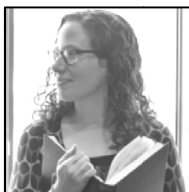


Although the commentators we reviewed answered our questions from different vantage points, disagreeing at times, they seem to share something in common: the highlighting or even extolling of the paramount virtue of humility, be it on a personal or national level.

I hope our study demonstrated how identifying questions and referring to our traditional commentaries can provide us with the opportunity to consider the values and issues being addressed by the commentators as a way of enhancing weekly Torah study and encouraging us to engage in meaningful reflection and/or discussion.

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### Power and Love

**Rachel Rosenthal, Adjunct Lecturer of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS**

[P]ower without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

— Martin Luther King Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?” (1967)

For the Israelites, who have only known power as a source of violence and destruction, the process of becoming a free nation is terrifying. They repeatedly ask Moshe to take them back to Egypt, fearing that they cannot survive on their own. However, at the moment of receiving the Torah, God promises the Israelites that they will be God’s chosen people, showering them with love during the ultimate display of power that is the revelation at Sinai. It is not enough for God to demand subservience from the Israelites. Their fealty must come from love, from a genuine desire to have a relationship with God.

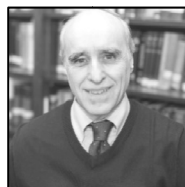
In the world today, it feels like there are too many displays of power that are devoid of love, and too many hollow proclamations of love that are devoid of any action. In this week’s parashah, Moshe shows the Israelites how to create a justice system, and God reminds them that the system is built from loyalty and affection. How will we break out of our echo chambers and armchair activism to pursue true justice, a justice built on both power and love?

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## Yitro 5777

יתרו תשע"ז



### Why Did Moses Listen to Yitro’s Advice?

Deriving Lessons from the Commentators Interpretations

**Dr. Walter Herzberg, Assistant Professor of Bible and Professional and Pastoral Skills, JTS**

Yitro heard that God had done wonders for Moses and Israel and had redeemed them from Egypt. He journeyed from Midian with Moses’s wife and sons to the Israelites’ encampment at the mountain of God. We hear nothing of Moses’s reunion with his wife and children, but rather a detailed account of Yitro’s organizational advice to Moses:

Yitro advised that Moses set up a judicial system to alleviate the burden upon him and thus better serve the needs of the people; that Moses would teach the word of God, but would no longer adjudicate small matters; that only the most difficult matters would be brought to Moses’s attention, the remainder being attended to by a judicial system populated by God-fearing, upstanding, wise men. Moses listened to his father-in-law and implemented his suggestions by doing “all that he had said.”

1. Why was Moses so quick to heed Yitro’s advice? (Exod. 18:24)
2. Why was Yitro the source of the advice? (Or, why didn’t God directly instruct Moses to set up a judiciary system?)

**Tzeror Hamor** (Avraham Saba, 1440–1508, Spain/Portugal/Morocco) states that Moses listened to Yitro’s advice because

“he saw that his advice was good.” So good that Moses “did all that he said (v. 24) without adding or detracting, because his [Yitro’s] words were divinely inspired (*ruah hakodesh*). This highlights Moses’s humility—that he accepted the Truth from the one who stated it and implemented it (Yitro’s plan] without changes. And it also showcases the wisdom of Yitro, who perceived that which Moses had not.”

1. If Moses wholeheartedly accepted advice from an outsider, we too, by extension, should be willing to seriously consider persuasive arguments for improvement regardless of the source of that advice. Ralbag (Rabbi Levi ben

Gershon, 1288-1344, Provence) explicitly articulates this lesson, stating: “It is appropriate for a person to take heed of good advice and forsake his own approach when it is not as good. For indeed, Moses, our teacher of blessed memory, notwithstanding his perfection and wisdom, put aside his own approach in the face of Yitro’s advice—since it was better!”

2. In addition, Moses sensed that Yitro’s advice was divinely inspired, thereby indicating that non-Israelites (or non-Jews) may serve as conduits for divinely inspired instruction (including to Jews).

Tzeror Hamor continues by responding to the following implied question: Why did Yitro merit having Moses accept his advice to establish a judicial system at his behest? Tzeror Hamor opines that God wished for this advice to come from Yitro so that the Israelites would be aware of the great wisdom that Yitro possessed and understand how appropriate it was for Moses to have married Yitro’s daughter; Yitro was, indeed, wise like Moses.

Tzeror Hamor highlights God’s concern for Moses’s reputation—lest the Israelites wonder how Moses could have married a (foreign) Midianite woman. By extension, like God (*imitatio dei*), we too should be concerned with the reputation of others, and anticipate and attempt to neutralize unjustified negative reactions to another’s conduct.

**Or Hahayyim** (R. Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar, 1696-1743, Morocco, Jerusalem) also asks why Yitro was the source of this advice and not Moses.

It appears to me that the reason is for God to show the children of Israel—this generation and every subsequent generation—that there are among non-Jews giants of understanding and insight. Go out and learn from the insight of Yitro in his advice...

The intention in this is that God did not choose Israel because their insight and cognition were greater than those of the nations of the world. Rather, their choosing came from a *hesed* [pure kindness] on high and from love of the patriarchs.

... Even though there are among the nations those who are wiser [than those among Israel], nevertheless, God brought us to Himself and chose us. And it is especially for this [reason] that it is incumbent upon us to praise the one who chose us on account of God’s kindness.

### Deriving lessons from Or Hahayyim’s comments

1. Or Hahayyim makes explicit what is implicit in the comment of Tzeror Hamor: that there are wise people among the nations with much insight to offer to the world in general and Jews in particular. While Tzeror

Hamor encourages individual humility, Or Hahayyim encourages national humility.

2. We also learn here that God chose the Jewish people not because of their particular wisdom or insight, but on account of God’s pure *hesed*, or benevolence, for which we should acknowledge and thank God—once again extolling the value of national and individual humility and eschewing the tendency towards national hubris.

**Abarbanel** (Don Isaac Abarbanel, 1438-1507, Spain/Portugal/Italy), on the other hand, does not think that Yitro’s advice was divinely inspired or especially insightful. He notes that Yitro’s judiciary plan was certainly a good one, but insists that the advice given was obvious. So obvious that even “the most ignorant would realize that it was a foolish idea for one person [Moses] to stand from morning until evening to adjudicate” matters that were brought before him. And since Moses was “master of the prophets and the greatest of the wise men,” Moses and all the elders of must have considered this idea on their own. Abarbanel (who is known for preceding his comments with a list of questions), wrote:

1. How is it [possible] that Moses and all the elders of Israel didn’t notice that appointing judges would ease the burden upon Moses, and that no one among all this (illustrious group) would realize that it would be appropriate to appoint judges who are “able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating unjust gain, so much so that Moses listened to his father-in-law and implemented his suggestions by doing “all that he had said.”
2. And how is it [possible] that God didn’t teach Moses such a simple insight as this one.

According to Abarbanel, Moses actually had intended to implement a similar judicial system himself soon after the giving of the Law a few days later. (This interpretation is based on the opinion that Yitro arrived before the giving of the Torah.) Nevertheless, for the sake of treating Yitro with honor and respect, Moses did not reveal to Yitro that he (Moses) had already thought of the idea to establish a judicial system.

### Deriving lessons from Abarbanel’s comments

1. At times, perhaps, we ought to withhold some information for the sake of the honor of another individual. Moses honored Yitro by agreeing to implement his plan rather revealing that he had thought of the very same plan himself.
2. Moses’s withholding of the information also speaks to his humility by selflessly allowing another to receive credit for a plan he was intending to implement.