

## Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

SHEMOT

VA'ERA

BO

BESHALACH

YITRO

MISHPATIM

TERUMA

TETZAVEH

KI TISA

VAYAKHEL

PEKUDEI

# YITRO

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# LIFE'S BLESSINGS

**The** giving of the Torah is considered to be one of the most far-reaching episodes known to humanity. Whilst God Himself utters the first two commandments,<sup>1</sup> the magnitude of God's voice is so great that the Jewish people beg for Moses to speak in place of God, lest they die.<sup>2</sup> This is the first and only recorded time that God reveals Himself to an entire nation – a pinnacle of human history – and yet, rather than giving this episode a grandiose name or even referencing the Ten Commandments, it is named after a relatively minor character from the story, who happens to be a convert – Yitro. Why? What is so great about Yitro that he merits to have this extraordinary section named after him?

**The** whole world sees the amazing miracle of the splitting of the Reed Sea. The Midrash says that every other body of water in the world was also separated at that time.<sup>3</sup> The impact of witnessing this

supernatural event, however, dulled, and eventually people began to forget. This unfortunate phenomenon occurs on a micro-level almost daily.

**We are constantly surrounded by everyday miracles; from the birth of a baby to the blossoming of a flower.**

Yet we walk around as if everything is normal, carrying out day to day activities, blind to the miracles taking place all around us.

**The** key to living an enriched life can be found in the character of Yitro. In contrast to the generation around him, Yitro internalizes and appreciates the greatness of the miracles he has witnessed. His exposure to the spiritual, fosters within him an increased sensitivity and awareness of similar experiences. So when the Jewish people are victorious in their battle against Amalek, he immediately understands that this was not simply due to the might of the

Jewish army and he acknowledges that this must be the work of God.

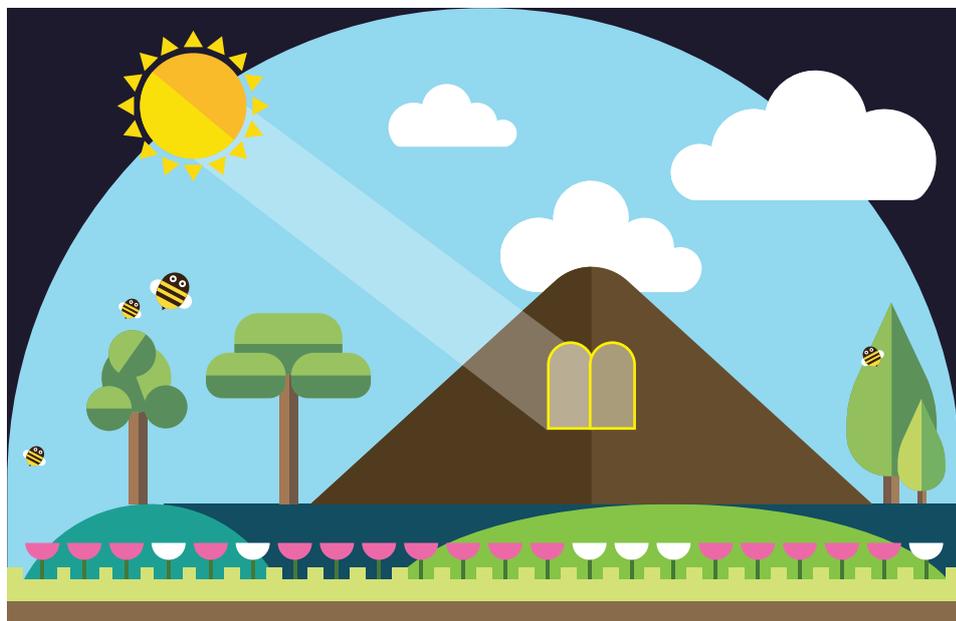
**This** unique section of the Torah is always read around the time of the festival of *Tu bishvat*, the new year or 'birthday' for the trees.<sup>4</sup> Just as on a person's birthday, we celebrate their existence, reminisce about their younger years and share blessings for their future, similarly the Jewish calendar has identified an appropriate date for celebrating the existence of trees. On *Tu bishvat* we celebrate the beauties of nature, we take wonder in the new blossoms flowering after a dormant winter season and we marvel at the magic of a bee pollinating a flower.

**In acknowledging the way that a tiny seed can grow into a magnificent tree, we acknowledge the simple everyday natural miracles that underpin the world.**

It is therefore no coincidence that the miraculous and supernatural story of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai is read precisely around the time of *Tu b'shvat*. The wonder and inspiration felt in that moment of revelation should be the same wonder and inspiration we experience when witnessing the everyday miracles of life and the world around us. And perhaps it is for this very reason that this portion of the Torah is called Yitro.

**Having** witnessed the miracle of the splitting of the sea, and the Jewish people's miraculous victory over Amalek, Yitro begins to realize that his whole existence is one majestic miracle. It is relatively easy to marvel at supernatural phenomena, but to take that wonder and superimpose it into everyday life, to notice the miracles hidden beneath the surface of nature, and to appreciate God's role in our everyday world, brings gratitude to an altogether different level.

**From** this viewpoint of wonder, this moment of gratitude for all that is around him, Yitro converts to Judaism. He journeys forward with his family and joins the Jewish nation. His decision reflects the underlying tenet that a prerequisite for receiving the Torah and living a life of Judaism is to be grateful for everything one has, to acknowledge daily miracles and to integrate their meaning into the fabric of our lives. Yitro's attitude towards the wonders of the world, and his subsequent conversion to Judaism, is a blueprint for the mindset required by the Jewish



People as they stand and prepare to receive the Torah. The message of Yitro and perhaps the reason this portion is named after him, is that the grandiose morality and groundbreaking content of the Ten Commandments is predicated upon a basic level of appreciation. Practicing as a Jew involves allowing gratitude and appreciation to infuse every facet of our life. This finds expression in daily blessings over food, sights, smells and actions.

**In this way we affirm the ideal that acknowledging and making blessings over life is the greatest way to transform life into the ultimate blessing.**

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Makkot* 24a.

<sup>2</sup> *Exodus*, 20:15-18.

<sup>3</sup> *Exodus Rabba* 21:6.

<sup>4</sup> Mishna, Tractate *Rosh Hashana* 1:1.

#### Parasha Fact:

The parasha in which the Torah is given is named after someone who the Midrash says tried every form of idolatry under the sun, underscoring the ultimate accessibility of the Torah to everyone, regardless of background.

#### Next week in Mishpatim:

*Throughout our daily lives we are tasked with sanctifying the mundane moments. We make blessings over food, we sanctify that which we earn by giving charity and we sanctify our time through celebrating the festivals, to name but a few. It is clear that our everyday life needs to be infused with spirituality. One could ask, however, whether that formula also works in the opposite direction, with a duty upon us to infuse the Holy with the mundane. A brief episode where, immediately following the Revelation at Sinai, we find the elders of the Jewish people sitting eating and drinking while gazing at God, sheds interesting light onto the art of juggling the sacred with the mundane.*