



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Yitro 5775

By Mollie Andron

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After the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, Parashat Yitro tells of the dramatic reunion between Moses and his father-in-law, Yitro, who is a Midianite priest. The *parashah* opens with the simple words “*vayeshama Yitro*—and Yitro heard.” We are not told what he heard, but we see that Moses’s father-in-law is quickly moved to action in support of Moses and the Israelite people. He gathers his daughter Tziporah (Moses’s wife) and her two children, and together they travel to meet Moses in the wilderness.

Rabbinic commentators explore what might have prompted Yitro to leave his home and go toward Moses. Rashi suggests that he had heard about the splitting of the Sea of Reeds that allowed the nation to make its narrow escape from Egypt, and about the war with the Amalekites, who attacked them along the way. Although we don’t know exactly why this news compels Yitro to join the Israelites in the wilderness—perhaps his relationship to Moses causes him to feel allied to a people beyond his own; or perhaps he feels sympathy for this new nation that had experienced physical trauma and was in need of support and solidarity—it is clear that the story of the Exodus speaks to Yitro deeply.

When he arrives, Moses goes out to greet Yitro and tells him about the miraculous events that God performed. Rashi proposes that Moses describes these events in order to bring Yitro closer to Torah; in other words, to further connect him to the Israelite narrative. Yitro hears Moses’ story and quickly responds, by declaring God’s glory and bringing a burnt offering to honor God. The Rabbis wonder why Yitro, a person of such status and position and a priest of another religion, would make offerings to the Israelite God. Ramban suggests that Yitro had heard the stories of God but wanted to experience them for himself—an act of radical empathy.

Indeed, this act of listening to Moses and experiencing the Israelites’ story and culture first hand leads Yitro to identify with their plight, pay homage to their God, and even begin to invest in their future. As the *parashah* progresses, we see that Yitro and Moses’s worlds unite and their level of responsibility and commitment towards one another expands.

His careful listening enables Yitro to become an effective ally and advisor to Moses. He sees the Israelite leader performing his daily ritual of enforcing and adjudicating God’s law and observes that Moses is in danger of wearing himself out. Yitro proposes a change to the leadership system, suggesting that Moses delegate leadership responsibilities and authority by empowering tribal leaders to work alongside him to judge the people and further his cause of shepherding a just society.

Now Moses is the one hearing. Knowing already that Yitro has listened and internalized his story, Moses is able to trust Yitro and form a meaningful partnership with him to create lasting change. And in turn, both men have gained insight and understanding of each other’s stories. After this exchange, Yitro returns home, leaving Moses to implement this change that was born out of mutual understanding and respect.

¹ Exodus 18 vs.14

This intense encounter between Moses and Yitro causes them both to reexamine their current positions and behaviors. Yitro hears, sees, absorbs, internalizes and comes to appreciate a new culture, God, and people. Moses listens, interacts and comprehends what he has to do in order to prepare the Israelites to become a unified people and lead them effectively.

This story offers an important lesson to us, as defenders of human rights and seekers of global justice. Following Moses and Yitro's interaction, the Israelites receive the Ten Commandments. We should learn from Moses and Yitro that revelation and transformation can only occur when people truly hear and listen to the stories and experiences of others. Yitro heard and he came to Moses in the wilderness. Because he was willing to hear and bear witness to the experience of another people, his life changed and he was able to create impact and partnership along the way. In our own activism, we can only act in solidarity and partnership once we have entered into the wilderness and truly listened to the voices and stories of others.



Mollie Shira Andron is currently getting her Master's in Midrash and Jewish Education with a specialization in experiential education at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Last year she interned in the experiential education and development departments at American Jewish World Service. Mollie has worked in a variety of Jewish education settings including the Jewish Education Project's LOMED initiative, the Heschel School, the TEVA Learning Alliance, Storahtelling, Temple Emanu-El and Eden Village Camp. When Mollie is not busy running around she loves camping, hiking, visiting museums, drinking tea, singing and spending time with friends and family. Mollie can be reached at mollieandron@gmail.com

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org •

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