

Father in Law

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Jethro appears several times in the Torah and in fact has several different names. But he is known primarily as the Father in Law of Moses and this title is given to him seven times in this single chapter. It emphasizes the incredible respect that Moses had for him and equally the fact that if in Midian he was a High Priest and a Very Important Person, his fame will rest entirely on his relationship to Moses.

Moses's respect is based on his long association with Jethro as his son in law and indeed employee. He will have come to appreciate not only his hospitality but also his experience and wisdom. And Jethro fully supports his son in law's mission to rescue the Israelites and lead them out of slavery.

He took his daughter and grandsons back from Egypt to the security of Midian while Moses and Aaron negotiated and suffered under Egypt. He brought them back when he knew it was safe and as the Torah says, he delighted in and was proud of Moses and his success.

Jethro comes to visit Moshe bringing his family and wants the best for his family. Good leadership does not require dealing with every issue personally as much as seeing that there are good and effective people to delegate to and spread the load. And unlike McKinsey, Bain and other consultants nowadays Jethro charged no fee and asked for no kickbacks.

But Jethro also presents us with a problem. Did he convert or not? In our text here in the Torah he returned home. The non-Jewish Bilaam refers to the Kenites, the descendants of Jethro dwelling apart. Yet as the people approach the Land of Israel Moses asks him to stay and join them in settling the land. Later on in the Book of Judges, Yael is described as married to a Kenite and living in between Israel and Canaan. The problem remains unsolved.