

A Brief Note on Parsha Yitro

Parsha Yitro opens with the arrival in camp of Yitro. Word of what God had done for Moses and his people Israel had come to the lands of Midian, where *Yitro*, the father-in-law of Moses lived. He journeyed to the Israelites' encampment, bringing with him Zipporah and Gershom and Eliezer, the wife and two sons of Moses. Unlike the last foreign visitor to the camp – the Amalekite warrior – Yitro brought blessing to the camp and made offerings for God.

The Torah is a multi-faceted document; one of its strands provides insight into the early development of Israelite society. While traditional Torah commentary is dedicated to the proposition that Israel entered Egypt a small clan but left a large nation – that the *Bene Israel*, seventy in number who went down to Egypt, emerged as “*Am Yisrael*”, the people or nation of Israel, that conclusion is not supported by the facts. At the highest, the Israelites may have shared only a few customs, circumcision being the most indicative, and perhaps language. They also had a story, one that defined their origins, which gave them a common heritage.

The Israelites however possessed none of the institutions, which allow groups of people to transcend a tribal identity. They had none of the incidence of a nation; no form of government, even in the loosest sense, nor did they have a set of laws to follow or enforce. When they left Egypt, they had one common asset, Moses, who, as the text has stressed, had to struggle to gain and retain the confidence of the people.

Yitro noticed Moses' success, and it worried him. The Torah depicts an overwhelmed leader being hounded from sun up to sun down, by various petitioners. Yitro, feared for what he saw, believing that such an unrelenting pace would harm his son-in-law. He suggests that Moses begin to delegate his administrative and judicial functions.

Moses was to remain as the absolute arbiter. According to *Sforno* his mandate was the public business. He would adjudicate disputes between the leaders regarding public policy, and, most importantly he would teach God's laws and statutes. However he was advised to select a group of men who were to be appointed as “*leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens*”. Based on the traditional viewpoint, and assuming 600,000 men left Egypt, the leadership cadre would number 78,600 men. Not addressed in the suggestion, though it may be assumed that the framework was organized within a tribal structure. This structure appears to have been supplanted by a council of wise men.¹ This council in turn was used as a model for the *Sanhedrin*, derived from the Greek *synedrion* (assembly), an institution that arose in the time of the Second temple.

Interestingly, *Yitro* decided on a leadership model that focused on wisdom and moral righteousness, rather than on military and organizational skills. Later leaders of Israel would need warrior's skills to begin the conquest of the Land of Israel. A balance in the characteristics of leadership, a mix of brain and brawn, would be found in the kingships of David and his son Solomon, who were great fighters and thinkers. David is

traditionally accepted as the author of most of the Psalms. Solomon has three books to his credit: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

Parsha Yitro, Shabbath January 26, 2008

ⁱ *“Gather to me 70 men of the elders of Israel... and bring them to the Tent of Meeting, so that they should stand there with you”* (Numbers 11:16).