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Kol Rinah
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Has anyone become an Eagles fan recently? Or perhaps a Chiefs fan, in the last few weeks, given that these are the teams in tomorrow's Super Bowl? Sometimes we root for underdogs, but we also like supporting winners. We like supporting and being part of success. And especially when we can combine those things—underdogs' success—that's the greatest thing to get behind, right? Success can be an indicator of quality sometimes—the best picture nominees are all pretty good movies.

The Israelites in Egypt appear like the classic underdogs, oppressed, unlikely to succeed, but they have a lot of pluck, they stick to their traditions. When they not only leave Egypt, but benefiting from a miracle, pass through the split Sea of Reeds, and then defeat Amalek and his army, they become the underdog that has won the whole tournament.

It's no wonder that Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, comes at that moment, at the peak of Israel's success. He wants to be part of a winning team. Abraham Lincoln is fabled to have said, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." It's become clear that God is on Israel's side, and so to be a part of Israel is to be on God's side.

And there are even midrashim that suggest that Yitro and Amalek were in league with Pharaoh, and that Yitro repented after Pharaoh fell, or that Yitro fought for Amalek, and repented when Amalek lost.¹ This would mean that Yitro, having been on a losing team, is interested in being with the winner.

Who of us doesn't want to be associated with success?

The Torah reading begins, "וישמע יתרו"—Yitro heard (Ex. 18:1)." The parting of the Sea of Reeds and the defeat of Amalek are the two things Rashi suggests that Yitro heard. But in the ancient midrash that Rashi is quoting,² there's a third option suggested—that Yitro heard about the giving of the Torah.³

The report or anticipation of a revelation of God might be sufficiently motivating to bring Yitro from Midian. We do have a certain fascination with extreme weather and geological phenomena. There's a certain majesty to a powerful storm. There are people who chase tornados, want to experience the intensity of a hurricane, and want to visit active volcanoes, and there are elements of all of these in the revelation at Sinai. The earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria last week was devastating and its results horrifying. Its power was awesome and terrible. What we really want is to experience God's presence in nature in intense but safe ways.

But it doesn't have to be the physicality of God's revelation that inspires Yitro, or us. "The giving of the Torah," מתן תורה, represents a path, a *derech*, a covenant, a way of life that

¹ See Exodus Rabbah 26:7 and Midrash Shemuel 12:2.

² See beginning of Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael on Parashat Yitro.

³ The assumption implicit in Rabbi Elazar ha-Moda'ee's suggestion here is that Yitro actually came to the Israelite camp *after* the giving of the Torah, and that the Torah as we have it is not written in order. For more on this, see Ramban's comment on Ex. 18:1.

makes claims and obligates me, but also promises to make my life meaningful in the context of community, history and morality. Meaning, community, purpose—that's exactly why most of us are here right now, and every Shabbat. People join religious communities for precisely those qualities. They always have, and always will.

Maybe it was the aura of success that brought Yitro to the Israelite camp. Maybe it was the raw physical experience of revelation, or the promise of meaning, community and purpose that attracted him. But I want to offer a third possibility.

Yitro may not have been an Israelite, but he also wasn't a complete stranger—he was the father of Tziphora, Moses's wife. Yitro brings Tziphora, and her and Moses' sons, Gershom and Eliezer, to be with Moses. Visiting a friend, reuniting family—these are compelling forces. Relationship is so powerful, and also a locus of the holy, of God's presence, whether in deep, platonic friendship, romantic love, or within family. We jump through hoops to be with people we care about.

So what was it that brought Yitro? Family and relationship, awe, success, covenant? It could have been any of these, or all of them.

What motivates you the most? What motivates you to do things beyond the necessities? What motivates you to show up at shul? (I hope it's not tornadoes.)

Notice, by the way, that these draws, these attractions, are all passive—they are not evangelical, not proselytizing. Somehow, Yitro (and presumably others!) heard about the Israelites, God, Mt. Sinai, the Torah, and came. There was no explicit invitation. It was the echoes and reverberations of intense and authentic experiences of people, and God, being themselves, being their best selves, that drew in Yitro.

So it was then, and so may it be again, with us here at Kol Rinah, and with every Jewish community. כן יהי רצון.