be found at the beginning of the *parashah*.

9) And Yitro rejoiced over all the kindness that the LORD had shown Israel when He delivered them from the Egyptians. 10) "Blessed be the LORD," Yitro said, "who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. 11) Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, yes, by the result of their very schemes against [the people]." 12) And Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aharon came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moshe's father-in-law. (Exodus 18:9-12 [all trans. from sefaria.org unless noted])

Much of the discussion about these verses has been about the sacrifices brought by Yitro and the reaction of Aharon and the elders of Israel. How could Yitro bring these sacrifices? Was the reaction of Aharon appropriate? But I would like to offer

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## D'var Haftarah: Choosing to See and Hear

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

Isaiah chapter 6 marks Isaiah's introductory prophecy. It is familiar to most of us because it contains the famous refrain from the Kedushah section of the Amidah (the standing prayer): "*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* – Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Host, the whole earth is filled with His glory". What is less familiar is the content of the message which follows this vision of the angelic praise of the Divine. This prophecy marked troubled times where both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were in the process of disintegration due to external pressure and internal rot. God entreated Isaiah to deliver a disturbing message to the people: And He said: "Go and say to this people: 'Indeed, you must **hear** but you will not **understand**, indeed you must **see** but you will not **know**.' Make the heart of this people obtuse and block its ears and seal its eyes. Lest it see with its eyes and with its ears hear and its heart understand and it turn back and be healed." (verses 9-10)

This message bears similarity to God's hardening Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh's behavior was beyond repair and the resulting consequences were there to be seen. The doors of repentance seem to be closed for him. Similarly, God has judged Isaiah's people to be sinful and on account of their recalcitrance, punishment seemed inevitable. In context, Isaiah's message is a result of his profound awareness of what is happening around him. He knows the score and discerns that if nothing is done the results will be tragic. For them, too, the doors seemed to be closed.

The difference, though, is that this message is directed to the people. Its intent, according to Rabbi Mordechai Breuer (20<sup>th</sup> century Israel), was to warn them that the consequences of their actions were in their hands. If they chose to lack the basic discernment of their situation, the results were obvious. The purpose of God's message was to shock the people into awareness so that they might take the measures necessary to save themselves. (Pirkei Yishayahu, pp. 236-7)

Isaiah's prophecy is carefully crafted to remind us to pay attention to what goes on around us – to "hear" and to "understand"; to "see" and to "know". He alerts us to be aware of what goes on around us, lest we face the results brought about by lack of discernment, as did Isaiah's generation.

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## Parashah Study: When Did WE Receive the Torah?

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

**Text: Shmot 19:1-2**

**(1) On the third new moon of the Israelites' going out from the land of Egypt, on this day did they come to the Wilderness of Sinai. (2) And they journeyed from Refidim and they came to the Wilderness of Sinai, and Israel camped there in front of the mountain.**

- What is the relationship between v.1 and v.2?
- The text seems to suggest a date for the arrival in the desert of Sinai, by the mountain. Why do we care about such a date?
- Why do you think that the Torah does not state the exact date of the revelation at Sinai, nor does it declare a holiday to commemorate it?

**Commentary: Rashi Shmot 19:1**

**On this day:** ... *It could have said "on that day." What is the meaning of "on this day"? That the words of the Torah shall be new to you, as if they were given just today.*

- Linguistically, Rashi is based on the use of "on this day" rather than on the more common "on that day". What does the word "this" indicate about the object it describes?
- Rashi's comment expands the ranks of those involved in the receiving of Torah. Who is included?

**Commentary: Ramban (Nahmanides) Shmot 19:1-2**

**On the third new moon** – *the text should have said 'and they journeyed from Refidim and camped in the Wilderness of Sinai on the third first moon of the Israelites' going out of the land of Egypt' as it said previously in the Wilderness of Sin (16:1). But coming to the Wilderness of Sinai was for them a day of happiness and celebration, and they have been yearning for it since leaving Egypt; for they knew that there they would receive the Torah for Moshe had told them what was said to him 'you shall worship God on this mountain' (Ex.3:12); and also to Pharaoh he said 'let us go a three days' journey...that we may sacrifice to the LORD' (Ex. 5:3) which is the walking distance from Egypt to Mount Sinai...*

- What does Ramban do to the first 2 verses of the chapter? What does this highlight in the Torah text?
- How does this part of the journey differ from all other parts of the journey of the people?
- In your opinion, what other events, if written into Jewish history, should have received a unique opening line based on the thoughts of Rashi and Ramban? What might such an opening line sound like?