

Date: 17 Shevat 5786 (February 4, 2026)

Torah Portion: Yitro

Topic: Courage to Change

We learned and accepted that Yitro came to the Wilderness after the Matan Torah. Moreover, the Scripture also supports by stating, “the gentiles shall come to You from the ends of the earth” (Jer. 16:19). This verse implies that at least one non-Yisrael came to Hashem in the aftermath of the Matan Torah, and there is no record of a non-Yisrael other than Yitro having approached Yisrael in the Wilderness. The Midrash is saying that when Hashem has done extraordinary things on behalf of the Yisraelites, spiritually sensitive individuals among the nations have been inspired and have come to recognize the divinity and majesty of the Elohim of Yisrael. The Talmud (Zevachim 116a) explains that when Hashem gave the Torah at Mount Sinai, the nations of the world became frightened of the noise and ran to ask Balaam what was happening, he said, “YHWH will give strength to His nation” (Psa. 29:11). Rashi explains that the reason the Torah is referred to this way is that it is the strength (יָזַם; *oz*) of the Yisraelites.

Based on this observation, Shem MiShmuel says that the term יָזַם; *oz* describes the trait of spiritual courage. It is the ability to rise to the moral challenges of life and withstand the inclination to become discouraged over the failures of one’s past.

The Midrash asks how Rahab, a woman of questionable reputation, and Yitro, a former advisor to Pharaoh who had engaged in every known form of idol-worship, able not only to admit that they had lived their entire lives in error, but also to believe that they could still correct their mistakes, purify themselves, and gain acceptance as members of Elohim’s chosen people?

The Midrash answers that Elohim endowed the Yisraelites with יָזַם (*oz*), inner strength and courage, which enables them to endure any spiritual challenge or hardship they may encounter. In addition, Elohim established that a measure of this attribute would be transmitted to all who seek to join their ranks. This spirit of courage fortifies potential converts with the belief that their cause is not hopeless, that a door has been left open for them to step through to eternity and transform their existence.

The Yisraelites stood before the Sea of Reeds with the Mitzrites advancing swiftly behind them, and -encouraged by Moshe’s assurance of Elohim’s assistance – the Yisraelites did not panic or despair. They summoned their inner strength and plunged into the sea, descending until the water reached their very nostrils. In the merit of their unreserved faith, Elohim parted the waters and exposed the dry land underneath. In tribute to the courage that made this salvation possible, after crossing the sea to safety, the Yisraelites sang (Exo. Ch. 15).

Rahab drew upon the strength (יָזַם; *oz*) to overcome her past and endure the difficult process of emerging from a life of sin into one of supreme righteousness. Similarly, Shlomo states (1Sam. 2:10), “May [YHWH] give the strength (יָזַם; *oz*) His king.” Elohim blessed Shlomo with courage, and hence the rest of the world, which was subservient to him, was also granted a measure of that courage. This led the Queen of Sheba to come witness Shlomo’s greatness and give eloquent praise to Hashem (1Kings Ch. 10).

Likewise, when we received the Torah, we were granted strength and courage. Therefore, when Yitro decided to join Yisrael, he also received an infusion of spiritual courage. This gave him the fortitude to come and join Yisrael despite his former attachment to idolatry.

The idea behind all these incidents is summed up by the verse (Jer. 16:19), “YHWH, my strength and my stronghold and my refuge, in the day of distress the gentiles shall come to You from the ends of the earth” Elohim has bestowed this trait of spiritual courage upon the Yisraelites. YHWH is “my stronghold” (וּמַצְעָזִי; *u-ma-'uz-zi*) in that He transmits the same trait to those who wish to join Him. YHWH is “my refuge” (וּמְנוּחָי; *u-me-nu-si*) “in the days of distress,” for even when we face adversity, we do not lose hope, but rather lift up our spirits and fortify ourselves to reach out to Hashem as Yisraelites did when they stood before the Sea of Reeds.

Shalom.