

## Should I Stay or Should I Go? Parashat Beha'alotekha 5781

Rabbi Michael Safra

Should I stay or should I go? Are you with us or against us? Friend or foe? Sometimes the answers are not so obvious.

There is a story in the Torah portion. It's on p. 825 of *Etz Hayim* if you want to follow, chapter 10, verse 29. After camping for almost a year near Mount Sinai, we read that on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the journey, the cloud lifted and the Israelites were ready to travel. They thought it would be a short trip; they would soon enter the promised land. And we read in verse 29 on p. 825:

Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the Lord has said, 'I will give It to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the Lord has promised to be generous to Israel."

But Hobab replied, "I will not go, but will return to my native land." Moses said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide. So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the Lord grants us."

And that's the end of the story. We don't know what happens. Did Yitro go home? Some assume he must have because we don't hear from him again. Others assume he stayed because the book of Judges tells us that "the descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses" were given a portion in the Land of Israel. (I note some confusion with the names. Sometimes Moses's father-in-law is called Yitro; sometimes he is Hobab; sometimes he is Reuel. Here he is a Midianite; in Judges he is a Kenite. Scholars explore these differences, but the bottom line is that it is the same person).

But why does Yitro want to go back home? He and Moses have a rapport; he has praised God and set his lot with the Israelites. And why does Moses need him to stay? Why would he need a guide if he has God showing the way by means of the Cloud of Glory? The text cries out, "*darsheni*, expound, comment, figure me out!"

It seems that the relationship was complicated. Yitro was a Midianite, and not just any Midianite, a Midianite priest. Later in Numbers, the Torah will command "*tzaror et hamidyanim*, Assail the Midianites and defeat them!" Yitro is called a Kenite; Kenites are given a portion in the Land of Israel. But the book of Samuel suggests a relationship between the Kenites and Amalek, Israel's most vial and hated enemy.

This Midianite is good; he is the grandfather of Moses's children; he gave Moses sound leadership advice; he had knowledge of the wilderness; he once formally proclaimed, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods!" Maybe, says Joseph Bekhor Shor, enemies will see Yitro with Moses and say, "This guy did not leave his native land for nothing! He must have seen that God is with them!" Maybe, suggests Hizkuni, he will set an example for other would-be converts to Judaism.

Which is it? Friend of foe? Does Yitro belong with the Jewish people or not? Does he stay or does he go? The text is ambiguous.

In 2021, we call this intersectionality. Sure, he believes in our cause; he can be an ally; but he's also one of *them*. It happens all the time. Organizers of next month's New York City Pride March announced that gay and lesbian police officers from the Gay Officers Action League are not invited to march. These officers are allies and partners in the march's mission, but they also represent other interests.

Remember the Chicago Dyke March in 2017, when three women were ejected because they were carrying rainbow flags emblazoned with a Jewish star. Never mind that these individuals were champions of the cause, as are most Jews. The march organizers determined that the Jewish star is Zionist and therefore a "trigger" for violence. The same thing happened with the Women's March in 2018. Jews were forced to choose: women or Israel. That is unfair and wrong.

We saw it again during the conflict in Israel. It was alarming to see leaders from Black Lives Matter proclaim solidarity with the Palestinians, as it was alarming when the UN passed its infamous 1975 resolution declaring that Zionism is racism. It hurts, especially in light of our efforts to learn more and support the cause of racial justice. We support racial justice because it is right; and we support Israel's right to defend herself because it is right too, and it is us; and we condemn antisemitism because it is wrong. And we must stay in the fight. We must protect and defend and nurture these alliances. We must teach each other in spite of the complexities of friend vs. foe.

I was inspired on Thursday by the "Act Against Antisemitism" virtual rally – the number of congressional leaders, Black leaders, American Muslims, American Asians, celebrities who stood up to condemn antisemitism in all its forms. Pastor Chris Harris of Bright Star Church in Chicago said it best: "Thank you for being with us when we needed you. Now we stand with you when you need us." I met Pastor Harris when he co-chaired a mission to Israel of Rabbis and Black Pastors that happened to take place just days after the Pittsburgh massacre. He has his criticisms; we have our differences; I wouldn't respect him if we didn't. But his love for the Jewish people is real. His relationship with Rabbi Michael Siegel is real, as is the partnership between Bright Star Baptist Church and Anshe Emet Synagogue.

I am working to develop those kinds of relationships in our own community because racism is bad, antisemitism is bad, and we need each other. It is difficult work for all the reasons we know; and there are ambiguities and inevitable setbacks. But there are so many partners and potential partners in the fight against hatred of all forms.

In 1939, David Ben Gurion faced a similar challenge in his role as leader of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine. The British government issued a White Paper restricting Jews' rights to purchase land and severely restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine. But there was another fight too. On September 1, war broke out and the same British government began to lead the effort against the Nazis. Faced with competing interests, David Ben Gurion proclaimed, "We will fight the White Paper as if there is no war and fight the war as if there is no White Paper." Some relationships are messy, but we know what is right.

The Torah doesn't tell us how the story ends. Did Yitro return to his ancestral homeland, or did he stay with Moses and the Israelites? We don't know. All we know is what we read a generation or two later in Judges: "The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up with the Judites from the City of Palms to the wilderness of Judah; and they went and settled among the people in the Negeb of Arad." In the end, when the time was right, the two groups that were once enemies, two groups that at times marched together and at times were forced apart, the two groups settled together ... because together is how they belonged.

And that is my prayer now. May we soon experience that world where all people – Jews and Arabs, Palestinians and Israelis, Blacks and Whites, Asians and Muslims and Latinx and Jews and straight and gay and cis and trans – all people can live together in a world that gives "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance"; where "justice flows like a mighty stream" and all people are truly free; where every individual might "sit under their own fig trees with none to make them afraid"; because peace will reign on earth. Shabbat shalom.