

# OUTSIDERS LOOKING IN

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Yitro is one of the most enigmatic of all of the personages that appear in the Torah. There are many Yitros in Yitro's life and perhaps this is the reason that the rabbis taught us that he possessed seven different names. Each name perhaps represented a different Yitro at a different point of his life. We meet him at the crossroads of his life's choices and beliefs. On one hand he is a priest or former priest of paganism in Midian. He has experimented with every form of religion in the world before coming to the faith of monotheism. He is influenced undoubtedly by his unexpected son-in-law, Moshe. But he is also greatly influenced by the Exodus from Egypt and the visible and impressive miracles that accompanied this event.

But there is also an inner conviction that moves him and makes him a monotheistic believer. He states: "Now I know that the Lord is God for He has avenged Himself on the Egyptians in the manner that they intended to destroy the Jews." The Egyptians drowned Jewish children in the Nile and they were therefore drowned themselves at Yam Suf. Thus Yitro is impressed not only by the miracle of the destruction of the Egyptian oppressor but by the manner and method of destruction that the miracle exhibited itself.

It is the measure for measure method of punishment that truly fascinates him and leads him to abandon his home and background to join Israel in the desert. Having arrived at his new beliefs by judicial and rational analysis, Yitro then applies that same method in advising his son-in-law Moshe as to the formulation and efficient operation of the Jewish judicial system in the desert. He is consistent in his analytical approach to matters. Perhaps that is why he was so positively influenced by the measure for measure punishment of the Pharaoh and his Egyptian hordes.

Yitro is the ultimate "outsider" looking in to see Torah and the Jewish people. Many times the "outsider" sees things more clearly than the "insider" in a society does. In Yiddish there is an expression that a temporary guest sees for a mile. (I know that this lost something in translation but you get the gist of it.) The Jewish people, especially in our religious world, live a somewhat insular existence. Due to this, many times we are unable to see what otherwise can be plain to others.

The example of Yitro encourages us to give respect to the insights of "outsiders" in our community. Oftentimes they come from different backgrounds and have fought their way through many false beliefs to arrive at Torah and the observance of mitzvot. Their views and experiences should be important to us. The tendency to force the "outsiders" to become exactly like the "insiders" is eventually counterproductive to both groups. Yitro never becomes Moshe but Moshe and Israel

benefit from Yitro's judgment and advice. We can all benefit from insights, advice and good wishes from our own "outsiders."

Shabat shalom.

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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](http://www.rabbiwein.com)