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### Yitro: Lessons for Modern Leadership

The major event in today's Torah portion is Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, yet the portion is not called "the ten commandments" nor even "Moses." It is named after Moses's father-in-law, Yitro (Jethro). It should be noted that no less than 13 times in the portion Jethro is identified as Moses's "father in law." 13 times in only 27 verses. This appears to be done with great reverence. Compare that with the jokes of late night comedians in January about the news that the mother-in-law of the President of the United States would be residing in the White House. While this would be a great opportunity to make a mother-in-law joke, I know better..

Jethro is credited with helping Moses shape a judiciary. But there is so much that we can learn from the dialogue between Moses and Jethro about the importance of effective leadership and the traits of great leaders; and that perhaps, in part, may be one reason why Jethro's name is honored with the title of this Torah portion.

If you walk in the Barnes & Noble in Blue Back Square and head toward the service desk and look to your right you will find rows of shelves containing books and guides about modern leadership. There you will find such books as:

*Leadership 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know*

*Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Danger of Leading*

*Good to Great: In the Social Sector!*

*Everything I Know about Business I Learned at McDonald's: The Seven Leadership Principles That Drive Break-out Success.*

And my personal favorite title: *Death By Meeting: A Leadership Fable About Solving the Most Painful Problem in Business.*

Following the recent elections in the United States and in Israel, voters chose among candidates based not only on substantive issues but also on who they thought would be a more effective leader and exercise good judgment especially in uncertain and difficult times. Leadership in the financial and commercial world has also been under special scrutiny as we question why and how some of the brightest minds made serious mistakes that led us into the current financial crises. Many have asked why did these particular leaders fail: what went wrong? Where were the deficiencies? How can we do better?

Many of you have taken on leadership roles here at the Emanuel and beyond these walls. So whether you are a member of our Board of Trustees, take an active role on one of our committees or you are a lay leader involved in Brotherhood, Sisterhood or Minyonaires, you own a business, volunteer at other Jewish or secular nonprofit organizations, you are a professional, you are a member of the clergy, or a teacher, or you are the head of household, there is much to be learned about best leadership practices from today's Torah portion, specifically the dialogue between Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro.

I think just about everything we need to know about effective leadership can be found near the beginning of today's Torah portion in only 14 verses (18:13 - 27). So if you are interested in leadership you can skip the latest leadership bestseller, and save \$29.99, just study Yitro.

In recent weeks we have followed Moses's journey in leading the Israelites out of Egypt – from slavery to freedom -- and his personal journey from a reluctant leader to an effective, albeit rookie, leader of a community.

In today's portion, Jethro sends word to Moses to let him know that he will meet up with Moses and bring along with him Zipporah, Moses's wife, and his children. Upon arrival, Jethro hears first-hand about Moses's success over many hardships and how God had delivered the Israelites out of Egypt and into freedom. And Jethro praises God and then Jethro, Moses, and Aaron do what all good Jews do -- they eat a meal together.

The next day is Jethro's first opportunity to observe Moses in his leadership role. He watches as Moses presides as judge in hearing disputes between members of his community. Moses sits in judgment "Min ha-boker ad ha-evev" (from morning until evening) while the people stand in line waiting –the first true judicial backlog. When Jethro sees the gigantic task and enormous responsibility that Moses has assumed and his less than respectful treatment of the people, he asks Moses,

**“What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning to evening?”**

Moses answers the question directly not fully recognizing Jethro's observation and concerns.

**“It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God.”**

While displaying an emerging ego, Moses could have then abruptly ended the conversation, by adding something like – ***And besides, I am Moses. Didn't I just tell you about the hardships I have overcome and how I worked with God to deliver the people from Egypt? I spoke to God. Don't you see their reverence for me as a judge and all that I accomplished?***

No, instead, Moses exhibits one of the most important traits of great leaders: humility. Moses is a classic example of what Jim Collins in his book Good to Great, calls the highest, most successful form of leadership, *Level 5 leadership*: a leader who builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the goal of building a great company, or in Moses's case, a great community. It's not that Level 5

leaders have no ego, they do and Moses's ego was growing. But their ambition is -- first and foremost -- for the good of the institution, not for themselves.

As we celebrated Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday this week, we are reminded that he was one of the few Level 5 Presidents in U.S. history: self-effacing and modest; he never let his ego get in the way of his primary ambition for the larger cause of creating a great, enduring nation, and like Moses, a champion of freedom through the strength of his personal will.

It was Moses's humility that allowed him to accept Jethro's constructive criticism about Moses's less than favorable treatment of the people. Moses trusted Jethro and continued to engage in the conversation.

Unsatisfied with Moses's lack of awareness of the big picture, Jethro is pretty blunt with Moses. But he not only offers criticism in a non-judgmental way, he suggests a plan of action: He says:

**“The thing that you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you can not do it alone. *Now listen to me.* I will give you counsel and God be with you! .... You shall (also) seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill gotten gain, set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds,**

**fifties, tens, and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but have them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by making them share the burden with you. If you do this - and God so commands you- you will be able to bear up: and all of these people too will go home unwearied.”**

In that short passage, we can cull out five guiding leadership principles that Jethro offers to Moses (maybe we can call it Yitro's 5 commandments?).

- (a) Show respect for the members of the community;
- (b) Do not exceed one's own physical limitations or risk compromising effectiveness;
- (c) Do not try to succeed alone; delegate responsibility to others and share in the burdens of leadership;
- (d) Find other leaders who (i) are capable; (ii) fear God; (iii) are trust worthy and who spurn ill-gotten gain.
- (e) Establish priorities because not all tasks merit the same level of attention.

But Jethro was also providing with Moses an overriding leadership lesson. Step outside of your ministerial role, see the bigger picture. See beyond the narrow confines of your day-to-day tasks. Find a greater vision for the community, one that might be more successful. In this case, have more than one judge –Moses—who could convey

the laws to the community. Do not be overly dependent on one leader so that succession is likely.

Here, Moses exhibits another important trait of effective leader: an ability to listen to constructive criticism from someone he trusts. Moses must have recognized that it was easier for Jethro to see how Moses's actions were not fair to the people he was judging and his approach was not one that was physically sustainable . He needed to do what Jethro did: get up on the balcony and observe and listen to what is happening in the community.

And **“Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he said”**

So we learn from Jethro's advice and Moses's reaction to it:

Leaders should be humble and their ambition should be for the community first.

Leaders should be open to listen to constructive criticism from trustworthy sources.

Leaders should periodically step back and get on the balcony to learn how to best serve their community

Leaders must be open to, and embrace, change when necessary.

Leaders must convey an appropriate vision for their community

And lastly, leaders should strive to delegate responsibility to capable individuals as no one leader –whether you are Moses or Abraham Lincoln -- can be successful alone.

Shabbat shalom