

Yitro: From Hierarchical Leadership to Democracy **Chana Borow, Class of 2026**

In this week's *parsha*, Parshat Yitro, we see an astonishing act of leadership and humility from Moshe Rabeinu—one that would impact how we think about leadership for all time to come. We see Moshe Rabeinu, already a great leader, recognize, with the help of Yitro, that he needs to take a step back and delegate for his own well-being and the well-being of Bnei Yisrael. Moshe was able to recognize that Yitro, his father-in-law and a priest of Midian, had many more years of leadership experience under his belt. Yitro had been in Moshe's shoes before, a man with limited time and capacity, called upon to solve seemingly endless dilemmas. Moshe is able to recognize his caring father-in-law for the leader that he was and to really learn from this elder, even though he emerged from a very different community. This willingness to learn from a leader who comes from a world apart is remarkable.

Moshe approaches Yitro with the utmost respect:

Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent (Shemot 18:7).

Even though Moshe is the most powerful and well-respected person in Bnei Yisrael, he takes the time out of his day to go out and meet Yitro. He does so with bows and kisses, demonstrating humility, trust, and love. Moshe goes one step further, showing an acceptance of Yitro and his culture:

And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law (Shemot 18:12).

Moshe not only shows Yitro an immense amount of respect, but he also shares in Yitro's religious practices. While Moshe is not specifically mentioned in this verse, the Ibn Ezra explains that this all took place in Moshe's tent and therefore the Torah does not need to add Moshe to the verse. Yitro, a priest of another nation, gave a *korban*, a sacrifice, to God. According to Ibn Ezra, "for God" tells us that this is a sacrifice to Hashem, to affirm Hashem as the one true God and to thank Him. It is not obvious that Moshe and Aaron would be okay with accepting a sacrifice from someone who used to be the priest of another nation, a nation that worshiped other gods. But Moshe realizes that Yitro's past can be an asset to him:



24 Shevat 5784 | February 3, 2024

But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one party and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God." But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! ... Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you... Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said (Shemot 18:14-19, 22, 24).

Here we see Moshe Rabeinu, the quintessential Jewish leader, recognize how much he can learn from a leader of a different nation. Moshe was able to continue on as a strong leader because of the skills in delegation that he learned from Yitro.

Sometimes, as a leader, it seems easier to just do everything by yourself. It's easy to believe that this is the only way to get things done correctly. Yitro here is thus holding Moshe's hand through this process of giving up some control, helping him make space for others and their imperfections. Moshe was used to a hierarchical style of leadership. He grew up with Pharaoh as his primary role model, a man who ruled with an iron fist and did not relinquish control for anything. Yitro comes in and shows Moshe that there is a different way. There is a more democratic way that is not only better for the leader, but also better for the community as a whole.

Yitro helped Moshe bring a nation of slaves into a system of democracy. A system where everyone's voice is heard and matters. A system which ultimately allowed Bnei Yisrael to thrive.

We can learn a lot from Moshe's receptivity here. When leaders from different nations, different traditions, different religions come together, we get a richer understanding of the world around us and our own communities. Especially in hard times, when it is so easy to be divided and to stay siloed in our own bubbles, we need to push ourselves to be more like Moshe Rabeinu. To see humanity and wisdom in sources outside of ourselves so that we, and our wider worlds, can thrive.

Shabbat Shalom.



24 Shevat 5784 | February 3, 2024

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