"Jethro came to the wilderness" (Exod. 18:5) – Chronology and Meanings

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The hermeneutical principle often cited by commentators "*ein mukdam u-me'uchar ba-Torah*" seems at first sight to be a chronological-historical observation; most commonly it prefaces attempts to resolve textual difficulties by suggesting an alternate order of the verses that compose the biblical text. The disputes surrounding use of this principle, similarly, are usually perceived as stemming from conflicting ideas about chronological reading. I would like to suggest a different perception, in which such disputes may be seen as complimentary aspects of reading. The disagreement among the commentators concerning when Jethro came to the desert, and the resolution of this question in the Hasidic approach voiced by R. Judah Leib Alter, author of *Sefat Emet*, will serve as a test case.

Most commentators contend either that (1) Jethro arrived before the Torah was given [*matan Torah*], as a linear reading of the Torah narrative would attest, or (2) Jethro arrived after the Torah was given, meaning that the biblical narrative must be read out of order. The first view would then perceive the relevant verses as presenting an ideal vision, in which Jethro and the advice he offers symbolize worthy human behavior or *derech eretz* deliberately chosen. This behavioral mode would logically be introduced into the world before the Torah was given in order to pave the way for the Torah's higher moral order. The second view, in contrast, emphasizes the practical applications of the Torah within the new reality engendered after the sin of the Golden Calf. In this scenario, in response to the reality of sin, appropriate human behavior in the world [*derech eretz*], can become fully realized only after the Torah has been given, and in accordance with the guidance and rules the Torah contains. Rather than seeing these two views as mutually exclusive opposites, I suggest they may be perceived as two aspects of a single reality – an ideal and a practical side, both of them equally "true".