

Yitro

יתרו

“Jethro”

Exodus 18:1 – 20:26

Torah Together



This key *Torah* portion describes the giving of the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. The experience was very dramatic and showed the awesome majesty of our God. Much insight can be gained into the character of God and His expectations of us by studying this story.

1. Jethro visits Moses - 18:1-27

a) Here we learn that Moses had sent his wife, Zipporah, and their sons back to her father, Jethro. When and why do you think this was done? What significance do you find in the names of Moses' sons?

We know that Moses took his family with him on the trip to Egypt but we are not told when they returned. Moses may have sent them back after the episode with his son's circumcision (Exodus 4:24-26). Moses probably knew that it could be dangerous for his family in Egypt, and it may have also distracted him from his work for God. Gershom means 'alien' or 'stranger there,' and Eliezer means 'God is my helper'.

b) What do you find interesting about the initial meeting between Moses and Jethro? What was Jethro's conclusion after Moses told him all that had happened to them? What did Jethro do with “Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel”?

Moses, now the leader of approximately two million people, bowed down and kissed Jethro. Evidently, Jethro had already heard of the Israelites adventures (18:1), but he was delighted to hear of them from Moses (18:9). Jethro concluded that “now I know that God is greater than all other gods...” (18:11). (Similar stories are I Kings 17:24 and II Kings 5:15.) Jethro brought a burnt offering to God and they ate “in the presence of God.”

Scripture Link:

Exodus 4:20 clearly states that Moses took his wife and sons with him as he began his trip to Egypt. However, **Exodus 18:2** implies that Moses had sent his wife and sons back home to her father. Do you think the incident described in **Exodus 4:24-26** may have had something to do with this?

Life in a Polytheistic Society

As we read the stories in the *Torah*, it is important to remember that people in this time and culture believed in many gods. The God of the Israelites needed to show Himself to be not just another God, but THE God of the Universe. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, believed in YHWH, but he also believed in many other gods. So his statement in **Exodus 18:11** is important because it shows he then understood who really is God.

Results of Delegation

Even though Moses was used greatly by God, he was still just a man and could only accomplish so much in a day. By delegating some of his work, he was able to focus on his time with God and on teaching the people about God. Perhaps more importantly, God was better able to work in the lives of other Israelites to develop their talents.

Scripture Link:

Given his new understanding of the God of the Israelites, one may have thought that Jethro would have joined the Israelites on their journeys. It appears that this was not the case. **Numbers 10:29-32** may shed additional light on this subject.

God Marries Israel

There are many similarities between the standard marriage contract and the contract God establishes with Israel. God promises to love and cherish (“you will be my treasured possession”) and Israel promises to obey. Note that in **Exodus 19:8**, Israel said, “I do.”

c) After Jethro had seen how Moses spent his time with the people, what was his concern? What was the essence of Jethro’s advice to Moses? According to verses 19 & 20, on what two tasks did Jethro tell Moses to focus? Do you think this was godly advice?

He was concerned that Moses and the people would “wear themselves out.” Jethro advised Moses to delegate his responsibility. Moses was to focus on “representing the people before God” and on “teaching them the decrees and laws.” It appears to be godly advice to focus on prayer and on the Word.

d) Did Moses follow the advice of his father-in-law? What four qualifications did Moses look for in the men that he appointed as leaders? Compare I Tim 3:1-13 & Titus 1:5-9.

Moses “did everything” his father-in-law said. Leaders were to be 1) capable, 2) God-fearing, 3) trustworthy, and 4) men of integrity (who hate dishonest gain).

e) What did Jethro do after this? Do you find this interesting? **After this, Jethro “returned to his own country.” One wonders why he didn’t join the Israelites. Numbers 10:29-32 implies that some of Jethro’s family may have stayed with the Israelites.**

2. At Mount Sinai - 19:1-25

a) How long had it taken for the Israelites to reach Mount Sinai? Do you know in what month this occurred on the Hebrew calendar? What feast is celebrated in this month?

It had been three months since they left Egypt. The month was Sivan (Nissan, Iyar, Sivan, . . .). Shavaot (Feast of Pentecost or Weeks) is celebrated in Sivan and is believed to correspond to the time of the giving of the law at Sinai.

“You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”

Exodus 19:6

b) Analyze God’s proposed contract with Israel in verses 3 - 6. What two things does God promise Israel? What conditions must Israel meet? Does this remind you of another common type of contract? List any similarities and differences. How did the Israelites respond to God’s proposal?

God promises to make Israel 1) His treasured possession, and 2) a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Israel must obey God and keep His covenant. Like a marriage contract (to love, cherish, and obey) God, the bridegroom, is marrying Israel whom He “carried on eagle’s wings and brought to himself.” Israel agrees, saying “I do” or “everything God has said, we will do.” (See Deuteronomy 32:11)

c) After the Israelites accepted God's proposal, He wanted to meet with them. What did the people have to do to prepare for their meeting with God? Why do you think this was necessary? Why do you think God set limits around the mountain?

The people were to "consecrate" themselves, setting themselves apart and washing their clothes. Aside from preparing to meet their "betrothed", God wanted to reinforce the need for cleansing from sin. The boundary around the mountain was necessary because God's holy nature can be deadly to sinful man.

d) Describe the events on the day that the people went out to meet with God. What did the people hear as God spoke to Moses?

Thunder and lightning, thick cloud over the mountain, the people heard a "very loud trumpet blast." God descended on Mount Sinai in fire and the whole mountain trembled. As God spoke to Moses, the people heard the trumpet blast "grow louder and louder," and they trembled.

e) Skipping ahead to Exodus 20:18-21, how did the people respond when they heard God speaking to Moses? Do you think the people needed to be warned not to cross through the boundary that had been placed at the bottom of the mountain?

The people "trembled with fear" and "stayed at a distance." Being afraid that they would die, they told Moses that he should speak with God and they'd just listen to him. Because of their great fear, it seems doubtful that the people were likely to cross the boundary to draw closer to God.

3. The Ten Commandments - 20:1-21

a) The first commandment, which many consider the most important, is given as a negative commandment ("thou shalt not..."). What is the positive form of this commandment?

To have no other gods before Him is to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

b) The second commandment is also given in the negative sense. Why do you think God is so concerned about idols and images (see **Isaiah 40:18-26**)? Do you find any significance in the fact that this commandment lists the punishment if it is broken? What is the positive form of this commandment?

Images dishonor God because they cannot adequately express His greatness. Also, images can become a "replacement" for God in the minds of men, taking on characteristics that belong only to God (hence the word "jealous"). The positive form would be to worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23).

God's Holiness

The holiness of God can be deadly to sinful humans. We will read many stories where improper interaction between an unclean person and a holy God results in illness or death. A large part of the training that the Israelites needed was to learn how to approach a holy God.

God's Awesomeness

The lightning and thunder, the fire and the deafening trumpet blast (the voice of God) must have been frightening for the people. We see from **Exodus 20:18-21** that the people were so fearful that they asked Moses to interact with God for them. They were afraid that God's voice itself would kill them.

A Jealous God

God describes himself as jealous, meaning "apprehensive of losing affection or position." It is as if God were worried that "some one else" might take his place in our life. This seems to fit the situation well! God wants us to hold Him in the absolute highest regard in our lives, not to be replaced with any other gods, idols, or images. Is there anything in your life that you love more than God?

The Sabbath

The Sabbath is very important to God. There are many commands and references to it throughout all of scripture. Here God makes it clear that we are to “keep the Sabbath holy,” (set it aside for God) and to “not do any work . . .” As with all commands in the *Torah*, we are blessed if we keep them. (See **Isaiah 58:13-14** to see another promise God makes to those who keep the Sabbath.)

Commandment Order

It has been observed that the Ten Commandments can be easily divided into two parts: The first five Commandments concern our relationship with God while the second five concern our relationship with each other. Does this make sense to you? Does the fifth commandment fit this pattern?

Idolatry and Adultery

Given that God likens our commitment to Him to that of a marriage contract, the act of adultery (being unfaithful to one’s spouse) is like idolatry (being unfaithful God). We know that God can always be trusted to be faithful and true in His commitment to us. He wants us to be faithful to our spouse in the same way.

c) The third commandment concerns the misuse of God’s name. Can you give some examples of the misuse of God’s name? What might be a positive form of this commandment?

Most obviously, cursing people or things in God’s name violates this. However, when we swear an oath by His name without the ability to keep it, we also misuse His name. In some sense, “worshiping the creation rather than the Creator” is misusing God’s name. The positive is to “hallow” or revere His name, as suggested in the Lord’s Prayer, Matthew 6:9.

d) The fourth commandment establishes Shabbat (the Sabbath). Is there any question about which day is Shabbat? How are we to remember it? How do you think Shabbat should be observed today?

Shabbat is clearly the seventh day. We remember it by 1) setting it aside for God, and 2) by resting and not doing any work on this day. It is certainly the case that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27), but we should be able to keep it in the way defined here. As simple as it sounds, keeping the Sabbath is often difficult for those who try to observe it. (NOTE: Isaiah 58:13-14 is good for how God feels about Shabbat.)

e) The fifth commandment, the only one with a promise (**Ephesians 6:2**), is a positive commandment (“Thou shalt....”). Why do you think this is important to God?

By honoring our parents, we show that we respect parental authority which is a model for submission to godly authority. This then helps assure reverence for God throughout the generations.

f) Commandments six through ten deal with our relationships with one another. In the sixth commandment, the Hebrew word *rasah* is more appropriately translated “murder” than “kill.” What is the difference between murdering and killing? What might be a positive form of this commandment?

Murder requires malice or hatred for another, whereas killing may not (i.e., in war). See Matthew 5: 21-22. One way in which this could be stated positively is “love your neighbor as yourself.”

g) The seventh commandment addresses sexual immorality and the sanctity of marriage. What might be a positive form of this commandment? What parallels can you find between this commandment and the second commandment?

A positive statement might be “love, honor, and cherish your wife and honor the sanctity of the marriage contract.” The second commandment refers to idol worship which God often compares to adultery. As adultery violates the marriage contract, worshiping other gods violates our contract with God.

h) While the eighth commandment most directly applies to personal property, in what other ways do we “steal”? What is a positive form of this commandment? Can you see how this commandment might be similar to the third commandment?

We can steal time from our employer, we can steal a person’s good reputation through gossip, we can steal a person’s happiness or joy through unkind words. A positive form of this might be “do to others that which you would like to be done to you.”

i) The ninth commandment involves lying. In what other ways do we “bear false witness”? A positive form of this commandment might involve the “truth”, about which the Bible has lots to say. Do you gain insight from any particular verse or passage?

We violate this by lying and distorting the truth, but we also violate it by not speaking the truth when we know it. We know that God desires truth in our inmost parts (Psalm 51:6) and that the truth will set us free (John 8:32). There are many passages in the Brit Hadashah concerning truth, all of which apply.

j) The tenth commandment addresses our attitudes more than our actions. What does this imply to you about sin in general? How would you state this command positively?

This shows that all sin starts in our heart. One way to state this positively is “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

4. Idols and Altars - 20:22-26

a) What material was to be used in constructing an altar to God? Why do you think He was concerned with the types of stones that were used? Why do you think God prohibited steps at His altar?

God specifies that His altar be made of earth. If stones were used, they were to be uncut or not dressed. God wants no human craftsmanship involved. It may be that He doesn’t want man to have any part in the sacrifice other than the sacrifice itself. Some believe that the prohibition on steps is so that God’s altars won’t look like some pagan altars. It also shows that God comes down to man’s level; man does not ascend to God. The Israelites built a ramp to the altar.

b) What was to be done on God’s altar? Where was this to be done and what was God’s commitment to the people?

The sacrifice of burnt offerings and peace or fellowship offerings were to be made on the altar. This was to be done “wherever God caused his name to be honored” and He promised to “come and to bless you.”

Scripture Link:

In **Matthew 19:16-18**, Yeshua gives a shortened list of the commandments, ending the list with “love your neighbor as yourself.” Do you think this captures the intent of the tenth commandment?

Altars and Sacrifices

The animal sacrifice was at the heart of God’s system of worship. Today, it seems foreign and somewhat primitive to us. But it taught several valuable lessons. First, God’s perfect justice demands payment for sin and that usually involves death. However, in love, God allows us to substitute something innocent to pay for our sin. Also, a free-will offering of something of value to us allows us to demonstrate our thankfulness to God. All of these reasons still apply today.

Digging deeper

1. Compare Jethro's advice to Moses in **Exodus 18** with the incident recorded in **Acts 6:1-6**. List the similarities and differences. What lessons in leadership can you draw from this?

In Acts, the leadership needed to focus on "prayer and the ministry of the word" (verse 4), which was exactly what Moses needed to do. By choosing capable, godly men for the delegation of responsibility, not only is the leadership free to focus on what they should do, but others have the satisfaction of participating in God's work. All parts of the Body are needed and should feel used by God. There is a difference between leadership and control.

2. *Yeshua* had many things to say about the Ten Commandments. (e.g., **Matthew 5:21-30; 12:1-12; 15:1-11; 19:16-30; 22:34-40; Mark 7:5-13; 12:28-34; Luke 6:1-10; 10:25-37; 13:10-17**; and many others) After having examined the origin of these commandments, do *Yeshua's* comments take on any additional significance for you?

Any of the passages listed are good starting points for discussion. For many people, real insight can be gained by re-examining Yeshua's comments about these commandments after reading this Torah portion.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Isaiah 6:1 – 7:6; 9:5-7

Brit Hadashah : Matthew 5:21-30; 15:1-11; 19:16-30; Mark 7:5-15;
10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30; Acts 6:1-7; Romans 2:17-29;
7:7-12; 13:8-10; Ephesians 6:1-3; 1 Timothy 3:1-14;
2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 12:18-29;
James 2:8-13; 1 Peter 2:9-10