



The Parsha in Practice

What's YOUR Big Idea?

Parshat Yitro begins as most visits from in-laws do. The in-law arrives, catches up with all of the recent news and affairs of family, wakes up the next morning, meddles, and then leaves. The Torah refers to Yitro as the "father-in-law" of Moshe over a dozen times, and in the meddling department, he does not disappoint.

After seeing the long hours that Moshe puts into adjudicating cases and advising those who came to him with questions, Yitro came upon a plan to lighten Moshe's load. Moshe would create a hierarchical system of judges and only the most difficult questions - unanswerable by anyone else - would ultimately arrive at his doorstep.



The Midrash states that one of Yitro's seven names, "Yeter," (meaning: "addition") was given to him because of the extra section of the Torah that was added because of the advice he offered. As it states: "וְאַתָּה תַחֲזֶה" וְיָתֵר, "He was named "Yeter" because of the extra portion that he caused to be written in the Torah."

The "extra" verses the Midrash is referring to begins with Yitro's big idea for Moshe:

וְאַתָּה תַחֲזֶה מִכָּל־הָעָם אֲנָשֵׁי־חַיִל יְרֵאֵי אֱלֹקִים אֲנָשֵׁי אֱמֶת שֹׂנְאֵי בָצַע וְשֹׂמְרֵי עֲלֵהֶם שְׂרֵי אֲלָפִים שְׂרֵי מֵאוֹת שְׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים וְשְׂרֵי עֶשְׂרֵת:

You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens...

One would have thought that the extra verses that Yitro is credited for introducing would begin with his earlier criticism of Moshe's method:

וַיֹּאמֶר חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה:

But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right."

Why is Yitro not credited with the addition of the text that describes his complaint and only with the solution he provides? The Chiddushei HaRim explains that the Midrash goes out of its way to note the part of Yitro's exchange that is helpful, not simply the part that is critical.

It doesn't take much to poke holes in arguments, find flaws in the work of others, or generally assume a critical posture towards... everything. In fact, to most people, snark, irreverence, and criticism is usually seen as witty and clever and the sign of the discerning and analytical mind.

Yitro approaches Moshe with the problems, but it's only the solution that he provides (itself susceptible to significant hole-poking) that is truly to be considered creditable to Yitro as a true and worthwhile "addition" to Torah. Finding problems are easy. Proposing solutions is trickier. First, they are liable to be cut down as quickly as the plan they are replacing. Second, fanciful ideas and those who propose them might be seen as "unrealistic" and "naïve." We see more to be lost than to be gained, and so we remain quiet, and the next great idea is stillborn.

In Parshat B'Haalotecha, we read of those who complained that the Manna they received in the desert was insufficient and that meat was what they really needed. The Torah refers to these people as follows: **וַיְהִי הָעָם כְּמַתְאֲנָנִים**, *and the people were like complainers,* to which Rashi comments that they were labeled as "like" complainers because they were insincere and were just looking for a pretense to rebel. It seems that being people who complain with constructive goals in mind are fine, but it is those who appear to be truly concerned but really are only "like" complainers are the problem. They are simply looking to bash, deflate, and ruin. Sincere complainers on the other hand? They get things done.

Unprecedented times require unprecedented ideas. For me, it took some time with the shul doors locked to really begin to understand why we all had entered those doors in the first place and what it is that shuls like ours truly provide to its wide array of members. Recreating a shul experience online, then considering supplementary, complementary, or entirely alternative programming hasn't always worked, but hey, it's our first pandemic.

As we imagine what life will look like at the other end, we've had enough of a pause on normalcy to challenge the notion that we can simply recreate what we **had** and instead should begin to consider the fact that we must reimagine what we **can have** going forward. I know that I've been thinking of these ideas and I also know I can't do it alone. Since my *Un-Muted* tour this past summer, I've been collecting your ideas and attempting to reflect on whether, or when, they are possible. Supposedly Einstein is quoted as having said "If at first the idea is not absurd, then there will be no hope for it." So please, keep them crazy, and keep them coming.

What do you wish a shul could do better? What would you like to have more/less of? What have been the things that have been more unexpectedly impactful to you and might be better cultivated for others as well? The world has provided the disruption. All we need now are the ideas!

Yitro's contribution seems to be as much about the fact that he offered an idea as the idea itself. The status quo was not working and instead of making that critical comment and leaving Moshe to figure it out on his own, he submitted his entry into the suggestion box. His contribution added to the way the Torah was studied, shared, and decided upon, and ultimately, added to the very Torah itself.

What will be your addition?

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach