

# JETHRO THE CONVERT

MOSHE REISS

## INTRODUCTION

There is no evidence of any formal conversion process in the Torah. People who wanted to join the nation of Israel left home and lived with the Israelites, thus demonstrating their new affiliation.<sup>1</sup> In the post exilic era we begin to find possible evidence of some form of conversion (Esth. 8:17). Historically, "conversion became common in the centuries after the Babylonian Conquest."<sup>2</sup> Salo Baron estimated the Jewish population at the time of the destruction of the First Temple at 150,000, and by the time of the Second Temple's destruction at eight million.<sup>3</sup> That would require extensive conversions between these periods; when there was little growth in the world population.

## JETHRO THE OUTSIDER

Jethro is introduced in Exodus 2, where he marries off his daughter Zipporah to Moses. His status as a proselyte is connected to a much later appearance, in Exodus 18, when he brings Moses' wife and sons to join the Israelites after their escape from slavery in Egypt. At this reunion, Moses tells Jethro how God took action against the Egyptians. Jethro gives thanks to God for delivering Moses and the Israelite people, and then proclaims: *'Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods'* (Ex. 18:11). This statement was seen by rabbinic commentators as an indication of Jethro's conversion to Judaism (TB *Zevahim* 116a; *Sanhedrin* 103b-104a).

The timing of Jethro's arrival is a matter for discussion by the commentators, since it is stated that he meets Moses at the mount of God (Ex. 18:5), although the Israelites only arrive there in the next chapter (Ex. 19:2). This shows that the order of events presented here is thematic rather than strictly chronological. Radak (Kimhi), the medieval Jewish commentator, interprets this sequence of events in a manner that directly addresses the issue

*Moshe Reiss, a former resident of New Haven, Connecticut, is a rabbi and has a B.A. from Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. in economics from Oxford University. He was a lecturer at Columbia University, assistant to the rabbi of Yale University, and has been a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. He is now a resident of Israel, where he writes and lectures. His book Messengers of God appears on his website: [www.moshereiss.org](http://www.moshereiss.org).*

of how Israel should relate to outsiders. He suggests that the Jethro episode in Exodus 18 is placed where it is, despite having taken place after chapter 19, because it creates a purposeful juxtaposition with the preceding chapter (Exodus 17) in which Israel battles the Amalekites. Ibn Ezra adopts the same approach. Two peoples, the Amalekites and the Midianites (represented by Jethro), encountered the Israelites in the wilderness. The Amalekites were evil, destined to become the nation of Israel's eternal adversary, but Jethro came as a friend. Moses and the Israelites must learn to distinguish between different outsiders and to understand that not all are the same. Such a distinction may be crucial for the newly formed children of Israel and their leader.

In Exodus 18:1, Jethro is reintroduced as the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses.<sup>4</sup> This is the third time in the Bible that Jethro is called "the priest of Midian"; in each case it is the beginning of a new scene (Ex. 2:16; 3:1; 18:1). In the first scene, Moses settles in Midian; in the second, he leaves Jethro to encounter God at the burning bush; and in the third scene, Jethro arrives to provide Moses with guidance in his new leadership role. In each case Jethro's identity as a Midianite is mentioned to emphasize and reinforce his status as an outsider and (in Ex. 18:1) as a priest. Whether the term *kohen* (priest) here denotes a religious or political leader, it is clear that Jethro had an important role in his Midianite community. However, everywhere else in Exodus 18 the text refers to Jethro not as "the priest of Midian" but as "the father-in-law of Moses." This latter description is particularly emphasized in chapter 18, where it occurs no less than 13 times. That connection makes Jethro an insider. It should be noted that after Jethro proclaims the greatness of God and offers sacrifices (18:11-12), he is referred to only as the father-in-law of Moses, not as a Midianite and not even by his own name. Jethro's role as an important adviser to Moses can only be assumed after their familial connection is fully established. This incident and the change in terminology used to describe Jethro symbolize the "conversion" process through which Jethro becomes an Israelite.

#### JETHRO THE INSIDER

By reuniting Moses and Zipporah, Jethro acts as a father and father-in-law, not as a priest. By listing the sons and their names including a word-for-word

repetition of the phrase *I was a stranger in a foreign land* (18:3), the next two verses not only remind us that Moses is still a father, but recapitulate key events in Moses' life, including an earlier acknowledgment of his alienation from life in Egypt and his refugee status in Midian (18:3-5). Jethro reminds Moses of his familial tie: *I, your father-in-law Jethro . . . and your wife and her two sons with her* (Ex. 18:6). He also asserts a claim, reminding Moses that he has bonds of kinship that obligate him to Jethro. These family connections help to resolve the tensions between insider/outsider.

Moses sets out to greet his father-in-law, kissing him at the beginning (Ex. 18:7) and showing him respect at the end (18:24). They inquire about each other's "peace" (i.e., welfare, *shalom*), an echo of Jethro's earlier wish that Moses "go in peace" (Ex. 4:18). Jethro remains a figure of peace; as a result, Moses can and does bring Jethro into his/God's tent.

Moses gives his father-in-law an account of everything God did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians on Israel's behalf, also describing the hardships encountered so far on their journey (Ex. 18:8). This is not merely a roster of glorious divine acts, but a chronicle of the reality of Moses' life as he brought this people out of Egypt. After listening to Moses, Jethro immediately grasps the essential point: God has delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery. The text states: *And Jethro rejoiced over all the good that God had done for Israel when He rescued them from the hand of Egypt. And Jethro said: 'Blessed be the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, who delivered the people from under the hand of Egypt'* (Ex. 18:9-10).

Jethro's new understanding and positive evaluation of God allow him to become an insider and offer useful advice to Moses, a judicial structure in which to implement God's laws after the revelation on Mount Sinai.

Ironically perhaps, the Midianite Jethro's praise of God is also contrasted with that of the Israelites themselves, shedding a negative light on the Israelites' behavior since their departure from Egypt. Jethro celebrates God's liberation of Israel from Egypt, in marked contrast to the Israelites who wish to return to Egypt, as noted in Ex. 16:3 and 17:3. Jethro sees clearly what Israel can only glimpse in fleeting moments punctuated by hunger, thirst, and complaint. The contrast between his praise and their grumbling amounts to a withering critique of their behavior.

This acknowledgment of God's superior might is precisely what God sought when He inflicted the Ten Plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Pharaoh was disastrously slow to grasp the power of the God of Israel. By contrast, on hearing what had occurred, Jethro immediately recognized and acknowledged the superior power of God.<sup>5</sup> Through that acknowledgment one outsider, Jethro the Midianite priest, stands in sharp contrast to Pharaoh, the other great outsider of the Exodus.

Once Jethro recognizes God's superiority, he makes a burnt offering and a ritual sacrifice, as any priest would do. From the sacrifice he shares a meal with Aaron and the elders of Israel (Ex. 18:12). By so doing, Jethro becomes more of an insider than a stranger. On the other hand, for his praise and recognition of God to be worthy of note, he must differ in some measure from the Israelites. The sacrifice can be regarded as a form of conversion (Rashi) or simply as a covenant between Moses and Jethro, like those between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26:28-30) or Jacob and Laban (31:44-54).

The day after the offerings, Jethro speaks to Moses, proposing a more efficient method of adjudication whereby Moses shares his responsibilities with other Israelites. The order of events in Exodus 18 suggests that Jethro can only make such a suggestion after having first established himself and gained credentials as one who recognizes and praises the God of Israel.

When offering his advice, Jethro is careful to refer repeatedly to God (Ex. 18:19, 21, 23; there are three such references in verse 19 alone), although the substance of his advice is practical and even mundane. He tells Moses that he should distinguish between major and minor matters, continuing to adjudicate major cases while others are empowered to deal with minor ones. Jethro offers sound practical reasons for this course of action, with the aim of preserving his son-in-law's health and strength. The focus on God in Jethro's advice led many rabbinic commentators to assume that Jethro was divinely inspired.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Talmud (TB *Sotah* 11a, *Sanhedrin* 103b-104a), Jethro's descendants were great rabbis entitled to sit in the Chamber of Hewn Stone, where the Sanhedrin met. This was the equivalent of a modern high court of justice – an appropriate reward for the offspring of Jethro, who told Moses how to organize the judicial system.

Jethro concludes advice (Ex. 18:23) with the assurance that if his instructions are followed, the people will *return to their place in peace*. The word "peace" has now been spoken three times in connection with Jethro's presence in the narrative (Ex. 4:18; 18:7, 23). In fact, it is the last word reportedly uttered by Jethro, accentuating his figure in wholly positive terms.

#### JETHRO THE CONVERT

The suggestion that Jethro was a convert has a threefold basis: the fact that he blessed the Lord; that he made sacrifices and a burnt offering to God; and that he then participated in a festive meal, breaking bread with Aaron and the elders before God (Ex. 18:10, 12). The battle with Amalek (Ex. 17:8-16) that immediately precedes Jethro's arrival apparently leads on to Exodus 18:1, *Jethro . . . heard everything that God had done for Moses and for Israel*. This fostered

the rabbinic understanding that Jethro was inspired to convert after hearing about the defeat of Amalek (TB *Zevahim* 116a; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, 3). In other midrashic sources, Jethro and his family spontaneously converted before ever meeting Moses. This explains why the shepherds in Midian disliked and oppressed Jethro's daughters (*Shemot Rabbah* 1:32).

Not all of rabbinic literature viewed Jethro in a completely positive light. Concern is expressed that his statement of faith, '*Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods*' (Ex. 18:11), makes room for pagan deities. Jethro is therefore compared unfavorably with Rahab (Josh. 2:9-13) and Naaman (II Kgs. 5:15-18), who did not acknowledge other gods. According to this view, Jethro — having heard what God did to the Egyptians — was simply being prudent (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, 3d). Ramban (Nahmanides) elaborates that while Jethro in fact acknowledged God's supremacy, this did not necessarily mean that he rejected idol worship. It was simply an admission that the God of Israel had proved superior to the others. These conflicting opinions about Jethro mirror rabbinic statements about converts, some positive and others negative.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that Jethro converted presents a major textual difficulty, since we find (Ex. 18:27) that Jethro returned to "his own land," Midian, and did not remain with the Israelites, as all others had previously done. Furthermore, later on, Hobab, variously identified as Jethro (Reuel) or more probably as

his son, is invited by Moses to join the people; he initially refuses and his final decision is not stated in the text (Num. 10:29-32).<sup>8</sup> To resolve this problem and view Jethro once again as a righteous convert, R. Berechiah explains that Jethro converted and then returned to Midian in order to convert the rest of the Kenites, who later came to live in Israel (Judg. 1:16). R. Berechiah's pro-convert stance is attested by his statement that Israel's merit can be ascertained from the number and quality of converts "like Jethro, Rahab and Ruth" (*Kohelet Rabbah* 6:5). Going even further, R. Eleazar states that God told Moses: "I am He that brought Jethro near, not keeping him at a distance . . . some say that the *Shekhinah* went with him" (*Mekhila*, Yitro).<sup>9</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

As proselytes in the Greco-Roman era became more numerous, the Rabbis sought a biblical archetype as justification from the scriptures. Although some of the Rabbis adopted a negative attitude toward conversion, a significant number found Jethro as well as Ruth the Moabite acceptable symbols of conversion. Jethro serves as the male example of a positive conversion experience. In later Jewish history, attitudes toward conversion would vary due to particular circumstances, wavering between a positive and a negative approach.

#### NOTES

1. This was the case with the matriarchs, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, and later with Ruth.
2. Judith R. Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counselors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983) p. 45.
3. S. W. Baron in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 13:869-871.
4. Jethro has several names in the Bible, such as Reuel, Jether and Hobab.
5. Jeffrey H. Tigay on Exodus, in Adele Berlin, and Marc Brettler, (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 143.
6. See William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (AB, 2; New York: Doubleday, 1998) p. 171.
7. See, for example, TB *Berakhot* 8b and *Yevamot* 47b for negative comments; TB *Pesahim* 87b and *Megillah* 17b for positive comments.
8. See also the midrashic commentary of *Sifre* on Numbers 10:29; and J. Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1933), vol. 1, p. 189.
9. Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1968) p. 75.