

Due to the configuration of our Jewish calendar, we ended the Book of Genesis and began the Book of Exodus in January 2021, which means we are reading these two parashiot twice in this civil year. Back in January, perhaps anticipating our very early Pesach, I pondered four questions regarding Parashah Shemot. Now, nearly a year later, four more questions have emerged, all of them concerning Moses' father-in-law: Who was this Kohen of Midian, first called Reuel and then Yitro in our parashah? Why does HaShem allow Moses to seek refuge with an idolater? Why does a person of his stature have to send his daughters to fetch water for his sheep? And why does he have so many names? Considering the plethora of stories they wove around him, our sages were obviously just as puzzled. They readily found an explanation for the second and third questions, which they usually answered together: "Although Yitro had been the priest of idolaters, ... he was convinced of their falseness and despised them. In fact, he had decided to repent even prior to the arrival of Moses. He had summoned his townsmen and told them, 'I have served you until now, but now I am old; select another priest.' Because he had returned the paraphernalia used in idolatrous worship, they were angry with him and turned against him so violently that no one would speak to him, or work for him, or tend his flocks. He pleaded with the shepherds to care for his flocks, but they refused, Hence, his daughters were compelled to take them out to pasture. ... They oppressed him and drove his daughters away just as a divorced woman is driven away." (Midrash Tanchuma Shemot 11) So, who was this man? One of the most strangely anachronistic stories finds him together with Job (or Amalek, depending on the source) and Balaam as one of Pharaoh's counselors pondering what to do about the Hebrews. "Balaam advised drowning the newborn males, and was killed. Job, who was silent and reluctant to express his opinion, was sentenced to suffer afflictions. And Yitro, who fled after he disagreed with that counsel and Pharaoh sought to kill him, his descendants were privileged to sit as scribes in session with the Sanhedrin in the Chamber of Hewn Stone." (Talmud, Sanhedrin 106a) In a different take, Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer sees him as one of Pharaoh's magicians. He coveted the rod that was created at the beginning of the world and passed from Adam to Enoch, to Noah, to Shem, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jakob, who brought it with him to Egypt and gave it to Joseph. After Joseph died and his house was plundered, the rod was placed in Pharaoh's palace. Yitro took it, and planted it in the middle of his garden, and no one was able to approach it anymore (i.e. understand its lettering and thus pull it out and claim it). "When Moses came to his house ... and saw the rod and read the letters which were upon it, he put forth his hand and took it. Yitro watched and said, 'This one will redeem Israel from Egypt.' ..." Yes, an archetypal story, similar to the Arthurian and Völsunga myths. Adding to the confusion about his affiliations, some scholars theorize that it was the Midianites (or Kenites – another discrepancy) who introduced the monotheistic concept of YHWH to the Hebrews (the Midianite, or Kenite hypothesis – fascinating reading)! According to Midrashic sources, his seven (a special number, as we know) names define his virtues: His two main names derive from a root that means additional: *Yitro* (3:1) because he overflowed with good deeds, and *Yether* (4:18) because he caused additions to the Torah. *Reuel* (2:18) means friend of HaShem. *Putiel* (6:25) because he distanced himself from idolatry or because, like Potiphar, he fattened calves for idolatrous sacrifice (both a bit farfetched). Aaron's son Elazar and a daughter of Putiel were the parents of Pinchas. *Chovav* (Numbers 10:29) means beloved. Curiously, here it is Chovav, "son of the Midianite Reuel," who is Moses' father-in-law. In Judges 1:16 he is *Keni*, zealous. Finally, in Judges 4:11 he is *Chever* associate of HaShem. But, similar to their treatment of the servant Abraham sent to find a wife for Isaac, some of our sages cast him in a negative light. Of the least favorable depictions, Midrash Mechilta Yitro 1:1 has Yitro making Moses swear that his first child must be raised as a dedicated idolater, and Midrash Tanchuma 12 defines the word *vayo'el* (2:21 Moses agrees to stay) as an oath that he would not leave Midian without his consent. "Lest he do to him what Laban had stated, 'If you afflict my daughters and take wives [Gen. 31:50].'" (Midrash Yalkut Shimoni 247:168 says that Yitro imprisoned Moses for ten years, intending to starve him to death; but Zipporah, who loved him, secretly brought him food to keep him alive. In all their multifarious richness, these stories only raise more questions, which will increase as we encounter Moses' father-in-law in later readings. He is indeed a complicated and enigmatic character, and the stories surrounding him are equally so. The ambivalence of our sages reflects the ambivalence many of us feel toward people who enter our world from the outside, alternately praising and condemning their desire to be part of it and sadly but understandably, often alert for the tiniest sign of insincerity or duplicity. Unfortunately, the less we know, the more we begin to assume. And like the sages of Talmud and Midrash, we sometimes let our imaginations run wild trying to understand the strangers in our midst. Experience has taught us to be wary, but it has also taught us that some of these strangers can enrich us in untold ways.

Shabbat shalom!