



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Yitro** (יִתְרוֹ, "Jethro")
- **Chapters: Exod. 18:1-20:23**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (i.e., parashat Beshalach) recounted how God delivered the children of Israel from Pharaoh's advancing armies by dramatically drowning them in the Sea of Reeds. The Israelites were overjoyed over their new freedom and celebrated by singing the "Song of the Sea." Despite their newly found freedom, however, the people soon began complaining about the hardship of life in the desert. Nonetheless the LORD was gracious and provided both fresh water and manna from heaven to meet the people's needs.

In this week's Torah portion the Israelites reached the Sinai Peninsula (in the land of Midian), where Moses met up with his father-in-law Jethro (i.e., Yitro) who had heard of God's deliverance of the children of Israel and wanted to see for himself what God had done. Upon their reunion, Moses told his father-in-law all about what the LORD had done to Pharaoh for Israel's sake. Jethro rejoiced, blessed the LORD, and offered sacrifices which were communally eaten with Moses' brother Aaron and the elders of Israel.

After this, Jethro observed how Moses sat every day to judge the people "from morning to evening" and expressed concern that his son-in-law was taking on too much responsibility. He then wisely advised Moses to establish a hierarchy of judges to help bear the burden of governing the Israelites, thereby freeing Moses to be a more effective intercessor before the LORD. Moses heeded his father-in-law's advice and selected godly men to become leaders among the people.

On the third new moon after leaving Egypt (i.e., the 1st day of the month of Sivan), the Israelites encamped before Mount Sinai - the place where Moses was initially commissioned. God told Moses to say to the people that if they would obey his teachings, they would become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The people responded "all that the Lord has spoken we will do." After three more days of preparation, the Presence of God was revealed on the mountain with smoke and lightning and shofar blasts. Moses called the people to come to the foot of the mountain but to refrain from ascending it – upon pain of death. God then called Moses to ascend the mountain and instructed him to repeat the prohibition against anyone being on the mountain during the revelation. Moses then descended and, while standing among the people at the foot of the mountain, God uttered the Ten Commandments to all of Israel. As God spoke, however, the people drew back in terror, and begged Moses to become their intercessor.



Basic Questions



1. Who were the Midianites? ¹
2. Who was Yitro (i.e., Jethro)? ²
3. How long did Moses live among the Midianites? ³
4. Moses married Yitro's daughter Zipporah. What were the names of Moses' two sons and what do the names mean? ⁴
5. Where was Moses' immediate family during the time of the Exodus? ⁵
6. How long was Moses away from Midian before he returned after the Exodus? ⁶
7. Where did Yitro meet Moses after he returned to Midian? ⁷
8. What convinced Yitro that the LORD was greater than all the other gods? ⁸
9. Yitro advised Moses to establish judges over the Israelites. What were the qualities these judges were to possess? ⁹
10. Did Moses heed his father-in-law's advice? ¹⁰
11. When did the Israelites reach Mount Sinai after the Exodus? ¹¹
12. What did God call the people at this time? ¹²
13. God told Moses to ask the people if they would accept his Torah. What did the people say, and what was their reward for doing so? ¹³

¹ Descendants of Abraham and Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6) and therefore cousins of the sons of Jacob. At first they settled east of the Jordan River but eventually they became nomadic shepherds in the Sinai Peninsula.

² The "priest of Midian" who took Moses in after he fled from Pharaoh. Jewish tradition regards him a pagan priest who "fattened calves for idolatry" (Sotah 43a); midrash says he was a *universalist* who worshipped all the gods.

³ 40 years while working for his father-in-law as a shepherd. Note that when Moses later led Israel to Sinai, he likely used the same route he took when he first fled Pharaoh....

⁴ Gershom and Eliezer. Gershom means "A stranger there" (in Midian) and Eliezer means "God is my help," in reference to his deliverance from the sword of Pharaoh (Exod. 18:3-4).

⁵ In Midian with Yitro. Apparently Moses sent them back to Midian some time before the plagues began. Of course Moses' brother (Aaron) and sister (Miriam) were with him in Egypt. It is likely that his mother (Yocheved) and his father (Amram) had died earlier.

⁶ One year and three months. He encountered the burning bush on Nisan 15 and the Israelites left on that same day the following year. They arrived in Rephidim (near Sinai) on the new moon of the third month, six weeks later.

⁷ In Rephidim, near Mount Sinai.

⁸ Because the LORD delivered the Israelites and brought them out from under Pharaoh's yoke. Jewish tradition maintains that this marked the occasion of Yitro's conversion.

⁹ Men that feared God; men of truth who hated unjust gain.

¹⁰ Yes, which leads to the question of the extent of his influence over Moses (and indirectly the Israelites). Yitro's advice became the basis for oral law in later Judaism, and he is credited with being the "father of the Sanhedrin."

¹¹ On the new moon of the third month (i.e., Sivan 1), exactly six weeks after the Passover.

¹² Bet Ya'akov – "the house of Jacob." Israel would become "am segulah," a treasured people if they obeyed God.

¹³ The people agreed by saying, kol asher diber Adonai na'aseh ("all that the LORD has spoken, we shall do"). The reward was to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (mamlekheth kohanim v'goy kadosh).



14. What were the “three days of separation”? ¹⁴
15. According to Jewish tradition, when (exactly) did God reveal the Torah to Israel? ¹⁵
16. Where was Moses when God began uttering the Ten Commandments? ¹⁶
17. Why do you think God chose Mount Sinai to reveal Himself? ¹⁷
18. Can you list the Ten Commandments? ¹⁸
19. Why is the first commandment connected to the Exodus? ¹⁹
20. What does the festival of Shavuot (“Pentecost”) mean in Jewish tradition? ²⁰
21. Six Torah portions are named after people. Can you list them? ²¹

Discussion Topics

1. Moses lived with Yitro for over 40 years. He married his daughter Zipporah and their children became Yitro’s grandchildren. Indeed, Yitro’s presence surrounds *both* of Moses’ experiences at Sinai – first just before the revelation at the burning bush, and later just before the Sinai revelation with Israel. In fact, Yitro’s advice to Moses essentially established the Jewish view of judges and courts of law and established Moses as the chief mediator of the Israelites. How much influence do you think Yitro had in Moses’ development?
2. After Yitro converted, he returned to his homeland where he attempted to convert the Midianites to the true faith (Exod. 18:27). He was unsuccessful, however, and later the Midianites became allied with the Moabites against the Jewish people. God finally directed Israel to destroy the Midianites (Num. 31:1), though they were unable to completely do so (Judges 6:1). The fate of Yitro is unclear. His son Chovav later joined the Israelites and his descendants became incorporated into the tribe of Judah (Num. 10:30-32).
3. God set a “boundary” at Sinai the crossing of which resulted in the pain of death (enforced by the people themselves: Exod. 19:12-13). What was the purpose of this boundary? Compare Moses’ first experience at the burning bush with the later revelation at Sinai. What were God’s very first words to Moses?

¹⁴ Three days of preparation before the revelation at Sinai.

¹⁵ Sivan 6, later identified with Shavuot (“Pentecost”), 50 days after the Passover. On Sivan 1 the people came to Sinai. On Sivan 2, Moses ascended Sinai and God offered the Torah to Israel; Sivan 3-5 were the “three days of separation”; on Sivan 5 Moses offered sacrifice at the foot of the mountain; on the morning of Sivan 6 the Presence of God descended upon Sinai before all Israel - exactly 50 days after Passover...

¹⁶ At the foot of the mountain. God had sent him down again to warn the people not to come up when He began reciting the commandments before all Israel.

¹⁷ It was a humble place, non-descript, and not local to the land of Israel. All nations may accept the truth of Torah.

¹⁸ 1) I am the LORD your God; 2) no other gods; 3) no name in vain; 4) keep Sabbath; 5) honor parents; 6) no murder; 7) no adultery; 8) no stealing; 9) no false oaths; 10) no coveting.

¹⁹ Because the LORD is only known through deliverance from slavery.

²⁰ The anniversary of the giving of the Torah. This is exactly the time when the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples of Yeshua as well (Acts 2).

²¹ Noah, Sarah, Yitro, Korach, Pinchas, and Balak. Note that three portions are named for non-Jews.



4. The Hebrew word for holiness is “kedushah” which describes God as entirely unique, separate, exalted, transcendent, etc. In Isaiah 6:3 we read, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God of Hosts” (this is transcendence), though the verse immediately adds “the whole earth is filled with His glory” (this is immanence). The sages have said that we relate to God in a complex tension of *yirah* (fear) and *ahavah* (love). The glory of God is “kavod,” which means “heavy,” yet the love of God is what our hearts need most. Discuss....
5. How do you think Moses understood the laws of sacrifice *before* the revelation given at Sinai? Did he learn this while in Egypt? Midian?
6. Why did God call Moses to the summit of Sinai only to send him back down while the Ten Commandments were being spoken? Did Aaron go with Moses (Exod. 19:24)?
7. The sages regard the Ten Commandments as general categories into which all the other commandments could be understood. The first five commandments concern man’s relationship with God (*bein adam la-Makom*) and the second five commandments concern man’s relationship with his fellow man (*bein adam le’chavero*). The first five commandments are thought to be for Israel only, whereas the second five are for all people. Discuss the merit of this arrangement. How does the fifth commandment relate to God?
8. The Oral Law is called “*Torah she’bal peh*” in traditional Judaism. It’s basic idea is that not everything was written down by Moses (e.g., detailed applications of case law; the meaning of certain words (there was no dictionary included with the Torah!); how to perform various sacrifices, the traditions of scribal transmission, the use of customs, and so on). Discuss the relevance of tradition as it relates to our understanding of the Scriptures...
9. The Jewish people regard themselves as “chosen people.” Discuss what this might mean.
10. All of the Ten Commandments are written using the singular personal pronoun “you.” When God said, “I am the LORD your God,” this was meant to be taken personally. This explains the idea that during Passover each Jew is to regard himself as being personally delivered from Egypt. Discuss how to personalize the Ten Commandments in your own life.
11. The Second Commandment states that we are to make no visible representation of God (“no other gods; no images of God,” etc.). How does this relate to anthropomorphic language about God such as God is a King? a Judge? a Father? a Shepherd? a Rock? What about religious symbols that depict the crucifixion of Yeshua? Is this a violation of the Second Commandment? Finally, how might this relate to the Third Commandment that we should not take the name of the LORD in vain?
12. The Ten Commandments are listed *three* times in the Scriptures (Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-18; and Lev. 19:2-18). Why do you think they are repeated?

For Next Week

- Read parashat **Mishpatim** (i.e., Exodus 21:1-24:18)