

Parshat Yitro 5776

The Rishonim, based on the gemara in Zevachim 116a, are divided over whether Yitro came to visit Moshe Rabbeinu in the desert before or after matan Torah. Ibn Ezra claims that Yitro arrived after matan Torah based on the following proofs:

a) Moshe told his father-in-law, “I make known Hashem’s decrees and laws” – a sign that the Torah had already been given; b) Moshe states in Devarim (1:6-7) “Hashem, our G-d, spoke to us at Chorev saying: “you have been at this mountain long enough. Turn and travel onward”. These words were spoken just before the Jewish People left the Sinai Desert. In that same section, Moshe mentions the increased burden he faced due to Israel’s rising population and he describes the appointing of judges in charge “of thousands and of hundreds”. This was Yitro’s advice on the second day of his stay in the desert. We see, according to Ibn Ezra, that Yitro arrived just before the Israelites left the Sinai Desert. If Yitro arrived in the desert after matan Torah, why is the episode of Yitro placed before matan Torah in our parsha? Ibn Ezra states that the episode of Yitro is placed after the battle with Amalek to contrast the best and worst of the non-Jewish world. Amalek attacked us, we therefore remember its wickedness; whilst Yitro was inspired to join the Jewish People and advise them on a new legislative system.

Ramban quotes Ibn Ezra and wonders why Yitro mentioned yetziat mitzrayim but did not mention the giving of the Torah. Why did Moshe not tell him about the giving of the Torah? Ramban accepts the view of R’ Yehoshua in the gemara in Zevachim, that Yitro arrived after the war with Amalek but before matan Torah. Abarbanel agrees with Ramban and refutes the proofs on which Ibn Ezra relies. For example, in relation to Moshe telling Yitro “I make known Hashem’s decrees and laws” – Abarbanel claims that this is a reference to the laws taught to Bnei Yisrael at Marah, prior to matan Torah.

Rashi’s view seems unclear. While he mentions that Yitro had heard about the splitting of the sea and the war with Amalek, he does not mention the giving of the Torah, implying that it had not yet happened. However, later on we read “*Yitro felt joy for all the good that Hashem had done for Israel*” – Rashi comments that this refers to “the manna, the well and the giving of the Torah”, implying that matan Torah had already occurred.

In parshat Beha’alotecha, Moshe told Yitro “we are travelling to the place Hashem told us that He would give us; come with us”, yet Yitro refused and said: “rather than go with you, I will return to my own land and birthplace”. This corresponds exactly to our parsha: “Moshe let his father-in-law depart and he returned to his land”. Ohr HaChayim states that Moshe pressed Yitro to join Bnei Yisrael in the Land of Israel, since by going back to Midian, the Midianites would say that Yitro studied the Jewish faith and valued it highly yet still decided to return to his land; this would represent a chilul Hashem. After hearing about the miracles that Hashem had performed for the Jewish People, including the 10 plagues, kriyat Yam Suf and victory over Amalek, Yitro had been so inspired that he had enthusiastically joined Bnei Yisrael in the desert and converted to Judaism. Why then did he not want to join Bnei Yisrael on their journey to the Land of Israel?

On the words “*Yitro felt joy*” Rashi, based on Sanhedrin 94a, comments “his flesh was filled with goose pimples” over the destruction of Egypt. Such a man, who had heard about all that had happened to the Jewish People, yet was unwilling to join them in their land, must have had mixed feelings about their success. According to Chazal, Yitro argued that, as a convert, he would not inherit a portion in the Land of Israel. Moshe rebuffed this claim, promising him a portion, however Yitro was not convinced. On the words “and he went to his own land”, Rashi, based on the Mechilta, comments “to convert the members of his family”

Sforno states that Moshe succeeded in convincing Yitro to leave his sons with the Jewish People. Yitro himself returned to his native land, according to Sforno because he was too old to want to adapt to a new unfamiliar country. Rivash, 14th Century Rishon from Barcelona, states that Yitro was afraid of the fighting that would inevitably be involved in the conquest of Eretz Yisrael. Moshe tried to persuade Yitro that Hashem would enable Bnei Yisrael to successfully conquer the Land, however Yitro was not convinced.

In contrast to Yitro, much later in Tanach Ruth converted to Judaism but also realised the significance of joining the Jewish People in their own land. Her mother-in-law, Naomi, tried hard to convince Ruth to part ways and return to her own land. However, Ruth did not want to remain a Jewish convert in Moav. She understood the connection between the Torah, Jewish People and the Land of Israel and she ultimately merited to be the mother of the Davidic dynasty.