

Bnei Yisroel is traveling in the desert and Moshe keeps a long-standing appointment.

וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר-הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הָרֶה
הָאֱלֹקִים:

“And Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe came, and his children, and his wife, to Moshe to the desert, that he was camping there at the Mount of the Lord.” (Shmos 18:5).

When did this episode occur? The Torah is not necessarily written in exact chronological order. However, this episode has to take place prior to the Revelation at Har Sinai. Yisro comes because he “heard all that the Lord did for Moshe and for Yisroel his people—in Hashem taking them out of Mitzrayim.” (Ibid 18:1). Clearly this pasuk is referring to the makos and the splitting of the Yam Suf. There is no mention of the giving of the Torah. In fact, the Torah mentions that at this point Yisro is still the High Priest of Midyan. (Ibid). Had he heard of the Revelation, he would be compelled to “know that Hashem is greater than all gods.” (Ibid 18:11). Further, there is no reason to place this out of order. There is also no reason to think that Moshe would allow his wife and kids to miss the Revelation.

An additional consideration is it is unlikely he came after the Revelation. Immediately after the Revelation and for months Moshe is busy going up and down the Mountain. Forty days after the Revelation (ibid 24:18), then the *eigel hazav* disaster (ibid 32:1), then back up for the second luchos (ibid 34:2) and when he came down his face was glowing. (Ibid 34:35). Not only did he not have time to adjudicate all day at that time, but Yisro surely would have mentioned his glowing face.

As for coming to Har Sinai before the Revelation, Bnei Yisroel approached the Mountain some-time within the third month. (Ibid 19:1). Later, when recapping what occurred, the Torah says that Hashem’s presence was on the Mountain for six days and then He called to Moshe to ascend on the seventh day. (Ibid 24:6). It was seven days from reaching the Mountain until the Revelation. That is not enough time to meet Yisro and also go up and down the mountain, several times, messengering instructions and responses between Hashem and the nation. (Ibid 19:3-25).

However, we can understand when Yisro came if we understand when Hashem taught Moshe the civil and criminal laws set forth in ibid 21 et seq. “And these are the rules that you shall set before them.” (Ibid). It seems peculiar that Hashem would teach Moshe more laws between the Aseres Hadibros and him receiving the luchos. Further, Hashem already said two times that He wants Bnei Yisroel to keep his Laws and Statutes. (Ibid 15:26 and 16:28). The only mitzvos Hashem had given to that point were the laws of Pesach, piyan haben, and then not to gather Manna on Shabbos. Pesach and pidyan Haben were not applicable and there was only one rule for the manna: do not gather it on Shabbos. The mentioning of “Laws and Statutes” seems to imply many. Therefore, it

is much more reasonable that these civil and criminal laws were given to Moshe in the desert between the Yam Suf and reaching Har Sinai. These are the rules and statues refereed to when He said, "If you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your Lord ... and listen closely to His commandments and observe all His statutes." (Ibid 15:26).

She sheds light on Yisro's advice. "Seek out from the people individuals of charisma and fear of Hashem." (Ibid 18:21). He did not ask for the very wise or skilled scholars. The job was more about keeping the peace in the nation than elucidating nuances in the laws. Only after Yisro heard from Moshe more details about the Yam Suf, geula, and war with Amalek, did he say "now I know that Hashem is greater." (Ibid 18:11). It was then that he blessed Hashem for the kindness. (Ibid 18:10).

"And Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, and his children, and wife, came to Moshe." Yisro came to meet Moshe and escort his daughter and grandchildren back to Moshe. Tziporah came with Moshe to the inn. (Ibid 4:25). Then, Moshe and Aharon [alone] go to Mitzrayim to gather the elders. (Ibid 4:29). She is not heard from again until Yisro brings them here, back to Moshe. Clearly, after the assassination attempt at the inn Moshe and Tziporah realized that her being in Mitzrayim would only be a distraction from his mission. Pharaoh could easily use them as leverage against Moshe. He, therefore, sent them back to Yisro. Yisro knew that Moshe was going to return to the Mountain of Hashem because Hashem told Moshe to return with the people. Therefore, the rendezvous at or near the Mountain was prearranged.

"To the desert." This means the desert in or around Rephidim. In fact, after this episode the Torah continues the journey saga with "And they traveled from Rephidim and entered the Sin Desert, and then *they* encamped opposite the Mountain." (Ibid 19:2).

"That *he* was camping there at the Mount of the Lord." He is singular. It refers back to Yisro. If it was Moshe then it would be plural, referring to Bnei Yisroel encamping there, as the pasuk we just quoted said, וַיִּחַנוּ בְּמִדְבָּר "they encamped in the desert." It does say "And Yisroel encamped there, opposite the Mountain" in the singular. (Ibid). However, that is referring to Yisroel as the nation. However, our pasuk is referring to meeting Moshe, who did not camp alone. Further, the Mountain being near Midian, Yisro was used to encamping there to tend his sheep. Moshe was doing the same when he encountered the burning bush. Later, the pasuk makes clear that Yisro "went back to his land." (Ibid 18:27). Meaning, he returned to Midian, not to where he was pitching his tent. Yisro heard about Yisroel's travels and the miracles and he knew they were camping nearby.

This also answers why it says "Yisro *said* to Moshe, I am your father-in-law, I am coming to you." (Ibid 18:6). It should have been *he called* or *sent*. Also, surely Moshe knew he was his father-in-law. In actuality, Yisro said this earlier. *Moshe, I am your father-in-law, of course I'll care for your wife and children. I will then come to you and bring them to you, and meet you in the desert when you are on the way back to the Mount of Hashem.* That is why Moshe "goes out and calls his father-in-law." (Ibid 18:7). They meet and exchange information.