

Rabbi Gewirtz's Devar Torah for Parshat Yitro

It is remarkable that the Torah portion that contains G-d's revelation and prophetic communication of the "Ten Commandments" to the Jewish People and their acceptance of G-d's Covenant and Torah is named after Moshe's Midianite father-in-law, Yitro (Jethro). The very first verse explains that Yitro journeyed to the Jewish camp because:

"...(he) heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, His people that the Lord had taken Israel out of Egypt."

A Midrash quoted by Rashi discovers what a special person Yitro was from seemingly extraneous information in the verse:

"...Jethro, ...came to Moses, to the desert where he was encamped, to the mountain of God."

Rashi paraphrases:

"[We too know that he was in the desert [without the text stating it explicitly], but the text is speaking of Jethro's praise, that he lived amidst the greatest honor of the world, but his heart prompted him to go forth to the desert wasteland to hear words of Torah."

Yitro, the "Kohen" (Priest or Chief) of Midian, had heard of the Exodus and the "new law" that the Jews were to receive, and sacrificed honor and comfort in order to be part of it. Clearly, he was passionate about knowledge and truth.

It is puzzling, then, that the Torah reports that as soon as Yitro arrived in the Jewish camp...

"Moses told his father in law [about] all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians on account of Israel, [and about] all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and [that] the Lord had saved them."

Moshe does not take Yitro on a tour of the camp. He doesn't even offer him a hearty meal until later. Moshe's priority is to tell Yitro more about the Jews' hardships and G-d's miraculous salvation. Why? Yitro already knew much about that topic. That's why he had come! Rashi explains:

"(Moses spoke about these topics) to attract his heart, to draw him near to the Torah."

Moshe understood human psychology. Excitement wears off. Even a very motivated person will lose passion if it is not recharged. It is very fitting that the Jews' acceptance of the Torah is preceded by an example of how the Torah would remain vital, relevant and exciting for the long run. For our Judaism to be exciting, we must be regularly learning and doing. Life is like a down escalator. Standing still leads downward. Only vigorous effort will produce advancement and growth.

Shabbat Shalom!!