



ארגון רבני צהר



ההסתדרות הציונית העולמית  
המערך לשירותים רוחניים בתפוצות

## Parashat Yitro

-Dov Goldstein-

At the beginning of our parasha, Yitro arrives at the Israelite camp along with Tziporah and his two grandchildren, Moshe's sons. Why was Moshe separated from his wife and children? Why didn't they return with him to Egypt to join the rest of the Jewish people?

Our Sages in the Mechilta fill in the gaps in the story and explain Tziporah's absence as follows:

**When Hashem said to Moshe: Go take my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt ... Immediately Moshe took his wife and two sons and began travelling with them to Egypt ... At the same time He (Hashem) said to Aaron: Go forth to meet Moshe. Aaron went forth to greet Moshe and hugged and kissed him. He asked him: "Moshe, where were you all these years?" To which Moshe answered: "In Midian." Aaron further asked him: "Who are these children and women with you?" Moshe replied: "My wife and my sons." Aaron continued to question him: "And where are you taking them?" The answer: "To Egypt." He (Aaron) then told him: "We are grieving for the first ones [the Jewish people who are enslaved in Egypt], and now shall we grieve for these as well?" Moshe then ordered Tziporah: "Go to your father's house." Tziporah then departed for her father's home, taking her two sons with her.**

According to the Midrash, when Moshe returned from Midian to Egypt Aaron asked him why he was subjecting his wife and children to slavery. Aaron recommended that they wait in a safe place, in Yitro's house, and Moshe took his advice and sent them back.

This sequence of events prompts the question of whether it is proper for a leader to save his own family from the suffering of his people, or is it preferable for a leader to include his family in the general suffering? A second, follow up question would then be: If it is best that one's family suffer along with everyone else, is this justified in light of the potential moral dangers that lurk in a place of slavery and subjugation?

These questions are amplified when compared to Moshe's actions in his early years, several decades previously, as described by our Sages:

**He went to examine the suffering of the Israelites, in the manner of Hillel's dictum: "Do not separate yourself from the community, as one should not see the community in its suffering and say to himself 'I shall go to my own home and eat and sleep and be comfortable,' but rather he should shoulder the load with his comrades."**

In other words, Hillel commends Moshe who, despite growing up outside of the enslaved community, chose to return and experience the slavery first hand. In this context, considering Moshe's willingness to sacrifice his own wellbeing for that of the people, his unwillingness to take his children with him and teach them this value is all the more blatant.



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Midrash Rabbah presents a slightly different picture, suggesting that Moshe already grappled with the question of whether to take his family with him to Egypt even before his encounter with Aaron:

**And Moshe went – where did he go? He went to take his wife and sons. Yitro said to him: ‘Where are you taking them?’ He (Moshe) answered: ‘To Egypt.’ He (Yitro) said to him: ‘Those already in Egypt wish to leave and you are taking your family [there]?’ He (Moshe) answered: ‘They (the Israelites) are soon to leave and stand on Mount Sinai and hear God say ‘I am the Lord your God,’ and my sons are not to be there?’ Immediately ‘And Yitro said to Moshe ‘Go in peace.’**

The Midrash describes how Yitro had already warned Moshe about taking his family to Egypt, but that Moshe had refused to heed Yitro’s advice. Moshe made his decision purely from an educational perspective: How could his family be part of the Jewish nation without participating in the seminal event of the exodus from Egypt? In other words, Moshe is aware of the importance of educating his children to participate with the community and collectively bear its burdens. Moshe identifies the educational benefit of giving to others. Moreover, Moshe understands that without exile there can be no exodus; if his children join Israel in its slavery and hardship, they will also be able to join in the exodus and the redemption.

If Moshe indeed takes this perspective, why then does he heed Aaron’s advice? It is possible that Moshe thought that someone who did not personally suffer the hardship of slavery could not accurately assess the situation and provide proper guidance. Therefore, Moshe understood that Yitro’s natural inclination to protect his grandchildren took precedence over conflicting, and perhaps more proper, considerations of appropriate behavior. However, when Aaron, who lived among the people throughout their enslavement, says similar things, he must be listened to as his is a non-biased perspective.

The book of Ruth presents an example of a leader who tried to avoid responsibility and was punished for his actions. Naomi’s family left the Land of Israel to avoid the famine and the suffering experienced by their neighbors and friends. However, in an ironic twist, her husband Elimelech and sons Machlon and Chilyon died in Moab and did not live to return home to Bethlehem, as “the woman was left [bereft] of her two children and of her husband.” Elimelech’s fate is instructive in that it shows us the error in running from the community in times of hardship. This episode, though, is different from that involving Moshe as Elimelech chose to get up and run instead of facing the difficulty of his situation, whereas Moshe himself does in fact decide to join his brethren in their suffering, while only choosing to leave his family behind.

Moshe’s decision to return to Egypt suggests that he is aware of the importance of joining his people in their time of need, both from a personal standpoint (as is apparent when he leaves Pharaoh’s palace to personally view his people’s suffering) and from a familial and educational one (as Moshe goes against Yitro’s advice and elects to return to Egypt). However, when he encounters Aaron, who had experienced the suffering of Egypt firsthand, and Aaron recommends leaving Moshe’s family behind in Midian, he concedes that the practical risk associated with bringing them to Egypt outweighs the educational and social value gained by their presence.

At the same time, it appears that the end of the story, toward the end of the lives of Moshe and his sons, implies that Moshe would in fact have been correct and justified in bringing his family with him to Egypt.



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This is because Moshe's sons were ultimately pushed aside from all positions of leadership and did not follow in their father's footsteps. This end result is instructive of the importance of all members joining together to bear a communal burden. Furthermore, it appears that proper leadership demands that a leader include his family in the suffering of his people, even if such suffering is of the most extreme variety. At the same time, we also see that one who shelters his family from communal hardship is liable not only to lose the benefit of the relief from such hardship, but also any value his family members may have derived from facing the difficult situation and overcoming it.

Many families debate and question whether to live in a comfortable and homogeneous community that fits their lifestyle and value system, while distancing themselves from general society and foregoing any attempt to integrate into the community at large. However, the story of Moshe teaches us that, despite the significant price that may be paid on a family level for integrating into the various elements of society, the personal and educational value of bearing community responsibilities together with others outweighs the potential danger and risk inherent in such integration.

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