



Giving Each Other a Hand: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Yitro*

Exodus 18:1 – 20:23

In the course of our lives, we care for others, and we also receive care. During a period of stress, illness, or loss, we may experience a different interplay of caregiving and care-receiving.

The Talmud (Berachot 5b) tells us of Rabbi Yoḥanan, who was known as a leading scholar and also as a man who would bring comfort and healing to his colleagues when they were ailing. Once, Rabbi Yoḥanan himself fell ill. After one of his peers helped bring him back to health, someone asked why Rabbi Yoḥanan was unable to get better on his own. The answer: “a prisoner cannot free himself from jail.”

No matter how independent or adept we may be at helping others, sometimes we need to reach out in order to reach a greater sense of well-being and *shalom*.

In this week’s Torah portion, Moses is given important advice by his father-in-law, Yitro (Jethro). Yitro becomes concerned when he sees Moses at work in the Israelite camp, judging, teaching, and serving the people “from morning until evening”. Yitro, who has experience as an elder Midianite priest, tells Moses, “What you are doing is not good. Both you and the people will grow weary...; this is too heavy for you to do by yourself” (Exodus 18:17-18). Yitro then shows Moses how to organize a cadre of leaders and delegate some of his work to other capable hands. This serves to avert potential “burnout” during a trying time for Moses, while encouraging the first stages of leadership development and inter-tribal organization after the Exodus from Egypt.

Moses learns that it is not only better for himself to share some of the burden of leadership and caregiving, but it will be better for the people he is trying to help as well.

How can we tell when we need the help, the teamwork, the companionship, the support, or the encouragement of another friend, a loved one, or a caring professional? One indicator can be the feeling of imprisonment – being stuck like Rabbi Yoḥanan in a rut of some sort which we can’t seem to “escape” on our own. Another indicator—which might, as in the case of Moses, be more visible to someone other than ourselves: increasing weariness, perhaps with no sign of let-up. Sometimes people feel they can “do it all” or “take care of everything” themselves—but they might recognize that they can’t do it that way for long, or that with help, they could manage in a better and more healthy way.

(over)

There is a cliché that when one gives, one often receives in the process. The converse is often true as well: to ask the assistance of someone who has the capacity to respond, and to be on the receiving end of help—these can be a gift and an opening for blessing that we offer to someone else. Furthermore, many people who are receiving care and support may also take care of their caregivers on subtle levels—extending the energy to graciously welcome people into homes or hospital rooms, to articulate needs and desires, to accept help, to establish rapport, to reveal vulnerability or share thoughts and feelings and insights, to listen, to compliment or express gratitude. Caregiving can be a mutual endeavor!

You may want to reflect on the ways you are giving and receiving care and attention right now. As we acknowledge the fullness of our caring interchanges, we can honor sacred bonds of connection they contain: the intentions, the actions, our shared feelings and our unique experiences of vulnerability and inspiration, humility and human capacity, as we travel through the territory of illness and wellness, healing and loss, *mitzvah* and concern and compassion, and, we hope, *shalom*.

No matter where you are in terms of giving and receiving, needing and offering at this moment, may you be blessed in that flow of love and caring.

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