

Finding the Authority Within or How to Survive Advice from your Father in Law

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Text & The City | Yitro 2016

"I need not expand on the importance of the theme of authority. Few are the educated people who can exist without depending on others, or develop a truly independent opinion. One cannot overestimate the power of people's lack of internal decision making and their craving for external authority. The incredible rise in frequency of neurosis we see around us since the power of religion has been decimated serves as a measure of this."

(Sigmund Freud, Opening Lecture at the Second Psychoanalytic Conference, 1910)

This week's Torah portion is all about authority. Its second half tells the quintessential moment of Jewish authority: the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It's a hierarchical model of authority if ever there was one – with the Law given from up high and forced on the nation. The Israelites accept wholeheartedly, bowing their heads to Divine Authority, saying: נעשה ונשמע - We will perform and we will hearken. That's at least how one strand of our tradition tells it. For Freud, it is the moment of the inhibiting Super-ego being crowned over the id and ego, a heteronomous power which if internalized properly will bring out the healthy and productive individual. It is a tale of human yearning for external authority.

Discussions of the trouble with external authority abound. But the story of Sinai is prefaced by another tale of authority; one which puts a spotlight on our relationship to our own, internal authority. The juxtaposition makes a claim: before we establish the role of external authority, one's own sense of internal authority must be met

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face to face . This psychological exercise is played out by the quintessential underminer of authority: the parent-in-law.

Yitro, Moses' father in law and Priest of Midian, comes to visit his son-in-law's band of runaway slaves in their desert abode. Before leaving, the seasoned priest teaches his entrepreneuring young son-in-law a lesson in systems. Seeing Moses overburdened "from daybreak until sunset" by those seeking the ear of the leader, he advises him to create a multi-tiered human justice system which can transmit God's word to the people without over-burdening the sole prophet. It's a lesson in the move from charismatic leadership to bureaucratic leadership, [as Max Weber will call it](#) centuries later. But what is actually going on is Yitro calling Moses out for not recognizing his own authority, and not recognizing that the "locus of control" to his situation resides in himself.

This is how the little family spat is described in Exodus 18:

Now it was on the morrow:
Moshe sat to judge the people,
And the people stood before
Moshe
from daybreak until sunset.

When Moshe's father-in-law saw
all that he had to do for the
people,
He said: What are you doing to the
people!
Why do you sit alone, while the
entire people must stand before
you from daybreak until sunset?

Moshe said to his father-in-law:
It's the people who come to me to
inquire of God!
Whenever they have some legal-
matter, it comes to me –
I judge between a man and his
fellow

וַיְהִי, מִמִּתְחַרְתּוֹ,
 וַיֵּשֶׁב מִלְּשָׁה,
 לְשֹׁפֵט אֶת-הָעָם;
 וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם עַל-מִלְּשָׁה,
 מִן-הַבֹּקֶר עַד-הָעֶרֶב.

וַיֵּרָא חֹתֵן מִלְּשָׁה, אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-הוּא עוֹשֶׂה לָעָם;
 וַיֹּאמֶר: מַה-הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹשֶׂה
 לָעָם?? מַדּוּעַ אַתָּה יוֹשֵׁב לְבַדְּךָ,
 וְכָל-הָעָם נֹצֵב עָלֶיךָ מִן-בֹּקֶר עַד-עֶרֶב.

וַיֹּאמֶר מִלְּשָׁה, לְחֹתְנּוֹ:
 כִּי-נִבֵּא אֵלַי הָעָם, לְדַרְשׁ אֱלֹהִים.
 כִּי-וַהֲיִה לָהֶם דְּבָר, בְּאֵלַי,
 וְשִׁפְטֵתִי, בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין רֵעֵהוּ;
 וְהוֹדַעְתִּי אֶת-חֲקֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, וְאֶת-תּוֹרֹתַי.

וַיֹּאמֶר חֹתֵן מִלְּשָׁה, אֵלָיו:
 לֹא-טוֹב, הַדְּבָר, אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה, עוֹשֶׂה.
 נָבֵל תִּבְל--גַּם-אַתָּה, גַּם-הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ:
 כִּי-כַבֵּד מִמֶּךָ הַדְּבָר, לֹא-תוֹכֵל עֲשׂוֹהוּ לְבַדְּךָ!
 עַתָּה שְׁמַע בְּקִלְי, אֵיעֶצְדְּךָ...
 (שמות יח יג-כב)

One is enticed to read Yitro as the stereotypical conniving father-in-law: first, he spies on his son-in-law at work. Then he takes license to criticize his practices: “What are you doing?? Why are you doing it alone, and causing all these people to wait for hours??” When Moses gets all defensive (“I didn’t ask for this, they started it...”), Yitro turns to outright criticism, and finally to the sharpest weapon of the in-law: Let me give you some advice...

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This is how Rabbi Hayyim Ben Attar, one of the most attuned readers of dialogues in the Torah, reads the discussion between them: “Moses heard in Yitro’s words a criticism, as if he is forcing them to only adhere to his judgement, and not to others” (Or haChayim Exodus 18:16).

Of course, the contentious reading of Yitro and Moses’ relationship is not necessarily so. We’ll never know what tones (and undertones) filled their conversation. But as the experienced High Priest teaches Moses how to run an organized religion, he also names something about Moses’ insecurities.

A basic adage of organizational psychology claims that if a dysfunction in a system is perpetuated, it’s probably because it serves a need for all parties involved. As we view the long line of Israelites waiting on Moses’ word from morning to night, it is clear what need this is serving: like New Yorkers who love to wait in line for the “best food in town”, Moses is the only authority in their eyes, the all-powerful savior from Pharaoh, and they want to receive truth, leadership and guidance from his mouth only. But what need is this burdensome dysfunctional system serving for Moses? Why does he need an external review in order to change the dysfunctional system he allowed the Israelites to create around him?

I’d suggest that Moses doesn’t change the authority structure not because he actually enjoys being the sole authority, but because he feels deeply equivocal about the authority invested in him. He doesn’t feel empowered to hand it to others because he can barely admit that he is holding it himself. True, he’s exhausted, but this too serves a need: His loudly portrayed exhaustion shields him from having to take action beyond that which is already on his plate. (Thank you to David Levin Kruss for this point. I would have thought of it myself but have simply been too exhausted and overworked this week to do so...).

The dysfunctional system created around Moses allows him to continue to locate the “locus of control” in his life outside himself. First it resides with God, then with the Israelites; never with Moses. He doesn’t see himself as holding any authority, but simply serving external referents. That is a sure way to achieve exhaustion, but also to avoid recognizing one’s own power and responsibility, one’s internal sense of authority. Yitro supplies Moses with the wake up call that forces him to take the reigns.

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I find Moses' discomfort with his new found authority very relatable. The stage of life between 30-45 or so (or 80 in biblical terms) shoves us into all kinds of new authority roles which are not simple to embrace (even as we crave them). A parent who disciplines their child, the employer who fires and hires, the supervisor sending others on complicated and risky task. Truly recognizing and wielding the "authority vested in us" is no simple task, as it forces us to come to terms both with the burden of power and with the recognition of its boundaries. Often, it requires an external event - a conflict or failure or critical voice - to bring us to terms with how much authority we actually do wield. Many people hold an unjustifiably inflated sense of their own power and authority, but equally pernicious are those who hold an unjustifiably deflated sense of their authority. As the Prophet Samuel says to King Saul, before firing him: "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel!?" Saul's inability to recognize the burden of his own authority causes his downfall. Perhaps it is the fact that Samuel was no Yitro...

A big part of coming to terms with our own authority is recognizing what is actually being asked of us in our new role, and the mixture of projections and actual needs that people bring to us. The brilliance in Yitro's advice to Moses is not in the judicial structure he suggests, but in the way he allows Moses to see what he, Moses, brings to the table, and in that way come to terms with his authority:

*Listen to my advice, so that God
may be-there with you:*

*Be-there, yourself, for the people
in relation to God. You yourself
should have the matters come to
God;*

*You should make clear to them
the laws and the instructions, You
should make known to them the
way they should go, and the
deeds that they should do;*

עַתָּה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי, אִיעֲצֶדָּךְ, וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים, עִמָּדְךָ;

הֲיִנָּה אַתָּה לְעַם, מִוִּיל הָאֱלֹהִים, וְהִבֵּאתָ אֶתָּה אֶת-
הַדְּבָרִים, אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים
וְהִזְדַּרְתָּ אֶתְהֶם, אֶת-הַחֲקִים וְאֶת-הַתּוֹרֹת;

וְהוֹדַעְתָּ לָהֶם, אֶת-הַדְּרֹךְ וְלָכוּ בָהּ, וְאֶת-הַמַּעֲשֵׂה,
אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּךָ.

וְאַתָּה תַחַזֵּק מִכָּל-הַעַם אֲנָשֵׁי-חַיִל יִרְאֵי אֱלֹהִים,
אֲנָשֵׁי אֱמֶת--שֹׁנְאֵי כַזַּע;

וְשִׁמְתָּ עֲלֵהֶם, שָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים שָׂרֵי מֵאוֹת, שָׂרֵי
חֲמִשִּׁים, וְשָׂרֵי עֶשְׂרֹת, וְשִׁפְטוּ אֶת-הָעַם, בְּכָל-
עֵת.

וְהָיָה כָּל-הַדְּבָר הַגָּדוֹל יָבִיאוּ אֵלֶיךָ, וְכָל-הַדְּבָר
הַקָּטָן יִשְׁפְּטוּ-הֵם;
וְהִקְשִׁל מֵעֲלֶיךָ, וְנָשְׂאוּ אִתָּךְ .

אִם אֶת-הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה, תַּעֲשֶׂה, וְצִוָּךְ אֱלֹהִים, וְנִכַלְתָּ
עִמָּד;

וְגַם כָּל-הָעַם הַזֶּה, עַל-מִקְמוֹ יָבֹא בְשִׁלוֹם

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה, לְקוֹל חֲתָנּוֹ; וַיַּעַשׂ, כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אָמַר .

Yitro helps Moses differentiate between what only he can give, and what other fine people can do. He helps name the values and traits needed to do some aspects of Moses' job (caliber, awe, truth, hating gain), so that they can be delegated to others, while highlighting the ways in which Moses is irreplaceable, the things that only he can provide: "the matters that come from God".

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We often undervalue the very things we are best at, those skills and powers that come to us most naturally. This makes sense, since that which comes naturally to me requires very little effort –and therefore I underestimate or overlook its value. It is in all the ways in which we fall short, all the skills that require enormous effort and concentration that we attribute a high value to, thus making the half empty glass of our skills feel much more important.

Yitro helps Moses recognize that it *is* him that they are seeking, not just God; he helps him see his own voice and importance in the system, helps him make that which is projected on him and his own internal self assessment more congruent. He thus allow Moses to loosen his grip on the untenable system that he allowed the Children of Israel to create around him. Once Moses can come to terms with his own internal authority, he can begin the work of truly bringing God's matters to the people.

The fact that the people weren't really ready for it, well, that's a whole different Torah portion...



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