



Celebrating Success • Parshat Yitro

Yitro might best be described as recorded history's first consultant. He is an outsider who pays a visit, observes Moses, and tells his son-in-law that he's going about his business all wrong. Moses spends all day adjudicating issues and answering questions for the long line of people waiting for him. Yitro watches the spectacle in disbelief. The dialogue between these two leaders of different faiths and generations is fascinating:

“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?” Moses replied to his father-in-law, “It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one party and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God.” But Moses' father-in-law said to him, “The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. (Ex. 18:14-18)

Yitro does not initially feel sorry for Moses. He feels sorry for all the people who suffer while waiting for Moses. When Yitro questions Moses, Moses has a ready answer. It's not his fault. He is the human face of God's law. This is his divine assignment. There is no one else to whom he can delegate the work to relieve him of his responsibilities. Perhaps because Yitro was an outsider to Judaism, he did not accept Moses' reply. “The thing you are doing is not right.” It may seem right to you, but it will eventually impoverish

you and your people of vital energy and efficiency. Yitro appealed to Moses' concern for others by mentioning the people first. Moses might have dismissed his own burden but could not ignore what his overworking was doing to those around him.

Yitro, in effect, tells Moses he is suffering from compassion fatigue, a common problem for mission-driven leaders. The mission never ends so the work never ends so the leader never stops.

This has a modern-day correlate. In *The Five Choices*, authors Kory Kogon, Adam Merrill and Leena Rinne talk about the productivity paradox. We live in an age where technology has allowed us to be more productive than ever but has led to people feeling more overwhelmed than ever. The day seems to never end. There are no boundaries between work and home life. Exhaustion is high. Satisfaction is low. Energy ebbs. “You feel it every day when you come home frazzled, uncertain if you accomplished what you needed to, worried about things you've left undone, and dreading the day ahead...You feel it when you think of your potential and the great goals you have, but then feel battered and bruised by all the incoming tasks and demands that seem to always keep you from focusing on more important things.”

What's a hard-working person to do? We turn back to our Torah reading. Often, when we read Parshat Yitro, we focus on the above dialogue and Yitro's recommendations. But what we miss in doing this is something Yitro taught Moses

that may have been even more important than delegation: celebration. When Yitro showed up at Moses' tent door from Midian, Moses welcomed Yitro in and the two began a crucial conversation about what had happened since they were last together: "Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything that God had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how God had delivered them" (Ex. 18:8). Moses never recounted this information to Aaron and Miriam or to the people. They all had the experience together. There was no need.

Or was there?

The visit of an outsider enabled Moses to look back. Yitro's presence and his curiosity empowered Moses to reflect on his immense leadership accomplishments. When you lead people, you always look forward to the next stop, the next project, the next marker of success. The drive of ambition keeps driving non-stop. But this leadership engine and the intensity it generates can resolve itself in exhaustion and self-recrimination. Why am I not doing more? David Villa in his *Forbes* article, "How Celebrating Success Can Lead To More Of It" (May 12, 2022) writes that "often we are so busy and so consumed with trying to reach our goals that when we finally do, we simply say, 'What's next?'"

Yitro, however, helped Moses pause, savor and celebrate all that Moses had done; the young man who believed he was inadequate to the task had realized a dream: "And Yitro rejoiced over all the kindness that God had shown Israel when delivering them from the Egyptians" (Ex. 18:8-9). This rejoicing was followed and enhanced by a festive meal: "And Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law" (Ex. 18:12).

"Celebration is an essential part of motivating,"

writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his essay "Celebrate" (*Vayakhel-Pekudei*, Covenant & Conversation). "When we celebrate the achievements of others, we change lives." When we stop to celebrate, it allows us time to recognize all of the people involved in each accomplishment. Leaders never work in a vacuum. As a leader, you may believe that you don't need recognition or celebration and, thereby, deprive others who need to feel valued and want to celebrate.

Celebrating success is more than sending out an email or giving people a few hours off. It's a conscious, detailed recognition of the meaningful contributions of each member of a team that is followed by rejoicing. Rabbi A. J. Heschel once wrote, "People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation."

So, what do you need to celebrate right now and who would benefit from more celebration?