

The Books we Leave Behind

Behaalotecha 2018

The Jewish Center

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This past week, Rachel and I had the pleasure of seeing Othello performed at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park. It's always amazing to be reminded that Shakespeare's themes and variations are as relevant today as they were when he wrote them: Gender, race, loyalty, ambition, social status... Murder and suicide may be a little much, but I think we'd all be better off if 17th century tragedies were fresher in our minds.

So what's the trick? Shakespeare was sui generis. But how does one go about writing a script that endures for 400 years?

Intrigue also pervades our Parsha this morning. Behaalotecha is a veritable cavalcade of events dripping with drama: The triumphant march of the ark toward the Promised Land; the fantastical grumblers who dream of a return to Egypt; wayward prophets; a banquet of quail; and accusations lodged against Moshe Rabbeinu by his very own sister.

Between and between all this drama is a mundane scene that doesn't seem equal to the exalted plotlines of the Parsha.

Absent any context, the Torah tells us that Moshe goes out of his way to persuade Yitro to remain with the Jewish people as they head toward the land of Canaan. And Yitro declines.

The question is: Why does Moshe have such a hard time saying goodbye to his father-in-law and why does this pithy little narrative warrant inclusion in the Torah at all?

Of course we understand that there's a long relationship between the two characters. And maybe the psychologists in the room would posit that Yitro is a stand-in for the father-figure Moshe never had.

That may all be so. But I'd like to suggest that there's something more here than meets the eye.

To understand the potential significance of Yitro's departure, we need to understand something about Yitro himself.

His character development isn't quite a Shakespearean play in five acts. But Yitro does appear in four discrete scenes.

- We first meet him in the aftermath of Moshe saving his daughters at the well in Midian.
- He reappears after the Exodus and joins the Jewish people.
- He dispenses advice about Moshe's leadership style prior to Matan Torah.
- And then here in our Parsah he appears one final time as Moshe invites him to stay with Bnei Yisrael.

And I'd like to suggest that one common denominator binds these four scenes together: Yitro's single-minded focus on the good and welfare of others.

Consider the first scene: Remember Yitro's reaction to hearing the news that his daughters were saved from a band of threatening shepherds?

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-בְּנֹתָיו, וְאִיוֹ; לָמָּה זֶה עֹבְדֶתֶן אֶת-הָאִישׁ, קְרָאֵן לוֹ וַיֹּאכֵל לֶחֶם.

Where is he? Where's the man who saved you? It can't be that left you him. You have to find him and invite him to break bread with us. His focus is not on his own family or their safety, but on the man who saved them.

Now think back to the moment Yitro appears after the Exodus. Moshe tells him everything that's happened. And the Torah tells us:

וַיַּחַד יִתְרוֹ--עַל כָּל-הַטּוֹבָה, אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: אֲשֶׁר הִצִּילוֹ, מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם.

Yitro is overjoyed by the news that the Jewish people have been saved by Hashem. What moves him is not something personal or familial, but rather the salvation of people he's never met.

In the third episode Yitro observes Moshe judging the people by himself and insists he needs help – for Moshe's benefit and for theirs. Again, he's a force for the recognition of how the lives of others can be made better.

And in our Parsha, the pattern continues. Why does he insist on the need to return to his people?

The Midrash tells us went back to bring them closer to Judaism – a conclusion it draws from the simple reading of the pasuk in Shoftim:

וַיָּבִי קִינֵי חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה עִלּוֹ מֵעִיר הַתְּמָרִים, אֶת-בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה, מִדְּבַר יְהוּדָה, אֲשֶׁר בָּגְבוּ עָרֵד; וַיֵּלֶךְ, וַיֹּשֶׁב אֶת-הָעָם.

The descendants of Moshe's father-in-law rushed to join the Israelites upon meeting them in Canaan. It was from Yitro that they had learned of the Jewish people's exploits because Yitro had insisted on returning home to continue his pursuit of selflessness.

My argument is that at every turn Yitro is a magnet for good – not in some abstract sense – but in an empirical sense. His presence is always synonymous with the conviction that the life of another can be made better.

The capacity for Yitro to focus on others, to turn outward, to be positive and to be perpetually generous of spirit – must have been extraordinary. And Moshe knew it.

The proof is in the pudding.

טוב is the operative word that attaches to Yitro.

וַיַּחַד יִתְרוֹ--עַל כָּל-הַטּוֹבָה, אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיֹּאמֶר חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה, אֵלָיו: לֹא-טוֹב, הַדְּבָר, אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה, עֹשֶׂה.

And then five times in the span of two pesukim, Moshe uses the word טוב to convince Yitro to stay!

לָכֵּה אַתָּה וְהַטְּבֹנוּ לָךְ, כִּי-יְהוּדָה דְּבַר-טוֹב עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל...וְהִנֵּה, כִּי-תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ: וְהִנֵּה הַטּוֹב הַהוּא, אֲשֶׁר יֵיטִיב יְהוָה עִמָּנוּ--
וְהַטְּבֹנוּ לָךְ.

The prospect of losing a Yitro is unthinkable to Moshe. In his absence, who would serve as the exemplar of טוב?

- Moshe is the paradigm of truth.
- Aharon is the paradigm of peace.
- Yitro is the paradigm of chesed.

To Moshe's mind, Yitro's singular focus on the ethic of bringing Tov into the world is utterly irreplaceable.

And notice that Moshe's fear of losing Yitro is not unfounded. As soon as he leaves, the Jewish people begin to unravel.

א ויהי העם כמתאננים, רע באזני יהוה;

As soon as the personification of טוב is gone, רע becomes the leitmotif of the narrative:

ובעיני מלשה רע
למה תרעת לעבדך
הרגני נא הרג--אם-מצאתי חן, בעיניך; ואל-אראה, ברעתי.

The Jewish people have suddenly turned inward. They start romanticizing their lives in Egypt. They think of their own creature comforts; their own happiness. And suddenly that triumphant march toward the Holy Land has become a tragic tale of woe and despair.

Moshe knew the Jewish people wouldn't be the same without their icon of benevolence. And so he did everything in his power to keep him close.

Chesed begets chesed. Being around good people inspires us to be better. But the inspiration wears off quickly. We get distracted and move on to other things. It's not enough to have a single interaction. We need continuous exposure to people bringing more tov into the world to constantly replenish our tanks.

So it's very special this Shabbat to celebrate all of the amazing participants in our 100 acts of chesed challenge.

The goal of the campaign was for individuals and groups to honor The Jewish Center's treasured legacy of caring and kindness by pledging to do 100 acts of chesed and inspiring others to follow suit.

Of course we have an ethic of והצנע לכת אם אלוךך. No one is doing chesed to get accolades. But to the extent acts of chesed can impel others to act more benevolently, we want to highlight them.

Our campaign was a beautiful testament to the quality and quantity of chesed that our members can perform when we set goals to achieve.

Allow me to share with you just a handful of the submissions that we received from our participants:

- Took notes in class for blind person
- Baked cookies and delivered them to Israeli soldiers
- Taught a friend how to climb the monkey bars
- Made a professional contact for someone looking for a job
- Helped mommy do the laundry
- Did a jump-rope-a-thon to raise money for Bikkur Cholim
- Assisted a low income family fill out a FAFSA form
- Helped a child learn to read
- Prepared care packages for soldiers on active duty

Our members performed thousands of acts of chesed. And these are just the ones we know about.

Rav Eliyahu Chaim Meisels was a Torah giant of the 19th century. He studied in Volozhin with the likes of Yosef Ber Soloveichik and Yitshak Elhanan Spektor. For almost 40 years, he presided over the community of Lodz, a community that grew from 10,000 Jews to 160,000 during his tenure.

He was once asked by his friend Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, the Rav of Vilna, why he never wrote a book – why he never published his Talmudic novellae as was common for scholars of his generation.

Rav Meisels took out an old, tattered notebook from his desk. “I do have a book,” he said. “It’s the receipt book for the loans I made, the tzeddakah I distributed and the chasadim that I performed. These are the pages by which I want to be remembered.”

We may not be able to produce plays like Shakespeare. But we can surely write scripts that are equally enduring: the tales of kindness and compassion not easily forgotten by their beneficiaries.

Let’s not wait for the next 100 acts of chesed challenge to write our own chapters.

As the bard once put it: “Love sought is good; but given unsought is better.”