

# *Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

*Parashat Yitro*, Exodus, Chapters 18-20

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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## Jethro, Disraeli, and the Mountain of God

We have previously reflected on Churchill's admiration for the Jewish people, and how strange this seemed to some who knew him; Churchill's "one fault," in the words of one compatriot, is that he was "too fond of Jews." But for the historian Andrew Roberts, this was more than a mere detail in Churchill's life. It explains, for him, why Churchill understood the danger posed by Hitler when so many of his fellow Tory politicians did not:

Churchill's philo-Semitism, so rare on the Tory benches, was invaluable in allowing him to see sooner than anyone else the true nature of the Nazi regime.

What this means is that Churchill's fondness for the Jewish people was critically relevant to the seminal achievement of his career—the defeat of Nazism—which is also one of the seminal moments in the history of the world.

We bear this in mind as we ponder our *parashah*, which also begins with a non-Jew who is astounded at the tale of the chosen people, and by its debut on the historical stage. This non-Jew is the father-in-law of Moses, who seems to be simultaneously named Jethro and Hovav. It is quite clear that he is very, very fond of Israelites. We are told of Jethro's reaction upon arriving at their encampment:

And Jethro rejoiced for all the good which the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. And Jethro said, Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh. (Exodus 18:9–10)

It is a lovely sentiment. Yet we struggle to find a link between the tale of this admiring Gentile and the story that follows, which is not only a world-historical event, but the most important occurrence in the history of the world. The Almighty descends on earth, speaks from Sinai, and utters the Decalogue in a revelatory experience that will have enormous significance not only for Israel, but for all civilization.

Given how important this moment is, it is not at all clear why it is preceded by the seemingly prosaic story of Jethro's visit. Indeed, some of the details appear mundane in the extreme. Moses' father-in-law arrives, praises



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the Lord, and then proceeds to advise Moses in matters of leadership. Moses was himself originally answering the inquiries of the Israelites; Jethro, in turn, advises Moses to delegate:

So Moses gave heed to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. (Exodus 18:24–26)

And after this relatively undramatic story, without any segue, the Torah abruptly shifts to God's revelation to His people:

On the third month after the people of Israel had gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. (Exodus 19:1)

From Jethro to Sinai. Why does Jethro's tale appear here? It is Abraham Ibn Ezra who brilliantly suggests that the story of Moses' faithful father-in-law is placed in this precise passage in order to offer a contrast to the previous tale, which ended last week's *parashah*: the attack of Amalek. Jethro, he writes, hailed from Midian, an area adjacent to the land of Amalek, and yet Jethro responds to Israel not with hate but with love. Israel offers love and loyalty in return; the descendants of Jethro, Ibn Ezra notes, dwelled among the Israelites for generations, including in Davidic Jerusalem.

In other words, just as Churchill, in opposing Hitler, stood out as a philo-Semitic opposite of Hitler, the Amalek of his age, Jethro appears after Amalek in order to offer a marked contrast to the enemies of Israel. We are being given two very different reactions to the chosenness of the chosen people. As I noted recently in an article in *First Things*, the appearance of Amalek after the Exodus hints to us that it is the miraculous Jewish

relationship with history, the mysterious presence of the Jew in the world, that drives the rage of anti-Semites. My friend, the Christian leader Robert Nicholson, put it exceptionally well: anti-Semitism "almost always grows from a resentment of 'chosenness': the idea that the Jewish God appointed one nation, the nation of Israel, to play a special role in history." Anti-Semitism, Nicholson further argues, "isn't just any old hatred or racism. It is a grand anti-myth that turns Jewish chosenness on its head and assigns to the people of Israel responsibility for all the world's ills."

The appearance of Jethro can thus be seen as an immediate assurance by Scripture that others will not respond to the miracle of Israel as Amalek did. Umberto Cassuto strikingly takes note of the fact that linguistic links connect these two tales, and when we ponder these parallels we can also appreciate the contrast that is being

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established. During the battle against Amalek, Moses holds his arms aloft in prayer, when suddenly

The hands of Moses became **heavy** . . . (Exodus 17:12)

Moses therefore needed his brother and nephew to support his arms—he could not achieve salvation alone. In the next story, when Jethro sees Moses judging the people, attending to all comers without any assistance, he says to his son-in-law:

. . . the thing is too **heavy** for you; you are not able to perform it alone. (Exodus 18:18)

Another linguistic link: after the attack of the enemy occurs, Moses instructs Joshua to work with others to face this challenge:

**Choose for us men**, and go out, fight with Amalek. (Exodus 17:9)

In the next story, it is Moses who is told by Jethro to rely on others in facing the challenge of leadership:

Moreover **choose able men** from all the people, such as fear God . . . (Exodus 18:21)

The linguistic connection between these two tales also creates a contrast. Amalek, after the Exodus, seeks to attack Israel; Jethro, after the Exodus, seeks to assist Israel. The Amalekite enemies of Israel profoundly burdened Moses; Jethro, in turn, sought to alleviate the Moses' burdens. Two very different attitudes to the chosen people are on display in these two passages.

We are now able to understand why the story of Jethro immediately precedes that of Sinai. To utilize modern parlance, it is only in first studying the stories of both the archetypal anti-Semite and the first philo-Semite that we can understand the full implications of the revelation. Just before the Decalogue, the Almighty informs Moses that the covenant to be sealed in the desert will forever be a symbol of the Israelites' chosenness:

And you shall be for me a treasure from among the nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.  
(Exodus 19:6)

As Rabbi Norman Lamm explained, this means that biblical Israel's obligation is complex, with both internal and external dimensions; the Jews must preserve and remain loyal to their own identity and calling, while reaching out and communicating their message to the world. Rabbi Lamm reflects on the terms "holy nation" and "kingdom of priests":

A "holy nation" is a mission for the polity in and for itself: to grow in sanctity as a godly people. A "kingdom of priests" is the outward reach of the Jewish enterprise in the world: to be a priest-teacher to all of humanity, inviting it by both word and example to fulfill the "image of God" in which every human being was created. The two are linked: Israel cannot teach if it is not itself informed, and therefore it must always strive to be a "holy nation." And its own inner mission is unfulfilled if it fails to



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communicate holiness—in its numinousness and its ethical consequences—as “a kingdom of priests” to the rest of the world.

The complexity of Israel’s role can be discerned in the story of Sinai itself. On the one hand, as the great medieval poet Rabbi Judah Halevi has noted, the opening of the Decalogue speaks not of the God Who created the world, but the Deity Who freed His beloved people:

I am the Lord your God, Who took you out of the Land of Egypt. (Exodus 20:2)

On the other hand, through this particular nation, the biblical heritage is made known to the world, so that so many are in a certain sense connected to Sinai.

In his novel *Tancred*, Benjamin Disraeli describes a non-Jewish English aristocrat, the son and heir of a duke, who journeys to the Middle East, seeking to understand why the West is so profoundly indebted to all that occurred to a tiny people in a tiny land. The young lord’s journey takes him to Mount Sinai, where at first he worries that he has come to a site with no connection to him. After all, he is not a Jew, he has not dwelled in the desert or the Holy Land, and one might think that a future member of the House of Lords does not belong on a spare and sere mountain in the Sinai. But then he realizes suddenly that the Decalogue declared at that site has profoundly affected everything he knows:

Was he, then, a stranger there? uncalled, unexpected, intrusive, unwelcome? Was it a morbid curiosity, or the proverbial restlessness of a satiated aristocrat, that had drawn him to these wilds? What wilds? Had he no connection with them? Had he not from his infancy repeated, in the congregation of his people, the laws which, from the awful summit of these surrounding mountains, the Father of all had Himself delivered for the government of mankind? . . .

Why, then, he had a right to be here! He had a connection with these regions; they had a hold upon him.

The point, in other words, is that the story of Mount Sinai not only created Judaism, but changed the world, or as Disraeli goes on to say in the novel:

The life and property of England are protected by the laws of Sinai. The hard-working people of England are secured in every seven days a day of rest by the laws of Sinai.

The very notion of a day of rest, stated at Sinai as “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy,” is one given to Israel, yet it proclaims a concept for which humanity is profoundly indebted. Disraeli reflects in the novel on the fact that so many societies persecuted the Jews, “to whom they are indebted for the sublime legislation which alleviates the inevitable lot of the laboring multitude!”

Disraeli thus ponders the fact that the Jewish people, which preserved its own identity while giving the world so much, remain resented by so many for the mysterious way in which its own identity has endured.



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Preceding Sinai with Amalek and Jethro highlights for us two responses to Jewish chosenness, to the Jewish mission, two responses that can be found today and millennia ago. On the one hand, there will always be those who will bitterly resent the miraculous role of Israel in history, of God's special relationship with his people. Robert Nicholson has further reflected that anti-Semitism is fundamentally

a rebellion against what happened at Sinai, that desert mountain where the Israelites encountered a supernatural being who gave them a special revelation for the ages.

Jethro, in contrast, embodies an embrace of Sinai: he blesses God's relationship with His people, and all that it embodies about Israel's mission to the world, and its impact upon it.

The way in which Israel's mission relates to both its own separate identity, and to humanity, can be found in the fact that its story revolves around two mountains, both of which are called in the Bible the "*Har Hashem*," the "Mountain of God." The first is Sinai, which is outside the Holy Land. And then there is the second "Mountain of God" in Jerusalem, at the spiritual epicenter of the Promised Land. The two mountains, taken together, reflect the endurance of the Jewish people's particular identity, and the universal significance of its mission.

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One of the most striking aspects of the correspondence between Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat is the way in which Begin sought to explain to Sadat the complexity of Jewish identity. When Sadat, in 1981, wrote in protest to Begin after Israel formally annexed the Old City of Jerusalem, the Egyptian president made reference to a mountain in the Sinai:

I am inspired by the unique surroundings. The thoughts which I am sharing with you now occurred to me as I was on the peak of Mount Moses, reciting the Quran and worshipping God in this sacred part of the land of Egypt which witnessed the birth of a great mission. As I was reciting the Quran on this unparalleled spot, I became more certain of a fact I have stated before: . . . my peace initiative was a sacred mission. The story of the Israelites began in the land of Egypt. It is apparent that it is the will of God Almighty that the story would find its completion in Egypt also. This is the destiny of Egypt and its people.

To this Begin responded implicitly that, while he too embraced Sadat's "peace mission," he would not allow the particular Jewish connection to the Holy Land and Jerusalem to be effaced. Begin wrote:

You write to me: "The story of the Israelites began in the land of Egypt. It is apparent that it is the will of God Almighty that the story would find its completion in Egypt also." The history of the people of Israel did not begin in Egypt. It started in the country from which I write this response.



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Begin thus explained why the land in which he wrote was known as “*Eretz Israel*,” and then, describing the Roman emperor Hadrian’s attempt to erase Jewish history, Begin added:

The mighty Emperor also renamed, or misnamed, Jerusalem Aelia Capitolina. Except for students of ancient history, this name is now almost completely forgotten.

In other words, the foreign, Roman name given to Jerusalem has long disappeared, while the biblical one endures, a testament to the miraculous nature of the Jewish people, its bond to its land and sacred city, and its impact on the world. In the end of days, Isaiah tells us, the peoples of the world will go up to the “Mountain of the House of God” in Jerusalem, in recognition of the city’s profound link to the Jewish people, and the Torah’s role in human history.

That age of peace has not yet come. But there are non-Jews today—in fact many more than perhaps ever in Jewish history—who bestow love on the Jewish people, and see in the particularistic Jewish story a sign of God’s presence in history that can inspire so many beyond the Jews themselves. They also believe what Churchill wrote about the Jews:

At any rate there is no doubt about one miracle. This wandering tribe, in many respects indistinguishable from numberless nomadic communities, grasped and proclaimed an idea of which all the genius of Greece and all the power of Rome were incapable.

Our *parashah* is the one in which biblical Israel is charged with proclaiming the monotheistic idea to the world. It is therefore fitting that it is named for a non-Jew, Jethro, who lived near Amalek but was very “fond of Jews.” Jethro thereby reminds us that even in the face of the hatred of many, there will be those who will stand with God’s people. And the portion named for him is therefore a *parashah* of profound relevance to the moment in which we find ourselves.

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*May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.*



## **Additional Resources**

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on Amalek and the Miracle of Jewish History, “The Undying People,” *First Things*, January 2024. [Click here to read.](#)

Robert Nicholson on Anti-Semitism, “A New Year’s Resolution, An Ancient Evil: Combatting Antisemitism in 2019,” *Providence*, January 1, 2019. [Click here to read.](#)

