

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Yitro's language here mirrors the only other place in the whole Torah where something is referred to as "not good" - "Lo Tov". In Genesis chapter 2 verse 18 God says that *"It is not good (Lo Tov) that the human should be alone"*.

Yitro is given a very significant role in both of these cases. In the first, he is privileged to have not been present at the Exodus itself. Those present at, and saved by, the sea-shattering spectacle of the departure from Egypt might have been assumed to be able to Bless God's name for their deliverance. Such blessings might have flowed from their lips as they recalled what their own eyes had seen. Yitro was not there and yet he was capable of acknowledging God's role in those events. It is only he, the loving perspicacious outsider, who can teach us how to see through contemporary realities, peering back through the mists of time and distance to find words of praise. His absence blesses him and reveals his religious gifts. Only a non-Israelite can teach us those skills.

In the second case, Yitro is presented as having a God-like capacity to see the deficiencies in the world and to declare them as such with evocatively divine language. Yitro sees that Moshe's role in the nation, created by his uniquely intimate relationship with God, reflects Adam's existential loneliness in the opening chapters of Genesis. If Moshe is the only one to have spoken directly with God how could he ever consider creating intermediaries who could authentically judge the people? How would the people ever call for or accept judgement that came from the hearts of other humans rather than from the mouth of The Almighty? Only Yitro can see from the outside that Moshe's intimacy with God, left unchecked, would destroy both him and the nation.

We need wise people who can stand on the outside and look inwards towards us with love. We need to have the courage to listen to the voices of those who are not us but who observe us, bless what deserves to be blessed and criticize us where we cannot see our own failings. And we also need to learn to play that role for others too; daring to see others as they cannot see themselves. As the centrifugal forces of the spinning world threaten to push us to places where we intuit that we cannot or should not talk to each other's strengths and weaknesses, blessings, and curses, Yitro reminds us that truth is truth, regardless of whose tongue speaks it, and that cultures are not, and must not consider themselves, impenetrable self-contained worlds.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Yitro

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Annual | Exodus 18:1-18:22/3 (Etz Hayim p. 432-450; Hertz p. 288-301)
Triennial | Exodus 18:1-20:22/3 (Etz Hayim p. 432-450; Hertz p. 288-301)
Haftarah | Isaiah 6:1-7; 9:5-6 (Etz Hayim p. 451-455; Hertz p. 302-305)

D'var Torah: An Outsider's Gift

Rabbi Joel Levy, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

Yitro (Jethro) the priest of Midian, Moshe's father-in-law, meets the Israelites in the desert just before the revelation at Mount Sinai. He hears about their miraculous escape from Egypt and Blesses God for that deliverance. The next day he observes Moshe becoming exhausted by standing alone in judgment over the people and makes suggestions as to how Moshe might behave differently.

Shemot 18:10 is the verse where Yitro Blesses God for the Exodus:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּמִיַּד פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶת־הָעָם מִתַּחַת יַד מִצְרַיִם:

And Yitro said "Blessed be the LORD who saved you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who saved the people from under the hand of the Egyptians"

The Talmud (B'rachot 54a) picks up on this blessing and asserts that Yitro sets the precedent for a particular genre of Jewish liturgy:

MISHNAH: If you see a place where miracles have been done for Israel, you should say, "Blessed be He who did miracles for our ancestors in this place" ...

TALMUD Where does this rule come from? Rabbi Yochanan said: Because it says in the Torah - *"And Yitro said, blessed be the Lord who saved..."*

Shemot 18:17 is the verse where Yitro tells off Moshe for his impossibly unsustainable management style:

וַיֹּאמֶר חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה אֵלָיו לֹא־טוֹב הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה:

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

But Moshe's father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not good..."

D'var Haftarah: Challenging What We See

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The 6th chapter of the book of Isaiah offers us his introductory prophecy. This high point is recognizable to almost any Jew who comes to a Beit Knesset (synagogue) because it plays a role in one of the most prominent parts of our liturgy – the Kedushah, found in the repetition of the Amidah. In this vision, Isaiah experienced the angelic recitation of God's praise as recited in the divine throne room: "In the year the King Uzziah died, I beheld (va'ereh) my Lord (God) seated on a high and lofty throne, and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Fiery angels stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings; with two he covered his feet, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly. And one would call to the other: 'Kadosh, kadosh kadosh (Holy, holy, holy), The Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is filled with His glory (malei kvodo)!' (6:1-3)

This prophecy was obviously awesome and inspiring, serving to shore up Isaiah's ability to act as God's agent. Still, relating to God directly is not a simple matter. Some assume they have a relatively advanced relationship with God, while for others, God's absence is their normative experience.

One Hasidic master, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (Ukraine late 18th- early 19th century), saw in Isaiah's vision a map for how these two types of individuals might navigate their relationships with God. The first type of person, according to Rabbi Nahman, like Isaiah, has "beheld" God and, in consequence, thinks they "know" God. As limited human beings, this can lead to a false understanding of God. The other individual has a sense that they may never have experienced God's presence. Rabbi Nahman urges on these two types of individuals what he calls "maqqifin" or dialectic faith. In other words, in order to get at the "truth", each person must continuously religiously challenge themselves. The "knower" must ask him or herself "what it is that they have seen" (va'era) and what is the nature of the "glory" (kvodo) so that he or she not become religiously complacent. The person with no experience of God must take on the challenge of "the whole earth is filled with His glory".

The Isaiah vision, then, serves to prompt each to constantly challenge themselves religiously. Through this process, the knower will come to appreciate how little he/she really knows and the one who has little knowledge to grow in faith. (Likutei Moraran 2 7:7-8 – See Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, pp. 302-5)

In this way, just as Isaiah was given the strength to take on the real challenges which faced him, we, too, can find a way to get at God's truth in our lives.

Parashat Yitro Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Yitro, Moshe's father in law, arrives with Moshe's wife and children. The people of Israel arrive at Mount Sinai. A covenant is made between God and the nation, culminating in the awe-inspiring event of the Revelation at Sinai.

1) At the opening of the Parasha Yitro (Yitro), Moshe's father-in-law, arrives with Tziporah Moshe's wife who had been 'sent away' and her 2 sons (18:1-6). The story of Moshe's family is fragmented, with the pieces not fitting smoothly together (see also 2:21-22, 4:18-21). Why do you think that the Torah does not give us a clear story of the line of Moshe? (By comparison, the family of Aaron is clearly documented.)

2) Yitro sees the way Moshe deals and judges the people from morning until evening (18:13-23). He approaches Moshe with 2 questions: "What is this thing that you are doing for the people?" and "Why are you sitting alone, and the whole people stand over you from morning until evening?" What is the difference between the questions? Why do you think that he added his second question after asking the first one?

3) The story of the revelation at Sinai opens with an unusually wordy introduction of the time, the place and the people involved (19:1-2). Why do you think that the Torah decided to give such full details for the opening of this event?

4) In the so-called "Ten Commandments" we are prohibited from making any image (20:3). Why do you think this is prohibited? Do you think there is a connection to the verse before it forbidding us to have any other gods?

5) The people saw the sounds and the smoking mountain and moved away. They asked Moshe to speak to them and they will listen, rather than God, for they might die (20:14-15). How do you think that the people perceived Moshe, based on their actions and words here?

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