

# The Path To Follow

Yitro

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## Jethro's Intentions Were Pure

**I**t is written, "Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard everything that G-d did to Moshe and to Israel" (*Shemot* 18:1). Even before venturing into the desert to take the yoke of Torah upon himself, Jethro had forsaken idolatry and was no longer the "priest of Midian." Thus in the Midrash the Sages say, "At first Jethro was an idolatrous priest. Yet when he saw that there was no truth in it, he despised it and thought of repenting even before Moshe came. He summoned his townspeople and said, 'I have ministered to you up to now, but now I have become old. Choose another priest' " (*Shemot Rabba* 1:32).

If all this is true, why does the Torah describe Jethro as the "priest of Midian"? Such a description does not befit him, since it was no longer the case.

The explanation is the following: Although Jethro forsook the idolatry of Midian even before venturing into the desert, and despite the fact that the inhabitants of Midian removed the priesthood from him, because Jethro did not immediately venture into the desert after forsaking idolatry (and before hearing all the rumors about the great miracles that Hashem had performed for Israel), Scripture considered it as if he were still an idolatrous priest of Midian. Why?

It is because it is impossible for a person to take two paths at the same time. Since Jethro remained in Midian and had not gone into the desert, he was still called the "priest of Midian." Furthermore, since he had not gone to live in a place of Torah, it was as if he still acknowledged idolatry, for the Sages have said: "I would not dwell anywhere but a place of Torah" (*Pirkei Avoth* 6:9).

How do we know that there was no Torah or fear of Heaven there? It is because Jethro had been relieved of his duties and excommunicated, and they also tormented his daughters. As the Midrash tells us, "[Jethro] asked the shepherds to look after his flock, but they refused, and he had to use his daughters. 'They came and drew water' [*Shemot* 2:16] – teaching that they used to arrive early on account of their fear of the shepherds. 'The shepherds came and drove them away' [v.17] – was it possible, he being a priest of Midian, that shepherds should drive away his daughters? It is in fact to teach you that they excommunicated him and drove away his daughters as a woman divorced.... 'Moshe got up and saved them' – this teaches that...he said: 'Men usually draw water and women give the flock to drink. Here women are drawing water and men are watering the flock.' It does not say 'he delivered them,' but 'he saved them.' Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Eleazar the son of Rabbi Yossi the Galilean: 'The shepherds came with the intention of violating them, therefore Moshe saved them.' ... The Sages say, 'This teaches that they cast them into the water, from which Moshe drew them out' " (*Shemot Rabba* 1:32).

### He Came to Me Only for the Sake of Heaven

Rashi wrote, "What news did he hear that *ouva* [he came]?" The term *ouva* has a numerical value (including the word itself) of ten, corresponding to the Ten Commandments. This means that Jethro did not come to convert and take the yoke of the *mitzvot* and the Torah so he could boast of being the king's father-in law, but only for the sake of Torah. Thus we read in the Midrash:

"It is written, 'The wise inherit honor' [*Mishlei* 3:35]. This refers to Jethro: What [great] honor he inherited when he visited Moshe! He said to Moshe, 'I, your father-in-law Jethro, have come to you' [*Shemot* 18:6]. ... Rabbi Eleazar said: G-d told Moshe: '... I am He Who commanded the world to come into existence,' as it says, 'Almighty G-d, Hashem, has spoken and called the earth' [*Tehillim* 50:1]. 'I am He Who brings near and Who removes far away,' as it says: 'Am I a G-d from nearby – says Hashem – and not a G-d from afar?' [*Jeremiah* 23:23]. 'I am He Who brought Jethro near and did not thrust him afar, for this man who is coming to Me is coming for a good purpose – to become a proselyte. Bring him near as well and do not cast him off.' Thus we immediately read, 'Moshe went out to meet his father-in-law' [*Shemot* 18:7]" (*Shemot Rabba* 27:2).

This is why we initially read, "Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard...." If the Torah had only stated "the father-in-law of Moshe," we could have said that he only left Midian to boast of his son-in-law. The Torah therefore testifies that he was the "priest of Midian," teaching us that he did not come in search of glory, for in that case he would not have been forced to leave Midian and forsake idolatry. In fact idolatry had earned him great honor, yet because he had renounced it in order to venture into the desert, we must say that he did not come seeking glory. Rather, he came only for the sake of Heaven, in order to take the yoke of the Torah upon himself.

Proof that Jethro acted for the sake of Heaven can be found in the words of our Sages, namely that he was called Jethro because he was the cause of an additional [*yiter*] *parsha* in the Torah (*Mechilta Yitro, Amalek* 1). This teaches us that he went to convert for the sake of Heaven – in order to learn Torah – not to receive a reward or for glory.

### To Gladden Moshe

Furthermore, Jethro heard that all the miracles which had been done for the Children of Israel were only because of their unity, and that the sea had split because of unity. By the sea, the tribes competed with one another to be the first to descend into the water, and it was only through unity that they had defeated Amalek.

Thus when Jethro committed himself to unity and the yoke of the Torah, he fulfilled the beginning and foundation of the Torah. What did he do? He left Midian with Tziporah the wife of Moshe and his children, and he brought them to Moshe in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of loving one's fellowman as oneself, as well as to gladden Moshe. True, the Sages have said: "When the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moshe, 'Go deliver My people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt,' Moshe took his wife and his two sons and brought them to Egypt. Aaron came to meet him and asked, 'Who are these accompanying you?' He replied, 'They are my wife and sons.' 'Where are you bringing them?' He replied, 'To Egypt.' He exclaimed, 'We are grieving for those who are already there, and now we will have to grieve for these as well?' At that point he told Tziporah, 'Return to your father's home' " (*Mechilta, Amalek* 1).

Once they left Egypt, however, Moshe could have Tziporah and his two sons returned to him. Hence Jethro brought them back with him, in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of loving his fellowman as himself before going to receive the yoke of the Torah.

## The Punishment of One Who Rejects the Torah

It is written, “The seventh day is Shabbat to Hashem your G-d. You shall not do any work – you, your son, your daughter, your servant, your maidservant, your animal, and your stranger within your gates” (*Shemot* 20:10).

During the time that the *gaon* Rabbi Akiva Eiger *Zatzal* served as the Rav of Friedland, a huge fire broke out in the city and mercilessly destroyed house after house. The Jews who lived there were frantically trying to put out the blaze and save whatever they could. After great efforts, the fire was finally extinguished, but only after having burned numerous homes and leaving behind ruins.

Rabbi Akiva Eiger did everything he could to help the unfortunate who no longer had a roof over their heads. In short time, the large sums needed for the rebuilding effort were collected, and workers were brought in to vigorously start the rebuilding process. Rabbi Akiva Eiger imposed only one condition on the residents of the community: Every construction contract they would make with the builders was to expressly state that no work was to be done on Shabbat. As compensation, the builders would be given a certain amount of money for that day.

All the Jews in the city accepted and observed the Rav's condition without protest, except for one individual who dared to openly transgress it. A wealthy and arrogant man, he decided that he would not obey the Rav. He therefore ordered his builders to work on Shabbat in order to complete the building of his house as quickly as possible. On the first Friday night after the rebuilding had started, silence and calm reigned throughout the community. Early in the morning, Jews quietly made their way to synagogue with *tallitim* on their shoulders.

All of a sudden, the sound of hammers could be heard. Some people tried to locate the source of the noise, only to discover that the builders hired by the wealthy man were working on his house, just like on the weekday. Word of what was happening reached the ears of Rabbi Akiva Eiger, who was very upset with the public desecration of Shabbat in his community. He immediately sent someone to summon the wealthy man. The envoy went to where the wealthy man was living while waiting for his new house to be built, and he knocked at the door. A servant came out and asked him what he wanted. “Tell your master that the Rav is summoning him,” said the envoy. The servant went back inside, and after a few minutes he returned with the wealthy man's answer: “My master is very busy at the moment, and he regrets that he is unable to go meet the Rav.”

The envoy returned to Rabbi Akiva Eiger and told him of the wealthy man's insolence, who claimed that he was very busy and could not meet him. The Rav restrained himself and waited for the next day, when he again sent someone to summon him. This time, however, the reply was that the wealthy man was sleeping.

### The House Will Not Stand

On the following Friday night, Rabbi Akiva Eiger sent his *shamash* to proclaim throughout the community that the Rav had personally written a decree stating that it was absolutely forbidden to build on Shabbat. The Rav decreed that from that day on, it was no longer to be done. At the end of the decree, it was said: “Whoever violates these rules, a serpent will bite him.” The *shamash* fulfilled the Rav's orders by proclaiming the decree, but the wealthy man paid no attention to it, for he continued to act with insolence.

On Shabbat morning, Rabbi Akiva Eiger gave a sermon in synagogue in which he spoke of the gravity of transgressing Shabbat. He read his decree aloud and added a stern warning addressed to the public, affirming his certitude that anyone who opposed him by building on Shabbat, his house would not stand. The wealthy man mocked the Rav's words, however, and still ordered his builders to work on Shabbat.

In fact not long afterwards, his large house was completed, and it was more beautiful than any other in the city. He was very proud of his new home, and he moved into it with great joy. Yet after a certain time, the roof over one of the rooms suddenly collapsed. The wealthy man quickly summoned a building expert to determine the reason for the collapse. He performed a thorough examination of all the walls, and to his amazement he discovered that rot had already set into all the wooden beams. “The ceiling and all the walls have rotted and are worm-infested,” the expert said. “The entire house is at risk of collapsing, so you have to get out right away and move all of your things, because it will have to be rebuilt.”

Word of the extraordinary event spread throughout the

### Guarde Your Tongue

#### Some Good Advice

If we allow ourselves to listen to *Lashon Harah*, we must immediately and diligently strive to find some merit with the speaker. We must also strive to remove the resentment that he feels for the person he has spoken against. In this way, we will rectify the transgression retroactively.

If we know the speaker well, and we realize that the more we try to exonerate the subject, the angrier he will get, it is obvious that we should remain quiet. When he has left, it is a *mitzvah* to explain the entire story to others who have heard it, providing them with reasons why they should not believe what was said.

### A Letter to Each

It is written, “Jethro, the priest of Midian...heard” (*Shemot* 18:1).

There were four individuals who received an extra letter for their name: Abraham received a *hei*, Sarah received a *hei*, Jethro received a *vav*, and Joshua received a *yud*. When we combine these letters, we get the Tetragrammaton, which is astonishing.

In his book *Ohr HaChama*, Rabbi Moshe Chorev cites Rabbi Adi Amrutzi in explaining the reason for this: Abraham and his wife Sarah brought converts under the wings of the *Shechinah*, with Abraham converting the men and Sarah converting the women. Jethro was also a father to converts, since he was the first to convert spontaneously, and Joshua converted the inhabitants of Gibeon.

Therefore the merit of the community was conferred on all four of them, for they brought close those who were far and placed them under the wings of the *Shechinah*. They were thus worthy of being given a letter from His Name as a reward from their actions, measure for measure.

### A Double Rescue

It is written, “Blessed be Hashem, Who has rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh, Who has rescued the people from under the hand of the Egyptians” (*Shemot* 18:10).

Why is the expression “Who has rescued” used twice?

In *Responsa Halachot Ketanot*, the *gaon* Rabbi Moshe Hagiz *Zatzal* explains that two rescues took place: The first involved Moshe and Aaron when they set out on their mission, so that the Egyptians and Pharaoh would not harm them when they came before him. The second involved the people, so that the Egyptians, who were their overseers, would not harm them.

With regards to Moshe and Aaron we read, “Who has delivered you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh.” Yet with regards to the people we simply read, “Who has delivered the people from under the hand of Egypt.” This is because Moshe and Aaron were specifically rescued from Pharaoh when they presented themselves to him as Hashem’s emissaries. Such was not the case for the people, and therefore they were only rescued in a general way “from under the hand of Egypt.”

### Honoring Parents

It is written, “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be prolonged” (*Shemot* 20:12).

I will be inspired by the elders, for our fathers have told us, and we have seen with our own eyes that many people we know and whom we have witnessed properly honoring their father and mother have merited great honor, wealth, children, and long life. Whoever acts incorrectly by not honoring their father and mother as they should, all sorts of misfortunes come upon them. They do not leave this world before having become poor

and falling into great need. They experience no success and have no blessings in anything they do. Illnesses will sometimes afflict them, some will be childless, and they leave this world without hope.

If people lightly regard the *mitzvah* of honoring their parents, to the point of even striking and cursing them, and yet we see them living in peace in harmony, experiencing no misfortunes, trials, or poverty – as opposed to what is written concerning those who do not honor their father or mother – we may be certain that they will not escape punishment at the end of their lives. If they experience no punishment in this world, it is because Hashem is patient. However their punishment will be that much worse in the World to Come.

– *Tochachot Chaim*

## In the Light of the Parsha

### Without Torah Study, Faith Can Easily be Lost

At the giving of the Torah, Hashem told Moshe: “They will also believe in you forever” (*Shemot* 19:9).

The commentators (see *Ohr HaChaim*, *Ibn Ezra*, and *Ramban*) have said that the Children of Israel already believed in Moshe prior to that point, as it is written: “They believed in Hashem and in His servant Moshe” (*Shemot* 14:31). That being the case, what was added at the giving of the Torah?

We clearly see that when people develop faith in Hashem and His servants the *tzaddikim* because they have seen wonders and miracles, their faith is not solid. Likewise when a person repents because he has seen a miracle, his repentance will not last forever. When he first sees a miracle, he will believe in Hashem and repent, but afterwards this impression will fade and he will return to his former self. It is only the faith that a person obtains through Torah study that is permanent. I have seen among the writings of the Vilna Gaon that if someone does not study Torah, miracles will have no effect on him, nor will they push him to improve. Hence despite the fact that the Children of Israel had faith in Moshe, this faith only came to them because they had witnessed the miracle of the splitting of the sea. Because such faith is not permanent, Hashem said that the faith they now achieved at the giving of the Torah would be permanent, for it came to them through Torah. According to the Vilna Gaon’s remarks, we may explain why the Children of Israel made the golden calf just 40 days after the giving of the Torah. They had seen with their own eyes how Hashem is G-d in Heaven above and the earth below, and the *Shechinah* constantly dwelled upon the mountain. Yet according to the remarks of the Vilna Gaon, we see that because they had not yet studied Torah (since Moshe had not yet descended from the mountain to teach it to them), they may have lost the faith that they had acquired at that time.



### What They Saw

When Haim Elbaz and Elisha Zerbib attended a Torah lecture during the week of *Parsha* Yitro, and they heard the description of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, they tried to imagine the plain meaning of the verse: “All the people saw the voices” (*Shemot* 20:15).

The two men, who had university degrees in computer science, reasoned that since it says that the people “saw the voices,” this should have a meaning at even the simplest of levels.

Moving from theoretical to practical, they looked through the writings of the commentators and realized that things were clearer than they had initially imagined. On the verse in question, Rashi states: “They saw what was audible, which is impossible to see elsewhere.... Emanating from the mouth of the Almighty.”

The *Kli Yakar* says much more clearly, “It is probable that each word that emanated from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, immediately materialized and possessed substance, to the point that all the letters could be seen flying in the air, as if everything was written before the people. Hence the Sages said that when Moshe broke the tables, the letters flew in the air.”

The *Kli Yakar* also explains the expression, “The people saw and trembled and stood from afar” (*Shemot* 20:15): What did they see? They saw the letters flying in the air.

#### A Great Deal of Divine Help

Before Elbaz and Zerbib began to look into the possibility that “the letter were flying in the air,” they didn’t know where they were headed. They conducted their research in their spare time, and only as a hobby. “A love for Torah and a scientific background, along with a great deal of Divine help, are a sure way of discovering what we did,” they said. “Since we knew that we were dealing with serious issues, however, we addressed the *Rishon LeTzion*, the *gaon* Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu *Shlita*, and told him about our idea. We showed him our initial findings, and only continued exploring the subject once we received his blessing.”

They initially tried to write their own software to conduct their research, but they were unsuccessful. Then they came upon a website which had some software they could download and use. All they needed was a regular computer with a sound card and a microphone, and obviously a program to record and analyze sounds.

To give the reader an idea of the research they did, it must be noted that in order to analyze sound waves, a regular decoder is needed. An audio spectrogram is a visual representation of sounds decoded by frequency. With regards to the frequency of sound waves, the unit of measurement is the hertz (Hz), which is defined as one cycle per second. The human ear can detect frequencies as high as 20,000 Hz, although human speech is usually less than 3,000 Hz. Any frequencies higher or lower cannot be detected by the human ear. Dolphins, for example, can emit sounds with a frequency of 100,000 Hz (that is, 100 KHz)!

#### The Discovery

To graph the frequencies of the sounds made when a particular letter is pronounced, a technique known as acoustic spectrography is used. By hooking up the microphone to their sound card, and by knowing the principles of speech, Elbaz and Zerbib began to pronounce the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The software then decoded the sounds by frequency and displayed them graphically on the computer screen. Thus for each Hebrew letter they spoke, a spectral image was displayed. To compare these letters, they also did a spectral analysis of Roman letters. Since the spectrogram displays the image on the screen from left to right, as Roman letters are read, they mirrored the image in order to correspond to the way that Hebrew letters are written, namely from right to left.

The results were astounding: The spectral images of the Hebrew letters were identical to their physical shapes, as accepted by tradition!

This is a great witness to the Sacred Tongue’s uniqueness in regards to the relationship between the written letter and its pronunciation. The probability of letters in any given language having the same shape as their audio spectrogram is about the same as the probability of the word “coat” having an audio spectrogram that looks like a coat!

What is particularly interesting, Elbaz and Zerbib point out, is that the spectrogram of certain letters more clearly corresponds to their physical shape when pronounced in a certain way. For example, the spectrogram of the letter *vav* more closely resembles the shape of the letter itself when it is spoken with a Sephardic pronunciation. The same applies to a Yemenite pronunciation of the letters *tav* and *beit*, and to an Ashkenazi pronunciation of the letter *tzadi*.

### By Allusion

#### Acronyms in the Text

It is written, *Sheshet yamim ta’avod* (“six days shall you work” – *Shemot* 20:9). The second letter of each term form the word *shema*, telling us by allusion that during six days of the week, we must not rush through prayer and the recitation of *Shema* because of our work.

*Sheshet yamim* (“six days”): This is an acronym for *shetitpalel shalosh tefilot mibilti yechsar mishum yom* (that we pray the three prayers without missing a day).

*Ta’avod* (“shall you work”): This is an acronym for *avoda deshemaya bekavana titpalel* (you shall recite the prayer with concentration).

*Ve’assita kol melachtecha* (“and do all your work”): This is an acronym for *vetikba itim sheta’assok Torat Hashem ki lo*