

Jethro

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Children of Israel are ready to march. Trumpets of silver are made to add to the means of communication. Up to now movement was decided by Cloud and Fire agents of God. Now, as they prepare to invade and stand on their own, they need a new method. And once again, as just before the crucial Sinai experience, at this second juncture, Jethro is mentioned as a crucial figure in the story. Except for some strange reason, here he is called Hovav Ben Reuel and still the father-in-law of Moses.

And just as in Exodus when Jethro arrives he counsels Moses to set up a council of seventy elders to help him. Here too, without mentioning his name, the seventy elders are appointed. But we don't know if this is referring to the first time or the second.

The Torah is ambiguous about whether Jethro stayed with Moses from the start or not. If he left before Sinai, there is no mention of his returning. But now Moses turns to him and says that as they are about to invade, he wants Jethro to be part of the invasion and to share in the Land of Israel. Practically, he says, Jethro and his people can help because they know the Israelites and they know the lie of the land and they could be "their eyes."

And once again the Torah is ambiguous. There is no reply. The continued presence of Jethro suggests two things to me. One is that Moses wanted to stress the importance of family loyalty. The other was that he was eager to welcome people outside the Israelites who shared his values and spiritual commitment to God which Jethro clearly did. In marching into Canaan Moses was committed to the destruction of idolatry, of tribes unable to see another point of view. But Jethro typified the pious of the nations of the world who were always welcomed.

Yitro, Moses's father in law is constructive. He analyses the situation. He sees that Moses has not organized his administration effectively and so he gives him constructive advice.

The people then complain about the food they are getting. They are not starving, they just do not like it. But in saying how wonderful it was in Egypt we know they are being dishonest. They are distorting reality to suit their polemic.

Miriam and Aaron have what they believe is a legitimate complaint against Moses though there are different interpretations as to exactly what it was. But the punishment comes because of the way in which their objections were made public. It was the manner of the complaint that was wrong.

This is a challenge to us all today. We may see something we think is wrong or that we are unhappy about at home or at work. We should find the right way of airing it, the sensitive and tactful approach rather than being provocative and aggressive.