

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

### Yitro 21 “Derech Eretz and Inclusion”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. It happens that February is Jewish Disabilities Awareness and Inclusion Month, known as JDAIM, an event we acknowledge each year. While it may be more complex to address this topic during Covid, when no one is in shul, it remains a priority for our shul and I believe should be discussed even in this context. It's fitting, then, that this week's parsha sheds light on the issue of inclusion.

The Midrash Rabbah Kohelet teaches the well-known principle of *ain mukdam u'meuchar batorah*, *the narratives of the Torah are not written in chronological order*. Based on the Torah's general departure from historical sequence, some jump to the conclusion that this principle means that the Torah's order of presentation is simply random. But obviously that can't be the case, since every facet of the Torah has a meaning. Now, the sequence in this week's parsha is a prime example of this conundrum: Last week we read about the Exodus from Egypt, and while the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of this week's parsha does continue with the revelation at Sinai, it begins with an apparent non sequitur -- the story of Moshe and his father-in-law Yitro discussing the Jewish Judicial system.

The Gemara in Mesechet Zevachim 116a points out that this narrative about Yitro is out of historical order. And many scholars comment that it is out of logical order as well, since it would make more sense for it to follow next week's parsha, Mishpatim, when the Jewish people receive the Torah's civil law.

But if we look closer, we can find a profound message in the Parsha's narrative sequence, because it captures the dictum in Pirkei Avot that *derech erez kadma l'torah*, that *derech erez comes before Torah*. As I've explained in the past, the story of Yitro is a source for the laws and ideals of *derech erez*. For example, when Moshe greets his father-in-law, Yitro, Yitro challenges and admonishes him, *if you don't come to greet me, at least greet your family whom you have abandoned!* Also, when Moshe declares that the Jewish people should bring all their disputes directly to him for adjudication, Yitro objects to that proposal, because it would require everyone to stand and wait their turn for an inordinate amount of time, while Moshe would have the luxury of remaining seated.

So, what does *derech erez* really mean? If we examine each context in which the Talmud uses this phrase, we can discern at least 7 meanings, including farming; earning a living; intimate relationships; being a respectful person, a *mensch* (so to speak); and enacting rules to help society function better.

Basically, the concept follows its literal interpretation – *derech erez - the way of the land* – because it means that we must strive in our relationships to understand the wavelengths of other people and respect the value of differences among our fellow human beings.

That is what it means to say that *derech erez* comes before Torah and why Yitro's story precedes the narrative about receiving the Torah. Yitro was teaching Moshe that Judaism is not just a religion of laws and ritual; it is about developing the ability to engage in appropriate behavior with every person and situation you encounter.

And that is also why this parsha is entitled *Yitro*, the primary person who taught us this lesson. Both the title and the sequence of our parsha convey to us that the practice of *derech erez* should take priority in our lives, even above the Torah and the momentous event of receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The JDAIM initiative helps to reinforce this message, by reminding us that in our commitment to halacha, we must apply it to real life and make a special effort to be sensitive to the needs of other people who are different from us. God willing when we're back in shul we'll continue in our commitment to make Mekor a space where people feel at home and have a place.

But in the meantime, we can all feel the influence of our shul community even when we're not physically together and try to incorporate the practice of inclusion - of *derech eretz* - in our daily lives. Shabbat shalom.