

That One Where... Yitro

Exodus 18:1-20:23(26); Isaiah 6:1-7:6,
9:5(6)-6(7) (A); 6:1-13 (S); 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

Shimar A. Keith

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Table of Contents

Teaching Lesson.....	4
(1445 B. C.) Exodus 18:1-20:23, יתרו - Yitro	4
Jethro reforms adjudication	4
Aliyah i 18:1-12.....	4
Aliyah ii 18:13-23	6
Aliyah iii 18:24-27	6
The Ten Commandments.....	6
Aliyah iv 19:1-6.....	6
Aliyah v 19:7-13	6
Aliyah vi 19:14-19	6
Aliyah vii 19:20-20:20(23).....	6
Chapter 20.....	7
Maftir 20:21(24)-23(26)	8
The Commandments in this Portion.....	8
Positive Commands, <i>vii</i>	8
Negative Commands, <i>vii</i>	8
Parting Lesson.....	10
(758 B. C.) Isaiah 6:1-7:6, 9:5(6)-6(7) (A); 6:1-13 (S).....	10
New Covenant Lessons	11
(A. D. 28) Matthew 5:21-30	11
(A. D. 28) Matthew 13:14-15, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10.....	11
(A. D. 29) Matthew 15:1-11, Mark 7:5-15	11
(A. D. 29) Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30.....	11
(A. D. 30) John 12:40.....	11
(A. D. 32-37) Acts 6:1-7	11
(A. D. 61-63) Acts 28:26-27.....	11
(A. D. 50-60) James 2:8-13	11
(A. D. 58) Romans 2:17-29.....	11
(A. D. 58) Romans 7:7-12.....	11
(A. D. 58) Romans 13:8-10.....	11
(A. D. 60-64) I Peter 2:9-10	11
(A. D. 61-63) Ephesians 6:1-3	11

(A. D. 63-64)	1 Timothy 3:1-14.....	11
(A. D. 63-64)	Titus 1:5-9.....	12
(A. D. 64-67)	2 Timothy 2:2.....	12
(A. D. 65-70)	Hebrews 12:18-29	12
(A. D. 95, 96)	Revelation 4:8.....	12

Teaching Lesson

עלייות; aliyot: “ascend” or “going up”. An aliyah is a subdivision of the Torah portion. There are seven aliyot in each portion. Each one is read by a different person and the last aliyah contains the maftir (concluder).

(1445 B. C.) Exodus 18:1-20:23, יתרו - Yitro

Jethro reforms adjudication

Aliyah i 18:1-12

The [Tannaim](#) debated what news Jethro heard in [Exodus 18:1](#) that caused him to [adopt the faith of Moses](#). [Rabbi Joshua](#) said that Jethro heard of the Israelites' victory over the [Amalekites](#), as [Exodus 17:13](#) reports the results of that battle immediately before [Exodus 18:1](#) reports Jethro's hearing of the news. [Rabbi Eleazar of Modim](#) said that Jethro heard of the giving of the Torah, for when God gave Israel the Torah, the sound travelled from one end of the earth to the other, and all the world's kings trembled in their palaces and sang, as [Psalm 29:9](#) reports, “The voice of the Lord makes the hinds to tremble . . . and in His temple all say: ‘Glory.’” The kings then converged upon [Balaam](#) and asked him what the tumultuous noise was that they had heard — perhaps another flood, or perhaps a flood of fire. Balaam told them that God had a precious treasure in store, which God had hidden for 974 generations before the creation of the world, and God desired to give it to God's children, as [Psalm 29:11](#) says, “The Lord will give strength to His people.” Immediately they all exclaimed the balance of [Psalm 29:11](#): “The Lord will bless His people with peace.” [Rabbi Eleazar](#) said that Jethro heard about the dividing of the [Reed Sea](#), as [Joshua 5:1](#) reports, “And it came to pass, when all the kings of the Amorites heard how the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the children of Israel,” and [Rahab](#) the harlot too told [Joshua's](#) spies in [Joshua 2:10](#): “For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea.” ([Babylonian Talmud Zevachim 116a.](#))¹

Jethro was Moses' father-in-law, a Midianite priest who, our sages tell us, had sampled every form of idol-worship on the face of the earth. This week's Torah reading begins with the account of how Jethro, having heard of Israel's Exodus from Egypt and the great miracles that G-d had performed for them, comes to the desert to join his destiny with theirs.

"The Torah speaks of our physical world, but alludes to the spiritual realms," writes Nachmanides. The historical events recounted by the Torah echo spiritual "events" unfolding on a higher plane of reality: the story of the Exodus is also the story of a spiritual liberation from a spiritual "Egypt," a spiritual splitting of a spiritual "sea," a spiritual battle with a spiritual "Amalek," etc. It is in the spiritual dimensions of the latter two events that the key to understanding Jethro--the man and the Parshah--lies.

"Land" and "sea" represent parallel worlds--mirror realities, if you will. "Every creature that exists on land," says the Talmud, "has its equivalent in the sea." Two different environments populated by the same creatures, land and sea are virtually identical yet vastly different: the one dry and exposed, the other sodden and submerged.

¹ Wikipedia – Yitro: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yitro_\(parsha\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yitro_(parsha))

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But there is a marked difference between the *manifest* nature of this dependence. There is nothing to prevent the land animal from severing all direct contact with the land for extended periods of time (20th century man has all but done so). Conceivably, a land creature can live an entire lifetime without acknowledging, or in any way demonstrating, from where his sustenance is derived.

Sea creatures, on the other hand, live submerged within their source of nourishment. For most of them, this submersion is a matter of life and death: a fish out of water is not only a creature out of its element but a creature who cannot survive more than a short while.

Thus, "land" and "sea" represent two modes of being. In the spiritual sense, a "land creature" is one who lives his life on the material surface of reality, with little mind to the underlying forces that sustain it. Life, for him, is foraging for food (or the more "sophisticated" forms of material gratification), consuming it, and using the energy to forage for more food. A spiritual essence, source and purpose to life, of which the material is but an embodiment and expression, seems to him a fantasy or, at best, irrelevant.

In contrast, the "sea creature" is a being wholly submerged, and *demonstratively* dependent upon, his source of sustenance. To him, life is inseparable from its root and aim, and he lives and breathes this truth his every living moment. He is one who has drowned his ego in the sea of supernal truth, who has merged his self with the spiritual essence of reality.

The Exodus had set us free from the paganism of Egypt. It had removed the shackles of "landism" from our souls, exposing us to the all-consuming spiritual truth of the sea. It had liberated us from the prison of self, allowing us to merge with the infinite essence of all. But our redemption was not complete until the sea was to split before us and we were to "walk on dry land within the sea"(Exodus 14:29)--until we were to learn to transcend their sea-identity as well.

At the Splitting of the Sea, G-d showed us that man can walk on dry land within the sea--that he can live a life that is aware of, and servant to, its divine source and, at the same time, retain and constructively apply his identity and individuality.

On the road from split sea to flaming mountain, we were attacked by Amalek.

Who is "Amalek"? What force or phenomenon can challenge the soul that has been liberated from the material confines of Egypt and has transcended the spiritual depths of the sea?

The Torah describes Amalek is one "who happened upon you on the road." The Hebrew word *korcho* ("happened upon you") employed by the Torah also translates as "cooled you off"; this, explains the Midrash, expresses the deeper significance of Amalek's deed:

"What is the incident [of Amalek] comparable to? To a boiling tub of water, which no creature was able to enter. Along came one evil-doer and jumped into it. Although he was burned, he cooled it for the others. So, too, when Israel came out of Egypt, and G-d rent the sea before them and drowned the

Egyptians within it, the fear of them fell upon all the nations. But when Amalek came and challenged them--although he received his due from them--he cooled the awe that the nations of the world had of them" (Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei 9).

The essence of Amalek can be summed up in two words. Two simple, shallow, meaningless, deadly words: "So what?"

The Chassidic masters point out that the numerical value (*gematria*) of the Hebrew letters that spell *Amalek* is equivalent to that of the letters that spell *safek*, "doubt." Amalek is the essence of doubt--cynical, irrational doubt that knows no bounds, and is immune to all rational and empirical evidence.²

Aliyah ii 18:13-23

Aliyah iii 18:24-27

The Ten Commandments

Aliyah iv 19:1-6

Aliyah v 19:7-13

Aliyah vi 19:14-19

Aliyah vii 19:20-20:20(23)

Reading the words "And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, to the top of the mount" in [Exodus 19:20](#), the Mekhilta supposed that one might think that God actually descended from heaven and transferred God's Presence to the mountain. Thus the Mekhilta noted that [Exodus 20:18](#) (20:19 in the NJPS) says: "You yourselves have seen that I have talked with you from heaven," and deduced that God bent down the heavens, lowering them to the top of the mountain, and spread the heavens as a person spreads a mattress on a bed, and spoke from the heavens as a person would speak from the top of a mattress. (Mekhilta Bahodesh 4:50:1:11-12.)

Rabbi [Joshua ben Levi](#) taught that when Moses ascended on high (as [Exodus 19:20](#) reports), the ministering angels asked God what business one born of woman had among them. God told them that Moses had come to receive the Torah. The angels questioned why God was giving to flesh and blood the secret treasure that God had hidden for 974 generations before God created the world. The angels asked, in the words of [Psalm 8:8](#), "What is man, that You are mindful of him, and the son of man, that You think of him?" God told Moses to answer the angels. Moses asked God what was written in the Torah. In [Exodus 20:2](#), God said, "I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the Land of Egypt." So Moses asked the angels whether the angels had gone down to Egypt or were enslaved to Pharaoh. As the angels had not, Moses asked them why then God should give them the Torah. Again, [Exodus 20:3](#) says, "You shall have no other gods," so Moses asked the angels whether they lived among peoples that engage in idol worship. Again, [Exodus 20:7](#) (20:8 in the NJPS) says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," so Moses asked the angels whether they performed work from which they needed to rest.

² [Chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org/global/popup/default_cdo/aid/2783/jewish/What-Jethro-Heard.htm) – What Jethro Heard: http://www.chabad.org/global/popup/default_cdo/aid/2783/jewish/What-Jethro-Heard.htm

Again, [Exodus 20:6](#) (20:7 in the NJPS) says, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” so Moses asked the angels whether there were any business dealings among them in which they might swear oaths. Again, [Exodus 20:11](#) (20:12 in the NJPS) says, “Honor your father and your mother,” so Moses asked the angels whether they had fathers and mothers. Again, [Exodus 20:12](#) (20:13 in the NJPS) says, “You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal,” so Moses asked the angels whether there was jealousy among them and whether the Evil Tempter was among them. Immediately, the angels conceded that God’s plan was correct, and each angel felt moved to love Moses and give him gifts. Even the Angel of Death confided his secret to Moses, and that is how Moses knew what to do when, as [Numbers 17:11–13](#) reports, Moses told Aaron what to do to make atonement for the people, to stand between the dead and the living, and to check the plague. ([Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b–89a.](#))

Chapter 20

The Mishnah taught that those who engaged in idol worship were executed, whether they served it, sacrificed to it, offered it incense, made libations to it, prostrated themselves to it, accepted it as a god, or said to it “You are my god.” But those who embraced, kissed, washed, anointed, clothed, or swept or sprinkled the ground before an idol merely transgressed the negative commandment of [Exodus 20:4](#) (20:5 in the NJPS) and were not executed. ([Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:6](#); [Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 60b.](#))

The Mishnah interpreted the prohibition of animals working in [Exodus 20:9](#) (20:10 in the NJPS) to teach that on the Sabbath, animals could wear their tethers, and their caretakers could lead them by their tethers and sprinkle or immerse them with water. (Mishnah Shabbat 5:1; [Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 51b.](#)) The Mishnah taught that a donkey could go out with a saddle cushion tied to it, rams strapped, ewes covered, and goats with their udders tied. [Rabbi Jose](#) forbade all these, except covering ewes. [Rabbi Judah](#) allowed goats to go out with their udders tied to dry, but not to save their milk. (Mishnah Shabbat 5:2; [Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 52b.](#)) The Mishnah taught that animals could not go out with a pad tied to their tails. A driver could not tie camels together and pull one of them, but a driver could take the leads of several camels in hand and pull them. (Mishnah Shabbat 5:3; [Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54a.](#)) The Mishnah prohibited donkeys with untied cushions, bells, ladder-shaped yokes, or thongs around their feet; fowls with ribbons or leg straps; rams with wagons; ewes protected by wood chips in their noses; calves with little yokes; and cows with hedgehog skins or straps between their horns. The Mishnah reported that [Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah](#)’s cow used to go out with a thong between its horns, but without the consent of the Rabbis. (Mishnah Shabbat 5:4; [Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54b.](#))

A [midrash](#) noted that almost everywhere, Scripture mentions a father's honor before the mother's honor. (E.g., [Exodus 20:11](#) (20:12 in NJSP), [Deuteronomy 5:15](#) (5:16 in the NJPS), [27:16](#)) But [Leviticus 19:3](#) mentions the mother first to teach that one should honor both parents equally. ([Genesis Rabbah 1:15.](#))

According to the Mishnah, if witnesses testified that a person was liable to receive 40 lashes, and the witnesses turned out to have perjured themselves, then [Rabbi Meir](#) taught that the perjurers received 80 lashes — 40 on account of the commandment of [Exodus 20:12](#) (20:13 in the NJPS) not to bear false witness and 40 on account of the instruction of [Deuteronomy 19:19](#) to do to perjurers as they intended to do to their victims — but the Sages said that they received only 40 lashes. ([Mishnah Makkot 1:3](#); [Babylonian Talmud Makkot 4a.](#))

[Rabbi Ishmael](#) interpreted the words “all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the voice of the horn” in [Exodus 20:14](#) (20:15 in the NJPS) to mean that the people saw what could be seen and heard what could be heard. But [Rabbi Akiba](#) said that they saw and heard what was perceivable, and they saw the fiery word of God strike the tablets. (Mekhilta Bahodesh 55:1:1.)

The Gemara taught that [Exodus 20:16](#) (20:17 in NJPS) sets forth one of the three most distinguishing virtues of the Jewish People. The Gemara taught that [David](#) told the [Gibeonites](#) that the Israelites are distinguished by three characteristics: They are merciful, bashful, and benevolent. They are merciful, for [Deuteronomy 13:18](#) says that God would “show you (the Israelites) mercy, and have compassion upon you, and multiply you.” They are bashful, for [Exodus 20:16](#) (20:17 in NJPS) says “that God’s fear may be before you (the Israelites).” And they are benevolent, for [Genesis 18:19](#) says of Abraham “that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice.” The Gemara taught that David told the Gibeonites that only one who cultivates these three characteristics is fit to join the Jewish People. ([Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 79a.](#))

Maftir 20:21(24)-23(26)

The Mishnah deduced from [Exodus 20:20](#) (20:21 in the NJPS) that even when only a single person sits occupied with Torah, the [Shekhinah](#) is with the student. ([Mishnah Avot 3:6.](#))³

The Commandments in this Portion

Positive Commands, <i>vii</i>	Negative Commands, <i>vii</i>
To know there is a God (Exodus 20:2.)	
	Not to believe in divinity besides God (Exodus 20:3.)
	Not to make an idol for yourself (Exodus 20:4.)
	Not to worship idols in the manner they are worshiped (Exodus 20:5.)
	Not to worship idols in the four ways we worship God (Exodus 20:5.)
	Not to take God's Name in vain (Exodus 20:7.)
To sanctify the Sabbath with Kiddush and Havdalah (Exodus 20:8.)	
	Not to do prohibited labor on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10.)
To respect your father and mother (Exodus 20:11.)	
	Not to murder (Exodus 20:13.)
	Not to commit adultery (Exodus 20:13.)
	Not to kidnap (Exodus 20:13.)
	Not to testify falsely (Exodus 20:13.)
	Not to covet another's possession (Exodus 20:14.)
	Not to make human forms even for decorative purposes (Exodus 20:20.)
	Not to build the altar with hewn stones (Exodus 20:23.)

³ Wikipedia – Yitro: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yitro_\(parsha\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yitro_(parsha))

Not to climb steps to the altar ([Exodus 20:26](#))

Parting Lesson

(758 B. C.) Isaiah 6:1-7:6, 9:5(6)-6(7) (A); 6:1-13 (S)

Both the parshah and the haftarah recount God's revelation. Both the parshah and the haftarah describe Divine Beings as winged. ([Exodus 19:4](#); [Isaiah 6:2](#).) Both the parshah and the haftarah report God's presence accompanied by shaking and smoke. ([Exodus 19:18](#); [Isaiah 6:4](#).) And both the parshah and the haftarah speak of making Israel a holy community. ([Exodus 19:6](#); [Isaiah 6:13](#).)⁴

⁴ Wikipedia – Yitro: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yitro_\(parsha\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yitro_(parsha))

New Covenant Lessons

(A. D. 28)
Exodus 20:13

Matthew 5:21-30

(A. D. 28)
Isaiah 6:9-10

Matthew 13:14-15, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10

(A. D. 29)
Exodus 20:12

Matthew 15:1-11, Mark 7:5-15

(A. D. 29)
Exodus 20:12, 13-16

Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30

(A. D. 30)
Isaiah 6:10

John 12:40

(A. D. 32-37)
Aliyah ii

Acts 6:1-7

(A. D. 61-63)
Isaiah 6:9-10

Acts 28:26-27

(A. D. 50-60)
Exodus 20:13, 13(14)

James 2:8-13

(A. D. 58)
Exodus 20:13(14-15)

Romans 2:17-29

(A. D. 58)
Exodus 20:14(17)

Romans 7:7-12

(A. D. 58)
Exodus 20:13-14(17)

Romans 13:8-10

(A. D. 60-64)
Exodus 19:5, 6

1 Peter 2:9-10

(A. D. 61-63)
Exodus 20:12

Ephesians 6:1-3

(A. D. 63-64)
Aliyah ii

1 Timothy 3:1-14

(A. D. 63-64) Titus 1:5-9

Aliyah ii

(A. D. 64-67) 2 Timothy 2:2

Aliyah ii

(A. D. 65-70) Hebrews 12:18-29

Exodus 19:12-13

(A. D. 95, 96) Revelation 4:8

Isaiah 6:2, 3