

What Jethro and the Happy Fisherman Both Knew

By Aharon Loschak



Do you know the story of the fisherman?

Let me brief you—it's a good one.

Mr. Smith, a wealthy real estate magnate and casino mogul, vacations in Cancun. Hitting the beach, he notices an incredibly skilled local fisherman. With lightning speed, he catches one fish after another, with such effortlessness it almost seems criminal.

Mr. Smith saunters over to the fisherman. "Tell me, what do you do?"

"I sit here and fish, of course."

"And then what?"

“Well, when I have enough for my family, I go home, cook dinner, sit around a campfire with family and friends, sing folks songs, drink some homemade tequila, and go to bed.”

“Listen,” Mr. Smith tells him, “with your fishing skills, you could be making real cash. You could sell all that extra fish and pretty soon, you could buy a fishing boat and catch even more fish!”

“And then what?” asks the fisherman.

“Why, you could hire more fishermen, train them, and eventually buy a whole fleet of boats!”

“And then what?”

“You kidding me? You could open an entire corporation and sell fish across the world, making hundreds of millions of dollars!” Mr. Smith exclaims excitedly.

“And then?” asks the fisherman, still unconvinced.

“With that kind of money, you could retire to a sandy island, eat good food, sit around a campfire with family and friends, sing songs all night, drink to your heart’s content, and sleep like a baby!”

With a wry smile, the fisherman responds, “I’m already doing that right now.”

It’s an amusing tale that highlights the futility of “chasing success” and the frustrations of running along the hedonic treadmill of life.

But it raises a disturbing question: what, then, are we supposed to hope for? “Success” often turns out to be a mountaintop at which people arrive—and then they’re downright miserable. You know why? Because at the end of the day, we’re stuck in our own skin, we’re limited to the borders of our own success, and for those who pause and think about it, it can be extremely frustrating to simply be the best version of ... yourself. Is there really nothing greater and more exciting on tap?

How do we break “out of the box” and not end up like Mr. Smith, suggesting dumb ideas to the fisherman?

Jethro, our *parshah*’s titular character, knew the answer.

What Did Jethro Hear?

In the opening verses we read, “Jethro, the chieftain of Midian, heard all that G-d had done for Moses, and for Israel His people that G-d had taken Israel out of Egypt ... [and] Jethro ... came to Moses, to the desert where he was encamped, to the mountain of G-d.”¹

Who was Jethro? In addition to being Moses’ father-in-law, he was a high ranking pagan official and priest, whom the Midrash testifies was proficient in every deity and theology of the world.² He had tried it all. And now, in his advanced age, he threw it all away and joined up with a band of former Israelite slaves in the desert on their march to the Promised Land.

Quite a character!

I want to point you to Rashi, who asks, “What news did he hear that [compelled] him to come?”³

This is an odd question. After all, the verse explicitly states what Jethro heard—“All that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel, His people that G-d had taken Israel out of Egypt.” Why, then, is Rashi asking a question the verse clearly answers?

Jethro’s Epiphany

Look again at Rashi’s words. He doesn’t simply ask, “What did Jethro hear?” rather, “What news did he hear *that [compelled] him to come?*”

These extra words are critical. After all, he could have stayed home and gone to the local Jewish court and converted there. Or done it online.⁴ Why did he need to make the long and arduous journey into the desert to actually change his life?⁵

Jethro didn’t just convert. He actually *came* to join the Jews—in a desert of all places. He wasn’t content to join his newfound faith in the comfort of his home in Midian. Rather, on the merit of his convictions, in his search for the ultimate truth, he abandoned his cushy position at home and joined fate with a band of slaves wandering in a desert.

That’s something truly radical.

Jethro understood something profound about life in general, and about Judaism in particular. He understood that to join the Jewish people and receive the gift of the Torah requires a proper understanding of what the Torah is. It’s not just a nice book you can read and use to guide your

life. It's not just a moral code, a way of leading an "inspired life." It's much more. It's the ticket to stepping beyond your puny humanity and crossing the bridge into the divine. To connect with G-d.

And you can't do that from the comfort of your couch. You gotta move. You gotta do radical things and make bold moves to challenge your own finiteness.

Be Like Jethro

We all have our comfort levels. Our "mountaintop" where we feel, "Ah, I finally made it." If you're not there yet, you could probably see it and imagine how good it's going to feel when you get there.

But as mentioned, it gets frustrating at the top of the mountain. Sure, it's nice for a bit, but at the end of the day, it's all *you*—and you're not going anywhere from there. Stay in that comfort zone, you will never grow and reach beyond your own nose. And eventually, you may get miserable.

Jethro's bold move teaches us to *move*, radically so. To reach out of your comfort zone and do something crazy that will lift you out of the prison of your own skin.

So, don't just be excited about Shabbos and tell your neighbors how beautiful it was at the rabbi's house for Friday night dinner, how his oh-I-don't-know-how-many kids were all perfectly showered and dressed and behaved like little angels. Don't just talk about it and keep off your phone for one honorary hour on Shabbat. Do something radical. Keep Shabbat next week like a crazy person. Just do it. Lift yourself by your own coattails to a crazy place and go off the grid for an entire 25 hours—like a true Jewish maverick.

Or, learn how to read Hebrew. Do it right now. Don't wait until you clear your calendar and finish soccer practice with the kids. Do it now. Just go online and take a course, and challenge yourself to be praying like the rabbi by next month. Just do it. It's crazy, right? I know. That's the point.

You get the idea. Do one little crazy thing. Leave your comfortable position like Jethro, and take a step out into the desert, the big, bad wilderness where things are uncertain and you don't have your footing. Take *one step*, for heaven's sake.

And then—Heaven will pick you up.⁶

FOOTNOTES

1. [Exodus 18:1-5](#).
2. Mechilta Exodus, ad loc.
3. Commentary to [Exodus 18:1](#).
4. These lines are not intended literally. There were no Jewish courts in Midian, and online conversion is not doable, even today.
5. After all, in those inchoate days prior to Jewish settlement in Israel and their real formation into a nation, simply aligning with their belief system and pledging allegiance to the G-d of the Jews would have been more than enough from a theological standpoint.
6. This essay is based on Likkutei Sichot, vol. 16, p. 201-202.

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