



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Yitro

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Yitro

Lessons from Jethro



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Sometimes, the most personal things – the baggage we carry – are the most difficult for us to see. We cannot see the weaknesses in ourselves or in our loved ones, though, of course, we can see with 20/20 vision the weaknesses in others.

So, sometimes we may learn the deepest and truest lessons about ourselves from outsiders. Especially when traveling, literally or figuratively.

On the journey of life, the baggage we carry is not all bad. It contains our heritage, our sense of purpose, our soul. In fact, our baggage is packed with knowledge, but sometimes it takes an outsider to open it up for us to see. And that is when we learn the deepest secrets about our selves.

As we discover in this week’s Torah reading, it took an outsider, Jethro – a non-Jew, a sheikh, a chieftain, a high priest, a medicine man, a minister and leader of another nation – to capture the depth of the Nation of Israel.

Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, plays a major role in the Hebrew Bible and he is also revered by other religions – by Christianity and Islam – and especially by the Druze, whose esoteric monotheistic faith considers Jethro its founder.

Jethro has seven names. In their meaning lies an important message for us today.

This is how we receive the Ten Commandments anew.

LESSONS FROM AN IN-LAW THE 7 NAMES OF FOREIGN MINISTER JETHRO

1. Unknown Knowledge (Joke)

Rabbi Rabinovitz is going to Israel to recharge spiritually and reconnect with his soul and homeland. He arrives at JFK International Airport for his El Al flight and goes to the security desk to have his luggage checked in.

“Has anyone put anything in your baggage without your knowledge?” asks the security guard.

Rabbi Rabinovitz replies, “Listen, if it was without my knowledge, how would I know?”

2. The Baggage We Carry

Sometimes, the most personal things – the baggage we carry – are the most difficult for us to see. We cannot see the weaknesses in ourselves or in our loved ones, though, of course, we can see with 20/20 vision the weaknesses in others.

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As we discover in this week’s Torah reading, it took an outsider, Jethro – a non-Jew, a sheikh, a chieftain, a high priest, a medicine man, a minister and leader of another nation – to capture the depth of the Nation of Israel.

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3. The Druze

The Druze are an interesting study. An ethnic group of Arabic-speaking people, they live in northern Israel, in Syria, and in Lebanon. Their religion embraces Islam – though Muslims consider the Druze infidels – as well as Judaism, Christianity, and even Hinduism. This is why they call themselves *Al Muwahideen* which means “Unitarians.” (No kidding!)

The Druze are supremely tribal, and they are fiercely loyal. Their loyalty extends to the country they live in, its government and sovereign leadership. In Israel, the Druze serve in the IDF and many go on to work for the Israeli police or border patrol. In Lebanon and Syria, the Druze are just as anti-Israeli as the next guy.

Here are two examples which contrast the actions of two Druze men and show just how loyal the Druze are to the country of their birth.

Let's first consider the story of Zidan Sarif, an Israeli Druze. Zidan was one of the brave heroes killed in the horrific slaughter at a Har Nof synagogue in November of 2014. He was a policeman who was nearby when the terrorist attack was taking place and came running to save the Jews who were trapped in the synagogue, being hacked to death with axes and cleavers. While trying to save the Jews, he was shot to death. Zidan gave his soul to save human life, while the terrorists did everything in their power to kill human life.

Now let's contrast this with the story of Samir Kuntar, a Lebanese Druze. In 1979, Samir Kuntar smashed in the skull of a Jewish baby against the rocks with a butt of his rifle, after he killed the baby's father.

Newsweek stated that, “the details of Kuntar's attack are so sickening that they give pause even to some of Israel's enemies.”¹

After spending some thirty years in an Israeli prison, Samir Kuntar, with four other prisoners, was released in 2008 in exchange for two bodies of Israeli soldiers murdered in Lebanon by Hezbollah. Kuntar, the baby killer, became a hero in the Arab world. Samir Kuntar was killed this past December near Damascus when a building he lived in exploded. Hezbollah claimed that the Israeli Air Force was responsible.

Zidan Sarif was loyal to Israel. Samir Kuntar was loyal to the enemies of Israel. Zidan Sarif believed one should save life at all costs. Samir Kuntar believed that smashing in the skull of a baby makes one a hero.

The Druze in Israel (perhaps with a few exceptions) are staunchly Zionistic and pro-Israel. Which brings us to the Israeli village of Kfar Zeitim, located near Tiberius.

4. Kfar Zeitim

The north of Israel, home of the Jewish people for thousands of years, is replete with holy burial sites and tombs of some of history's greats – from the Rashbi to the Ari. According to Druze tradition, it is also the eternal resting place of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law.

One of the most important gathering places of the Druze people is Kfar Zeitim, where they believe Jethro is buried.²

Jethro of Midian is considered an ancestor of all Druze and revered as the spiritual founder of their religion as well as their chief prophet.

Jethro is a unique name. One does not come across many Jethros. In modern culture we come across only Jethro in *The Beverly Hillbillies* and the rock band Jethro Tull. And, of course, it is the name of this week's Torah portion – *Parshat Yitro*, translated into English as Jethro.

¹ <http://www.newsweek.com/mideast-why-israel-freeing-samir-kuntar-90511?rx=us>

² http://www.druzehistoryandculture.com/historical_sites.htm

5. Parshat Yitro

Interestingly enough, this is the Torah portion in which the Ten Commandments are given. This alone suggests that Jethro is very important. Indeed, we are taught that the revelation at Sinai could only take place after Yitro arrived on the scene. So what secret does he have to teach us?

How did Jethro – a Midinite sheikh, a chieftain, a high-priest,³ leader and medicine man – come to join the people of Israel? The Torah reveals the following:

Now Moses' father in law, Jethro, the chieftain⁴ of Midian, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, His people when the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt.⁵

The Midrashic text known as the Mechilta discusses what exactly inspired Jethro to join his son-in-law Moses and convert to Judaism. It was undoubtedly one (or perhaps all) of these three events: 1) the Splitting of the Sea 2) the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai 3) the war Israel waged against the nation of Amalek.

Whatever it was, Jethro was sufficiently impressed that he left Midian, came to where the Israelites were gathered and became instrumental in forging the nation. He is credited with establishing the first judicial and educational system for the Jewish people.

The Mechilta says that his dedication, commitment, and divine faith are captured in his name.

All seven of them, actually.

³ See Mechilta for which title is most appropriate for Jethro – was he a spiritual priest, tribal chief, or political leader, or all three?

⁴ The Hebrew word is kohen. R' Aryeh Kaplan translates this as sheikh.

⁵ Exodus 18:1.

6. Seven Names

According to the Mechilta, Jethro is not just named Jethro (in Hebrew, Yitro) as unique as that name might be. He has seven other (equally unique) names.⁶ And this is what they are – quoting the Mechilta:

Yeter, Yitro, Chovev, Reuel, Chever, Putiel, Kini.

Yeter because he inspired a section to be added (hotir) to the Torah.⁷

Yitro to indicate his increase (yeter) in good deeds.⁸

Chovev, because he was beloved (chaviv) by the Omnipresent.⁹

Reuel for he was like a neighbor (reah) to the Omnipresent.

Chever for he was like a friend (chaver) to the Omnipresent.

Putiel for he had made a clean break (putah) from the idol worship of Midian.

Kini because he was zealous (kinah) for heaven and acquired (kana) the Torah.¹⁰

To sum up, Jethro's seven names express seven different positive attributes:

1. Yeter – he added to the Torah, innovating a whole new system of judicial systems and judges.
2. Yitro – he excelled in good deeds, converting to Judaism and committing to all of its mitzvot.
3. Chovev – he was beloved by heaven and he was a lover of Torah.

⁶ Cf. Sifrei.

⁷ This is the portion of the judicial apointments (Birurei Hamidot).

⁸ Rashi references another Midrash that states the letters vov was added to his name (Yeter to Yitro) after he converted to Judaism, to indicate his acceptance of the additional mitzvot.

⁹ Rashi: because he loved (chavav) the Torah. See Judges 4:11.

¹⁰ See Torat Shlaimah XV ad loc (p. 4) for different versions of the Midrash.

4. Reuel – he was a neighbor of the Divine; that is, he was close to heaven.
5. Chever – he was a friend to the Creator.
6. Putiel – he broke away from his negative past, making a clean and complete break.
7. Kini – he was zealous for the sake of heaven and he acquired Torah.

Each of these seven names represents another type of relationship Jethro had with the Creator. What can these seven names teach us about our own lives, about our own relationship with the Omnipresent, and about our relationships with the people around us?

7. Seven Gifts

Sometimes we are most unaware of the gifts and talents buried amidst our own baggage and we need an outside force to remind us. Jethro, who saw the Jewish people as an outsider, reminded us of what we have.

And what we have is represented by his seven names: Yeter, Yitro, Chovev, Reuel, Chever, Putiel, Kini.

1. Yeter – As did Jethro, each and every one of us must approach the Torah, the body of Jewish wisdom and scholarship, as a work in progress to which we are expected to add a new dimension. Sure, the canon of Torah is unchanging, and none of us has the right or ability to add or subtract from it. However, from Jethro we learn that the study of Torah should be done not just as an intellectual pursuit to which we bring nothing and from which we take nothing to add, but in a way that is Yeter – always adding to its understanding and depth, like a dynamic organism, which is constantly growing and increasing. The study of Torah can be compared to the human body – even though no limb can be added or subtracted, it is an organism which is alive and growing. This is what we learn from Yeter.

2. Yitro – As our relationship with Torah must be an add-ictive one, so must our relationship to good deeds. Before converting to the faith of his daughter Tziporah and son-in-law Moses, Jethro was obligated to abide by the Seven Noahide Laws – a mere seven obligations. After he converted, Jethro was responsible for 613 mitzvot. You and I can do the minimum, or we can do the maximum. The name Yitro teaches us that to be a Jew is to constantly do the maximum and, by our example, to inspire those around us to do the same.

3. Chovev – It is very easy to say you love God. It is much, much harder to make ourselves be the beloved of God. Of course, innately, we are all loved by and precious to God, but there are people, when you look at them, you see how much God loves them, how much people love them, how beloved and precious they are. From the name Chavav we learn that, in addition to loving God, we should live in such a way that God – and humanity – loves us.

4. Reuel – A good way to begin a connection with God is to try to be a neighbor of God. We should try to build our homes and lives in vicinity of God, neighboring divine ideas and good deeds – living in a divine environment. Sometimes, simply by dwelling where goodness surrounds us, we find that goodness takes over.

5. Chever – The word *chever*, or *chaver*, meaning “friend,” comes from the same root as *chibbur*, meaning “connection.” A true friend is an on-going connection, which exists whether the friends are in the same room or whether they are on two sides of the universe. Befriending God is connecting to God, whether we feel that God is close or distant. Today two people can connect even if thousands of miles stand between them, the connection unseen to the naked eye and seemingly miraculous. The same is true with our friendship and connection to God: it is unseen to the naked eye, but it is there no matter where we may be and no matter if we are wired in or not. All we have to do is want it.

6. Putiel – We all must make a clean break from the negative aspects in our lives. As Jethro broke away completely from strange worship of the Midian idol, we too must break away completely from all the things that are strange to the purpose of our hearts and souls. And we know what they are.

7. Kini – This name implies two things, zealous and eternal. We all must have something heavenly to be zealous about. Find one thing that is beyond you, that is holy and pure, and be passionate about it. And try to own it. In addition to learning Torah and doing good deeds, try to acquire holiness. Because, when you own holiness, the way you own your house or car, you take care of it and feel proud. The Torah should be experienced in this way, *kanah*, acquired like a personal possession. Its ownership will ensure that you are zealous about it as well.

8. Know Your Self (Conclusion)

The Druze see Jethro as their biological ancestor, spiritual leader and chief prophet. The Druze may be onto something.

Sometimes by seeing how a sheikh or minister or chieftain or leader or high priest of another nation sees us, we are reminded of the innate gifts in our personal baggage.

The seven names of Jethro demonstrate a small fraction of what we have. May we embrace it all and change the world!

Shabbat Shalom!

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