

The Priests of Inclusion

Yitro 2018

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

A couple of months ago I had occasion to be in Houston, Texas. On the plane ride home I struck up a conversation with the fellow sitting next to me. When I told him I was a rabbi he shared with me that he was a very active member of his Jewish community in Houston. In fact, he was excited to tell me that the name of his business is Tikun-olam-usa. “Tikkun Olam?” I said. “What business are you in?” To which he said, “Medical marijuana.” I asked if he had a card. He said no. His clients are in Israel.

I don’t actually want to talk about medical marijuana this morning – although I suppose the topic could make for a provocative derasha. But I share this story with you because it captures a sentiment to which I want to return in a few moments.

The character of Yitro is *sui generis*. Moshe has only one father-in-law. And it would be difficult to imagine any other person filling his role and actively changing the trajectory of Moshe’s leadership in the Torah.

And yet a close reading of the text reveals that the story of Yitro is strikingly similar to a story of a character we met many moons ago – another outsider who appeared on the scene and gave direction to a great Jewish leader.

The character I have in mind is Malkitzedek. Remember the story: In the aftermath of the war of the four kings against the five, the king of Sodom approaches Avraham and proposes that they divide their spoils. And just at that moment, out of nowhere, a man called Malkitzedek appears with bread and wine. He praises God and reminds Avraham that the true source of blessing in the world is none other than Hashem.

The parallels are too conspicuous to ignore.

- Both Malkitzedek and Yitro are described as priests. Malkitzedek is a כהן לאל עליון; Yitro is a כהן מדין.
- Both utter blessings of Hashem. Malkitzedek says ברוך אל עליון. Yitro says ה' ברוך.
- Both talk about being saved from the hand of the enemy: מן צריך מידך says Malkitzedek while Yitro says אשר הצילו מיד מצרים.
- And both break bread with the respective Jewish leader in the narrative.

So the question is why? What does the Torah hope to accomplish by casting Yitro as a new incarnation of Malkitzedek?

Based on an essay by Judy Klitsner, what I’d like to suggest is that the cases in which they intervene represent two poles of a spectrum. In the grand scheme – in the great continuum of people in need – Avraham and Moshe are opposites.

Avraham came from nothing. He had to make his own way in the world. He led a life of trial and tribulation. Nothing was ever handed to him. If ever there were a person who could benefit from guidance or help, it was him.

Moshe's story couldn't be more dissimilar. He grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth: The biological child of princes and the adoptive child of a princess. He had the pedigree and the upbringing of a natural leader. By the time he assumed the role of Moshe Rabbeinu, we would have expected that he needed next to nothing more.

And so ever so subtly, the Torah insists that there is no one who can't benefit from the advice and wisdom of an outsider.

Had Avraham not had Malkitzedek, he could have fallen into the trap of the Sodomites. In a world of paradigmatic takers who ascribed victory to themselves, Malkitzedek reminded Avraham that Hashem is the source of our success and our mission is to be givers.

And had Moshe not had Yitro to teach him about the wisdom of sharing the yoke of leadership, who knows how long he would have been able to sustain his utterly unsustainable model.

We take for granted that these heroic leaders of ours were successful. But in an alternate reality absent the influence of external forces they could have been utter failures

The literary and thematic parallels between Malkitzedek and Yitro conspire to create an invaluable lesson: Whether a person comes from nothing or comes from everything, there will come a moment in life when he will need help.

It's with this in mind that I would suggest we can understand one of the most iconic lines in our parsha. What does it mean to be a ממלכת כהנים – a kingdom of priests? What's a Kohen? Think of the Israelites in the moment that they hear these words at the foot of Sinai. There's no temple; there's no mishkan; what do they know about priests? And what does it mean to have an entire nation of leaders? Doesn't someone have to follow?

To be a ממלכת כהנים is to be a nation of Malkitzedeks and Yitros. To be a priest is to be a minister – to attend to the needs of someone else: To offer help or support or relief or comfort at a moment they may not even realize they need it.

I'm thinking about this message this morning for three reasons:

First, as we launch our 100 acts of chesed campaign, it's a reminder that opportunities for chesed abound. For 100 years our Center has been a bastion of all kinds of chesed. Join our 100 acts of chesed challenge and join the spirit that's coursed through our institutional veins for 100 years.

Second, as you'll hear more about in a moment, every year at this time we ask you to support Hatzolah of the West Side. What a blessing to live in a community where I know that at any moment – if there's an emergency – there's a group of volunteers who will drop everything and

devote all of their time and attention to my well-being. The work of our Hatzolah volunteers is extraordinary and we should support them in every way that we can.

And finally, in this second half of our centennial, part of our goal is to lay out elements of our vision for the next 100 years. What will be our communal priorities? What are the issues in which our membership is going to take a leading role?

I don't think it would be too bold to say that issues pertaining to inclusion certainly have to be near the top of our list. We have to recognize that there are people who don't yet feel welcome in our community and we have to do more.

We think of chesed in terms that are entirely too narrow. Beneficiaries of chesed don't need to be on the street or in a crisis. Our job is to be כהנים – to minister to the needs of all people. Sometimes those needs will be economic; sometimes they'll be emotional or social.

From Avraham to Moshe – there's no such thing as self-sufficiency. Each of us has a blind spot or a predisposition or an anxiety or a disability or a special need. Some of them are obvious and some of them are less so. But rest assured there is no one among us not in need of something.

And so when we talk about inclusion, we have to mean something more than hosting a Yachad Shabbaton. We don't get to put in a little effort or a little money once a year and check a box. Inclusion means the creation of an ongoing ethic – a culture that welcomes and embraces every kind of person and allows them to be their best Jewish selves.

We should be proud of the fact that

- That our building is handicap accessible
- That we have large print siddurim and chumashim for the seeing-impaired
- That we partner and support organizations like Yachad and Ohel
- That our kids are so comfortable with children of all backgrounds and abilities

But there's so much more than we can and should be doing.

We'll talk more about this down the road, but I invite you to join me in thinking of what we can do in these next 100 years to become leaders in the industry.

Everyone wants to see themselves as improving the world. Sometimes we just need to improve ourselves – and the rest will follow.