



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Yitro 5772

The Space In Between the Same and the Other

By Adina Roth

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Parshat Yitro opens with an unexpected visitor's arrival to the Israelite camp. Yitro, priest of Midian and father-in-law to Moshe, hears an account of the Israelites' travails and liberation and is sufficiently moved to come see for himself. Upon seeing Moshe's style of judging the people, he says: 'The thing which you are doing is not good.'¹ This bold critique seems odd for someone who is not of the people, especially since Moshe is not reprimanded in this way by anyone else throughout the Torah.

A close reading of the text reveals a nuanced relationship between Yitro and Moshe. Yitro is described only once as the priest of Midian, but is referred to as *choten*, father-in-law, eleven times throughout the narrative. This term suggests both a connection and simultaneous disconnection between Moshe and Yitro, as a father-in-law is both a relative and an outsider. Yitro's multiple names—seven according to Rashi²—reinforce this sense of closeness and distance. Two of these names, *Yeter* and *Yitro*, refer to surplus, addition or supplement,³ creating a sense that he brings something additional and different to the Israelites. But he is also called *Chovev*, beloved, and *Chaver*, friend—suggesting a sense of closeness and similarity to the people.

This unusual niche that Yitro occupies in the community is illustrated further when, upon hearing the wondrous things that God has done for the Israelites, he affirms "God is greater than all the other gods."⁴ By not denying the existence of other gods (as Rashi deduces from this text),⁵ Yitro simultaneously extends himself towards the belief system of Moshe while maintaining his polytheistic beliefs.

Thus, Yitro hovers in a liminal space, embodying the qualities of what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to as the *nebenmesnch*, the neighbor who occupies a position of being different and similar, simultaneously.⁶ Paradoxically, this liminality strengthens his intervention with the Israelites, as he brings the objectivity of the outsider and the care of the insider. As *Yeter*, Yitro introduces a different system of leadership, adding something new to what exists. And as *Chaver*, he brings an intimacy with the people that gives him the privilege to critique and intervene.

Yitro's subtle balance between *yeter* and *chaver* is a powerful model for global justice work. As activists, we need to hold a tension between both poles in order to work with integrity in our encounters with people in the Global South.

¹ Exodus, 18:17

² Rashi, Exodus 18:1.

³ He is called *Yeter* because this *parshah* was added in his name and *Yitro* because when he recognises the God of the Israelites, his name receives an additional *vav*.

⁴ Exodus, 18:11

⁵ Rashi, Yitro, 18, 11

⁶ Lacan, Jacques. 1992. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Translated by Dennis Porter. New York: Norton.

On the one hand, we must work to create a sense of closeness and come to understand the context of people we seek to help. We need to visit their communities and listen to their stories. At the same time, we employ an outsider's perspective, and our objectivity enables us to assess and support change.

It is important to maintain a balance between these two poles, because if we stray too far toward either, we risk overstepping our bounds. If we identify too much, we risk sentimentally collapsing our narrative into another's people's story, assuming that we know what people want because they must be just like us. We may also fail to look with an assessing probing eye, as we emphasize listening and connecting over objectivity. Inversely, if we maintain only *yeter*, then we might impose our ideas without understanding what people need and want, and without gaining trust.

It seems to me that AJWS's focus on partnerships with grassroots organizations is a way towards approximating Yitro's in-between space. AJWS's staff meet and connect with members of communities and come to understand their context intimately. They respect the expertise and experience of the local people, and support their self determination. Yet, they also acknowledge their difference and distance, and seek to provide assistance that that distance enables. AJWS helps strengthen small grassroots organizations by providing them financial support and access to peer networks and international conferences and movements for change. It serves in a respectful advisory role, to help organizations grow.

As individuals, we too are drawn to work in partnerships with people in developing countries because we identify with the struggles and challenges of another people. But we must recognize that we are not the same as them and neither are we the experts. Our intervention requires the expertise and experiences of the people themselves. In between our concern and our contrast, the partnership model enables us to make a contribution.

By acting in this way, Yitro is able to make a powerful *tikkun*, repair, to Moshe's work with the people. From that liminal space, his offering is received and he returns to his home. We, too, should strive to be both *yeter* and *chaver*, supporting global change with compassion and respect, closeness and distance.



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