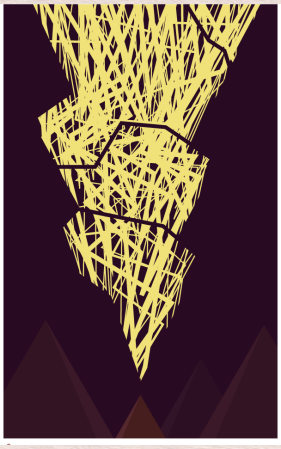
Yitro: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?



ART BY HILLEL SMITH © 2025

Yitro, Moses's father-in-law, hears of the great miracles God had performed for the Israelites, and comes to visit, bringing with him Moses's wife and sons. Seeing Moses struggle to lead the people on his own, Yitro advises him to appoint judges and officials to help him with the task of governing.

The Israelites camp across from Mount Sinai, and are informed that God has chosen them to be his holy nation, a designation they faithfully accept. Then, the entire people assemble at Sinai's foothills for the giving of the Torah. God descends on the mountain with great sound and thunder, summoning Moses to climb on up.

God gives the Israelites the Ten Commandments, obliging them to believe in God; to not worship idols; to not take God's name in vain; to keep the Sabbath; to honor their parents; to not commit murder; to not commit adultery; to not steal; to not bear false witness; and to not covet another's property. **Overwhelmed by the intensity of the revelation, the people beg Moses to receive the Torah on their behalf and convey it to them in turn.**

"I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha, Yitro, is one of very few named after people, and one of fewer still named after people who weren't Jewish. To what did Moses's father-in-law owe this great honor?

By giving Moses a precious bit of worldly advice — namely, to appoint an entire civil service of judges and magistrates to help him govern his people — Yitro teaches us one of the Torah's most vital lessons: ***Derech Eretz Kadma la'Torah*, a Hebrew phrase meaning that proper behavior preceded the Torah.**

We may be righteous, and wise, and eager to sit down and study for hours, but unless we're prepared in very mundane ways, here on earth, to receive the divine wisdom, the divine wisdom isn't going to help us one bit. And a nation that lacks a proper governing structure, a civil society, laws and procedures that make everyone feel heard and seen and makes justice accessible to all is not a nation that's ready to climb up the ladder of righteousness.

But Yitro doesn't merely tell Moses all of this; instead, he shows his son-in-law **an example of righteous living** that can still teach us all a thing or two about being in the world.

First, Yitro pays attention. He's a very important man, the high priest of Midian, but he's sensitive and attuned to everything happening around him, which is how he hears the story of the Exodus in real time. And when he does, he doesn't just say "huh" or "that's nice." He understands which way the wind is blowing, and he acts on it: he gets up, leaves his comfortable life behind, and travels to the middle of the desert to be with his son-in-law and his people. And finally, when Moses tells him the whole story, Yitro is genuinely happy, even though neither he nor his people have benefited in any way from God's grace. It makes sense, then, that Yitro becomes the first person in history to utter the words that are so common for us now — *Baruch HaShem*, blessed is the Lord.

And that is a special privilege — and a great lesson. The 19th century sage, Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, better known as the Ketav Sofer, taught us that while the Israelites have previously praised God for miracles He had done for them, **Yitro stands out for praising God for miracles done for others**. It's his ability to be genuinely happy and supportive of people deserving love and support that awarded Yitro his very own parsha name, and it makes him a worthy teacher for us today.

Join the club

You'll receive our weekly newsletter with the Torah reading, updates on our community and local events, and everything else you need to dive into the greatest story ever told. Visit **simchattorahchallenge.org** to sign up today!