

TORAH SHMOOZE YITRO

Scriptural Context

- Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, had observed that Moses was serving as the sole judge to the whole people.
- Yitro's response teaches that "rather than merely finding fault with what others do, we should offer constructive suggestions" (Zelig Pliskin)—and, of course, we should be prepared to help carry them out, as Yitro demonstrated by his conversion to the Israelite religion.
- Yitro told Moses that what he was doing was "not good" (לא טוב). (Exodus 18:17) Notably his language was sensitive: he did not say what he thought, "You are doing wrong!" but chose more diplomatic language, more in the spirit of "You could do better—both for yourself and for the people." He then proposed what Moses should do specifically to remedy the situation:
- And you will see, out of all the people, able men [and women], God-fearing men [and women], men [and women] of truth, hating unjust gain; and you will place [such people] over them [the children of Israel], [to be] rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. (Exodus 18:21)

Commentary & Midrash

- Based on Yitro's proposal, it was necessary for Moses to appoint nearly 80,000 leaders, which he did. In effect, every seventh or eighth man in Israel was a formal leader of the people.
- Or Hachayim says that it was not for the people to appoint judges, but that Moses "should look for suitable candidates." He goes on to say, however, that Moses should not appoint them "until they also proved acceptable to all the people and the people asked for these men to be appointed. . . ."
- The midrash goes further to state that *Moses asked the people* "to propose capable and pious" candidates for him to appoint "as judges and leaders." He told the people: "If a man were to present himself to me as a candidate . . . I alone should not be able to decide . . . ; but you know them, and hence it is advisable for you to propose them." (Legends of the Jews)
- According to the midrash, the qualities of a judge included: possessing wisdom (i.e., understanding of what is morally true, right, and lasting), reverence for God, modesty, hatred of covetousness, love of truth, love of humanity, a good name (i.e., a reputation for integrity, compassion, and justice), and a willingness to be completely devoted to study of Torah and public affairs. (Legends of the Jews)
- The leaders of the people were to have moral stamina, a willingness to listen to *all* the people, and sufficient strength of character not to be intimidated by the more powerful members of the community. They would be the ones upon whom the people could rely, and thus they would be followed. They would reject all forms of personal enrichment gained at the expense of another by threats or actual wrongdoing.
- The qualifications for those who were appointed leaders over thousands were different than those appointed over hundreds, and so on. The organization

proposed by Yitro required “different ranks of competence for each level of judges.” The point, however, was “not . . . [that] one [was] placed over a thousand, but rather [that] one [was] picked out of a thousand as the ‘best and most capable.’” (S.R. Hirsch)

- In modern terms we might imagine the qualifications of the leaders as such that the “rulers of thousands” would be those who could extend their vision and commitment to klal Yisrael (the whole people); the “rulers of hundreds” would be those who could teach and apply the law while respecting the uniqueness of each group or faction within the community; the “rulers of fifties” would be those who could balance the demands of both order, which requires upholding the decisions of lesser judges, and disorder, which results from confirming unjust judgments; and the “rulers of tens” would be those who could judge and teach face to face with each and every member of the community. And, of course, every level of leadership would have to have the qualifications of the levels beneath it.
- How, then, was Moses “to see” whom he should appoint as leaders? First, the leaders to be appointed by him would be nominated by the people. And second, the candidates would have to meet specific criteria. But ultimately, Moses, as the highest human authority in the community, would have to make the final decision. The Hebrew word for “to see” is t’khezeh (תִּחְזֶה) from the root khet-zion-hei (חזה), which is also the root for “seer” and “vision.” This root ordinarily conveys the idea of seeing with “inner perception,” as a prophet has a vision from God. We might reasonably expect, then, that Moses’ ultimate decision would be based on a prophetic vision of God’s will.
- “These chosen men of the people were appointed not only for deciding legal processes, but they were also responsible for the teaching of the people. . . . until the Torah was completely understood and assimilated and carried out by the whole nation.” (S.R. Hirsch)

Questions

- What do you think of the leadership qualities enumerated in our traditional texts?
- Have you ever lived any place where people knew each other well as neighbors—and, if so, what kinds of things did you know about your close neighbors?
- Do our members know each other well enough as neighbors to nominate the best leaders—and, if not, would it make sense to take steps in an organized way that would enable many members to get much better acquainted as leaders?
- Is it appropriate or useful nowadays to have leaders of tens in a congregational community?