

**A FEW SHORT COMMENTS ON PARASHAT YITRO**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 22, 2022 20 Shvat 5782**

שמות י"ח:א-ב' וישמע יתרו כהן מדיון חתן משה... ויקח יתרו חתן משה את צפורה אשת משה אתר שלוחיה:

**Exodus 18:1-2** *And Yitro priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses heard... So Yitro, father-in-law of Moses took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after she had been sent home.* Initially, the text identifies Yitro as a **priest and father-in-law**, but then, next verse, it identifies him only as a **father-in-law**. Implication? Yitro is coming to Moses not in an official capacity but in a personal one.

י"ח:ד' ושמ האחד אליעזר פיאלקי אבי בעזרי ויצלני מתרב פרעה:

**18:4** *and the other was named Eliezer, meaning, "The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh."* An alternative translation: *The God of my father was my strength/power and He saved me...* (based on a similar word in Ugaritic.) Subtle but different. Was God the source of Moses' "help" or Moses' "strength"? Likewise, when the Psalmist says, עזרי מעם ה' (Psalm 121) does he mean, *my help comes from the Lord* or *my strength comes from the Lord*? Is there a difference? Yes.\*

י"ח:ה' ויבא יתרו חתן משה ובניו ואשתו אל-משה אל-המדבר אשר-הוא חגה שם הר האלקים:

**Exodus 18:5** *Yitro Moses' father-in-law, came with (Moses') sons and wife to Moses in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God.* Is this the same place that God first appeared to Moses (Exod. 3)? If so, then this moment is layered with private meaning for him. Pilgrimage and prelude. Do he take a moment to say to his family: *See that place? That's where I had the vision of the bush on fire and noticed that it wasn't destroyed. That's where I first heard God. Right now, our being here is the fulfilment of God's promise,* (3:12) תעבדון את-האלקים על תהדר הנה: *you will worship God at this mountain.*

י"ח:כ"ז וישלח משה את-חתנו ויגד לו אל-ארצו: {פ} **18:27** *Then Moses sent his father-in-law, and he went his way to his own land.* After their reunion and celebration, after the experience of mentor-

ship that Moses gets from Yitro, they part. R. Joshua says that *he sent him with honor*, R. Elazar Hamodai says that *he sent him with many gifts*. How do you part from a loved one? What is the difference between *honoring* and *giving a gift*?\*\* י"ט:א' בחודש השלישי לצאת בני-ישראל מארץ מצרים ביום הנה באו מדבר סיני:

**19:1** *On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai.* The verse establishes for us the temporal and geographical setting of the story. But could there be something else signified by the fact that this is the **third month**? We have moved from one season to another, we are now in a new quadrant of the year, a new phase. Recall also that when Moses was born, his mother hid him three months after which, a new phase of his life began.

י"ט:ד' אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים ואשא אתכם על-כנפי נשרים ואבא אתכם אלי:

**19:4** *'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me.* God's purpose in taking Israel out of Egypt was to bring them *close to him*. These verses express God's fervent hope and desire that Israel become the instrument through which God can break through to the world.

י"ט:ו' ואתם תהיו-לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל-בני ישראל:

**19:6** *but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* 'These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.' What does this mean? A priest is an intermediary, an agent, a teacher. These words encapsulate the mission of Israel: they are to be, simultaneously, **a part of** the world and yet also **apart from** the world. But will this people, fresh from the experience of slavery comprehend what is being asked of them? י"ט:ז' ויבא משה ויקרא לזקני העם וישם לפניהם את כל-הדברים האלה אשר צוהו ה':

**19:7** *Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the LORD had commanded him.* Why elders? What are they for?<sup>§</sup>

\* "My help" suggests passivity and quiescence. "My strength" suggests autonomy and resoluteness. "My help" is when your car breaks down and you get a tow. "My strength/power" is when you get refueled.  
 \*\* Gifts are tangible. Honor is intangible. When you

give someone a parting gift it will always trigger a memory. When you give them honor, you kindle their heart. What's better?  
 § The Elders function as intermediaries. They are a necessary element in the chain of transmission.

**י"ט:ח'** וַיַּעֲזְבוּ כָל-הָעָם וַיִּחַדְדוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' **נְשִׂאָה** וַיָּשָׁב מִזֵּה אֶת-דִּבְרֵי הָעָם אֵלָיָה:

**19:8** All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the LORD has spoken **we will do!**" And Moses brought back the people's words to the LORD. The people receive the message spoken by Moses, mediated by the elders, and they commit to what has been asked of them. But do they really understand what is being asked of them? How could they? What do they know of being priests and being holy? (Not much).

**י"ט:ט'** וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בְּאֵי אֵלֶיךָ בְּעֵבֶר הָעֶנָן **בַּעֲבוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עֲמֻנָה וְגַם-בְּהִי יֹאמְרוּ לְעוֹלָם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דִּבְרֵי הָעָם אֵלָיָה:**

**19:9** And the LORD said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, **in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.**" Then Moses reported the people's words to the LORD. God will speak to Moses, and the people will overhear what He says. Why? Because they are not capable of hearing God directly themselves. The experience of divine disclosure is too overwhelming for them. Only a person with exceptional capabilities, a prophet like Moses, can translate that experience into words that are comprehensible. *The only way that they will be able to trust you is if they hear Me talking to you.*

**וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דִּבְרֵי הָעָם אֵלָיָה:** **Moses reported** the people's words to the LORD. In other words, God needs Moses to convey His message to the people, and the people need Moses to convey their message to God. The ground rules of the relationship are being established. This is how it's going to work.

**י"ט:כ"ה-כ"א'** וַיִּרַד מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמְרוֹ:

**19:25-20:1** And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them. God spoke all these words, saying: Unfortunately, the text is bafflingly unclear. But that might be the point! To recap: God has instructed Moses to get the people ready in two days, because on day three, *God will descend before the people on Mount Sinai.* The people are warned that if they come close to the mountain they will incur the penalty of death. On the third day, the mountain is a spectacle of lightning and thick clouds, they hear crashing thunder and loud shofar blasts. They tremble because it is so overwhelming and frightening. Nevertheless, Moses brings them closer, right to the edge of the moun-

tain! The mountain is quaking, erupting in fire and billowing smoke. God calls Moses, Moses ascends. But then, God tells Moses to go back down and warn them not to come closer to the mountain. But then, Moses reacts and says, *The people cannot come up the mountain because we have already restricted it.* But then, God replies, *Go back down and then come up with Aaron your brother...* So then, Moses goes down and that is when *he speaks to the people.* Does Moses relay the Ten Statements, or does God relay them Himself? We don't know! Do the people even hear them? They are scared out of their minds! They see a mountain on fire, billowing smoke! They hear thunder and trumpets! Could they have heard anything that was said? Would an ordinary person have been able to hear anything let alone make sense of it under these circumstances? Layers of commentary (and a movie!) have shaped our understanding of what happened here. But the text indicates that it was a moment of pure terror and that **while the words were being said**, (by God or by Moses) this is how they were behaving: **כ"ט-י"ט'** וְכָל-הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת-הַהָר עֹשֵׂן וַיִּרְאוּ הָעָם וַיִּזְעוּ וַיַּעֲמִדוּ מִרְחֹק: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר-אֵתָהּ עִמָּנוּ **וְנִשְׁמָעָהּ** וְאֵל-יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֲלֵהֶם פְּנִימָוֹת:

**20:15-16** All the people witnessed the thunder and the torches, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and the people saw and they shook and went to stand at a distance. They said to Moses, "You speak to us and **we will listen**, but let not God speak to us, lest we die. Why do they say that? Because they **couldn't hear what was being said**, with the equivalent of a volcanic eruption going on right in front of them! It's not that they weren't interested, it was that they simply couldn't hear and they certainly didn't understand its contents. The message would have to be conveyed to them in a different manner. God so deeply wanted to break through to humanity. But God is too overwhelming and the moment doesn't work the way God wanted. Like so many other moments in the Torah, God expects one thing, and instead, another thing happens. Read this account with fresh eyes. God so deeply wants the people to hear Him. He really thought that they are going to want to run up the mountain! But in reality, all they want to do is run away from Him! Shabbat Shalom!

This week's Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Paula and Aaron Kondioti to commemorate the 22nd anniversary of the Bar Mitzvah of Benjamin Joseph Kondioti.