

Parashat Beha'alotecha 5783, 2023:

And Yitro Went to His Land

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parshiot Yitro and Beha'alotecha contain two versions of Yitro's departure from *klal Yisrael*. The first is quite terse: "Moshe saw his father-in-law off, and he went away to his land (*va'yalech lo el artzo*)." (*Sefer Shemot* 18:27) The second, however, is far more expansive:

Then Moshe said to Chovav the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law, "We are traveling to the place about which Hashem said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be good to you, for Hashem has spoken of good fortune for Israel." He [Chovav=Yitro] said to him, "I won't go (*lo alech*), for I will go (*alech*) to my land and my birthplace." He [Moshe] said, "Please don't leave us, as you are familiar with our encampments in the desert, and you will be our guide. And if you go with us, we will bestow on you the good which Hashem grants us." (*Sefer Bamidbar* 10:29-32, all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The *Midrash Mechilta* on *Sefer Shemot* provides the backstory regarding what took place when Yitro left Moshe:

And he [Moshe] said to him [Yitro]: "You have given us excellent advice [regarding the establishment of courts throughout *klal Yisrael*], and the Omnipresent one, Himself, has agreed to your plan, please do not abandon us." And he [Yitro] responded to him [Moshe]: "Is it not the case that a small lamp will only be of value in a place that is dark? For, after all, this same small lamp will do absolutely nothing if it is placed between the [shining] sun and the [reflecting] moon. You, Moshe are the sun, and Aharon, your brother, is the moon. Therefore, what will the small lamp [that is, what can, I, Yitro,] do in your midst? Rather, behold, I will go to my land, and I will convert all the people in my country, bring them to *talmud Torah*, and bring them under the wings of the *Schechinah*..." (*Mesechta d'Amalek* II, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, Yitro felt that he had given his personal best toward the advancement of *klal Yisrael*, and that the time had come for the luminaries of the Jewish people to fully shine their light upon the people. Moreover, he felt he could make an even greater contribution to advancing Hashem's glory in the world by converting his nation, and thereby bring them *tachat kanfei HaShechinah* (under the divine protection of the Master of the Universe).

In his *Commentary on the Torah*, the Alshich HaKadosh *zatzal* (Rav Moshe Alshich, 1508-1593) presents a different backstory than the *Mechilta*. In so doing, he provides an outstanding analysis of the previously cited verse in our *parasha*: “I won’t go (*lo alech*), for I will go (*alech*) to my land and my birthplace:

Even though Moshe never questioned his [Yitro’s] allegiance to the Torah, Yitro was concerned and said to himself: “Perhaps Moshe questions whether or not this is the end of me and thinks I have loosened my connection to Hashem’s Torah. Or, perhaps he thinks that even though I will remain strong in my *emunah* (faith), perhaps when I reside once again among the non-Jews, I will return to my [former] gods.” He [Yitro], therefore, set his [Moshe’s] mind at ease (literally, *mareh lo hana’ah*) and informed him that he would not abandon Hashem.

According to the Alshich HaKadosh, Yitro subtly shared his true intentions with Moshe through the use of the words, “*lo alech*,” and “*alech*:”

He said: “*lo alech*,” This meant, “I [Yitro] am only refraining and holding back from traveling with the Jewish people, and not, G-d forbid, [rejecting] the Torah, [for I remain a *ger tzedek*].” And regarding the second [potential concern of his son-in-law, Yitro said:] “But rather, only to my land and my birthplace *alech* (shall I go)—but not to my gods.”

The Alshich HaKadosh brilliantly unpacks the meaning of *lo alech* and *alech* and reveals how these seemingly simple words were meant to dispel any conceivable fears Moshe may have had concerning Yitro’s unbreakable connection to the Torah and Hashem.

May we, like Yitro, remain ever steadfast in our love of Hashem, and loyal to His holy Torah, wherever we may go. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)