

## Drash on Parashat Yitro (Exodus 18:1-20:23) – 5 February 2021

In this week's Parashat, Moses is visited by his father-in-law, Yitro (Jethro), whom he tells about all the wonders God had done for his people in rescuing them from Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Yitro rejoices with Moses, declaring that God is greater than all other gods. Yitro then gives offerings to God before celebrating with Moses' family and the people of Israel.

The next day, Yitro goes out to where Moses is working, and realises that all the people come to Moses for judgements (of matters big and small). Yitro is horrified by the amount of work Moses is undertaking, and suggests a system whereby others can be trained to undertake some of the work. In effect, Yitro and Moses establish the first systematic legal system.

That done, Yitro goes home, and Moses and the Israelites set off for Sinai.

At Sinai, God reminds Moses of what He did to the Egyptians, and politely suggests that if Moses keeps the Covenant, God will deliver great things to Moses and all the people of Israel. Moses tells his people of this, and they engage in preparations for what ends up being God delivering the Ten Commandments.

As always, a lot happens in a short space of time – or very few pages. The delivering of the Ten Commandments (and we know these are only a few of the 613 mitzvot) has, of course, received much attention. But they are not the focus of today's drash; rather, my focus is on the first half of the Parashat – that concerning Yitro.

When we consider the happiness Yitro shared with Moses, and his celebration of their escape from Egypt, it doesn't seem particularly surprising. Yitro's daughter, Tziporah, is Moses' wife, and their sons are his grandchildren. Who wouldn't be pleased? But Yitro, himself, praised God – claiming that Moses' God was greater than all the others. Again, there is nothing too surprising about this until we realise that Yitro is not a Jew. Rather, he is a Midianite priest! He is not only of another religion, he is a *priest* of that religion. While there is some suggestion that Yitro converted at some point, that is not relevant here. What is striking is his praise of Moses' God.

Indeed, the words he uses are 'Baruch Shem', and this is one of only three times these words appear in the Torah – each time by a non-Jew. The others are by Noah (which surprised me), and Avraham's servant. So why are these words reserved for non-Jews? Rabbi Jonathon Sacks suggests that the subtle point being made here is that the God of Israel is the God of all humankind, even if the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humankind.

What a beautifully Jewish interpretation. That is, the importance of humanity, of showing kindness to others, of tzedakah, of taking care (or repairing) the world (tikkun olam) are central to Judaism. Believing in God might be optional, but taking care of the world and each other are not.

Ours is not a religion where we can simply say that God is wonderful and that's it. Ours is a religion where our actions count. Performing mitzvot involves intent (kavanah) and action (keva). Our God (however we understand him or her) is inextricably linked to us and the world in which we live. Yitro's declaration thanking and praising God is a recognition of this link with humanity.

Later in this Parashat, God delivers the Ten Commandments, each of which is an instruction on how to behave and/or an explication of the relationship between God and humanity and between humanity itself. Again, this link is made explicit.

But I digress; I return to my focus on Yitro – the name of this week's portion. But why does this non-Jew receive such an honour?

Following the Baruch Shem portion, Yitro sees that all the people come to Moses to sort out disputes. From morning to night, Moses is approached – on matters large and small. As Yitro rightly points out, this is exhausting – and perhaps unnecessary. After all, surely some of the easier tasks could be outsourced. And this is precisely what Yitro recommends. Indeed, he outlines what is essentially the first legal system, complete with a well-structured hierarchy of judges and assistant judges etc. But Moses remains at the top, with responsibility for the most serious issues and now with time to mentor others.

In contemporary times, the ideas of outsourcing and restructuring are commonplace. I would go so far as to say they have become an industry in themselves, to the point where reinvention of the wheel is accepted practice. Sigh. So what was so amazing about what Yitro suggested (and achieved), and what can we learn from this today?

Let's look at Yitro's first instruction to Moses. Moses was to identify the people he saw as most suitable to be the judges – the leaders. They were to be 'men of substance, ... men of truth, ... and those who hate monetary gain.' In other words, they were to be people (I know they were all men but let's be a little contemporary here and assume it can include women); people who were *not* in it for themselves. And they were to be people who had already demonstrated their integrity.

Yitro's system specified that Moses, who knew the job and knew the people of Israel, should have primary responsibility for the structuring *and* the implementation. Yitro's system recognised Moses' knowledge, wisdom and experience. It would ensure that Moses' skills could be passed on to future generations – in a way that would involve others in this process *and* eliminate the need to reinvent the wheel. Yitro's system took advantage of the energy of youth and the experience of the elder. Isn't this a good prescription for succession planning of any type?

Let's face it: we *do* live in a society where age and wisdom are not recognised. Indeed, they are often implicitly or explicitly decried. It's not hard to imagine a system today where Moses has been working his butt off (and doing a fabulous job, mind you) but decides to retire, or someone new comes along and hurries the process along. It is likely that a replacement would be found and this person would want to, or be expected to, change the system such that it reflects him/herself. Again, this is precisely *not* what Yitro and Moses did. When did we stop valuing experience? Why is it that so many systems around us have lost sight of what they are really about –

under the guise of 'innovation' and 'progress'? When did we stop caring about wisdom – and those who have obtained it?

Wisdom is a concept studied by psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers. Wisdom can only be achieved through experience and consideration (there we go again – action and intention), but it is not achieved by all. It involves a distillation of a lifetime's knowledge and experience, and drawing out the key points (not dissimilar to a drash, but of the whole Torah in one). Passing on wisdom to others can be part of a personal legacy, but it can have impact on a larger scale too. Passing on knowledge and wisdom can help others on their path. It can save them making some mistakes, and it can enable further progress to be made in the future.

Consider the scientific process. If we ignore previous researchers' findings – and importantly, their theories – we impede progress. While a few individuals might make names for themselves along the way, we cannot progress the world in which we live, nor the lives of its inhabitants. In effect, we hinder, we don't benefit, humanity. Had Yitro left Moses to continue as he was (until he died), others would have taken his place, but how much of his experience would have been lost? And no-one benefits. The next generation has to work just as hard and long – partially to the same end. (There goes that wheel again, round and round).

So a complex legal system, with future planning, was established, thanks to Yitro, a non-Jew. The name Yitro (or Jethro) is said to mean 'abundance', or as Rabbi Sacks puts it, 'addition' – and wow, this was some addition. With Moses in the top leadership position, he continued to speak with God and, after receiving the Ten Commandments, had the system in place to ensure they were passed on.

It is said that because Moses implemented the system, it is included in the Torah. But Yitro's ideas ensured that the laws could be passed down to everyone, and that they could impact all areas of their lives. This was Yitro's addition. I suggest it was Yitro's wisdom that enabled all this to occur. Sure, Moses usually gets the credit, but the Torah portion is called Yitro. More important than his non-Jewish status were his commitment and actions that honoured God and humanity. Clearly, our actions count. And even without a belief in God, we can honour the memory of both Yitro and Moses with what we do – our tikkun olam.

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