

## Parashat Yitro

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Drash by  
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*Jeff Bernhardt and I worked on this together - thanks, Jeff.*

Earlier this week I was at conference of women rabbis. It's a very nurturing and very scary place to be. Nurturing to be with people who do similar work, with whom I have so much in common, many of whom I love, and scary to hear and to say how hard the work is and to see how, the moment we are in a safe setting, we all find ourselves easily on the verge of tears a lot of the time. I think I've stayed that way all week, even when the setting wasn't so safe. That can be hard.

Our old friend, Rabbi Janet Marder, addressed the gathering one evening. As current and first woman president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the largest association of rabbis in the world, our dear Rabbi Marder, who was BCC's first rabbi, could be said to be the highest ranking woman rabbi in the world. Not bad for a rabbi who was told - oh so many years ago now -- that if she became the rabbi of BCC she could kiss her career goodbye.

I think probably standing up here is as far as I'm going to get in following in her footsteps!! But I am always glad to be in her presence. And I am glad to have gotten this far in following her, and to sojourn here at BCC for so long.

She spoke, among other things, of a book she had read that she said had nothing to do with being a rabbi except the title. It's called *The Fortress of Solitude*. And she began to talk about how many rabbis she knew, including herself, seal themselves off in various ways - how else could we do what we do? Being with people in so many times of sorrow and stress and pain, and trying to be a presence of comfort and strength and gentleness. Being with people in moments of their happiness, when we ourselves might not be. No wonder rabbis burn out, she thought aloud, or wall themselves in.

Of course it's not just rabbis who might fit that title, *Fortress of Solitude*. In this week's Torah portion, poor ol' Moses, who some people call the first ever rabbi, also found himself sealed off. The Israelites - newly freed from slavery in Egypt, only

recently having walked across the sea on dry land, but before they receive the 10 commandments and all God's other suggestions for communal living -- the Israelites have parked themselves in the desert and are awaiting instructions for what to do next. Into the midst of this nervous crowd comes Yitro, Moses's father-in-law, a Midianite priest himself, come for a visit and to sing praises of the God of Moses, who had delivered his son-in-law and the Israelites so miraculously out of slavery. Yitro goes to work with Moses the next day and sees a sight that appalls him: "Moses sat to judge the people. And the people stood by Moses from morning to the evening." [Exodus 18:13] Yo, Moses, says Yitro, "The thing that you're doing isn't good. You'll be worn out, both you and this people who are with you, because the thing is too heavy for you. You won't be able to do it by yourself." [v.17-18]

And you thought our 24/7 work weeks were something new? At least, perhaps, Moses got Shabbat off. Remember those billboards for that Jewish website called AskMOSES.com? You could write in and ask questions of a real live rabbi, in smaller print it said - "available 24/6."

Anyway, proving himself a master of corporate design, and a real CEO mentor, Yitro told Moses the secret: delegate, delegate, delegate. He instructed Moses to find worthy people: who fear God, who tell truth, who hate bribery, and to set these people as chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens. Let them sweat the small stuff, Moses, said his father-in-law, "and they'll bring every matter that is big to you. And make it lighter on you, for they'll bear it with you. If you do this thing, and God will command you, then you'll be able to stand up, and also this entire people will come to its place in peace." [18:21-23]

Of course it's not just Moses, and not just rabbis, and not just you who get caught in these kinds of traps, who begin to think of ourselves (whether consciously or unconsciously) as indispensable or irreplaceable- and sooner or later, of course, it turns out we're neither indispensable nor irreplaceable - in fact, it often turns out that suddenly people can't wait to dispense with us and replace us, and that we can't wait to be dispensed with and replaced! Oh ouch. I hate when that happens.

Centuries ago already, the Torah put forth these lessons - taught to us by an outsider, by Yitro (Moses, after all, didn't marry an Israelite) - lessons too often ignored in this day and age - how did that happen? Among the lessons being taught are these: everyone needs help, no one can do it all (and certainly not all alone); that we usually need to ask for help if we're going to receive any help; and the lesson that people don't tend to offer assistance to people who look like they can do it all - or who look like they think they can do it all; the lesson that it's not only

okay to ask for help, it's vital, it's life preserving.

And it's a gift we can give one another - two gifts really - for it goes both ways: asking for help is a gift we give others - it gives them something to do at a time when they might otherwise feel helpless, it allows them to know the joy of helping someone; and asking for help is a gift we give ourselves - reminding us we are only human, reminding us that human beings are meant to live in community, showing us that it feels good to receive help, allowing us to unseal ourselves, to take down our walls, to dismantle our fortresses of solitude.

On Sunday morning some of us are gathering for a planning meeting - to revive and refresh our bikkur cholim committee - the committee charged with the communal mitzvah of visiting the sick, of trying to help those in need in our community. If you are not already planning to be there and would like to be, please see me after services and I'll be happy to give you details. Bikkur cholim is just one way we as Jews, as human beings, stand ready to help others, invite others to ask for help.

I say as human beings because we've, sadly, seen very often lately how quickly human beings do reach out to others caught in some sudden and unexpected drama....trauma:

The tsunami victims the victims of storms closer to home

The passengers on LA's own commuter rails earlier this week

The stories not only of courage, but also of interdependence, told by survivors of Auschwitz this week, as the world commemorated the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The liver transplant, that our dear friend Dan Saunders, partner of Bill Fields, received this week. El na rafah na lo. Being an organ donor, by the way, is a simple way that we can all give, even when we are no longer alive.

The community near and far that has gathered around our friend, and past BCC president Marie-Jeanne Lambert, as she and her partner Sandy Rubenstein face Marie-Jeanne's diagnosis of breast cancer. Their friend and BCC member Ginger Jacobs has flown back east to be with them in Philadelphia where they live now.

The arms circling our newest member - baby Sonja - as her adopting mothers, Debby and Rachel, took her to the mikvah yesterday, having already flown to the other side of the world to get her.

The hands on act of restoration that we're all invited to engage in here on March 20th, as we each lovingly restore a letter to a passage of our Holocaust Torah, readying it so that we might read from it from now on, every Yom Kippur morning. Among the verses we'll restore is this one: I have set before you life and death...choose life, that you may live. [Deuteronomy 30: 19?]

You get my point. You get Yitro's point. You get God's point, and you get the message that Moses himself had to be taught - we need help, each of us, and we help, each of us - as we are able - that's how we know we're human beings, clever creations of a God who works in subtle and mysterious ways.

Shabbat shalom.