

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Yitro

February 6, 2021, 24 Shevat 5781

Torah: Exodus 18:1-20:23; **Triennial** 18:1-20:23

Haftorah: Isaiah 6:1-7:6, 9:5-6

Goosebumps **Ilana Kurshan**

Our parsha begins with a surprising change of scene. Following the dramatic showdown at the Red Sea and the exultant triumph against Amalek at Rephidim, the Torah now zooms in on Moshe's intimate reunion with his father-in-law, Yitro, who shows up with his wife Tziporah and two children. When we last encountered Yitro, Moshe was taking his leave following the burning bush episode, in response to God's command to return to Egypt. Now he joins Moshe in the wilderness and offers sacrifices to God. Why does Yitro appear at this point in the narrative, between the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah? What is his role at this crucial point in the history of the Jewish people, in that brief window between redemption and revelation?

The Talmudic rabbis disagree about what Yitro heard that motivated him to leave Midian and come join the Israelites in the desert. Was it the story of the

Exodus? Or the story of the revelation at Sinai, which according to some rabbis, who hold that the Torah is not written in chronological order, had in fact already happened? Rabbi Eliezer argues the former, and indeed, this seems to be the straightforward reading: The first verse of our parsha states, "Yitro priest of Midian, Moshe's father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out from Egypt" (18:1). And yet this answer, too, is not quite as straightforward as it might seem, because if Yitro heard all about the Exodus, why did Moshe then have to tell him about it? As the Torah goes on to relate, "Moshe then recounted to his father-in-law everything that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them" (18:8). Why did Moshe have to repeat what Yitro had already heard?

Perhaps the point is not what Yitro heard, but rather what Moshe recounted. Even if Yitro already knew about the Exodus, the story needed to be told. As God told Moshe on the very day they went forth from Egypt, "And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt'" (13:8). Twice a day Jews must recite the Shema, which identifies God as the One who took the Israelites out of Egypt, as do the Ten Commandments. The Passover Haggadah teaches that "the more one tells about the Exodus of Egypt, behold

this is praiseworthy.” This is a story that we are commanded to tell and to retell. And yet in order to tell the story, there needs to be someone to listen. That is why Yitro comes on the scene.

Yitro appears in the Torah between the Exodus and the revelation because he is the ideal audience. He is sympathetic to the Israelites – his daughter, after all, is married to their new leader – but he was not with them in Egypt and he did not experience the Exodus first-hand. Like all of us alive today, he was not an eyewitness, and so he relies on the stories. He hears about what he did not see with his own eyes. His arrival is the occasion for the first retelling of the narrative we are commanded to tell and retell for all subsequent generations.

Yitro’s reaction serves as an important model for all of us, who struggle each year to view ourselves as if we have gone out of Egypt – as if it is all happening to us for the first time. Yitro has a genuine religious response, and he speaks words that no Jew had spoken before that point: “Baruch Hashem!” (18:10). He also rejoices—“*vayichad* Yitro”—a term which the Talmudic sages interpret in two ways (Sanhedrin 94a). According to Rav, Yitro passed a sword over his body, implying that he circumcised himself and converted. According to Shmuel, the news gave him goosebumps. Either way, Yitro has a physical reaction to the news – it gets underneath his skin. This is all the more remarkable if we assume

that Yitro had already heard about the Exodus, and was hearing it all for the second time.

Yitro’s visceral response to the Exodus makes sense when we consider that he is a religious figure – he is a Midianite priest. He is sensitive to the spiritual dimension of experience, and perhaps he prompts Moshe to frame the Exodus in these terms. When Moshe shares the Exodus story with his father-in-law the priest, it becomes not just a story of political liberation, but also one of divine redemption. Perhaps this is why we are commanded to reference the story of the Exodus as part of our daily prayers – we recite the Shema to remember that the Exodus from Egypt was not just a historical event, but a foundational moment in our covenantal relationship with God. And so it is not just Yitro’s reaction that is a model for us, but also Moshe’s recounting. Moshe’s encounter with Yitro teaches us that sometimes we need to step back to reflect and recount to others so as to become sensitive to the spiritual dimension – to those moments in life when we, too, might get goosebumps.

What Does a Judge Do?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Shmot 18:13-23

(13)And it was on the next day that Moshe sat to judge the people...from the morning until the evening... (15)Moshe said to his father-in-law: `...the people come to me to inquire of God. (16)When they have a dispute, it comes before me and I judge between a man and his fellow; and I make known the laws and teachings of God... (17)And Moshe's father-in-law said: `the thing you are doing is not good...' (19)Now listen to me:... You represent the people against God... (21)And you shall seek out from among the people capable men...let them judge the people at all times... (23)If you do this – and God will charge you – you will be able to stand and all these people will come to its place in peace.”

- What are the reasons the people turn to Moshe? What part of the job is Yitro proposing that Moshe delegate?
- Yitro warns that Moshe and the people will suffer under the current system. What do you think will be the damage to each?
- The burden was obviously heavy on Moshe. Nonetheless, Moshe and the people expected him to hold both roles. What might be the reason(s)?

Commentary: Ibn Ezra (long) Shmot 18:15-16

***And he said:** Moshe answered: I do two things – one is “the people come to me to inquire of God” meaning to seek His Torah. And the second “When they have a dispute, it comes before me”. And he answered first about the last: “I judge between a man and his fellow”; [then] “I make known the laws and teachings of God” to those who seeks.*

- What are the 2 parts of Moshe's job as a judge (*shofet* in Hebrew)? What might it teach us about the perception of a judge in biblical texts?
- Which aspect could be removed from Moshe? What do you think would be the benefit of transferring it to multiple people?

Commentary: Ramban Shmot 18:22-23

When there are many judges, the oppressed can go to the judge at any time that he wishes, and find him available; but they cannot approach you [Moshe] because of the great crowd... And many will suffer the lawlessness for they will not get the opportunity to tell you, or they will not wish to leave their work until such time that they will be able to approach you...

- What is the role of accessibility in a proper justice system? Why?

Self Reflection

Bex Stern Rosenblatt

In a time when the world seems broken and in need of repair, how can we, who are also broken and in need of repair, step up to the challenge? There seems to be a need for someone whole, someone outside the system, to step in. In our Torah portion, that person is Yitro, father-in-law to Moshe and outsider to the Israelite people, who steps in and redirects Moshe. But when we don't have that outsider, we can figure out how to gain enough distance that we can act as one. Our liturgy allows us to imagine ourselves as these whole beings wholly outside of ourselves daily when we recite the kedushah during the Amidah. Approaching the holiness of God, we rise up on our tiptoes and invoke the words of the angels from Isaiah 6:3, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole world is filled with his glory." How can we imagine ourselves as these angels? What is it we are imagining when we do this?

The word used for angel in our haftarah, Isaiah 6, is *seraphim*. The root is likely *saraph*, to burn. Fire is familiar imagery in our thinking of God in the Bible. This is God who appeared to Moshe in a burning bush, led the people in a pillar of fire, and expressed anger through billowing nostrils. Fire makes sense as an image. It's all-consuming and ever changing. To imagine ourselves as angels in light of *saraph*, in light of fire, makes us one with a bigger, awe-inspiring, and perhaps angry source of power.

The word *seraphim* seems to have a specific meaning beyond its relationship to fire. It appears seven times in the Bible. In every instance besides those in Isaiah 6, the word refers to snakes. In Numbers 21, while wandering in the desert, the Israelites complain and God sends fiery snakes, *nahashim seraphim*, to attack them. God then tells Moshe to make Nehushtan, a copper snake, to heal those who had been bitten. Likewise, in Deuteronomy 8:15, Moshe recounts to the Israelite

people their origin story, telling of the wandering in the desert amidst fiery snakes, *nahashim seraphim*. Isaiah 14:29 tells the genealogy of the *seraph*, tracing it through other kinds of snakes. And Isaiah 30:6 mentions the *seraph* as a flying snake. If we are looking for an other to imagine ourselves into, something that will allow us to get outside of ourselves in order to help heal, fiery flying snakes are about as other as you can get.

Jewish commentators help us to understand these beings, these *seraphim*, as angels. Rashi notes that these beings stood "*mima'al lo*, from above him" in Isaiah 6:2, which Rashi takes to mean as in heaven. He locates these beings as with the divine. Rambam will go on to revise a whole hierarchy of divine beings, placing *seraphim* fifth of ten in the ranking of the types of angels. These beings are closer to God, part of the heavenly host. By speaking their words, we imagine ourselves moving up the heavenly hierarchy, situated closer to God.

However, in Hullin 91b we read that we need not engage in this exercise at all: "the ministering angels do not recite their song above until the Jewish people recite [their song] below." The angels are waiting on us to recite the kedusha. They need us, with all of our brokenness and imperfection, to call them into the recitation of holiness. Perhaps we don't need to chase after fire and snakes and angels, looking for a magic cure. When we look at the world and see our broken reflection in it, perhaps it is precisely from that place of brokenness that we can begin to heal the world.