

D'rash Yitro 1/18/14

We often start d'rashes by saying that this is a rich parsha, but that seems especially superfluous with Yitro. I will say, though, that, like many monumental events – real or mythical – the giving of the Ten Commandments seems stranger, more extraordinary and harder to comprehend the more you examine it. When I gave a d'rash on this parsha a few years ago, I talked about how strange the moment of receiving the Commandments is – how none of the pieces fit together; how no one at all seems to be listening at the moment when G-d is speaking – but today I want to focus on the material bracketing the Decalogue itself.

It's interesting that the portion includes what it does; the rabbis could just have made this week's portion the Ten Words, but instead the story begins with Jethro – even though that seems out of sequence since it happens at Sinai – and the portion even takes Jethro's name. Why is this lead-in material so important that it has become inextricably linked to the Commandments? And why does the portion not just end once the Commandments are given?

First, I have to say, the opening is rather funny, presumably unintentionally, with its combination of normal niceties and world-changing events. The surface is just a greeting and exchange of formalities between Moses and his family after not having seen each other for a long time. The exchange between Moses and Jethro is pretty much: "Good to see you. How are you? What's new?" "Oh, we were freed from Egypt and G-d split the sea for us and drowned the Egyptians." "Oh, that's great. Let's eat." This does at least capture the difficulty of fitting historic experience into daily life, which is perhaps a good way for us to warm up for the story of Sinai.

But there's more here. First, this is the first time the story of the exodus is being told to someone who hasn't experienced it – and in that sense, this is the first seder, moreso than the one the Israelites hold before even leaving Egypt. Jethro (and Moses' wife and sons) are, in a sense, the first people to receive the Passover story as we do.

But the real significance of this moment for the Torah is Jethro's reaction. He hears the story of the exodus and exclaims that G-d is greater than all other gods (18:11). I think it's this validation of our story and its moral by someone who is basically an outsider, a pagan priest, that *we* are supposed to hear. It's as if we need to know that someone other than us thinks this story is amazing and that G-d is all-powerful before we're ready to hear the Commandments.

Next comes the section on judging. Another odd piece. First, it seems strange that this is in the text before the giving of the Commandments. But judicial systems can be put in place before actual laws. Article III of our Constitution precedes Congress passing any legislation.

But why does it need to be Jethro who recommends this system? It's clear why no Israelite should recommend it – they rely on Moses, but also the suggestion to delegate power could have been read as a way to take power from him – a bad idea; think how Aaron and Miriam are treated later when there's even a hint of that. But why couldn't G-d just tell Moses to delegate? Or why couldn't Moses decide that for himself?

Here, too, it seems important to the text that the idea come from an outside validator (the first consultant?). And the heart of the idea is really the need for human judging from people with no special claim to G-d, even if the law is divine. It's as if before hearing the Ten Commandments delivered by G-d, we have to learn, from Jethro, that it's okay to have a human system of judging that doesn't all connect directly to G-d. Jethro's system means that we don't need to hear directly from G-d or Moses to have a functioning legal system. The outsider thinks that's okay.

So, Jethro's story apparently tells us things we need to know before we're prepared to hear the Ten Commandments. But then what happens when the Israelites hear them – because, the parsha, as I noted, doesn't end with the telling. The Israelites (who, interestingly, don't have the benefit of overhearing Jethro's conversations) are scared; they don't want to hear from G-d, they want to hear from Moses. And then there's this extraordinary and, to me, somewhat baffling exchange. The people ask Moses to speak to them and Moses answers (20:17) “Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray.”

In some ways, this seems like the world's greatest non-sequitur – Don't be afraid because G-d wants to test you and to make you fear Him. I'm not sure how to make sense of this; maybe it means “don't be afraid right now of this spectacle, the real issue and your real fear should be about how you live the rest of your lives.”* But the interesting thing about this scene to me is that it's included at all, and in this parsha – that the immediate reaction to hearing the Ten Words is fear and confusion. All the spectacle that G-d works so hard to create and that the text works so hard to convey in some ways has the opposite of its intended effect, at least in the moment.

And so where does this leave us? It makes me think about an important tension between the text and the subtext. The text is all bombast and confidence and absolutes, but the subtext is all uncertainty and fear and a need for outside reassurance. And the parshiot are divided up to make sure we hear both, at the same time, in a portion named for Jethro. We hear this even as we're told we're going to be different from everyone else – “a kingdom of priests” – and are given the absolutes of the Commandments.

A need for outside validation can be dangerous – “peer pressure” in today's parlance – but maybe this text shows that such a need is unavoidable and maybe not entirely unhealthy when considering major undertakings. If nothing else, it certainly complicates the already remarkable story of Sinai.

So, I'd like to open it up to discussion of how people make sense of these tensions in the way the Sinai story is given to us. Thanks.

* My interpretation is prompted by Norman suggesting, in the Torah discussion that maybe this passage means that the Ten Commandments are a test, and we're going to fail, but we're not going to die from that, we're going to keep on trying and failing.