SOUL OF TORAH נשמת התורה

A Chassidic Take On The Parsha

By
RABBI YSOSCHER KATZ
YCT Torah Department Chair of Talmud

February 7th, 2026 | PARASHAT YITRO | 20 SH'VAT 5786

The Mission of Particularism: Why Yitro Comes First

The central event of this week's Torah portion, Yitro, is the story of Mattan Torah (the Revelation at Sinai). However, as the Children of Israel prepare to accept the Torah and enter a covenantal relationship with God, their journey is interrupted by something unexpected: the sudden appearance of Yitro, an outsider who is not a member of the tribe. Yitro's arrival makes a significant impression on the community. His son-in-law, Moses, leaves the camp to greet and welcome him into the community. Moses then prepares a feast to celebrate his arrival. It appears Yitro is not only welcomed, but he is given a prominent role in shaping the community.

When Yitro observes Moses' overwhelming judicial responsibilities, he devises a plan which completely overhauls the Jews' communal structure. He instructs Moses to delegate some of his tasks to others, thereby helping him move from a centralized mode of leadership towards a more egalitarian model. Yitro the outsider becomes Yitro the insider.

After we are given much detail about Yitro's integration into the community, the Torah returns to its original trajectory: the narrative of Mattan Torah.

On the surface, the interjection of Yitro's arrival into the story seems disruptive and distracting. One wonders, why did the Torah find it important to preface the Mattan Torah narrative with the story of Yitro, a stranger from a foreign nation?

The Sefat Emet of Gur, Rav Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter z"l, teaches that Yitro's arrival just before Mattan Torah is not incidental; rather, it is part of a deliberate, expansive strategy. He writes:

כי ה' יתברך בחר לו בני ישראל לחלקו והיה עולה על הדעת כי על ידי זה נתרחקו האומות. אבל באמת אדרבא זו עצה עמוקה של הבורא יתברך לקרב כל האומות אליו יתברך על ידי בני ישראל. ובני ישראל מבינים זאת, והם חפצים לקרב הכל אליו יתברך ... ויתרו שבא קרבו אותו בכל כחם ... שמסר העוז לבני ישראל שיהיה התוקף בידם בכח התורה שמסר להם ... כיון שהם שלוחים לקרב כל הברואים אליו יתברך (שפת אמת בשלח, תר"מ)

For the Holy One, blessed be He, chose the Children of Israel as His chosen people [by giving the Torah]. One might have concluded that as a result, the nations of the world were pushed away. But, in truth, the very opposite is the case: this is a profound and audacious strategy of the Creator, blessed be He, to draw all the nations close to Him through the Children of Israel. And the Children of Israel understand this, and desire to bring all of creation close to Him... When Yitro came they wholeheartedly brought him close. ...He (God) conferred this strength upon the Children of Israel—that the power would be in their hands through the might of the Torah which He gave them so that they may fulfill their mission... since they are His emissaries to bring all created beings close to Him, blessed be He.

SOUL OF TORAH נשמת התורה

A Chassidic Take On The Parsha

February 7th, 2026| PARASHAT YITRO | 20 SH'VAT 5786

The *Sefat Emet* of Gur reads the placement of the Yitro narrative as a test of the people's character before *Mattan Torah*. The fact that the Jews were chosen to receive the Torah could have led them to cultivate a sense of particularism and superiority. To counteract that tendency, the Torah chose to preface the story of *Mattan Torah* with the tale of Yitro, introducing it as a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. By doing so, the Torah underscores the election of the Jews is a means to a universal end: to bring the light of Torah to all of creation through wholeheartedly embracing the outsider, recognizing their value, and learning from their perspective.

The *Sefat Emet*'s reading challenges us to grasp the purpose of particularism: not as a withdrawal from the world, but as a specific assignment to bring all of creation closer to God.

This vision of universalism transcends mere social ethics, grounding itself instead in the profound Chassidic principle of the Divine Spark (nitzotz Elokai). This principle teaches that a sacred, essential flicker of God's presence—an imprint of the Divine—permeates every single created being. This means that every human being, regardless of their background, belief, or origin, is infused with a shared, essential holiness. The difference between an insider and an outsider is therefore not one of value, but of circumstance: everyone possesses this essential divinity, even if they express it differently.

It is this radical, inherent spiritual egalitarianism that necessitates a robust embrace of the outsider. Welcoming the stranger is not merely an act of kindness; it is the recognition and affirmation of God's presence in the world. The ultimate lesson of Yitro, as illuminated by the *Sefat Emet*, is that the power of the Torah is not intended to be used for separation, but to provide the spiritual capacity to recognize the universal presence of God.

The Torah, by emphatically stressing the contributions of an outsider as the preamble to *Mattan Torah*, thus presents Israel's particular election as the means for realizing this universal spiritual vision. Israel's triumphant welcome of Yitro, and the Jews' readiness to receive the wisdom of an outsider, is the ultimate preparation for *Mattan Torah*, a demonstration that they recognize the essential, shared divinity in all humanity.

YCT
VIBRANT TORAH LEADERSHIP
ישיבת חובבי תורה