DVAR TORAH – YITRO
"What's In A Name"
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

- This week's Torah Portion some would argue is the most important in the entire Torah, all would agree I think that it is in the top 10. It is the revelation at Mt Sinai and contains within it the 10 commandments.
    - But what is the portion called? Is it called The 10 Commandments, or Revelation – no the name given by the first significant word in the first sentence of the portion is **Yitro**. The name of Moses' non-jewish father-in-law Jethro.
    - The poet asks what's in a name? Our tradition answers – a lesson as important as the 10 commandments – in fact maybe more important given that the story of Jethro and Moses comes before the giving of Torah.

- Tell story of Moses and Jethro
    - Jethro is Moses' Father-in-law – a Midianite and the man who saved at the well when he ran from Pharoah
    - Brings Zipporah and his children
        - Gershom = I was a stranger in a strange land
        - Eliezer = God was my help and saved me from Pharaoh's sword
    - Moses greets him and takes him back to his tent to tell him everything that has happened to the Israelites
    - Jethro hears all that happened Moses and the Children and blesses God – he is the first to say "Baruch Hu" in the Torah – Jethro – not a Jew – praises God and says that on account of these miracles he believes that the God of Israel is greater than all other Gods and makes an sacrifice to Adonai
    - The next day Moses shows him around the office
    - Takes him out to see him at work
    - Jethro sees Moses sitting from morning to night judging the people and dealing with the disputes one at a time
    - Says to him –Mah ha davar hazeh saher atah oseh l'am?" what is this thing that you are doing TO/FOR the people. Why do you act alone, while the people stand in line waiting to see you from morning to night. You'll wear yourself out and these people as well.
    - Moses tries to explain that he is the only one qualified to judge the people.
    - Jethro – doesn't buy it – sounding like a true father-in-law looking out for the man who is now providing for his daughter he tells Moses the task is too heavy for you – you can't do it alone and instructs him to setup a system of lower courts to hear the smaller cases.

    - As we say at Hanuakah a great miracle happened there – Moses listens to his father-in-law and the people and Moses are spared the continuing ordeal.

- So who is Jethro that his name should be mentioned just before the giving of the 10 commandments?
- The mishnah says: azeh who haham, m' who lemaed me kola dam / who is wise the one who learns from all people
- Jethro is not Jewish but he is wise – he both appreciates the miracle of the Jewish people's redemption by offering a sacrifice to Adonai and at the same time he gives Moses critical advice that he implements in better managing his flock.

The encounter and placement of Jethro as a trusted advisor in Moses' life illuminates three important lessons:

- **Faith in God is not exclusive to the Jewish people.**
    - Midrash – Torah given in the wilderness because it's truths belong to all people, we are its guardians but it's teachings are for everyone.

- **The ability to pray to God, in a Jewish context, is not limited to Jews.**
    - In biblical times non-jews could offer sacrifices
    - Rabbinic Judaism establishes the principle that "righteous people of all nations have a share in the world-to-come"(
    - In a modern context this should remind us of the Ger vtoshvah – the resident stranger in our community, the non-jewish spouse who honors our tradition by bring his or her children to Torah.

- **We can and should learn from others**.
    - Inspire of our successes and noble accolades – we have not cornered the market on good ideas.
    - The attempt to insulate Judaism from the non-Jewish world is not only fruitless, but also would rob us of much that continues to make Judaism relevant and meaningful in every generation.

In short, the decision to begin the portion that includes the giving of the Torah at Sinai with the story of Moses and Jethro established tolerance, pluralism, and intellectual openness as paramount Jewish values.

- **What makes the positive view of Jethro in the Torah even more noteworthy is that it comes so close on the heels of the story of Amalek, the nation that attacks Israel in last week's parashah and is so vilified.** The negative example of Amalek and the positive one of Jethro serve as dual reminders that we should **judge others based on their behavior, not their background.**

To be clear **openness to others is not an advocacy for there being no separation or distinction between us.** Boundaries are important they define who we are and also who we are not.

A chapter later the Torah sums up the encounter between Moses and Jethro by explaining that end up going their separate ways. The English translation of Exodus 18: states that "Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way." The Hebrew, however, indicates that Moses "sent"(*vay'shalach*) him. Despite what is shared, then, there is a difference that cannot be denied.

Jethro and Moses represent people who must walk their own paths. There are moments, however, when those journeys intersect. Rather than see those points of connection as a source of contention, our parashah offers that they can be times of blessing, benefit, and bounty.

As it is holds true in the ancient story of our people – so too can it and should it hold true in the chapter that we write with our own hand. Who is wise, the one that learned from all people.