



Unspoken Words

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

Parashat BeHa'alotkha 5785

The tragedy of Moshe's final conversation with his father-in-law are the words that he leaves unsaid.

Hovav, usually identified as Yitro,¹ is about to depart. Before he leaves, Moshe tries to convince him to stay:

במדבר י:כט

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֵתֵן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' אֲתָנוּ לָכֶם לָכֶה אֲתָנוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי ה' דֹּבֵר טוֹב עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Bemidbar 10:29

Moshe said to Hovav son of Re'u'el the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which God has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for God has promised to be generous to Israel."

¹ This is Rashi's reading of the *pasuk*, followed by many other commentators. For the alternative view that Hovav is Yitro's son (and therefore Moshe's brother-in-law), see Ibn Ezra's comments.



Moshe asks his father in law not to leave the people, but to venture with them into the land. He offers his father-in-law riches in exchange for his willingness to travel with them and settle in Israel.

Yitro, however, refuses:

במדבר י"ל

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי אִם אֶל אֶרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ:

Bemidbar 10:30

"I will not go," he replied to him, "but will return to my native land."

While he does not explicitly respond to Moshe's promise to be generous with him, Yitro's response is clear: he has a home of his own. He does not need material wealth that Moshe can offer him.

Undeterred, Moshe tries one more time:

במדבר י"א-לב

³¹וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל נָא תַעֲזֹב אֶתְנוּ כִּי עַל כֵּן יָדַעְתָּ חֲנֻתָנוּ בְּמִדְבָּר וְהִיִּיתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינִים: ³²וְהָיָה כִּי תֵלֶךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהָיָה הַטּוֹב הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יִיטִיב ה' עִמָּנוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ:

Bemidbar 10:31-32

³¹He said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide. ³²So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that God grants us."

We are not told what, if anything, Yitro replies to Moshe's final plea, but this is the last time we see him appear in the Torah. While the Torah does not tell us explicitly, it seems that at the end of the conversation, Yitro still maintains his original decision, and departs.

Soon after, though, it becomes clear that Yitro's departure is disastrous. Less than a *perek* later, we find Moshe in despair, and utterly alone:

במדבר יא:טו

¹¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' לָמָּה הִרְעִיתָ לַעֲבָדְךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא מִצַּתִּי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְשׁוּם אֶת מִשָּׁא כָּל הָעָם הַזֶּה עָלַי:
¹²הֲאֵנֹכִי הִרִיתִי אֶת כָּל הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם אֲנֹכִי יִלְדֵתִיהוּ כִּי תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקְךָ כְּאִשָּׁר יִשָּׂא הָאִמָּן אֶת הַיֶּלֶד
עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּיו: ¹³מֵאֵין לִי בָשָׂר לָתֵת לְכָל הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי יִבְכוּ עָלַי לֵאמֹר תִּנֵּה לָנוּ בָּשָׂר
וְנֹאכֵלָה: ¹⁴לֹא אוֹכֵל אֲנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לְשִׂאת אֶת כָּל הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי כִבֵּד מִמֶּנִּי: ¹⁵וְאִם כֹּכָה אֶת עֲשֵׂה לִי הֲרֹגֵנִי נָא
הֲרֹג אִם מִצַּתִּי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאֵל אֶרְאֶה בְּרַעֲתִי:

Bemidbar 11:11-15

¹¹And Moshe said to God, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? ¹²Did I produce all these people, did I engender them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a caregiver carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers? ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ ¹⁴I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. ¹⁵If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”

“I can’t do this alone,” he tells God. “I am not this people’s mother. I cannot carry it alone. If this is what you need from me—if doing this job means carrying the people alone—please kill me. I would rather die than carry this burden alone.”

Moshe's desperate plea is reminiscent of Yitro's warning to him long ago in Sefer Shemot when he first arrived in the camp and saw Moshe dealing directly with every complaint from the people. Yitro understands that Moshe cannot carry on this way and advises him to appoint judges to help him carry the burden.²

Yitro understands Moshe on multiple levels: as his father-in-law, he has known Moshe longer and better than perhaps anyone else in the camp. He has seen Moshe grow from the Egyptian exile his daughters meet at the well, to a Midianite shepherd, to the leader of a people. As the *kohen* of Midian and a leader in his own right, Yitro understands the burdens that Moshe carries and the loneliness that comes with leadership. When Yitro leaves the camp, Moshe loses the person who might be the closest thing he has to a friend. When he leaves, Moshe is truly alone.

It's a tragedy—but it is also a mystery. Why would Yitro, who journeyed far from home to bring Moshe's family to him, who has been Moshe's companion and friend, decide to leave?

The Torah offers us a hint to an answer in Yitro's first words about Moshe when his daughters come home and tell their father about the Egyptian man who saved them at the well:

שמות ב:כ

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל בְּנֵי יוֹ וְאֵיוֹ לָמָּה זֶה עֲזַבְתֶּן אֶת הָאִישׁ

Shemot 2:20

He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why did you leave the man?"

² Shemot 18.

Yitro's first words about Moshe are very similar to Moshe's request to him in this *parashah*: Yitro asks his daughters why they left Moshe behind, while Moshe requests that Yitro not leave the Jewish people.

But even though the words are similar, their implication is different. When Yitro speaks to his daughters about Moshe, he asks about Moshe the man: "Why did you leave **him**?" Yitro's concern for Moshe has always been personal. While the text never tells us so explicitly, we have every reason to think that Yitro cares about Moshe and even loves him.

Moshe's words, however, are far from personal: they are the words of a leader. When he asks Yitro to stay, Moshe says "don't leave us," emphasizing Yitro's relationship with the people as a whole. The tragedy is that Yitro, listening as a father figure and a friend, might have agreed to stay, had Moshe only said, "Please, don't leave **me**." Moshe, speaking as a leader, is unable to say those words, and Yitro is unable to bring himself to stay without them.

As readers, we are left wondering: might things have been different if Moshe had been able to speak in a different way, as an individual instead of as a leader? Might Bemidbar have ended differently if Yitro had been able to hear Moshe's unspoken words, to understand that his son-in-law needed him now, perhaps more than ever? Or if Moshe had been able to be clearer with what he was asking for?

All too often, through choice or through negligence, we speak past each other, unable to say the words we really mean, or that the other person needs to hear. Like Moshe, we might speak in terms of material wealth when the conversation at hand is really about relationship. We might say "don't leave us" because it is simply too frightening to say "don't leave me." And all too often, we refuse to listen for the meaning behind someone else's words: to hear the need they feel unable to articulate, to answer the unspoken request.



Every conversation is a choice. We can choose to speak past each other; to speak in cold, professional terms when what a conversation demands in the personal. We can hide behind the comfort of the plural “us” when what we really mean is “me.”

May we choose to say the words we mean, even when those words are as frightening as “please, don’t leave me.”

