

Yitro Dvar Torah – Jonathan Groner

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In many Jewish communities, one will find large numbers of physicians, or lawyers, psychologists or members of other professions, and there have been many appropriate divrei Torah that have been said over the years about the relationship of Torah to these professions. We have certainly heard a great deal about Jews' historical relationship to the law and about the Torah obligation to heal the sick and the high prestige of the medical profession in the Jewish community.

This D.C. Minyan community, it seems to me, has more than its share of people who follow a different profession. With all due respect to the large number of teachers here who teach everything from pre-K to K to elementary to high school to college, today I am going to focus on management consultants.

Parshat Yitro has a great deal in it, including of course the Ten Commandments, but I am going to view the parsha in these brief remarks as the ultimate source for wisdom on the consulting field. After all, what is Yitro doing throughout all of Chapter 18, other than giving Moshe consulting advice – advice, in fact, that Moshe follows to the letter? (Perhaps for those of you who are consultants, that is the most surprising thing – that Moshe actually follows the advice.)

As the chapter begins, Yitro, who is Moshe's father-in-law and is referred to as a chief of the Midianite tribe, comes to visit Moshe in the desert, bringing along Moshe's wife and two sons. After a ritual exchange of greetings and a ritual exchange of sacrifices, the friendly visit

continues on the next day, and Yitro sees that Moshe is working much too hard in his daily role of mediating and ruling on disputes among the people. Yitro suggests that Moshe alleviate his burden by delegating some of these tasks to others – as it says in verse 21, “able men who fear God, men of truth who hate bribery, who will be appointed as rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.”

As Yitro continues in verse 22, “any major matter will still go to you, Moshe, but the smaller matters will be handled by these new judges, and that will make your life easier because they will bear some of your burdens. That way, you will still be able to stand at the end of the day.” And Moshe does exactly these things and then Yitro goes back to his own land.

This all leads to a question, but not one that Rashi asks. The question is: What best practices in the management consulting field does this story illustrate?

Actually, I can think of at least four. First, although Yitro is in fact Moshe’s father-in-law, he is pretty much a stranger to Moshe and to the people in general. In verses 6 and 7, they make polite introductions but it seems that they hardly know each other. So Yitro is not an insider. He is an outsider, from a different tribe, and he can be seen as having a fresh pair of eyes to evaluate the situation. A 2012 article in *Forbes* magazine points out that consultants are often hired by a company because the people in the company who have the highest status are the most likely to resist change, and it often takes an outsider to the organization to make a recommendation that will actually be heeded.

Second, Yitro advises on process, not on substance. He doesn’t try to change the corporate values, as it were, of the Jewish people, which involve obedience to Torah and the elucidation of God’s law. Rather, Yitro concentrates on streamlining, delegating, and

modernizing the procedures that are in place, so that the clients (who can be seen here as the Jewish people as a whole) can get their disputes resolved faster and so that management (i.e. Moshe) can accomplish their role without risking executive burn-out, but while still maintaining control of major policy matters. As verse 26 says, “the difficult matters they still brought to Moshe but the small matters were handled by the new judges.”

Third, Yitro does not ignore the key role that sound personnel practices must play. If so much is to be delegated, those to whom the work is delegated must have the appropriate values. That is why they must be not only competent, able, intelligent judges, but also people who will reject bribes. This sounds pretty up to date in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All you need to do is pick up the newspaper and see that there are plenty of people out there who do not reject bribes. Yitro understood that no organizational change will succeed and last if the wrong people are put in charge.

Finally, Yitro doesn't stick around too long. I don't think it's accidental that the last words in the chapter are that Yitro returned to his own land. It wasn't, strictly speaking, necessary for the Torah to point that out. Yitro is presumably available to give his advice on another occasion, but as the story ends, his advice has been heeded, his relationship with his client is amicable or better, and he feels comfortable leaving the implementation of his suggestions up to a well-trained client.

Shabbat shalom, then – and to those of you who are management consultants, be assured that sometimes you really are doing God's work.