



Remembering the Shepherd

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It's only when Yitro, who knew Moshe before he became a leader, comes to meet him that we learn how lost Moshe has become.

Yitro, having heard about the Jewish people's deliverance, travels to meet Moshe. It's a moment filled with joy as Moshe rushes out to greet his father-in-law and tells him all about what's happened since they were last together:

שמות יח:ה, ז

⁵וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל מֹשֶׁה אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר הָאֱלֹקִים: ...⁷וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה לִקְרַאת חֹתְנוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשָּׂקוּ לוֹ וַיִּשְׁאַלְוּ אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֵלֶּה:

Shemot 18:5, 7

⁵Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, brought Moshe's sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God... ⁷Moshe 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.

The next day, though, Yitro sees something that upsets him:



שמות יח:יג-יד

¹³וַיְהִי מִמָּחָרֶת וַיָּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה לְשֹׁפֵט אֶת הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם עַל מֹשֶׁה מִן הַבֹּקֶר עַד הָעֶרֶב: ¹⁴וַיֵּרָא חִתָּן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה לָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר מָה הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה לָעָם מִדּוּעַ אַתָּה יוֹשֵׁב לְבַדְּךָ וְכָל הָעָם נֹצֵב עֲלֶיךָ מִן בֹּקֶר עַד עֶרֶב:

Shemot 18:13-14

¹³Next day, Moshe sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moshe from morning until evening. ¹⁴But when Moshe's father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"

When Yitro sees Moshe with the people, sitting alone all day, listening to their complaints, cases, and questions, he understands that something has changed—for the worse. He asks Moshe why he's sitting alone, and Moshe explains that he is there to deliver the word of God to the people, to judge their cases fairly according to God's law.

Moshe thinks that his strategy is necessary, but Yitro urges him to reconsider:

שמות יח:יז-כ

¹⁷וַיֹּאמֶר חִתָּן מֹשֶׁה אֵלָיו לֹא טוֹב הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה: ¹⁸נָבַל תִּבְלֶל גַּם אַתָּה גַּם הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ כִּי כָבֵד מִמֶּךָ הַדָּבָר לֹא תוּכַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדְּךָ: ¹⁹עֲתָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי אִיעֲצֶךָ וַיְהִי אֱלֹקִים עִמָּךְ הֲיִה אַתָּה לָעָם מוֹל אֱלֹקִים וְהִבֵּאתָ אֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים: ²⁰וְהִזְהַרְתָּ אֹתָם אֶת הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת הַתּוֹרֹת וְהוֹדַעְתָּ לָהֶם אֶת הַדָּרֶךְ יֵלְכוּ בָּהּ וְאֶת הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ:

Shemot 18:17-20

¹⁷But Moshe's father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; ¹⁸you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. ¹⁹Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, ²⁰and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the



practices they are to follow.”

“The thing you’re doing,” Yitro tells Moshe, “is not good. You cannot do this alone. Appoint other people who can judge the people, and you can stand before God and receive God’s word.” Moshe agrees, Yitro departs, and almost immediately after the text brings us to the next and greatest moment of revelation, Ma’amad Har Sinai itself (standing at Sinai).

The text doesn’t explain the link between the smaller revelation—Moshe’s understanding of his purpose, his role within the people—and the big revelation, in which he stands before God. Yet the juxtaposition of the narratives offers the possibility that the two are related. Perhaps the latter, the revelation at Sinai, is made possible by the former, Moshe’s meeting with Yitro.

What aspect of Moshe’s reunion with Yitro, a meeting of father-in-law and son-in-law and the exchange of some pragmatic advice, might have facilitated the divine revelation at Sinai?¹ Perhaps, in his words to Moshe, Yitro gives Moshe advice not only about how to govern the people, but also about how to remember who he is.

The encounter’s setting is significant: it takes place at Har ha-Elohim. Most often when we think of Har ha-Elohim, we think of the encounter at Sinai, and the giving of the Aseret ha-Dib’rot (Ten Commandments). But our first encounter with Har ha-Elohim took place long before, when Moshe was the young shepherd who encountered God in a burning bush because he took a moment to notice a strange sight and turn aside.

שמות ג:א-ג

¹ וַיִּמְשָׁה הָיָה רְעָה אֶת צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֶנּוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדִּין וַיִּנְהֵג אֶת הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל הָרֵאֱלִיקִים חִירָבָה:
² וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלִבְתֹּאֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּינָה וַיֵּרָא וְהָיָה הַסִּינָה בְּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּינָה אֵינֶנּוּ אָכָל: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה

¹ While here I treat the chronology of Yitro’s arrival and the Revelation at Sinai in the order given in the Torah, with Yitro’s arrival happening first, some commentaries assert that the Revelation took place first. See Ibn Ezra to Shemot 18:1.



אָסַרְהָ נָא וְאַרְאֶה אֶת הַמִּרְאָה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא יִכָּעַר הַסֵּנֶה:

Shemot 3:1-3

¹Now Moshe, tending the flock of his father-in-law Yitro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²A messenger of God appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. ³Moshe said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?”

When Moshe met God at Har ha-Elohim the first time he was a refugee, a man with a young family, a shepherd living in his father-in-law’s home. And it is exactly that man whom, despite his protests, God chose to be his prophet and free the Israelites from Egypt.

When Yitro comes to Moshe now, his last memory of him is still of that young shepherd newly filled with purpose, the man who turned aside to notice God in the world. In telling the overburdened, lonely Moshe that he must seek help, recognize his position, and stand **before** God, Yitro is not only giving fatherly advice; he is reminding Moshe of who he once was, and why God chose him.

“Don’t lose yourself in the demands of your office,” Yitro is telling Moshe. “You have gone through unimaginable transformation since the last time I saw you, much of it good. You have faced down Pharaoh, delivered the people from Egypt, and become their leader. But you cannot lose the person you were the last time you stood here at this spot. Remember that God chose you because of your ability to turn aside and notice God in the world. Don’t lose that ability. Remind yourself that your purpose, what makes you unique, is the ability you first discovered as a shepherd in the desert, your ability to stand *mul ha-Elohim*, before God.”

It is only after hearing Yitro’s words and remembering this central part of who he is that Moshe is finally ready for the encounter at Sinai in which he will stand once again before God at Har



ha-Elohim. It is by hearing Yitro remind him of why God chose him all those years ago when he was a simple shepherd who first encountered God at this mountain and was warned not to come too close, that he can finally become the prophet who will ascend it and encounter God face to face. In reminding Moshe of his true mission, Yitro allows Moshe to rediscover the God of Sinai.

Where do we find ourselves? Sometimes in the desert, alone. Sometimes at the foot of a mountain, surrounded by thunder and lightning.

But more often than that: in the quiet words of those who love us, reminding us of who we are, and giving us back parts of our souls we thought we'd left behind.

