

YITRO

Exodus 18:1-20:23

February 11, 2023

Shabbat shalom. Moshe has shown us time and time again that life at the top can be pretty lonely. Yitro, this week's parishat, is no exception.

Moshe has had his hands full ever since leaving Egypt. He's no sooner gotten the gang through the Red Sea when he's faced with the task of keeping the lot of them happy. This is not shift work. He and Aharon are toiling around the clock, with God at their side.

Enter Yitro, the priest of Mideon, and Moshe's father-in-law. One day he shows up at the camp with Moshe's wife and two sons in tow. Recall that they were deposited on Yitro's doorstep in order for Moshe to go to Egypt in order to plead his case with Pharaoh, even though an earlier parishat indicates that they had in fact gone down to Egypt with him.

While Zipporah and the boys don't have anything to say, Yitro certainly does, and his son-in-law respects him very much for it. Moshe bows low to the ground when he comes out to greet Yitro. This is the first and only time that Moshe has shown such high regard for another human being. This is his father-in-law as well as a priest, a real gonze macher if ever there was one. Yet there's a possible vestige of Moshe's former life at play here. Bowing down to those superior to you, be it Pharaoh or some government official was commonplace in Egypt. Yitro is himself a priest, and that as well entitles him to this display of reverence. His appearance elicits a dinner with no less venerable the personages of Aharon and the community elders. So, it's a surprise to Yitro when he sees Moshe the next day going out to hear the grievances of every community member with a complaint, be it large or small.

Why, he wants to know, are you doing all this yourself? Not only are you falling on your face with exhaustion, but the people are left standing around for hours, sometimes not even getting in to see you at all. Anybody ever waited in the Social Security office for a hearing? Then you know what I'm talking about.

Moshe has 4 possible motives for his perpetual and solitary community service. One may be his own ego at work; he's the only one who can do the job properly because God picked him to run the show. The second is God's simply expecting him to do the judging himself. The third can also be a lack of imagination; Moshe can't possibly see anyone else assisting him in any meaningful way. The fourth is his proclivity to impulsiveness; remember this is a man who killed an Egyptian overseer without any thought to the consequences. A person who slays first and asks questions later does not an effective administrator make.

While the text never supplies us with an answer, Yitro has a solution to the problem. He tells Moshe "The thing that you are doing is not right. You are wearing yourself out, and the people as well." He then proposes that Moshe appoint "chiefs from within who fear God and will not take bribes" to adjudicate the people's grievances; "Chiefs over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens." Sounds more like making

change at the bank than delegating responsibility. At any rate, Yitro further consuls, "If you do this, and God so commands it, then you will be able to bear up."

This is a win-win situation, and with a simple set of criteria to boot. Moshe doesn't stretch himself thin trying to help the community, and the community gets its issues resolved in a timely manner. Tziporah and the boys might even get some family time with Dad.

What's more, all those candidates need do is be God-fearing and honest. Considering the Israelites' dubious outlook on God, candidates with one of those qualifications might have been hard to find.

Nonetheless, Moshe, after being told that "If you do this, and God commands it, then it will be done." proceeds to do just what his father-in-law suggests, and the world's first judicial system is born. Now, what is missing from this picture? You guessed it-God. Moshe never has a conversation with God about Yitro's advice. He never seeks approval from his boss for going ahead with this project. Why? Perhaps God was willing to entertain the words of an outsider. Perhaps it's because Yitro was Moshe's boss before God was. Perhaps it was because God simply didn't have a clue. At any rate, No one is struck dead upon being selected for the job.

Fast forward to Deuteronomy 1:9-18. Where a dying Moshe is giving the last of his instructions to the Israelites prior to their entering Canaan. He recounts his "having the burden" of them, and how he "chose chieftains who were wise, discerning, and experienced" to hear the community's cases. And, yes, these chieftains were to judge over "thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens." Sound familiar? It should, but pay attention to the language. It's now nearly 2 generations later, and this crop of judges is to have intelligence as well as character. Notice, too, that Yitro is not even mentioned as the inspiration for Moshe's original actions. The priest of Mideon would have long since died, and his name would not have meant anything to them.

Why the shift in language? The Israelites whom Moshe was addressing in Deuteronomy were the children and grandchildren of the ones he was leading back in Exodus. That first cohort had a slave mentality as a result of living under Pharaoh's oppression. The later cohort had a far different outlook because they had lived their lives under the judicial system Moshe had set up years before. Moshe was an experienced enough leader to understand this, and he code switched accordingly.

We don't use the same language with our parents that we do with our children not just because of our relationship to them. We are interacting with people whose life experiences are not ours. On the one hand you have someone who watched only black and white TV and wondered if we would ever put a man on the moon. On the other hand you have someone who never used a dial phone in her entire life. And let's not get started on political views. Just remember that 1960s expression "Never trust anyone over 30."

A good leader is someone who is willing to take advice from others. A good leader is someone who knows how to meet his or her subordinates where they are in order to get the best out of them. And a good leader is someone who is able to change when the situation demands it. We who are in leadership positions, even when they are involuntary, have much to learn from Moshe. Shabbat shalom.