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What Yitro Heard: A Lesson on Listening

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A teacher of mine once pointed out that you can understand a lot about a story by where the author chooses to begin it. In the case of parashat Yitro, the parasha that contains one of the foundational events of our collective history – the Revelation at Sinai – the text opens with the word *vayishma*. He heard.

To whom is the text referring? Not to Moshe or to God; not even to the Jewish people, nor to anyone whom we would assume to be the central players in the watershed moment we are poised to bear witness to as readers. Instead, the text zooms out; the scene shifts from the struggles and miraculous triumphs of a fledgling nation in the desert over to a different landscape, to Midian, where Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, is *listening*.

Vayishma Yitro. Yitro hears of all God has done for Moshe and the Israelites. He hears about the plagues, the Exodus, the battle with Amalek. And he takes his daughter and grandchildren – Moshe's wife and two sons – and goes out to meet his son-in-law. What happens next is puzzling: when Moshe goes out to greet Yitro, he tells Yitro the story that Yitro apparently already knows.

ח וַיְסַפֵּר מֹשֶׁה, לְחֹתְנֹו, אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְפָרְעֹה וּלְמִצְרַיִם, עַל אֹדֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל: אֵת כָּל-הַמַּלְאָה אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַעְתָּם בְּדֶרֶךְ, וַיִּצְלַם יְהוָה

8 And Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done unto Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the travail that had come upon them by the way, and how the LORD delivered them. (Ex. 18:8)

If Yitro had traveled all this way because he had *heard* about all the wonders that God had performed for Moshe and his nation, why does their reunion begin with Moshe relating these events to Yitro as if Yitro had never heard about them before?

To dig into this question, let's take a look how the story continues. The following day, Moshe goes back to work. Yitro observes as his son-in-law spends morning until night... listening.

יג וַיְהִי, מִמָּחָר־הַיּוֹם, וַיָּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה, לִשְׁפֹט אֶת-הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם עַל-מֹשֶׁה, מִן-הַבֹּקֶר עַד-הָעֶרֶב.

יד וַיֵּרָא חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה, אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה לָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר, מַה-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה לָעָם--מִדּוּעַ אַתָּה יּוֹשֵׁב לְבַדְּךָ, וְכָל-הָעָם נֹצֵב עֲלֶיךָ מִן-בֹּקֶר עַד-עֶרֶב.

טו וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, לְחֲתָנוֹ: כִּי-גָבַא אֵלַי הָעָם, לְדַרְשׁ אֱלֹהִים.

טז כִּי-יִהְיֶה לָהֶם דְּבַר, בָּא אֵלַי, וְשִׁפְטֵתִי, בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין רֵעֵהוּ; וְהוֹדַעְתִּי אֶת-חֻקֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, וְאֶת-תּוֹרֹתָיו.

13 And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood about Moses from the morning unto the evening.

14 And when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did to the people, he said: 'What is this thing that thou doest to the people? why sittest thou thyself alone, and all the people stand about thee from morning unto even?'

15 And Moses said unto his father-in-law: 'Because the people come unto me to inquire of God;

16 when they have a matter, it cometh unto me; and I judge between a man and his neighbour, and I make them know the statutes of God, and His laws.' (Ex. 18: 13-16)

We might think that Yitro, champion of hearing, would encourage Moshe's choice to devote all of his time to hearing the cases of the Israelites and helping them to resolve their disputes.

But Yitro here comes to teach us that listening has its limits – and, crucially, so should listeners.

יז וַיֹּאמֶר חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה, אֵלָיו: לֹא-טוֹב, הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה, עֹשֶׂה.

יח נָבַל תִּבְלַל--גַּם-אַתָּה, גַּם-הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ: כִּי-כִבֵּד מִמֶּךָ הַדָּבָר, לֹא-תוּכַל עֲשׂוֹהוּ לְבַדְּךָ.

17 And Moses' father-in-law said unto him: 'The thing that thou doest is not good.

18 Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee; for the thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone. (Ex. 18:17-18)

The choice of the words *kaved mimcha* – literally, “it is heavier than you” – is an important one here. It echoes another kind of *kvedut*, “heaviness” we associate with Moshe. At the beginning of the Exodus story, when God sends Moshe to deliver the message of liberation to the Israelites, Moshe protests,

10 And Moses said unto the LORD: 'Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant; for I am slow ['heavy'] of speech, and of a slow ['heavy'] tongue.' (Ex. 4:10)

I'm not really much of a talker, Moshe insists. Words sit heavy on my tongue. Perhaps now, in our parasha, after all the speaking he has done in last few chapters – speaking to the people, to Pharaoh, to God – Moshe wants a break. He is retreating to his comfort zone, to what he feels he does best.

He wants to sit all day and to listen.

But listening, Yitro wants Moshe to understand, is not to be taken lightly; in fact, it is going to weigh Moshe down. Rashi explains the words *kaved mimcha* to mean, “its weight is greater than your strength.” It takes a certain kind of chutzpa to tell a person like Moshe that there is a weight too great for him to bear. After all, Moshe has borne a great deal over the years: he built a new life in a foreign land; took the scorn of the Israelites and the wrath of Pharaoh; he was a courier of miracles – split the Red Sea! But listening on this scale apparently carries a different kind of heaviness in Yitro’s view, one dangerous to Moshe’s potential to serve his role moving forward as leader of his nation.

Perhaps Yitro is concerned that the *koved*, the weight of hearing the troubles of the people, will leave too little room for Moshe’s voice – will make him truly *kvad peh v'kvad lashon*, heavy of speech and tongue. Moshe’s leadership requires the ability not only to take in others’ voices, but to raise his own. In the years to come as the Israelites wander the desert, Moshe is to both continue his role as spokesperson for God among the people, and also become the great advocate and defender of the people to God. He has to learn to speak as well as to listen.

Maybe this is why Yitro hears Moshe out as Moshe tells the story of the Exodus, though Yitro has heard it before. Moshe, the great listener, needs practice raising his voice. God knows this as well. Later on in our parasha, during the Revelation itself, we see Moshe’s voice crop up in a moment we might not have expected:

וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל-הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ, לֵאלֹהֵי-דְבָר
 יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה; וַיֹּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הָעָם, אֶל-
 יְהוָה. **8** And all the people answered together, and said: 'All that the LORD hath
 spoken we will do.' And Moses reported the words of the people unto the
 LORD. (Ex. 20:8)

Rashi asks the obvious question here: we understand that the nation might need Moshe to bring God’s word “down to earth” for them. But does God need Moshe to report back on what the nation has said? Did God not hear them? Rashi’s answer is, *lelamedcha derech eretz* – the text includes Moshe’s report-back to teach us a moral lesson, that Moshe didn’t assume that just because He who sent him knew the answer, did not mean that Moshe still didn’t have the duty to report back.

It strikes me, however, that the *derekh eretz* being modeled here is on the part of God. Just as Yitro had already heard the story but made space for Moshe to tell it, so God, who knows the response of the Israelites, waits for Moshe to share it with him. Amidst the thunder and lightning,

the back-and-forth between God and the people of Israel, God pauses to make room for Moshe to speak. Just as what Moshe himself experienced in the events of the Exodus is crucial for Yitro to hear, what Moshe himself has heard in the voice of the people is important for God. Moshe's role is to listen, yes, but it is also to speak. He cannot afford to be *kvad lashon*, heavy of tongue, if he is going to carry the word of God to the people, and especially if he is going to stand up to God on the people's behalf. He needs to be more than a mouthpiece; he needs to find himself within the conversation between God and the Jewish people, and take ownership of his voice in that conversation.

There is another function of listening here that I believe both Yitro and God show sensitivity to in these chapters. Both Yitro and God, in the moment they choose to listen, have something crucial to say. Yitro is about to advise Moshe in creating a revolutionary judicial system. God is about to reveal the precious teaching of the Torah. Each, by pausing before speaking, by listening first, lays the foundation for a trusting relationship that opens the door for Moshe to hear them. By creating space for Moshe and the people to say their piece, Yitro and God each pave the way for their own words to be heard.

The delicate interplay between listening and speaking, parashat Yitro teaches us, is a dance any great leader must master. Listening cannot be a retreat from speaking; nor can speaking be an excuse not to listen. If we speak without listening, if we share our voice without the foundation of trust created by making room for the other, then our voice has far less power. Yet if we hide behind listening, we risk losing our voice under the weight of all we take in. To be effective advocates for those who entrust us to serve them, we need to find our own voices, be able to articulate our own experiences and values. And when we have accessed the message that we have to give over – when it comes time to raise our voices – it would do us well to pause, take a breath, and see what doors open to take in our words when we first choose to listen.

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