

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

YITRO

(Yitro) Moshe's father-in-law said to him: 'What you are doing is not good. You will wear yourself out...' (18:17-18).

Moshe listened to his father-in-law, and did all as he said. (18:24)

Yitro, the text relates, observed the pressure Moshe was under in dispensing justice to Am Yisrael. He accordingly advised him to delegate responsibilities. Routine matters would be dealt with through a judicial hierarchy composed of eligible worthies. That would free Moshe to focus on major issues, and in consultation with the Almighty (c.f. Bamidbar 9:8) when necessary. And the Torah tell us that Moshe duly listened to his father-in-law and carried out his recommendations.

Yet Moshe does not give Yitro a single mention when recalling the establishment of that system in the parallel text some 40 years later (D'varim 1:12-18). Why then, did Moshe accept his father-in-law's advice? And having acted on it, why did he not give credit where credit was due?

In response, though the Torah tells us that Moshe followed Yitro's advice, Abarbanel explains that he did so only superficially. There were subtle, but

very meaningful differences. Yitro urged that the judges should be from anshei chayil - as Rashi explains, men with wealth. In contrast, Moshe would ultimately open these positions to anyone who could fulfil them: "Choose for yourselves wise men, who are known as such" (1:13). Then Moshe insisted that they be chachamim, people of wisdom - not just people of integrity as Yitro emphasized. One may add that Moshe stressed: "listen between the litigants and judge honestly" (1:17). Being able to properly listen is a very rare quality, especially when 'in too much a hurry' and 'have seen it all before'. It was the crucial quality that Moshe insisted on, not Yitro. The virtues emphasized by Yitro of being G-d fearing, honest, and untainted by greed were all important, but they would be ineffective by themselves in the absence of wisdom: knowing how to listen, and perceptively and sagaciously read the situation.

It is the capacities to listen carefully, read a situation for what it is, and apply wisdom honourably and sincerely in the knowledge that "the judgement is G-d's" (ibid.) that takes us a lot further than Yitro suggested to Moshe. Thus Moshe accepted Yitro's advice as far as it went, but he went very much further by extending the pool of choice for judges on one hand, and by greatly tightening the requirements for judges on the other.

Both were needed to make the system as fully effective and as Torah-compatible as possible. Without chochma - wisdom, the system would be worthless. And that chochma was entirely G-d's. As declared: "For it is G-d who gives chochma" (Mishlei 2:6).

Perhaps also this helps to explain why straight afterwards "Moshe sent his father-in-law away" (18:27). He honoured Yitro's effort as an outsider to associate with Klal Yisrael, and he wanted to make him feel good in doing so. Yet at the same time he saw that relations would inevitably conflict and sour were he to stay and find that Moshe didn't see and do things as he wished. So Moshe tactfully terminated the visit leaving Yitro the sense of goodwill that comes from having been taken seriously and listened to. 