

SERMON: Parashat Yitro 24 Shevat 5781 Feb 6, 2021

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WHY DO YOU ACT ALONE?

This week's portion finds us at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God descends as a cloud upon the mountain and reveals his glory and law to Moses. It is not surprising, then, that this portion contains what might be the most sublime mystical lines in the entire Torah.

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה לְקוֹל חֹתָנוּ וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אָמַר :
"Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said."

Nestled in just before the momentous events at Sinai, we get this line and I believe it is crucial to Moses ever getting up the mountain and opening to the Divine.

At the very beginning of the book of Exodus, we read:

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרּוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא
הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם : (פ)

"the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them."

The Hebrew word that was translated as "prolific" is *vayishr'tsu* – they swarmed. It is foreshadowing of the coming of locusts, and reflects both the Egyptian fear of the Israelites, but also how they saw them as less than human.

The medieval Italian commentator, Sforno, has an interesting midrash on this verse. Remember, the Torah doesn't have vowels, so Sforno reads this NOT as *vayishr'tsu* – they swarmed, but as *she ratsu*, meaning they were running. Sforno says they were so busy and overworked that they ran through their lives, not taking the time to even see their situation, much less do something about it.

In this week's portion, YITRO, we find that Moses is the one now running through his life, too busy to stop and reflect on how things are going. Since leaving Egypt, Moses has been dealing with one crisis after another, one uprising after another,

so that now at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Moses is totally stressed, working all the time, to the point he can't think about things – it is all he can do just to get through his day. *Ever have that feeling?*

We get our first glimpse of the problem when Moses' father-in-law Yitro, Jethro, brings Moses' wife and children to meet him at the foot of Mount Sinai. Jethro sends word to Moses that he is coming with Moses' wife and two sons. When they arrive, the text says:

Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent.

What's missing?

Moses doesn't hug his wife or his sons? He bows to his father-in-law and kisses him, and they go in the tent to talk. How must his wife and sons feel when having not seen him for a while, they trek to meet him in the desert, and he is too busy for them?

When has that been you?

The next day, Jethro observes Moses quietly for the day, and then when the day is done, says to an exhausted Moses:

"What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"

Moses gives his version of what all of us have said when we are stressed and overworked: "It's because they all come to ME and ask ME and they only trust ME to get the work done, otherwise everything will fall apart."

Moses is so stressed that he can't see how untenable it is for him to be the ONLY judge in the whole people, sitting out morning to evening handling cases large and small. He can't see what this looks like from the outside.

I also suspect that Moses is feeling pretty important, needed, and that his self-sacrifice is a great good that he is willing to do despite his stress.

This is where Jethro breaks through Moses' ego and his sense that only he can handle things. Jethro says:

לֹא־טוֹב הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹשֶׂה:

"The thing you are doing is not right."

Jethro continues with words that are as apt today as they were then:

"you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."

*"you will surely wear yourself out, **and these people as well**. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."*

Jethro tells him what he already knew: this isn't good for you. But then he tells him something Moses wasn't seeing: **his taking on everything himself was also wearing out the people's patience.**

Jethro then tells Moses to delegate his work to a system of courts and judges so that smaller issues go to them and only the difficult issues make it up to Moses.

Jethro says:

*Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; **and all these people too will go home unwearied.**"*

How often do we get stressed and feel we are the only ones who can get something done, and so we make the sacrifice, not seeing that the people around us are often also exhausted from us when we are spinning in that headspace.

Moses' wife, his sons, and the very people he is trying to serve are all being worn down by Moses' stress.

But unlike most of us, Moses miraculously was able to do something other than yell "I have no choice" – it is at this moment that he utters that most mystical inscrutable line of Torah:

"Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said."

May we be better able to listen to those voices in our lives that speak truth to us out of love and concern, and may we be better able to set our egos aside and reach out for help, remembering that it was only after he did so, that Moses was able to go to the mountaintop and be open enough to also hear God's voice.

Shabbat Shalom