

Parshat Yitro

Making Ourselves Abundant

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We encounter Yitro the way we encounter many of life's blessings: abruptly, randomly, and outside of our own perspective. One of the first things we learn about Moshe's father-in-law Yitro is his status as an outsider to the community. He is a Midianite priest, a non-Jew, an other. And yet the word that comes right before his identity as an outsider is the most affirming and validating action that brings him close to his son-in-law and the Jewish people.

וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן, חֵתֵן מֹשֶׁה, אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹקִים לְמֹשֶׁה, וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ: כִּי-הוֹצִיא ה' אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִמִּצְרָיִם.

Yitro, priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out from Egypt. -Shemot 18:1

Yitro actively listens to Moshe recounting God's miracles throughout the lives of Bnei Israel as they left Egypt. He arrives at the site of Moshe's leadership and is already listening before offering his thoughts. Just a few pesukim later he is celebrating and overjoyed at the victorious journey of Moshe's community. Yitro, like every good Jewish parent, *sheps nachas* for his children. True to the shoshon of his name, *yeter*, or abundance, Yitro has advice to give and perspectives to offer but carefully chooses to first offer boundless joy and compassion. Imagine the kinds of people we could become if we approached people with the same kind of *levvavot yeterot*, or overflowing hearts.

After bringing himself closer to the Jewish people through validation and shared joy, Yitro cannot help but be a parent. He sees his son-in-law working tirelessly day and night attending to the needs of his people and offers much needed concern:

וַיֹּאמֶר חֵתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵלָיו לֹא-טוֹב הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה: נָבֵל תִּבְלַגְּמָה אֶתָּה גַם-הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ כִּי-כִבֵּד מִמְּךָ הַדְּבָר לֹא-תוּקַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדְּךָ:

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. -Shemot 18:17-18

Moshe was taking on too many responsibilities. He was tending to the needs of so many others that he had forgotten about himself. The Midrash (Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael) illustrates this, *נבול*, this overtiredness of Moshe, as the leaf of a fig that is slowly wilting. Yitro's call to Moshe is a reminder to all of us: we cannot pour from empty cups.

Besides Moshe's own mental health, his very work would be hurt without this intervention. At Moshe's rate, the Jewish people he was serving would wilt alongside him. Suddenly, the very *kibud* (כבוד), or honor, that Moshe had of holding his people together became a source of *kaved* (כבד), or heaviness and weight.

French rabbi and commentator the Chizkuni commented on the nature of his work under this much pressure. He analyzes the same words *נבול תבל* through the language of

confusion--ערובוב-- writing that Moshe would become confused if he continued to work this hard without any help. Comparing Moshe attending to every single person's needs to the Tower of Babel, the Chizkuni emphasizes that just like God mixed up the languages of the builders, so too Moshe would (unintentionally) confuse the words of all of Bnei Israel. Yitro predicted that each person would shout their needs louder than the person before, commanding Moshe's immediate attention but not his presence. He would become confused as a result, unable to fully listen in the ways that a leader whose compassion is as boundless as his name can.

For the Chizkuni, the message is clear: Moshe needs to lean on others so he can maintain his art of true listening. For Yitro, Moshe needs to exercise the uncomfortable and vulnerable muscle of asking for help and delegating. For me, in this moment of reflection with his father-in-law, Moshe needs to refill his empty cup so it will overflow with the validation and presence for others that Yitro has for him. Moshe needs to replenish his overtired and wilted self by building judicial systems, protocols, and necessary boundaries in order to focus on his sacred task: making himself as *yeter*, as more than enough, for those who need his ears.

In our difficult moments, it is the blessings of abrupt outsiders that make us pause and reflect on our own empty cups that are in need of being filled. It is the moments when those we love transform their empathy and hearts into a wellspring of abundance that the joy they share with us is palpable. And it is with their same posture of compassion that those individuals can sharpen us and point out the moments when we can grow out of our wilted state and too become sources of validation for others.

Author Jan Richardson echoes this kind of power in her book *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*. She writes, "Within the struggle, joy, pain, and delight that attend our life, there is an invisible circle of grace that enfolds and encompasses us in every moment. Blessings help us to perceive this circle of grace, to find our place of belonging within it, and to receive the strength the circle holds for us."

The first two words of Parshat Yitro embody the circle of grace that Moshe so desperately needed during his new phase of leadership in the desert. May we all discover, cultivate, and become those blessings for ourselves and those in our wider circles.

Shabbat Shalom!



Emily Goldberg Winer was born and raised in South Florida, but moved to New York City in high school. She is a Wexner Graduate Fellow and currently works as a rabbinic intern at the Columbia/Barnard Hillel. She most recently completed the Jewish Innovation Fellowship at the 92nd Street Y and directed a teen fellowship at the Hebrew Home at Riverdale. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from Muhlenberg College where she studied Religion and Jewish Studies. There, she was a research and program intern at the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding. Committed to interfaith dialogue and pluralism, Emily is constantly exploring the traditions and stories of others. She has engaged in programs rooted in religious diversity, first among fellow Jews at the Bronfman Youth Fellowship and Drisha, and later across faiths at the Shalom Hartman Institute, Tanenbaum, and Auburn Seminary. Her most humbling experiences,

however, came from her years of working at the Phoebe nursing home with residents living with dementia as well as the Lehigh County Jail where she facilitated text studies for men and women. Emily lives in Riverdale with her husband Jonah, a rabbinical student at Yeshivat Chovevai Torah. When not learning Torah or brainstorming ways to make Jewish communities more inclusive, she enjoys volunteering at soup kitchens, people (and dog) watching, and adding puns into regular conversations.