

# Parashat Yitro, Exodus 18:1-20:23

## SUMMARY

Parshat Yitro (Exodus 18:1-20:23) begins with Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, arriving at the Jewish people's camp in the desert, where he is greeted warmly by a large entourage. Yitro was inspired to join them when he heard about the wonders and miracles which God performed for the Jewish people during the exodus from Egypt. Upon witnessing Moses serving as the people's sole judge from dawn until dusk, Yitro declares that this system will never work. He therefore suggests that subordinate judges be appointed to adjudicate the lower cases. Moses agrees to this plan. The Jewish people arrive at Mt. Sinai and prepare to receive the Torah. Moses ascends the mountain and God tells him to convey to the people that they will be to Him a treasure from amongst the nations. After three days of preparation, the appointed moment of revelation finally arrives, and amidst thunder, lightning, and the sound of the *shofar*, God descends upon the mountain and proclaims the Ten Commandments. Moses then ascends the mountain to receive the remainder of the Torah from God, both the written and oral segments, and the portion concludes with several mitzvot dealing with the construction of the altar in the Temple.

## OPENING OURSELVES UP TO LEARNING FROM OTHERS

*Ann Hartman Luban*

This week we read one of the most important *parashiyot* in the Torah. In it, God promises that we will be a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh*, a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," and we promise that *kol asher diber Adonai na-aseh*, "all that the Eternal has spoken we will do." (Exodus 19:6, 8) But for whom is this *parashah* named? Is it Moses, our teacher, our prophet, who has guided us on the journey from slavery to the wilderness of Sinai? No, curiously, this week's *parashah* is named for Yitro (Jethro in English), Moses' father-in-law, the priest of Midian.

In *Parashat Sh'mot* (Exodus 2), Moses struck the Egyptian taskmaster, fled Egypt, found refuge in the home of the Midianite priest Jethro, and married Zipporah, one of his daughters. The next chapter begins: "Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God." (Exodus 3:1) Why does the Torah repeat whose flock Moses was tending, and why does it repeat that Jethro is the priest of Midian?

Perhaps before Moses is able to see the bush that is "all aflame, yet...not consumed" (Exodus 3:2), the text wants to tell us who helped prepare him for this experience. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky teaches that "through Jethro, Moses learned a lesson that many of us have also come to understand in the spiritual journey of our own lives: It often takes someone else to open us up to a potential relationship with God." (*Learn Torah With...5755*, Stuart Kelman and Joel Lurie Grishaver, eds., Alef Design Group, 1996, p.129) It is perhaps not surprising then that Jethro, who previously helped Moses with his spiritual journey, reappears in our *parashah* as the people are "encamped at the mountain of God." (Exodus 18:5)

But Jethro did not come alone. The text states repeatedly that he "brought his daughter Zipporah, Moses' wife, and their two sons to [Moses] in the wilderness." (Exodus 18:5) Why the repetition? Where were they previously? Had Moses forgotten about them in the midst of his task of leading the people? Nowhere in the text does it say that Moses sent for them. Rather, it appears that Jethro, after hearing "all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, God's people" (Exodus 18:1), decided it was time for Moses' family and all of Israel to be reunited. By the time Jethro appears, the Israelites had already gathered at the base of "the mountain of God." Was God perhaps waiting for something before revealing God's self to the people? If Jethro had not come and brought Zipporah, Gershom, and Eliezer, would we still be "encamped at the mountain of God," waiting? What does this incident teach us about our own family? Do we remember to include them during our most important moments, or do we get so caught up in what we are doing that we leave them behind?

Sometimes it takes someone else to point us in the right direction, to teach us something we don't already know, or to remind us of what we know but have forgotten. In this *parashah* it is Jethro who comes to teach us. Can you think of some other times in our history when we learned from others? From whom can we learn today?

*Ann Hartman Luban is a clinical social worker at the Council for the Jewish Elderly and the program director for Holocaust Community Services in Chicago.*

## ADVICE FROM AN UNLIKELY SOURCE

*Kathy Kahn*

Why is this week's parashah, which deals with the momentous subject of the giving of the Law, named for a pagan Midianite priest? In this Torah portion, Jethro at first seems to be the almost irrelevant opening act for one of God's greatest performances! But Jethro belongs here. He and Moses are joined by both familial obligation and their mutual trust.

Jethro had sheltered Moses for many years and had given him his daughter Zipporah in marriage. When God commands Moses to return to Egypt and redeem his people, Jethro not only releases his son-in-law from Moses' sworn obligation to work for him for life but also blesses the God-directed purpose of his journey. Thus the family of Jethro plays an important part in the divine plan. But the final display of Jethro's allegiance occurs here, in the Torah portion named for him.

Upon hearing of the miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt, Jethro journeys with Zipporah to meet Moses in the wilderness. With the dust of the long journey still on his clothes, he asks to hear the glorious news of Israel's deliverance from slavery. And then Jethro does two things that our rabbis say mark him as a righteous proselyte. First, he raises his voice in heartfelt prayer to the God of Israel: "Blessed be God, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh....Now I know that God is greater than all gods." (Exodus 18:10-11) Jethro, the priest of Midian, is the first to offer a benediction and a sacrifice to God for the rescue of God's people. Neither Moses nor Aaron nor any of the 600,000 Israelites had thought to bless God until Jethro came. (Sanhedrin 94a)

Second, Jethro is the first to see beyond the heroic public persona of Moses and notice that his son-in-law is weary to the bone. Only he sees that Moses' strength is failing under the tremendous burden and responsibility of leadership: "And Moses' father-in-law said to him: 'The thing that you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.'" (Exodus 18:17-18)

But Jethro does not merely commiserate with Moses, he offers advice and a plan: "You represent the people before God....You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God....Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves." (Exodus 19: 21-22) Moses must learn to delegate responsibility and conserve his strength for the important matters that only he can address. In order to accomplish this, he must trust the wisdom of his tribal leaders.

In some ways, Jethro's advice also prepares Moses to implement God's commandments by offering solutions to logistical realities: How will Moses share the Law with the community? How can he insure that it is understood by every individual? How can he promote the application of God's commandments in the daily life of the people? How can he encourage their accountability to God?

After Moses put Jethro's plan into effect, he "bade his father-in-law farewell, and he [Jethro] went his way to his own land." (Exodus 18:27) Rashi states that Jethro left for Midian, intending to convert the members of his own family to Judaism. A wise counselor knows when to withdraw! Jethro leaves the spotlight, allowing Moses to prepare for the "main event."

### Discussion

- Can you think of examples from your own life when a pair of "fresh eyes" was able to assess a difficult situation and find solutions to a challenging problem?
- Does God's relationship with Moses reflect the relationship between Moses and his people? How are the two similar? How are they different? Do they both make use of delegation?
- Our rabbis tell us that Jethro became a proselyte after Moses told him about what God had done for Israel. In what ways do Jethro's actions and words reflect his new loyalties? In your experience, is this true of the modern proselyte?

*Kathy Kahn is the associate director of the [Department of Outreach at the UAHC in NY](#).*

## MOSES AND JETHRO CREATING A MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

*Sharon L. Sobel*

The American and Canadian federal elections were held in autumn, and the Israel elections to choose a new government have just concluded. With the races for president and prime minister so hotly contested in all three countries, there has been a great deal of discussion about the necessary qualities and characteristics of a good leader. For the most part, we look for traits that reflect our own viewpoint of the world. We ask ourselves, Whose views most closely resemble our own? or Which candidate is more likely to bring about real and lasting peace in the Middle East? Our discussions, however, tend to focus on *issues* rather than on actual leadership characteristics.

The Torah portion for this week, *Yitro*, teaches us that we must look beyond the superficial qualities when it comes to choosing a good leader. It helps us understand that there are certain criteria for leadership that transcend political, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries. *Parashat Yitro* enables us to make a distinction between the characteristics that make a great leader and those that make only a good leader. Ultimately, these qualities enable leaders to create meaningful relationships with those around them so that together they can work for the betterment of all.

*Yitro* provides us with two models of excellent leaders: Jethro, the Midianite priest who is also Moses' father-in-law, and Moses. Jethro is an example of a wise and seasoned leader. He is an impartial observer who is willing to share his knowledge, understanding, and wisdom with Moses. Moses is still in the first stages of his career as the leader of the Jewish people. He is a reluctant leader who ascended to his position only at God's insistence. Moses is humble: His ego does not get in the way. He is an excellent example of a leader who is able to listen to and learn from others. One of his great strengths is that he listens carefully to Jethro's wise advice and does not hesitate to integrate and incorporate that advice into the manner in which he leads.

From Exodus 18:1-27 we can extrapolate an outline of a training manual for leadership development, which we can use in all aspects of our lives: personal, religious, political, and professional. Jethro's behavior and actions show us that the following are crucial traits for a great leader:

- Seek your constituents where they are. (Exodus 18:1-6)
- Show care and concern for the well-being of others. (Exodus 18:7)
- Celebrate the accomplishments of others. (Exodus 18:9-12)
- Offer constructive criticism in a way that can be understood. (Exodus 18:13-23)
- In a nonjudgmental manner, give advice on how to improve things or help devise a plan for such action. (Exodus 18:19-23)
- Empower leadership (and encourage growth) in others by sharing the responsibilities. (Exodus 18:13-18; 21-23)
- Remember to delegate responsibility and authority wisely. (Exodus 18:21-22) Choose those who are:
- Capable
- Trustworthy
- Believers in God (crucial for religious leaders, both lay and professional)
- Ethical/principled
- Representative of the whole population

Moses' behavior and response to Jethro exemplify the following traits:

- Sharing one's accomplishments with those who care. (Exodus 18:8)
- Being open to, listening to, and learning from constructive criticism. (Exodus 18:24-26)
- Not hesitating to implement change when necessary. (Exodus 18:24-26)
- Being humble

*Parashat Yitro* reminds us that when we choose leaders, we must question more than their stances on political issues. We must ask, Do they have the necessary qualities to work with others to make this world a better place? *Yitro* also provides us with excellent models for creating relationships, which will enable each of us to be leaders in our everyday lives vis-à-vis our families, our colleagues, and our community. With Jethro and Moses as our guides, we will be able to lead one another to the Promised Land.

*Rabbi Sharon L. Sobel is the executive director of the UAHC Canadian Council for Reform Judaism.*

## YITRO: WAS GOD SPEAKING TO WOMEN?

*Sandy Schlanger*

In the Bronx *shtetl* in which I grew up, being Jewish was what you were. We weren't totally observant, but we accepted without question the traditions of our people: On Shabbat and the holidays my father *davened* in *shul* and my mother cooked. My brother took lessons and became a bar mitzvah, and I learned from my mother how to light the candles and make a *kugel*. It was only as I grew older and became more of a feminist that I began to question those roles. By the time my second daughter was born and I had become a Jewish educator, I was firmly ensconced in Reform Judaism. But I had another problem: How could I reconcile my love and respect for my Jewish heritage with my disappointment in our tradition regarding its treatment of women?

In *Parashat Yitro* we read: "And the Eternal said to Moses, 'Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes.'... Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, 'Be ready for the third day: Do not go near a woman.'" (Exodus 19:10,14-15) What's going on here? Perhaps Moses misinterpreted or misspoke God's words when he warned the people not to go near a woman. Therefore, Moses was a chauvinist, but that's another story. Or, we can just agree that the Torah was written by human beings, most likely men (despite Harold Bloom and *The Book of J*). Therefore, all this seeming exclusion of women from Revelation can be attributed to people who were only reflecting the attitudes of their generation. Or, most scary of all, Moses was reporting what God really wanted him to say, even though God didn't use the exact same words that Moses did!

According to Judith S. Antonelli in her book, *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah* (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995), there is another entirely different possibility, one that I like best of all. It goes as follows: There were actually two different meetings about the Revelation. While Moses was speaking to the men and telling them not to go near the women, Miriam was speaking to the women and telling them not to go near the men. And why was it necessary for men and women to be instructed separately? Says Antonelli, "Thus, like crossing the Red Sea, receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai was an extremely intense spiritual experience at which men and women were separate." Later on she adds, "Not only the experiences of the sexes differed, but each individual's encounter with God varied according to his or her personal capacity."

To me, this is a more than satisfactory conclusion. I have no trouble with God speaking and relating separately to all of us, as men and women and as individuals. As long as we are all allowed to assume our place in the story of the Jewish people, with Miriam alongside Moses and Aaron rather than following a step behind, my concerns are eased.

### Questions for Discussion

- Do you think women are justified in feeling that they are "second-class" people in traditional Judaism?
- Do you agree with Antonelli's interpretation of the above-cited passage?
- Do you think that it was necessary for men and women to receive separate instructions?

*Sandy Schlanger, RJE, is the director of education at Temple Sinai in Summit, NJ.*

## The Ten Commandments: Israel's Shared Purpose

*Jordan Parr*

As Moses is about to climb Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the Israelites gather at the base of the mountain and affirm their commitment to fulfilling God's commandments. Interestingly enough, they have not yet heard what those commandments will be! Nevertheless, they make a commitment to obey God's word: "All that the Eternal has spoken we will do!" (Exodus 19:8).

I like to think of the Ten Commandments as Ancient Israel's mission statement. God and Moses both knew that the Children of Israel needed a document that stated the purpose of the people and pointed them toward their destiny. It had to be a statement broad enough to encompass a variety of interpretations, yet compelling enough to be shared by everyone. The variety of opinions concerning the Ten Commandments today testifies to the sheer power and success of this most influential document. The Ten Commandments formed the Israelite people—a disparate people with competing agendas—into a unified nation with a shared purpose. Having a shared purpose defines community. Whether we are talking about a family, a business, or even a sports team, we need to start with a definite goal in mind. A family goal might be to have every child in the family graduate from college; a business goal might be to double last year's sales revenue; a sports team's goal, of course, is to win a championship trophy. People who share our goals enter our communities (the analogy also works in the context of marriage); if they have other goals, they will leave our communities and go somewhere else.

At Mount Sinai the Israelites have a shared purpose: to learn and to do God's will. They are preparing themselves for the coming Revelation and let it be known that they are willing and eager to form a community of like-minded believers at Mount Sinai. Later of course, that shared purpose fades away. But for now, in *Parashat Yitro*, shared purpose is

everything. They are eager to enter into this *b'rit*—this strange new covenant with God. The Israelites are not too sure what this commitment entails, but they certainly are ready to learn. Moses ascends the mountain as Israel's emissary to the Divine; he becomes the conduit through which the Israelites come to know God's will. And the Israelites answer the challenge as one: the entirety of that which God commands, Israel will do. Assent precedes knowledge, a true statement of faith.

How do we bring our people to a shared vision when all we see are competing agendas? This is the great challenge. A shared vision is essential before proceeding with a mission statement. If we cannot answer the simple question, "What do we stand for?" we will stand for nothing and, eventually, be reduced to nothing. This is true of a religious institution, a corporation, a sports team, or even a family.

A mission statement combines and formalizes the nuanced variations of what each individual sees as the mission of the organization and combines those personal ideas into a single coherent and mutually acceptable document. That is why the Israelites can agree to a mission statement, the Ten Commandments, even before they hear them. The basic concepts of obedience and service before God have already taken root among the people. The Ten Commandments are only the formalization of what is already implicit—service to God. In a way, the details are unimportant; the sense of common purpose is paramount and, through the words, "All that the Eternal has spoken we will do!" (Exodus 19:8), is made explicit.

Only with a sense of shared purpose can the disparate Israelites become one nation. The anticipation of receiving the Ten Commandments melds them into one people; yet this Revelation can never happen unless the Israelites share the common purpose of service to God. If they were not united in this way, they would not merit this Revelation.

This is the lesson that we must remember: without a shared purpose, none of our endeavors, from developing mission statements to moving our organizations forward to leaving our legacy, can occur. Do you have a vision that you have shared with others? If not, why not? And when will you start to work toward that vision?

***Rabbi Jordan Parr is spiritual leader of Adat Chaverim, Plano, Texas.***