

D'rash on Yitro
February 15, 2025
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Yitro is one of the most fundamental parshas in the Torah; it includes Jethro's advice to Moses about setting up a system of judges, and of course the Ten Commandments. It is also in many ways odd and disorienting, and even unintentionally humorous. I'm always a little amused at the brief description of Moses telling Jethro about the departure from Egypt. It's as if Jethro says, "What's new?" and Moses says, "Well, we had the Exodus."

There's also all the choreography around Mount Sinai, which is so convoluted that even G_d gets confused. And the portion ends on an anti-climactic note with perplexing references to cherubim and altar stairs. To me, all of this somehow both humanizes the Torah and reminds us of its strangeness – important elements that can be lost if we just look at the best known passages, like the Ten Words themselves.

But that's not what I want to talk about this morning. What struck me reading Yitro this time were the opening passages. We learn that Jethro has brought Moses' wife and two sons to Sinai; they were with Jethro during the escape from Egypt. It is only a fleeting mention, and Moses' sons are not referenced again in the entirety of the Torah. We are reminded for a brief moment that Moses has a nuclear family and then the Torah quickly moves on.

Why are his wife and sons mentioned here? I can think of a few reasons. In terms of plot, it gives a reason for Jethro to show up, which is what the Torah is actually interested in. It also perhaps humanizes Moses – and reminds us that he is a human leader – at the moment when he might seem most other-worldly and omnipotent, closer to a deity. Perhaps it helps underscore the notion that everyone was present at Sinai. And/or maybe the mention of the sons is here now so we notice their absence later – to emphasize that there is no direct lineal succession from Moses. That, too, may be part of the Torah's many efforts to ensure that no cult of Moses developed.

But intentionally or not, I think the momentary reference to Moses' family also raises broader questions about family and leadership.

To what extent is it appropriate for a leader to involve, or sacrifice his or her family as they pursue their larger goals? To what extent should leaders mold their families to understand, or pursue their work? To what extent should we judge or try to understand leaders based on how they treat their families and how their families behave?

Maybe one reason these questions came to mind when I read the parsha this time is that I just taught the Ibsen play "An Enemy of the People" in my Georgetown class, as I do every spring. I won't go into it in any depth here. It deals with a doctor who is run out of his community after discovering that the local baths – the heart of the town's economy – are polluted and causing visitors to get sick and die. In many ways, it's a more interesting and complex play than Ibsen intended. But one issue in it is whether the doctor should be more circumspect and restrained in order to protect his family, and his wife – in some ways the play's most interesting

and emotionally resonant character – moves from wanting to shield their children to supporting her husband and his view that the children must learn to fight for what is right.

That always reminds me of a *New York Times Magazine* article I read some 40 years ago about the Solidarity movement in Poland. The writer, John Darnton, was interviewing Solidarity leaders about a police raid when they had been rounded up late at night. One of the intellectuals said that he was so glad his children were asleep when he was arrested, and one of the working class leaders responded, “I woke my children up.” He wanted them to witness what was happening. Both understandable and very human approaches, if very different.

These days we also often use glimpses of a leader’s family life as a way to understand what kind of person they are – though that may or may not be wise, and can just devolve into gossip. But I do always remember something Walter Mondale said one of the years that he decided not to run for president, which I thought did provide some insight into him. Asked why he’d decided not to run that time, he said something like, “To think you’re the only person in the United States qualified to be president requires a kind of arrogance that, well, if I saw it in my children, I would spank them for it.” Very Minnesotan, perhaps; certainly from a bygone era.

So what do we take from this passing reference of Moses’ family? Why is it here? What does it make us think about in terms of how leaders should treat their families, and what we try to derive from leaders’ family relationships?