



PARSHAS YISRO – YISROEL GREENBERG

The following is based on the writings of Rav Goldvicht זצ"ל, first Rosh Yeshiva at Kerem B'Yavne. I don't have his ספר in front of me as I write, so I take full responsibility for any points I inadvertently distorted.

No-one will be surprised that Moshe, as busy as he must have been, went out to greet Yisro on his arrival at the camp. Even were it not for the מדרש which tells us Yisro was converting, making the moment one of profound 'קדוש ה', it was only polite to greet his father-in-law. However, it might be fair to ask why Moshe didn't sit with Yisro, Aharon and the elders to share a meal with them in פסוק יח. Rashi does just that, and answers that Moshe was "standing and serving in front of them." In other words, he was their waiter.

Why, amongst the honoured assembly of Yisro, Aharon and the elders, was Moshe not considered worthy of being honoured among them? The question is particularly acute given that Yisro is not named as a participant – the meal is "עם חתן משה." Surely Moshe himself should have been either honoured, or honouring Yisro? What was actually happening at that meal?

C. S. Lewis was able to remark in *The Screwtape Letters*, "a few centuries earlier, humans... still connected thinking with doing and were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning." This isn't always such an easy thing to do; indeed the Ramchal makes it clear that the essential point of his mussar work, מסילת ישרים, is not to teach new things, but to remind people of what was already known to them (or at least, what was already known to people like him). Perhaps the strongest message Yisro's visit offers us today is just that.

The man introduced at the beginning as "כהן מדין," high priest, described by Chazal as having tried every עבודה זרה there was, saw how compelling the events of יצאת מצרים were, how the narrative screamed "כי גדול ה' מכל" – "האלקים." And he came to find בני ישראל, and offered korbanos. And when he eventually leaves, Rashi tells us he went to convert his family. His part in the Torah, the compendium of all that is important in the world, is to be a paradigm of what it means to "connect thinking with doing."

This ability to detect the spiritual significance of events is something particularly valued in our nation. The particular role of the kohanim is to do just this on behalf of all of us; the Maharal famously comments on the fact that the gematria of "כהן" is 75 – midway between 70, representing the physical world, and 80, representing the spiritual world. Aspects of this role were also played by the elders in the desert, where each part of the Torah was taught first by Moshe to Aharon, then to Aharon's sons, then to the elders and finally to everyone. In fact, that was what was celebrated at the meal shared by Yisro and these groups: the ability to draw connections between the spiritual world and the physical.

Moshe, so intensely belonging to the spiritual world that he couldn't properly speak, clearly had no place at this meal. His role was not drawing this connection (which is why when Hashem sent him to redeem בני ישראל, He also sent Aharon who would "ידיה נביאך" – i.e. to bring to everyone else Moshe's message). So while Yisro, Aharon and the elders were celebrating their aptitude for this special task, Moshe was busy providing the source of spirituality for them to draw from. In other words, he was their waiter.