

YITRO THE ENIGMA

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The name of this week's parsha - one of the most important parshiyot of the Torah since it describes the seminal moment of Jewish life, the granting of the Torah at Sinai - bears the name of one of the most enigmatic figure in the Torah, that of Yitro. Yitro is the father-in-law of Moshe and a respected person in world society. The Midrash counts him as one of the main advisers to Pharaoh. His objection to the Egyptian ruler's treatment of the Jews forces him to leave this prestigious position and flee to Midian. There he also ascends in rank being described in the Torah as being the "priest of Midian."

The Midrash sees him as an idolater during that time, even forcing Moshe to commit one of his sons to his care and education. After the exodus from Egypt occurs, the subsequent miracles of the manna from heaven and the defeat of Amalek, Yitro apparently has a change of heart and mind. He now becomes a convert to Judaism of sorts and comes to join the Jewish people in their desert sojourn. He is accorded great honor in the Jewish camp due not so much to his own personal achievements as to his being the father-in-law of Moshe.

Yet it his advice to Moshe and Israel that establishes the judicial and governmental system for the Jewish people while they remained in the Sinai desert. Yitro will appear again later in the Torah when he decides to return to Midian and ignores Moshe's plea to remain with the Jewish people and help guide them into the Land of Israel. Later in Tanach, in the books of Yehoshua, Shoftim and Shmuel we read of his descendants who did live in the Land of Israel and were part of the general society there.

It is hard to get a handle on Yitro. He is the paradigm of many non-Jewish friends of the Jewish people who are well meaning, altruistic and apparently sincere in their support. Yet Yitro is not viewed in especially heroic terms in Jewish tradition. Something is lacking there. He is a friend and a supporter, an adviser and guide, but he does not seem to understand the Jewish people and its mission and purpose. In a paradoxical way, he loves the Jewish people and certainly his immediate family, but he finds it difficult to identify himself with them.

This is the striking difference between his attitude, statements and behavior and those of Ruth, the righteous convert. Her attitude towards the Jewish people is not only one of admiration and support, but rather it is one of complete identification. Yitro finds it difficult to cross that emotional and mental bridge. The truth be said, we need friends like Yitro in the world. And they are currently in rather limited supply. But we should not expect from them more than admiration and limited support. For

they never seem to really identify with us - with our circumstances and position. To the end, they remain as enigmatic to us as Yitro himself.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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