



Torah Reflections on *Yitro*

Exodus 18:1-20:23

Sometimes we feel like we are completely alone. When we are struggling with illness or difficult times—whether physical illness, mental illness or emotional challenges like depression or anxiety—it can seem like no one understands. Sometimes, people who truly want to help don't know how, and trying to explain things can be more frustrating or exhausting than it's worth. And on the other side--when we are the person who wants to help someone else to heal--it can be overwhelming or even hopeless. How do we know what to do? What does the other person really need, and what if we can't provide it? Finding healing for ourselves or offering it to others can both seem impossible.

In this week's Torah portion, Moses' father-in-law, whose name is Yitro, hears the dramatic news: that after plagues and pursuit and years of suffering, Moses has just led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Learning that Moses and his people are now encamped in the wilderness, Yitro immediately decides to go to him. We read:

“He sent word to Moses, ‘I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons.’ 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. Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything...all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how Adonai had delivered them.” (Exodus 18:1-8)

Yitro understands something important about Moses. At this point in the story, Moses has just come through a traumatic and exhausting situation, and there is far more difficulty to come. In the Torah we learn that this great prophet often experiences severe anxiety and despair. He sometimes feels too weak to make it to his destination, and even has suicidal feelings: “And Moses said to God, ‘Why have you been so cruel to Your servant?...I cannot carry this whole people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me instead, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!’” (Numbers 11:11-15) When Yitro learns what Moses is going through, he realizes that Moses is urgently in need of support.

Let us look closely at how Yitro helps Moses to heal. First of all, Yitro takes the initiative. He hears what has happened and goes to Moses where he is—reaching out to offer a visit, without waiting to be asked. The medieval commentator Rashi explains that the Torah here praises Yitro “whose heart moved him to leave his position of glory in the world to go out to the barren wilderness...” Entering the wilderness of someone else's pain can sometimes feel so uncomfortable that we stay away. But this puts the onus on the ill person to do all the reaching out. When we are in pain, having to ask for every bit of support we need is often too much, and someone else's initiative can be deeply healing.

Even while reaching out, Yitro also makes a point of respecting Moses' space. He sends word ahead that he's coming and lets Moses know who he is bringing with him: “I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons.” This gives Moses an opportunity to decide whether this visit would be helpful to him. For many of us, one of the difficulties of illness or recovery can be a loss of privacy, dignity or control over our lives, especially when we're in a hospital or other institutional setting. Whether we're needing healing or giving it, it's important to remember that we are no less human when we're sick, and deserve the same respect as when we're not.

Finally, Yitro is able to listen to the full range of Moses' experience: “Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything...all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how Adonai had delivered

them.” This section uses the words all and everything multiple times. Yitro listens as Moses tells him both the painful parts and the triumphant, hopeful aspects of what has happened to him and his people.

When we’re struggling to heal, one of the things that can often be missing is an opportunity like this: to tell the whole truth of our complex experience. Sometimes people only want to hear about progress, or point out what is hopeful, or explain why it could be worse. This approach—even with the best of intentions--can make us feel alone with our painful reality. Others might only want to talk about how hard our situation is, and don’t seem able to join us in celebrating small victories or affirming hope and optimism at times when that’s what we really need. This can make us feel like we have to cheer them up, when we’re the one who’s sick. Yitro demonstrates the kind of listening that can help heal; and only after listening to the complexity of the experience does Yitro later suggest interventions to help ease Moses’ burdens. And what does he suggest? That Moses recognize and utilize the support around him. Yitro points out that Moses is surrounded by capable people that could help him and relieve some of his anxiety: “Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you.” (18:22)

For Moses’ part, he demonstrates how being open to others can help us participate in our own healing. Moses listens and follows Yitro’s advice, even though Yitro is by all accounts an outsider. How could he possibly be helpful? He doesn’t share Moses’ experience; he isn’t even an Israelite. Yitro would seem to be an unlikely source of healing for Moses, and yet Moses is open to receive healing from someone we might not have expected could—or would--offer it. When Moses goes out of his tent to welcome his father-in-law, he welcomes in the possibility of caring support and genuinely helpful guidance.

Each of us, at different points in our lives, finds that we are Moses—in need of healing—and Yitro—in a position to help someone else. When we seek to offer healing, we can be inspired by Yitro’s initiative, graciousness and ability to listen to a complex truth. When we need healing and comfort for ourselves, Moses reminds us that we never know where that healing might come from, and it is up to us to embrace it, wherever it is found.

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