

TORAHSCOPE: Yitro (Jethro)

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Exodus 18:1-20:23[26]
Ezekiel 28:25-29:21

“Shema Yisrael”

“And Moses' father-in-law said to him, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; **you cannot do it alone**. Now listen to me: I shall give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, **and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk, and the work they are to do. Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them, as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.** And let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. **If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.**’ So Moses listened to his father-in-law, and did all that he had said” (Exodus 18:17-24).

This week as we turn once again to the study of the weekly Torah portion, we come to the section of the Book of Exodus that is best known for the articulation of the Ten Commandments. It is during this time period, after some of the initial trials of the journey into the wilderness with the lack of water and food, and just after the battles with the Amalekites, that Moses and the people of Israel come to the base of Mount Sinai and receive instruction from God. Most commentators have a tendency to focus on the reception of the Ten Words, penned by the very finger of the Most High. Without any doubt, these commandments are very important, because it is upon these very commandments that, according to Yeshua, everything else seems to revolve:

“And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

When we understand how the Ten Commandments always point disobedient Israel back to remembrance and obedience, the words of Yeshua make perfect sense. But rather than focus on the volume of material that can be discussed about the importance of loving God and one's neighbor, there is another topic that actually precedes the reception of the two tablets. In the opening chapter of this *parashah*, the character and actions for whom this reading is named is described. The man named, of course, is Jethro the father-in-law of Moses. The ancient advice that he gives to Moses, and consequently what it means for us today, is a subject that should take up considerable discussion in itself.

Even a society with specified rules, ordinances, regulations, commandments, laws, and statutes is destined to implode if the leaders of that society do not institute and implement Divine order. There are far too many historical examples of societal failures. Needless to say, Israel itself, in spite of these excellent instructions, is among the littered bones on the highway of civilizations. Let us turn and consider some of the precepts that today, as God's people are witnessing restoration, should be employed to ensure success.

The Big Picture

When you often study the Torah, the corresponding Haftarah selections can be used to prompt some major introspection. This week, some of the selected verses from Isaiah reminded me of the concept of government and Divine order. After all, the Holy One of Israel is a God of

order, and it is through His order that He is going to accomplish all the things that He has providentially ordained:

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; **and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.** There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, **to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore.** The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

If you will recall in this passage of Isaiah, the prophet is looking forward to a time when the Son of God will actually be born as a human being. He will be given the awesome names of Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace. These names, in and of themselves, should leave no doubt that the Son is indeed God in the flesh. But then in an interesting choice of words, the Prophet states that “**the government will rest on His shoulders,**” and “There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace.” In other words, all rule and dominion will clearly rest on His shoulders.

When I consider the visual picture of the government of the Kingdom resting on the shoulders of the Mighty God or Prince of Peace, I envision Yeshua in all His glory with the government literally resting on His shoulders. Now in order to do that, I have pictured the governmental structure like an upside down pyramid that is resting on its pinnacle on Yeshua’s shoulders. In my mind, this represents the absolute Divine order with Yeshua holding the entire governmental structure, and by extension, the world, up by His shoulders. His hands are still free to minister to the masses, but resting on His shoulders is the governmental scheme, with Him at the bottom, rather than the top, serving everyone. He holds everyone up by the power of His word, and when He speaks something it is accomplished. In fact, according to the author of Hebrews, He is presently seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high, with this governmental structure resting securely on His shoulders:

“And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and **upholds all things by the word of His power.** When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high; having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they” (Hebrews 1:3-4).

When I couple this mental image with the conceptual reality that Yeshua has clearly stated, “**He came not to be served, but to serve and offer Himself up as a ransom for many**” (Matthew 20:28), the idea of serving means to humble oneself and be at the bottom of the heap. But all of these mental images of the Messiah and His dual role as the Servant-King, who will lead by His service, draws me back to the Torah portion this week and the profound and honored advice that Moses received from Jethro.

Jethro’s Wisdom

We need to understand that the insertion of the episode with Jethro comes at a very strategic time for Moses and the Ancient Israelites. The deliverance from the Egyptian horde is behind them and the unified effort to defeat the Amalekites, in spite of some challenges, is complete. Jethro hears of these victories and is convinced that the God of Israel is the One True God, and so he decides to join the Israelites and bring Zipporah and the two sons of Moses, Gershom and Eliezer, to Moses at the camp. But here, this highly respected elder witnesses the leadership model that Moses employed, and he has the wisdom and the impetus to make some astute recommendations. As the text indicates, Moses was exhausting himself with meeting the ever-present requests of thousands, not to mention all of their unspoken demands.

Jethro could immediately discern that Moses was wearing himself out and that he had to do something to avoid fatigue and the impossible task of resolving all the disputes. The logical advice was to develop a way to duplicate his authority and choose capable men who could handle varying degrees of responsibility. His advice was two-fold: (1) Moses was supposed to continue in his position as the intermediary between God and the people, (2) but then he was to train up

disciples who would learn the commandments and precepts of the Lord and be able to apply them at the levels they were assigned:

“You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk, and the work they are to do” (Exodus 18:19-20).

Moses was not going to give up his unique relationship with the Holy One. After all, Moses had a special call upon his life that was apparent to those who knew him. Maintaining his relationship with God was critical to continue functioning as the leader of the emerging nation. And as we know, the Lord continued to pour through Moses an incredible amount of revelation that eventually is recorded in Scripture. However, since this channel of communication needed to be maintained, it was important to delegate the work of administration to others who were qualified to handle ministerial responsibilities. This is when Jethro establishes the essential criteria for selecting men who will be capable of handling various responsibilities:

“Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them, as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you” (Exodus 18:21-22).

Here in a very succinct manner, Jethro lays out four important attributes. These individuals are to be (1) able or accomplished; (2) they must fear God; (3) they must be truthful; and (4) they must hate dishonest gain. In many respects, these are the very same character traits given to us in the Apostolic Scriptures that classify elders and deacons in the local assembly. Let's take a look at each of these traits and see how they apply to criteria established some 1,300 years later. I believe we will discover that the same critical components are universal when it comes to being servant leaders.

Able or Accomplished Men of Character

When you go back and analyze Jethro's advice and the qualifications he articulates for leadership, it is obvious that the early Apostolic community appropriated his perspective on what qualified a person for leadership responsibilities among the people of God. Jethro, for example, states that the selected individuals must be able or accomplished. The text employs the word *chayil* (חַיִל), meaning “*ability, efficiency, often involving moral worth*” (BDB).¹ “The basic meaning of the noun is ‘strength,’ from which follow ‘army’ and ‘wealth’” (TWOT).² We see that those chosen need to be as dependable as one would want in the army defending the nation from evil forces. This would mean that they would be disciplined and strong and courageous to handle any of the challenges that might threaten Israel's welfare.

When you consider some of the Apostolic instructions, there is much more amplification of the qualifications. By the time the various epistles were circulating, Believers were largely meeting in small groups that typically met in homes in the Diaspora. It was critical for the Holy Spirit to give some vital instruction on how to reestablish Divine order among these groups. Thankfully, the Apostles, addressing many of the concerns of the Body of Messiah in often hostile environments, provided excellent instruction. Here, in this letter from the Apostle Paul to his disciple Timothy, is a more specific description of what an “overseer” (Grk. *episkopos*, ἐπίσκοπος) should be like.

“An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to

¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 299.

² Carl Philip Weber, “חַיִל,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:271.

manage his own household, how will he take care of the [assembly] of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil" (1 Timothy 3:2-6).

As you can read, the able or accomplished of the post-Resurrection era were to be individuals above reproach or highly esteemed for their character, and unable to be challenged for their integrity. Here, Paul further qualifies them as being the husband of one wife, exhibiting temperance, prudence, hospitality, respectability, having the ability to teach, not addicted to wine, and not pugnacious or contentious. Instead, such individuals must be gentle and free from the love of money. When you read this list, you are reminded that the leader is to be exhibiting a life that indicates that one is being led by the Spirit, is walking by the Spirit, and evidences the fruit of the Spirit. Just compare Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

God-Fearing Individuals

Next, Jethro indicates that Moses should appoint leaders who fear God. According to the Book of Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Throughout the Tanakh, the references to fearing God give the reader the distinct impression this feeling of awesomeness for who He is imperative for wise living:

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10).

This short passage from Psalm 25 summarizes the blessings associated with the proper fear of the Holy One of Israel:

"Who is the man who fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way he should choose. His soul will abide in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. The secret of the LORD is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant" (Psalm 25:12-14).

The Psalmist further elaborates the essence of fear as he concludes his remarks:

"Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with all *my* heart, in the company of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the LORD; *they are* studied by all who delight in them. Splendid and majestic is His work; and His righteousness endures forever. He has made His wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate. He has given food to those who fear Him; He will remember His covenant forever. He has made known to His people the power of His works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of His hands are truth and justice; all His precepts are sure. They are upheld forever and ever; they are performed in truth and uprightness. He has sent redemption to His people; He has ordained His covenant forever; holy and awesome is His name. **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever**" (Psalm 111:1-10).

As you read these passages and consider that Jethro was most particular about including a healthy fear of God as a critical characteristic for leadership, you realize that the fear of God truly indicates that a leader believes that He is real and that the consequences of disobedience are severe.

One of the reasons why a healthy fear of God is important for good leadership is that those failing to fear God will often fall into sin. Jude reflects on this reality in his epistle in the late First Century. As this passage depicts, those without a fear of the Lord often come into the love feasts with intentions to do great harm:

"But these men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed. Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. **These men are those who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear**, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting

up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 10-13).

Discerning that a leader has a healthy and true fear of God is extremely important. By evidencing this characteristic, the leader will lean upon the Lord for His wisdom and counsel for the decisions he might have to make.

People of Truth

The third principal characteristic that must be exemplified in good leaders is that they must be people of truth. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the term *emet* (אֱמֶת) has a variety of meanings, including: “reliability, sureness,” “stability, continuance,” and “faithfulness, reliability” (BDB).³ The Greek Scriptures likewise reflect this, often employing *pistis* (πίστις), meaning: “persuasion of a thing, confidence, assurance,” “good faith, trustworthiness, faithfulness, honesty,” and “an assurance, pledge of good faith, warrant, guarantee” (LS).⁴ *Pistis* frequently translates *emet* in the Septuagint, and these meanings are all employed in the Apostolic Scriptures. Leaders are required to not only know the truth, but be able to teach it well because they have experienced it in their lives. Writing to Titus, the Apostle Paul gives further instruction regarding able leaders in the assembly:

“For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, **holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.** For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not *teach*, for the sake of sordid gain” (Titus 1:7-11).

The emphasis on being able to know the truth is evidenced by being able to teach, exhort in sound doctrine, and refute those who contradict the truth. Paul informs Titus that there will be many rebellious empty talkers and deceivers who will come and introduce error for their own self-serving purposes. Leaders are required to know the truth in order to protect the sheep from wolves. Jethro’s words in this Torah portion would be comparable to telling the people of Israel to choose leaders who truly understood the Torah. Those people were trained to know the truth, and consequently could discern error and lead the flock through a proper interpretation of the instructions and how they should conduct themselves.

Honest Individuals

When Jethro tells Moses that he should choose individuals who hate dishonest gain, he is telling him to choose honest people who are not consumed with the love of money. They understand that the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. These are those who are absolutely convinced that life should operate according to a system of equal weights and measures. They are the types of individuals who will swear to their own hurt. When it comes to judicial matters, they will be absolutely sure that the people being subjected to review receive proper justice. The concept of treating others as you would have them treat you is inherent in their nature.

In Exodus 18:21 the Hebrew word *betza* (בִּצְאָה) is used to describe “ill-gotten gain” (NJPS) or a “bribe” (RSV). It usually means “gain made by violence, unjust gain, profit” (BDB).⁵ The first time it is used in the Torah is when Joseph’s brothers sold him to the Midianite traders as a slave.⁶ When we see this term used in the narrative of *Yitro*, is a connection being made back to this event? Certainly, able leaders in the community of Israel were not to accept such monies. The

³ BDB, 54.

⁴ H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 641.

⁵ BDB, 130.

⁶ “Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit [*betza*] is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood?’” (Genesis 37:26).

Apostle Paul warns Timothy about the dangers of loving money, and the corruption that many fall into by coveting it:

“But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. But flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance *and* gentleness” (1 Timothy 6:9-11).

Rather than pursue money, Paul encourages his readers to instead pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. These are all attributes of a leader who can be responsible for the children of God.

Restoration of Divine Order

In this day of restoration, how important is it that we should follow the model of leadership that was recommended by Jethro and established by Moses in the wilderness experience? Through the judgment he had as he surveyed the Israelites, Moses discerned who was capable of handling the different levels of responsibility. Some were given responsibility over thousands, and others responsibility only over hundreds, fifties, or tens. Each individual, however, had to be godly. The magnitude of responsibility was most likely a by-product of age and experience. Today, these same principles should be applicable.

The Apostolic Scriptures give us further requirements for those who should serve in the Body of Messiah. Should we not be even more careful as to who are elevated to positions of leadership in the local body? If we are mindful of these examples, we will be less apt to make the tragic mistakes of elevating people who are not qualified. Too often, this is the primary problem in much of the contention that has surfaced in the Messianic community. Too often, I have witnessed people who have—through the force of their personality—self-anointed themselves to be the leader of a group. When you really take a serious look at their qualifications, you realize that often they do not comply with Jethro’s guidelines, let alone the more specific admonitions of the Apostles. Is there any wonder why the emerging Messianic movement is frequently plagued with strife, contention, and division?

Perhaps if we went back to the basics of Divine order as described in this week’s reading, we would begin to minimize many of the problems inherent with poor, unqualified leadership. Moses certainly listened to the wise counsel of his father-in-law and implemented a leadership model that has stood the test of time. But lest we forget, as one takes on more and more responsibility in the Body of the Messiah, the individual does not “climb” the proverbial ladder, but rather descends further down in the pyramid that continues to rest on the shoulders of Yeshua. As you get closer to Him, the Servant of all, you realize that it is by your service to others that you descend down deeper to where all the muck of life floats. Down there, closer to Yeshua, you not only sense His presence, but you require it in order to handle the greater responsibility you have been entrusted.

There is a funny thing about working your way to the top of the spiritual heap. In the end, according to the Biblical model of leadership, you actually end up on the bottom, serving in your capacity as a servant of the Most High. You learn the simple axiom that through service you lead. You see that you are being conformed to the image of the Messiah, the Servant of servants, and you realize that the Divine order that you had in your mind is really upside down. And somehow, in His infinite wisdom for your life, you learn how to serve, no matter how low you sink in the funnel-shaped pyramid. You begin to understand how to navigate all of the “stuff” that settles down at the bottom through the fruit of the Spirit. Somehow, because you are walking by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit, all of the junk does not seem to affect you as much as it did when you were further from the apex. Perhaps it is the increased pressure, but eventually you realize that His Divine Order is really right side up rather than upside down. Or maybe you finally see it because you are just getting closer to the radiance of the light emanating from His shoulders, upon which you rest.

May we all reach for the bottom—to Him who is life eternal!

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