

Timing is Everything

This Shabbat, we read the most astounding event in the whole of Jewish and human history – the revelation of God at Sinai to millions of people and the delivery of the Torah to Israel. *Parshat Yitro* is a fundamental and fascinating portion. But the opening of this portion strikes the reader as odd.

Yitro is so named for the eponymous character. Yitro was Moses' father-in-law. He is described, in the opening verses of the portion, as the Priest of Midyan, who comes to Israel's encampment because he is stunned by the incredible victory and exodus from Egypt. When Yitro comes to the camp and watches his son-in-law closely – something parent-in-laws are known to do – he announces that Moshe must change his leadership style. Moshe is carrying too much of the burden by himself, he must train and empower deputy judges to work under him and adjudicate the people's cases.

The sages in the Midrash Mechilta debate when Yitro actually came to meet up with Moses and Israel and offer his suggestions. One view, shared by Ibn Ezra, suggests that Yitro came to Mt. Sinai much later, after the revelation event. He supports this view because the verse says that Yitro encouraged Moshe to relay teachings to the judges. The judges are, of course, being taught the Torah, which had already been given.

The other view, shared by Ramban, argues that Yitro came in the first moments of Israel's release from Egypt, before God's revelation at Sinai. Ramban supports this view based on the verses that suggest that Yitro was attracted to the excitement of Israel's exodus and the miracles God performed against Egypt. But the revelation event was far more wondrous than anything that befell the Egyptians and the implications of the revelation would have been too powerful to ignore. Thus, Ramban argues, Yitro arrived as Israel was settling in at Mt. Sinai.

Both readings of the text – Ramban's chronological and Ibn Ezra's a-chronological reading – must be amplified as it relates to the revelation event. For Ramban, Yitro's arrival and his suggestion to Moshe to deputize citizenry as judges in order to resolve civil dispute is a powerful comment when juxtaposed with the next episode in the portion, the revelation at Sinai.

In a sense, the empowerment of lay people and democratization of the authority, rather than exclusive investment in the figure of Moshe, maybe a conditional feature to the study and dissemination of the Torah to come. *Lo Bashamayim Hi* – the Torah is not in Heaven, but is given to man. We are the recipients of Torah and we are the ones who are tasked to uphold and apply to Torah. Literacy is our most basic and essential religious duty; *v'dibarta bam* – you shall speak the words of Torah. Without gaining personal access to our sacred text, we mute the voice of revelation or worse, we sever our bond that was shared with our ancestors, long ago.

Ibn Ezra's claim – that Yitro advised Moshe how to manage the people after the Torah had been given over by God to Israel – carries a whole different implication: namely, the revelation of the Torah does not guarantee delivery. In theory, were Moshe to have disregarded Yitro's suggestion to appoint lower court judges, Moshe would have been the lone Judge of Israel; knowledge of God's Will would have been privileged to the chosen one. And the delivery would have been paced by Moshe's endurance. Instead, in a revolutionary decision, Moshe agrees to share the Divine knowledge and the flood gates of access are opened to the whole of Israel.

My aim is not to valuate either view, but to argue for the necessity of both. Revelation inspired continued discovery but did not –ironically – assure broad or accurate delivery or continuity.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
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