

Shiur L'Yom Sheni¹

[Monday's Study]

READINGS: ***Torah Yitro:*** **Exodus 18:1-12**
 Haftarah: **Isaiah 6:1-3**
 B'rit Chadasha: **I Peter 1:22 - 2:4**

Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, came.

[Exodus 18:9 (a)]

Today's Meditation is Psalm 34:1-2;

This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is *Modim Anachnu* [We Give Thanks]

Vayish'ma Yitro kohen Midyan choten Moshe – And Yitro, sheik of Midyan, Moshe's father-in-law, heard ... *et kol-asher asah Elohim l'Moshe ul'Yisra'el amo* – all that Elohim had wrought for Moshe and for his people Yisrael **Exodus 18:1.**

Torah's 17th parsha, Yitro, introduces the seed of the Avrahamic Covenant to the challenges of *Contradictory Voices, Contrasting Perspectives, Competing Narratives, and Diverging Pathways*. Gird up your loins – this is where the choices we make begin to drastically affect our destiny!

The curtain of the parsha opens on a scene of relative quiet. In the aftermath of our nation's first season of warfare, *B'nei Yisrael* is camping peacefully in the shadow of Mount Sinai. The waves of attacks by Amalek's warlords have ceased – at least for the time being. But since our rag-tag group of refugees has now been twice traumatized by military assault, our beleaguered households could use some 'down time'. For a few moments, therefore the Holy One has therefore put our epic journey to great nationhood on 'pause'. The pillar of cloud and fire has taken up a watchman's position atop a tall mountain. Pure, living water gushes from a rock to form a river of life for us. Manna falls ever-so-sweetly from the Heavens every morning of the *shesh yamim* [6 days]. As for Moshe, he is the happiest he has ever been. This is what he was born for. Though 80 years old, he is suddenly bursting with enthusiasm, abounding in energy, and basking in revelation. He is constantly speaking with the Holy One face-to-Face - then joyfully pouring out the wisdom He has received over the multitudes. The people, in turn, are gathering their families and friends around Moshe and hungrily eating up every Hebrew syllable Moshe speaks over them. Day by day Moshe is growing in wisdom and in favor with God and with men. Day by day the common people are learning more about the Holy One, His Wisdom, and His Ways. For the first time since they left Egypt, no one is complaining. No one is questioning Moshe's leadership credentials; no

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one is disagreeing with any of his decisions. Not a single voice can be heard suggesting a return to Egypt. Can we say *fruitfulness*? Can we say *simchah* – i.e. *joy*? Can we say *shalom*? Ah, but this idyllic scene is about to change dramatically. First will come *the stranger*, then *the wind*, and finally *the fire*.

What's That Up Ahead?

The people of the Bridegroom King don't know it, but this is just a temporary lull in the Great Redemption story. They are right on the brink of world-changing events. The great *betrothal covenant ceremony* we commemorate with great anticipation each year at *Shavuot* [the Feast of Weeks] is about to unfold in real time. We will all see, and tremble, as the Creator of the Universe breaks through the finity barrier and comes to claim us as His own. We will all hear His Beautiful Voice speaking blessings over and His Bridegroom's vision for us. We will all be stunned to discover the level of goodness and world-changing potential that He sees in us. Hebrew or gentile by birth, whatever our cultural heritage, and whatever our vocation, before this week is over each of us personally, and all of us collectively, will have been visited, touched, and taught by the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov.

This looks to be our greatest moment. The venue is being prepared. The appointed time is rapidly approaching. The deep emotional wounds we sustained from the trauma of Egyptian bondage are healing. Our awe of and love for our Divine Suitor is surging. Tens of thousands of angels are keeping watch over us. What could possibly go wrong now? What – or who – could possibly distract us from preparing for our upcoming betrothal ceremony with the Bridegroom King of Heaven this close to the dawning of the appointed day?

Enter the Great Distractor, Stage Left!

Alas, a great distraction is indeed coming. That which appears 'good' to our fallen mind's ego and pseudo-intellect will soon seduce us away from our first love. Very soon we will forsake revelation in favor of organization. Very soon we will start thinking in terms of numbers instead of real human beings with names, faces, and unique issues, and we will start ooo-ing and ahh-ing over showy, public sacrifices instead of quietly encouraging and midwifing personal awakenings, physical and emotional healings, bloodline calling restorations, familial reconciliations, and deepening relationship with the Holy One inspirations. We will become infatuated with the voice and counsel of a charismatic human being – at the cost of forgetting the actual plan, strategy, and timing of our God.

We have a little more training – or actually a lot – to undergo. There are six hundred and thirteen or so important lessons – actually, *many more than that* - that we have yet to learn. There are hundreds more 'fear of man' challenges – ranging

from *distraction challenges* to *intimidation challenges* to *inordinate affection challenges*, to *anointing-envy challenges*, to *idolatrous hero-worship challenges* – that we must face, and fail miserably at, and then overcome, before we can be said to make an informed choice as to whether we will follow our Bridegroom whithersoever He leads – or will succumb to the charisma of an intelligent-sounding stranger. From whence will our last challenge of infatuation before the Great Betrothal Ceremony come? It will not come from our old nemesis Pharaoh. Pharaoh is still licking his wounds on the other side of the Sea of Reeds, This challenge will also not come from our more recent nemesis, Amalek. All Amalek’s warriors – or such of them as are left - are still licking their wounds from their recent defeat at the hand of a bunch of total novices to the art of war.

The next challenge of infatuation will come from a most unexpected source. And look yonder ... the curtain is fluttering *stage left*. A stranger to everyone in the camp except Moshe is approaching. We are indeed about to find out who the Holy One has ordained to present us with the challenge of infatuation. In this corner, wearing a kaftan and a smile – say hello to Yitro, *the ever-charming sheik of the desert nation of Midyan*. If the adversaries of the redemptive plan of the Holy One cannot destroy us with chariots or defeat us with armor, they always just go to plan ‘B’. They just send *this guy* – or one like him - into our Camp to dazzle and distract us. Welcome to the day of *Great Distraction!*

***After All That Has Happened, And All You Have Seen,
Are We Going To Let Ourselves Get ‘Midianized’ Now?***

Ever since the craziness at the Red Sea the Holy One has been careful to keep His Betrothed pretty much isolated from contact with the outside world. He arranged for her a zigzag route across the back side of and through the worst part of the desert – a rugged outback where virtually no human beings reside. Near the end of last week’s parsha however the Holy One *raised the curtain* and allowed the first episode of contact between His Beloved and the outside world. The first stranger whom the Holy One allowed to ‘come to call’ on His Redeemed Community in the desert was *Amalek*. When Amalek showed up he came *dressed for battle*. He left no question of his malevolent intentions. We did not have to wonder if Amalek was a friend or a foe. We knew immediately why he had come, and that he was *not and would never be a friend*. We thus knew instantly *how we needed to deal with him*. Our antennae and force fields were up. In today’s aliyah however a more subtle ‘**stranger**’ is going to come to call. This one will present himself in a *totally different* manner. This stranger does not look, talk, or behave like Amalek. But he is every bit as dangerous. He is *Midyan*², and he comes not with weapons

² *Midyan* means ‘strife or contention’. It was the Midyani who brokered the sale of Yosef to the Ishmaeli on behalf of his brothers. **Genesis 37:28**. It is the Midyani who will, at Ba’al-Peor in Moav, use the beauty

and war party but in subtlety. And he speaks through the crafty lips of his designated ambassador, *Yitro*. He will bear the title ‘kohen’, which is usually translated into English as ‘priest; But Moshe’s father-in-law is not a ‘*priest of the Holy One*’. He is a ‘*sheik of Midyan*’. He does not come to us as a representative of our Divine Courtier; he comes as a saboteur for and on behalf of Midyan.

Like Amalek, Midyan is a rugged people of the desert. Through the course of Torah and the book of Judges Midyan is going to prove to be *every bit as depraved and dangerous a nation as Amalek*. Unlike Amalek however Midyan will wage its war on Israel not through frontal assault, but through the artifices of *stealth*, through *deception*, and through *clever forms of manipulation*. Amalek we can see coming and deal with. Midyan however will always find a way to *catch Israel completely unawares*.

Behold the Stranger Is at the Door!

Look yonder, Dear Reader - here comes *Yitro* now! From earlier narratives of Torah we recognize the man as Moshe’s father-in-law. We know that after Moshe fled from Egypt his flight led him to a well in the desert lands where this man watered its flocks. We know that Moshe came to the aid of Yitro’s daughters at the well, and that in the aftermath of that encounter Yitro gave the hand of one of them – his daughter *Tzipporah* - to Moshe in marriage. And we know that after the burning thorn bush incident, when Moshe came to Yitro seeking permission to leave the clan and return to Egypt on a special mission for the God of the burning thorn bush, Yitro had responded, “*Go in peace.*” **Exodus 3:18**. But though we know these things, in truth we must confess that we really do not know this Yitro very well at all. For what reason has he come to our camp ... at such a critical time as this? We are, of course, not specifically told. Torah leaves it up to us to determine whether Yitro came to Sinai as a ‘friend’ or as a ‘foe’. Which do *you* think it was? Before answering however please note of the fact that something important is missing from the narrative. There is no ‘*vayadaber Adonai el-Moshe emor ...*’ [i.e. ‘*and the Holy One spoke unto Moshe, saying ...*’]. That means that the Holy One *did not tell Moshe to go out and greet Yitro*. Nor was it the Holy One’s instruction for Moshe to even invite Yitro into the camp, much less pay heed to his advice. In fact you may want to note that the Holy One did not even tell Moshe that Yitro was coming. Compare Exodus 4:14, where the Holy One specifically told Moshe of Aharon’s imminent approach.

Indeed you can look through Torah until you are blue in the face and you will never see a single word the Holy One had to say about either Yitro or this visit -

of its women to entice the Redeemed Community to turn away from the Holy One and take up idolatry. **Numbers 25**. It is the Midyani who will harass and oppress Israel in the days of Gideon. **Judges 6-7**.

pro or *con*. Is it possible that the whole Yitro-visitation episode at Sinai is designed by the Holy One to serve as *a test* or *trial*? The Holy One has after all recently taught us *critical keys to survival* in the face of the *slithering serpentine deceivers* of the desert. And those critical keys involve *sh'ma-ing HIS* Voice, and following **HIS** lead. The only persons the Holy One has authorized to speak on His behalf at this point are Moshe and Aharon. Yitro, who will declare specifically in this parsha that he is a polytheist, is never once described as having personally encountered - or to have any level of relationship whatever with – the Holy One. And, of course, he is never described by Torah as having been inspired by the Holy One to say or do anything. He is not a receptor of revelation; he can, therefore, not be a transmitter of it, either. Is his sudden appearance in our camp a test to see how well we have learned to apply the Holy One's keys to survival in real-life situations?

Is this Smiling Sheik a Friend ... or a Foe?

We have for several centuries now lived in a 'post-enlightenment' era – an era in which *human reason* and *logic* is held in far, far higher esteem than God's ways and will. Since post-enlightenment man has tended to approach all of life including spirituality through this humanistic prism for generations men have hailed Yitro as *a wise man*, *a thinking man*, and necessarily, a friend of the fledgling young nation of Yisrael. But is it really as we have been taught? Does the Biblical account bear out this conclusion? Or does the account of Scripture fly directly in the face of such teaching? I know that some who read these studies have heard – or even taught – that what Yitro introduced into the camp of the Redeemed in the course of this parsha was good, and from the very mind of the Holy One. I confess, I myself once thought – and taught – that very thing. I was wrong. I had fallen hook, line and sinker for the *Great Distraction*. I was pre-programmed by my religious training and dogma to accept that premise mindlessly. I was trained to want to have my ear tickled by the opinions and theories and logical deductions and rationalizations of men – and to think the voice of the Holy One – real, direct revelation from Him - was simply too much for my mind and heart to be able to process. But that was then, and this is now. I no longer believe for one second that Yitro was a friend of *B'nei Yisrael*, much less that his counsel and influence are the Holy One's idea of how things should be done in our camp. Let me explain why.

First of all, please keep in mind that Yitro is *not a Hebrew* – at least in the sense of being a descendant of Ya'akov. He is not former slave. He has not experienced a great deliverance. He has not painted his doorpost with the blood of a lamb. He has not eaten **matzah** with us. He has not tasted bitter herbs. He has not stared in horror at the clouds of dust that announced the arrival of Pharaoh's chariots. He has not walked dry-shod through the parted waters. He has not sung the song of the sea. He is a *Midyani* [i.e. a descendant of Midyan].

What does that mean to us, you ask? It does not mean we should hate or mistreat or even ostracize him – Heaven forbid! We are to *respect* foreigners, of course. Indeed, we are to *show them the goodness and model before them the ways* of the Holy One our God. But in our interactions with foreigners we also need to *discern the spiritual essence* of anything they offer us. In other words, while we are not to judge or hate or run from contact with *the persons*, we are most definitely to ‘test the spirits’ of the ways and customs and ideas which they try to peddle to us. **I John 4:1.**

If we are going to test the spirit of ways and customs and ideas presented by a Midyanite, we need to always keep in mind that the very name *Midyan* means ‘*strife or contention*’. This *does not sound good so far*. But let’s not jump to conclusions. Let’s check out *the historical record* of Midyan’s interactions with the People of the Holy One’s Covenant.

The Historical Record Set Forth in Torah is Not Encouraging

Torah tells us that it was the Midyani who brokered the sale of *Yosef* [Joseph] to the *Yishmaeli* [Ishmaelites] on behalf of his brothers. **Genesis 37:28.** Torah tells us that is going to be the Midyani who will at Ba’al-Peor use the beauty of its women to entice the Redeemed Community to turn away from the Holy One and take up idolatry. See **Numbers 25.** Furthermore, it is going to be the Midyani who will harass and oppress Israel in the days of Gideon. See **Judges 6-7.** So while we do not want to judge Yitro prematurely based solely upon his lineage, according to the historical record we certainly do have every reason in the world to be *on our guard* in his presence. And just because in our English Bibles Yitro is given the title ‘*priest*’ – which in Hebrew can also mean simply *sheik* – of Midyan – that should not cause us to relax our guard in the slightest. After all, Egypt had men our English Bibles call *priests*. The Ba’al worshippers of Kena’an have men our English Bibles give the auspicious title of *priests*. Indeed, every two-bit heathen religion of the world has always had *priests* and *shamans* and ‘*holy men*’ – and the undisputable truth is that such people have virtually all been both *enemies of the One True God* and *a snare to the people of the One True God.*

Secondly, let us consider the ‘chain of revelation’ the Holy One has released thus far. We know, because we are told by Torah, that the Holy One has appeared and spoken to Moshe on many, many occasions, and has spoken to Aharon on occasion as well. But have we told even once that the Holy One has appeared to, spoke to, commissioned, or given revelation to Yitro? No we have not. And we will not. No where. No time. No way. Never. Not in Torah. Not in ‘the Writings’. Not in ‘the Prophets’. Not in the ‘Apostolic Writings’. Not even in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Hmmm. Does anyone besides the Rabbi’s son find that interesting? So may I

humbly suggest that, without being judgmental, let us resolve to be *wise as serpents, harmless as doves* in regard to Yitro. The question we have to ask regarding Yitro, whatever may be his title, is *does He speak with the Voice of the Holy One, Our Shepherd ... or perchance is his the voice of a stranger*. Let us consider the very serious consequences of that distinction.

The Voice of the Holy One

In Genesis 3:8 we were introduced to something Torah calls ***Qol – the Voice of - the Holy One***. At that time we were told that Adam *heard qol of the Holy One God walking in the garden*. I confess that I have never understood the anthropomorphism. How can the Holy One have a ‘voice’? And yet, last week, while the Redeemed Community was encamped at *Marah*, in the place of bitter waters the Holy One began the process of teaching us that as His Redeemed people our survival depends upon us learning to *base our lives upon, receive instruction from, and live by His Voice - and by His Voice alone*. As we read in the latter part of last Thursday’s aliyah from parsha *Beshelach*:

sham sam lo chok umishpat

It was thus that [God] taught them a statute and a judgment,

v’sham nisahu v’yomer

and thus that He tested them, saying

Im-shamoa tish'ma l’qol Adonai Eloheicha

'If you sh'ma the Voice of the Holy One your God

V’ha-yashar b’eynav ta’aseh

and asah [make happen, build, cause to take shape] what is upright in His eyes,

v’ha-azanta l’mitzvotav v’shamarta kol-chukav

carefully heeding all His directions and carefully guarding all His instructions

kol ha-machalah a sher-samti b’Mitzrayim lo-asim aleicha

then I will not strike you with any of the sicknesses that I brought on Egypt.

ki ani Adonai rof’eicha

I am God who heals you.'

[Exodus 15:25(b)]

We will have to learn the hard way – as did Adam and Chava – that not every voice in Creation is the ***Qol of the Holy One***. And we will have to learn as well that each and every voice that is not the ***Qol of the Holy One*** – *i.e.* each and every ‘voice of a stranger’ – however pleasing or rational it may sound, is for us ***lo tov*** [*i.e.* neither good nor the source of anything good].

Be Very, Very Careful of the Voice of a Stranger

Those of a background in Christianity will remember the words of Yeshua of Natzret concerning *His sheep* and *His Voice*. In the tenth chapter of the apostolic account of Yeshua's beloved *talmid Yochanan* [John] the rabbi from Natzret spoke of a 'Good Shepherd', saying: *[T]he sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yeshua then went on further to say concerning His sheep: Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. John 10:3(b)-5.*

Even before delivering us from Egypt the Holy One has been training us *to know and to respond to His Voice*. We had never heard His Voice before Moshe's call. We had heard stories about Him, but we had never known Him or His ways. We were slaves, and the 'voice of another' – the voice of Pharaoh, his soldiers, his taskmasters, and all their Egyptian minions - was the only voice we had ever responded to.

We are not like Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, who each heard the Holy One speak on numerous occasions and came to be intimately familiar with the unmistakable Sound and Intonations and Power and Beauty of His Voice. As we begin this week's parsha the sad truth is that among all of our multitudes, *only one man – Moshe – has actually heard – and become familiar with - the Holy One's voice*³. It is almost time for that to change. It is almost time that all of us hear our Creator/Suitor's marvelous and life-changing Voice for ourselves. But alas, the Holy One's voice is not the only voice we will hear this week. As Tevye and Golda prayed over their daughters in the musical *'Fiddler on the Roof'*, so we must pray over the Redeemed Community as this new parsha begins:

May the Lord protect and defend you; May he always shield you from shame

* * *

*Strengthen them Oh Lord ... and **keep them from the stranger's ways**.*⁴

Enter *Yitro, kohen Midyan*, stage left. But why does he dare to interrupt our preparation for the climactic event in human history? Why does he come at such a time as this? Does he come as Moshe's father-in-law – *or* as a spy for the subversive nation of Midyan? And what - if anything - does the unannounced of this Midyani sheik's visit have to do with the upcoming 'big event' that is about to occur here in our midst? Ah, these are questions it behooves us to consider very carefully.

³ Aharon has received Divine messages from the Holy One as well, but only second-hand, through Moshe. The rest of the Redeemed Community has heretofore never heard the Holy One's voice.

⁴ The quote is from the song *'Sabbath Prayer'*, by Sheldon Harnick. For full lyrics, see <http://zemerl.com/cgi-bin/print.pl?title=Sabbath+Prayer+%28from+Fiddler+on+the+Roof%29>

Why Here? Why Now?

Is it possible that the Holy One is through Yitro's visit about to teach His Redeemed a valuable lesson – that sometimes our most dangerous enemies initially do not appear to be enemies at all - but look and act just *like well-meaning friends*? We must admit, you see, that Yitro⁵ is in a great position to serve as *the perfect 'spy' and/or saboteur* for Midyan. He is, after all the father of Moshe's wife, and the grandfather and guardian of Moshe's two sons. The elders of Midyan know very well that because of these relationships Yitro will be allowed to pass through the Radiant Cloud to greet Moshe and the redeemed community at the foot of *Har Sineh*.

Yitro is and will always be first and foremost *a sheik of Midyan*. And anyone familiar with the Bible knows that Midyan is *never going to be an ally* of the Holy One's Redeemed any more than is Amalek. Midyan is as a matter of fact always going to be seen looking for a way to do three things:

- [1] *distract us from what the Holy One is doing in us,*
- [2] *entice us into attitudes and practices that will weaken us, and thus*
- [3] *use our own physical desires and appetites against us to render us powerless to fulfill the Holy One's divine purposes for us.*

With Midyan, we are going to find out the hard way, *nothing is ever quite as it seems*. As we prepare to read about this second type of 'stranger' that we as the covenant people of the Holy One will encounter in life, however, keep in mind that *the Holy One has just given us four 'survival techniques' by which we are to approach, navigate through, and overcome all life's circumstances*. At Marah He taught us that the four keys to our survival are:

- [1] to *sh'ma* His Voice, and His alone,
- [2] to *asah* that which He proclaims as righteousness,
- [3] to *azan* – i.e. give ear – only to His Voice; and
- [3] to *sh'mar* all His instructions and directions. **Exodus 15:26.**

Last week we learned that these 'survival techniques' applied to dealing with things like bitter water, hunger, thirst, and the frontal attacks of Amalek. This week we will have to decide for ourselves whether we will also apply these *critical life instructions to interactions with smiling strangers*. Will we *sh'ma, asah, azan, and sh'mar* what the Holy One speaks to us? Or will we instead listen to - and follow - the *'voice of a stranger'*? Our dealings with a smiling, charismatic close acquaintance from our prior way of life constitute a great opportunity to find out.

⁵ Some sages associate Moshe with the spirit of *Hevel* [Able] and Yitro with the soul of *Kayin* [Cain].

Class Begins NOW!

Over the next few days Yitro will absolutely dazzle us with talk of *organizational modalities, institutional mentalities* and *form-over-substance priorities*. And he will do it at a critical time when what we are desperately in need of is *revelation, inspiration, and covenant relationship-building wisdom* from the mouth of the one who knows Him best.

Keep in mind that Yitro knows very little of the Holy One's calling upon Moshe's life – and virtually nothing of the Holy One's plans for the people in the Camp of the Redeemed. All he knows, it would seem from the text of Torah, are the organizational models, political power modalities, authority delegation protocols, and religious meeting patterns that have worked for him in the desert in his dealings with the Midyani.

Only one man in the camp knows the Holy One personally. That is Moshe. He is the one the Holy One chose to teach us His Ways. Yitro? *Not so much*. In fact, not at all. *Moshe* knows Yitro of course. But his relationship with Yitro took shape and settled into a routine long before Moshe ever met the Holy One. In those years Yitro taught Moshe something, of course. Let's see, what was it he taught him? Oh yes - he taught Moshe *how to take a wife, have a couple of children, wander in the desert for 40 years tending someone else's sheep, and fade into oblivion*. Hmmmn. What are the odds ...

Wisdom is Justified By Its Children

When Moshe first met Yitro Moshe was just a lost and lonely 40-year-old fugitive from Egypt looking for nothing but asylum. As today's aliyah begins, however, you the reader surely know that Moshe is by no means the same person that Yitro took under his wing four decades ago. He is no longer either lost or lonely. He has no need of asylum. And more importantly, he has met – and walked closely for many months now with – the Creator of the Universe. As a result Moshe is now the leader of a budding nation of between 2 and 3 million people – a nation that most definitely looks to potentially be a major competitor with Yitro's nation of Midyan for both the *space* and *food* on the desert floor. But does Moshe understand this? He bows in submission before Yitro. He kisses him affectionately in the Middle Eastern style. He engages him in polite conversation. And then he begins to talk freely and in depth of all the wondrous things the Holy One has recently done '*for the sake of Israel*'.

How Will Yitro Respond to Moshe's Testimony?

Yitro will respond to Moshe's enthusiastic testimony by acknowledging, acceding to, and at some level at least approving of the new thing the God of Avraham, of

Yitzchak, and of Ya'akov is doing '*for Israel*'. Torah tells us:

V'yichad Yitro al kol ha-tovah asher-asah Adonai l'Yisra'el

Yitro expressed mild joy because of all the good that the Holy One had done for Israel,

asher hitzilo m'yad Mitzrayim

rescuing them from Egypt's power.

Oh that Yitro had *stopped right there*. Alas, he did not. Instead he went on to say:

Atah yadati ki-gadol Adonai m'kol-ha-elohim

Now I know that God is the greatest of all deities

ki v'davar asher zadu aleihem

Through their very plots, He rose above them.'

[Exodus 18:10-11]

At first glance Yitro's words *sound very spiritual*. They sound so spiritual in fact that Moshe has *nothing to say in reply*. And, of course, neither does Aharon, or YOSHUA, or Kalev, or anyone else in the camp. And most importantly – *neither does the Holy One*.

Did you catch that? The Holy One remains *completely silent*. It appears he really is *testing His people*. And that might just include us, *Dear Reader!* What is the essence of the test presented by Yitro – or for that matter by any '*smiling stranger*'? The test is this: Will those in the Redeemed Community heed *the Holy One's* voice and instructions? Or will they like Adam and Chava listen to *the voice of a smooth-talking stranger* - and follow his voice and instructions instead? HMMMMM.

Now what were those four 'survival techniques' the Holy One gave us at *Marah* again? We are supposed to *Sh'ma* who and who alone? We are supposed to *Asah* what? We are supposed to *azan* – give ear – to only Whose Voice? We are supposed to *Sh'mar* whose instructions and directions? Uh ... just where does Yitro fit into what the Holy One taught us at *Marah*?

What Lies Behind that Smiling, Grandfatherly Face And All The High-Sounding Talk Coming From His Mouth?

Let us not be distracted or disarmed by this particular stranger's smiling face – or by the presence in his speech of a few religious buzzwords. Let us look very, very carefully at all the words Yitro chose to use. Let us *parse* those words and *analyze* them. Note how careful Yitro is not to acknowledge the Holy One as the '*only God*', or even the '*one true God*'. He instead refers to the Holy One simply as ***m'kol-ha-elohim*** - i.e. the '*greatest of all the deities*'. Yitro certainly appears to have left himself a lot of polytheistic paganism 'wiggle room'. The greatest of all ***elohim***? What does Yitro mean by 'all *elohim*'? 'All' implies ... well, at the very

least, it implies *more than one*. I wonder what *other deities* – albeit inferior – that Yitro still believes in and feels obligated to serve? Does he believe in the deities worshipped by the Egyptians? Does he believe in the gods worshipped by the Kena’ani? Does he believe in the deities of the Ph’lishtim? Does he believe in the pantheon of the Phoenicians? Does he bow his knee to a laundry list of made up deities peculiar to the Midyani? Is there, for that matter, any culture’s god-concept that he does not approve of? And note that the smiling sheik of Midyan attributes to other gods the intellectual capacity and will to devise ‘plots’. He says: **“Through their very plots, He rose above them.”** Exactly what ‘plots’ is he attributing to *other deities* – to deities other than the Holy One, the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Ya’akov?

A Step Too Far?

Note further that given an opening by Moshe Yitro cannot seem to resist the temptation to bask in the spotlight. All eyes are on him, now, and he takes full advantage of the opening. He makes a big show of building an altar in the midst of the camp. Then he slaughters animals and presents animal sacrifices on it. He starts with what our text calls an *olah* [ascending offering], and then he proceeds to slaughter something our text calls simply *z’vachim* – literally meaning multiple unidentified slaughterings.

Now this is interesting. I bet it *drew quite a crowd*. But exactly *where did the Holy One say Hmmmmn*. Look at the interesting way that Torah records the event:

V’yikach Yitro choten Moshe olah uzvachim l’elohim

Yitro brought olah presentations and [other] approaches to elohim

V’yavo Aharon v’chol ziknei Yisra’el

Aharon and all the elders of Israel

l’echol-lechem im-choten Moshe lif’nei ha-elohim

came to share the meal with Moshe’s father-in-law before the elohim.

[Exodus 18:12]

Moshe built an altar after the defeat of Amalek – but there is no reference to him making any animal sacrifices on that altar. To the contrary, all that he did was name the altar ‘*The Holy One my Rallying Standard*’. Yitro jumped in where neither Moshe nor Aharon had gone. Indeed, more importantly, he jumped in *where the Holy One had not yet said to go*. So I have a question for you now: *From whom do you think that Yitro, the pagan sheik of Midyan, learned how to make animal sacrifices?* Did he learn it *from the Holy One*? Or was it something he picked up from *his pagan friends and ancestors*?⁶

⁶ We know from Torah that the *Midyani* [Midianites], of whom Yitro was leader, were descendants of Avraham’s union with the woman Torah calls ***Keturah*** [believed by many to be Hagar, the Egyptian mother of Yish’mael]. Torah tells us specifically that Avraham fathered several children by Keturah, one of which

Was Yitro's Counsel Holy – or Was It Profane?

Keep in mind as you read all of Yitro's contributions to the Community of the Redeemed that *nowhere does Torah even once suggest that either Yitro's counsel or his worship-modality modeling conduct was inspired by the Holy One*. Did you catch that? I said that *nowhere does Torah even once suggest that any part of Yitro's counsel – or conduct - was inspired by the Holy One*. Does that surprise you? Well, if so I have *more news* for you. If you will take a few moments and look through all the other Books of the TaNaKh and the Brit Chadasha as well, you will find nothing in any paragraph of Holy Writ either suggesting that Yitro was led by the *Ruach* or that *what he did or said was good or helpful in any way*.

After all, the Holy One tells us plainly that *the thoughts of man are not His thoughts* and that *the ways of man are not His ways*. We have to determine whether and to what extent the things Yitro taught constitute '*our thoughts and ways*' – or *the Holy One's thoughts and ways*. And that is *the whole point* of the *Yitro-chronicle* narratives with which we begin our week.

By Their Fruit You Are to Know Them!

Yitro has temporarily 'buddied up' to Moshe. He has said what Moshe wanted to hear. He has even used a couple of the 'magic buzz words' of Moshe's developing faith walk. And yet if we will step back and take an objective look at the situation we would have to acknowledge the plain truth that Yitro is, despite his verbal expression of 'joy' on behalf of this vast army of people he has never met, *still a pagan*. And if we were to look ahead in Torah we would also see that Yitro is *not*, when the smoke clears, by any means going to *join up* with or *become engrafted into* B'nei Yisrael. He is *not* going to hang around and receive Torah with us at Sinai – much less journey with us to the land of promise. He is instead going to *go his separate way*. In fact, as soon as Yitro has *said his piece* and *planted his seeds in our camp for good or for evil*, Yitro himself will *mount his camel* and will *ride off into the sunset ...* right back to wherever it was he came from. Moreover, Yitro's people the Midyani are *never going to join the 'mixed multitude'* of peoples who embrace the Torah along with Yisrael at Mount Sinai; *to the contrary the Midyani are going to turn out to be a thorn in our nation's flesh for generations*.

The Constantly-Recurring Challenge of the Smiling Stranger With a 'Better Idea'

We absolutely must learn to make a distinction between what men teach – and the

was named Midyan, and who was probably the progenitor of the Midyani people. We know that Avraham's children by Keturah were not part of the covenant, and were 'sent away' by Avraham before his death.

religious activities they practice publicly - on the one hand, and instructions that come *directly from the Holy One*. The Torah provides a valuable help in this regard. Whenever the Holy One gives us *direct instructions*, you see, Torah uses the formula “*Vayadaber Adonai el-Moshe ...*” [And the Holy One spoke to Moshe, saying ...]. This formula will be repeated literally hundreds of times in Torah. When it is absent – as it is in the *Yitro-chronicle* narratives - we have to determine as best as we can whether what we see spoken and modeled is from the Holy One – or merely a Biblical record of *the thoughts and plans of man*.

We have to learn how to discern in each instance whether what ‘smiling strangers’ say and seek to involve us in doing with [or for] them – constitutes the Holy One’s way - or just *a way some man thought up in his natural, fallen brain*.

But ... What is the Father Doing? And What is He Saying?

Perhaps the best thing a person can do when confronted with a teaching or a practice that is not accompanied by a ‘*Vayadaber Adonai*’ preface in Scripture is to stop and consider ‘*What is the Father doing?*’ Not what does a stranger think would be a good idea. Not what kind of organizational mode, authority structure, or order of religious service works best in theory – but *what is the Father doing?* Let’s apply this process to the time of Yitro’s visit. What was the Father in the process of doing at the time Yitro arrived? Answer: He was teaching the redeemed community two things in preparation for the upcoming *Matan Torah* ceremony about which we will read in Exodus 20. First and foremost He was teaching His redeemed that above all else their lives and destinies depended on their *sh’ma*-ing, *sh’mar*-ing and *asah*-ing His Words/Instructions [see Exodus 15:26 and 16:28-30]. Secondly He was teaching His people to pay attention to the Torah-teaching of *His servant Moshe*.

Enter Yitro. He comes into camp and starts building altars, offering sacrifices, and telling everyone what to do. Suddenly the things the Father was doing are totally forgotten. Think about it. At Mt. Sinai just a few days hence the Holy One is about to cover with Israel the very subjects upon which Yitro expounds. Before the Holy One releases Divine revelation from Heaven, though, along comes Yitro to fill all our minds – including Moshe’s - with *worldly thoughts*.

What Yitro then proceeded to do there at the foot of Sinai constituted *the first non-Egyptian worship activities the Redeemed community had ever seen*⁷. Before the Holy One got the opportunity to tell us what true worship of Him was supposed to

⁷ Other than the rather non-descript altar service initiated by Moshe at Refidim, after the defeat of the Amaleki. At that time, we were told “*Moshe built an altar, and he called its name Adonai Nisi --God-is-my-Banner- and He said, 'The Hand is on God's Throne. Exodus 17:16.*”

look like - which He will do at Sinai, in the teachings recorded in the Book of Leviticus - what did Yitro do but jump in and introduce us to the *pagan version*.

Was it to hear Yitro teach principles of community life and modalities of worship that the Holy One brought us to the shadow of Mt. Sinai? Or did He bring us here to give us Divine Revelation from His own Mouth? I think you know the answer to that question. If you do not, please *read ahead a few chapters in the Book of Exodus*. Meanwhile, let us end today's study with a short meditation on what it means to 'serve' the Holy One our God as He desires for us to serve Him.

What Does it Mean to 'Serve' the Holy One?

In the introductory study of this week I reminded you that when the Holy One called Moshe into prophetic ministry at the burning bush the voice coming from the bush specifically proclaimed to the frightened shepherd: ***... after you lead the people out of Egypt, you are going to serve God on this [very] mountain.***⁸ Exodus 3:12. According to this Divine Declaration it appears that the focus of what is pre-ordained to happen here at this mountain which, in the words chosen by the Holy One, is going to involve Moshe 'serving' the Holy One. That is an *interesting choice of words* by the Holy One. What does it mean – this ***servicing*** of God that Moshe is supposed to do here? According to Exodus 3:12 whenever this *servicing* by Moshe happens – whatever it consists of - it will serve as a 'sign' [Hebrew, *ot*]⁸.

To our way of thinking, of course, it would seem to us that Moshe has already served the Holy One quite a bit before arriving at this place. In Egypt Moshe surely 'served' the Holy One by acting as His Prophet unto Pharaoh. He also surely 'served' the Holy One at *Marah* by throwing a tree into the pool of bitter waters. Did he not also 'serve' the Holy One in the *Wilderness of Sin* by explaining to the redeemed community the gifts of *manna* and *Shabbat*? Was he not also 'serving' the Holy One at *Refidim* by striking the Rock of Horev, releasing streams of water, and by holding up his arms throughout the attack of Amalek?

That is, to us, quite an impressive resume of serving - *especially for an 80-year-old man!* But to the Holy One all that Moshe has done thus far has merely *been preparatory*. The deepest level of serving which the Holy One *created, protected from infanticide, nurtured in a palace, called,* and has now *trained* Moshe to do *will start in earnest at this mountain*. Hmmmm. Perhaps we need a little Hebraic instruction on exactly what the Holy One considers a human being 'serving' Him to consist of. The Hebrew word translated as 'serve' is ***abad***, *ayin, beit, dalet*. It is a non-specific term meaning to interact with something [or someone] in a hands-on

⁸ *Ot* is, in Hebrew, spelled *alef, vav, tav*. It is thus something that connects the beginning with the end. The Greeks would call an *ot* the *alpha and omega*.

basis to bring about a state of fruitfulness. Some translate the Hebrew verb **abad** as meaning ‘to work’, but only in the sense that a baker ‘works’ dough [i.e. he kneads it], or in the sense that a gardener ‘works’ the ground in his garden [i.e. tills, plants, waters, thins out, weeds, etc.]. The essence of **abad**-ing is *cooperative co-labor*-ing. The idea is not to perform self-directed labor to make something happen which one has dreamed up in his own mind, but is instead to *involve oneself in a hands-on fashion with a life-force which the human in question did not in any wise begin and for the fruit of which he ultimately cannot claim full responsibility*.

Twice in the Creation account we encountered this Hebrew verb, and its usage in both of those incidences are highly informative. In Genesis 2:5 we found that for a man to **abad** the earth means to *do whatever is necessary foster and nurture its inherent capacity for productivity*. The ground was, after all, both blessed with the capacity for fruitfulness and *launched into an on-going fruit-producing process* by the Holy One in Genesis 1:11. Man’s assignment is to acknowledge and cooperate with this on-going process by doing whatever is necessary to foster it.

We found the same verb used in Genesis 2:15 to describe one of two things Adam was commissioned to do in respect to the Garden of Eden. He was, first and foremost⁹, to **abad** [usually translated into English as ‘tend’] the garden. To **abad** a garden involves getting to know it intimately and responding appropriately to its rhythm and ebb and flow. At different times the gardener has to **abad** his garden in different ways. Sometimes he **abads** the garden by directing excessive water away from some or all of its plants and trees; other times he **abads** by channeling appropriate quantities of *water toward some or all plants/trees*. Sometimes he **abads** by propagating/multiplying plants in the garden; other times he **abads** the garden by thinning and pruning the plants/trees that are there so as to assure each plant/tree receives what is for it the most beneficial amounts of sunlight.

In short, to **abad** means *to know and understand the essence and potential of a life force, and be prepared to co-labor with it as and however needed*. To **abad** the Holy One – which according to Exodus 3:12 is the purpose for which we have been called aside to this Mountain – thus means *to get to know the Holy One intimately, to come to understand His Thoughts and His Ways, to grasp the greatness of His power and His goodness, and to be prepared to join Him in whatever processes - of redemption, of judgment, or both – He has set in motion*.

Moshe was capable of doing that just fine *without any help from smiling strangers like Yitro*. And so are you and me.

⁹ As you will recall, the second part of Adam’s commissioning involved **sh’mar**-ing the garden [usually translated into English as ‘take care of it’ or ‘keep watch’ over and/or *guard/protect* it].

Questions for Today's Study

1. This week's parsha is named after a very unusual man - **Yitro** [known in English translations of the Torah as "Jethro"].

[A] What does the name "Yitro" mean? Look up "Yitro" in Strong's [Hebrew word #3503 (*yod, tav, resh, vav*)], and be sure to look up the root word "**yatar**" [Hebrew word # 3498] in Gesenius, to be sure you get the right meaning. Look at various verses in which the root word was used, and write your best explanation of what you think Yitro's name means.

[B] Who was this man named Yitro?

[C] List the reasons for which Yitro came to meet with Moshe and the redeemed community.

[D] Where [at what location] did Yitro encounter the redeemed community?

[E] What was about to happen at that location?

[F] How and why did Moshe pay homage to Yitro?

[G] List the things Moshe told Yitro about.

[H] What was Yitro's response when Moshe told him these things?

[I] What three things did Yitro introduce to [or model for] the redeemed community in today's aliyah verses? [Hint: one is in verse 10, and two are in verse 12].

2. The Haftarah aliyah begins with a dramatic appearance of the Holy One to *Yeshayahu* [Isaiah]. It deals with a *visual* experience as well as an *auditory* experience of the Holy One's Presence and Glory. Yeshayahu both *saw* and *heard* - as did the Redeemed Community at Sinai.

The reaction of Yeshayahu, however, is different than that of the Redeemed Community in parsha *Yitro*. Yeshayahu just wants to get closer to the Holy One, to hear His words. And no priest is necessary for him to do so.

*In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Holy One
sitting upon a high and lofty throne - and His train filled the Temple!
The serafim stood above Him. Each had six wings:
with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.
And one called to another, and said,*

K'dosh k'dosh k'dosh Adonai Tzeva'ot

Holy, holy, holy, is the Holy One of hosts;

melo chol ha-aretz kevodo

the whole earth is full of His glory.'

[Isaiah 6:1-3]

[A] During what time period did Yeshayahu prophesy?

[B] Look up Uziyahu [traditional English nickname *Uzziah*], in Smith's Bible Dictionary or other Biblical research tool, and write a four-paragraph, one-page essay on [a] the meaning of his name, [b] the times in which he lived and reigned,

[c] the major events of his life, and [d] the stunning circumstances of his last illness and death. The story of his life, which is well worth reading, is found in II Chronicles 26.

[C] Look up “*seraphim*” in Smith’s Bible Dictionary, or some other Biblical research tool, and write a paragraph describing what they are and at least two important things about them.

[D] What was going on in the world, and with the descendants of Ya’akov, at the time the Holy One appeared to Yeshayahu?

[E] From which tribe was Yeshayahu descended?

[F] Where did Yeshayahu see the Holy One?

[G] What was the Holy One doing when Yeshayahu saw Him?

[H] When did Yeshayahu see the Holy One

[I] What did Yeshayahu see around the Holy One?

[J] What sounds surrounded the Holy One in Yeshayahu’s vision?

[K] What do you think the *cry* of the serafim means?

3. In today’s B’rit Chadasha aliyah, *Kefa* [known in your English Bibles as “Cephas” or “Peter”] writes to the “elect exiles of the dispersion” - the Jews in exile who have accepted Yeshua as Messiah.

*Seeing you have purified your nefashot (souls)
Through sh'ma-ing that which was testified to by the Spirit
in ahavah shel achvah (unselfish love for your brothers),
love one another from the heart without tzevi'ut (hypocrisy):
having been sired, not through perishable zerah (seed),
but through zerah that is without shachat (corruption),
through the D'var Adonai (word of the Holy One),
Who is Chai v'Nitzav l'Olam (living and remaining firm forever).
For, "All flesh is like chatzir (grass),
And all of man's glory like the tzitz (flower) in the grass.
The grass withers, and its tzitz (flower) falls;
But the D'var Eloheinu (word of our God) endures l'olam (forever)."
[quoting YESHAYAHU (Isaiah) 40:6-8]*

This is the D'var (word, prophetic insight that stirs toward goodness) which was proclaimed to you.

*Putting away therefore all rishus (malicious wickedness),
all remiyah (guile, fraud, deceit), all tzevi'ut (hypocrisies),
all kin'ah (competition and envy), and all l'shon ha ra (evil speaking),
as newborn olalim (babes), long for the pure chalav ruchani (spiritual milk) of the Word,
that you may grow thereby,
if indeed you have tasted that the Holy One ki tov (is good and brings about good)
come to the Holy One, the Eben Chayyah (stone that lives and produces life),
chadal (rejected) indeed by men, but bechir (chosen)
and precious in the sight of the Holy One.*

[A] How does Kefa say the believing exiles had “purified their hearts”?

- [B] What is Kefa referring to as “the Word of God” in vv. 23 and 25?
[C] What “corruptible” and “incorruptible” seed is Kefa comparing in v. 23?
[D] What attitudes and actions does Kefa say are inconsistent with the life of a new creation, regenerated by the *Ruach HaQodesh* through the Word of God?
[E] What does Kefa say should be the primary activity of a new creation?
[F] What is Kefa referring to as the “milk of the word”?
[G] What does Psalm 34 have to do with what Kefa is saying? How about Exodus 18:9?

*May you taste and see that the Holy One is good;
and may you learn the secrets of worshipping Him as do the serafim around His throne.*

The Rabbi's son

Meditation for Today's Study

Psalm 34:1-2

*I will bless [Hebrew, **barach**] the Holy One at all times.
His praise [Hebrew, **t'hillah**] will always be in my mouth
My soul shall boast [Hebrew, **halal**] in the Holy One.
The humble shall hear [Hebrew, **sh'ma**] of it, and be glad*