

Yitro

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The focal point of this sedra is the revelation on Sinai that is called The Ten Commandments. Actually, they are not commandments as such, rather principles, which is why in Hebrew they are called the Ten Statements. Dibrot, not Mitzvot. At one stage they were read in the Temple and were part of the daily service. But the rabbis excluded them because they believed that people had come to think that only these ten were essential and the rest of the Torah was less important. This was also why some objected to standing when this chapter is read from the Torah.

None of the ten can stand by itself as an effective law without a lot of clarification. Does murder include self-defense, or war, or accident? Nevertheless, these principles have remained the essential formulation of basic morality and spirituality, not only for Jews but indeed for the whole world, because no other formulation has superseded them and they have been adopted, more or less as they are, by all the monotheistic religions.

Surprising, therefore, that this sedra is named after a non-Jew: Yitro, the priest of Midian, who also happened to be the father-in-law of Moses. He has heard of the exodus and now feels it safe to bring Moses' wife and two children from the safety of Midian to be reunited. On his visit he sees how overworked Moses is and advises him to delegate. Moses accepts his recommendations. Twelve times the Torah repeats his title as father-in-law of Moses, stressing respect both for the man and his position. Even in the very sedra where the Jewish people are given their specific religious constitution, there is room to remind everyone that we are not the only people on earth. Even with regard to a priest of another religion, [we are bound not only to respect the person](#) but also take his advice and opinions with consideration.