

Parshat Yitro: A Love Story

By Joy Ladin

for Liz

The last time I was here at Isabella Freedman, I fell in love at first sight. That's not quite right. "Fell in love" makes love sound like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. What happened to me was the opposite. I felt myself falling up, out of the tunnel of my solitary self, into a presence that was simultaneously deeply familiar (though we had only known each other for an hour) and utterly strange – a presence that seemed to have been there all my life, waiting to be recognized and answered.

Despite the absence of queer women and Friday night dinner, Yitro reminds me of that night, because in this parshah, the Jewish people fall in love with God.

Not that Yitro presents itself as a love story. The desert setting, the thunder, fire, smoke and threat of sudden death, certainly don't create a classically romantic ambiance, and to set the mood, the Torah gives us a lesson in delegation of authority, as Yitro advises his son-in-law Moses to stop responding personally to each Israelite who, as Moses puts it, "come ... to seek God" (Ex 18:15) – a practice which has "the people [standing] by Moses from the morning until the evening" – and instead create a system of judges.

But every good love story needs a "blocking character," someone who comes between the lovers and makes it hard for them to meet, recognize and respond to one another. In this love story, the blocking figure is Moses. Moses' intentions are noble. Though he's a naturally solitary man (when God assigns him the job of leading the people of Israel out of Egypt, Moses indicates that he prefers to keep tending sheep), Moses spends all day and evening surrounded by those who "seek God," conveying questions and disputes to God and God's judgments to the people.

As his father-in-law points out, this is a terribly inefficient system for dispensing justice – but Moses, raised as a prince in Egypt, one of the great bureaucracies of the ancient world, hardly needed Yitro to suggest the idea of delegation of authority. Moses wasn't thinking about efficiency; he was trying to fill the gulf between Hashem and hundreds of thousands of people who hadn't yet learned to perceive God's presence and love – love not just for some collective "Israel," but for each of them. Though every Israelite had witnessed Cecil. B. DeMille-type miracles, as Moses knew, the plagues, the splitting of the sea, even the daily miracle of manna, hadn't taught them to pour out their hearts to God, to turn to Hashem with their quarrels and questions, to hear Hashem's intimate, answering presence sounding inside them. Moses had devoted every waking hour to ensuring that no one felt more than one degree of separation away from God.



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But even one degree of separation is too much for love. When people had questions or problems that prompted them to “seek God,” they ended up seeking Moses instead. God, after all, was distant, terrifying, abstract, while Moses was right there beside them, teaching them, guiding them – and inadvertently laying the ground for the sin of the Golden Calf by diverting the people’s craving for the Divine Presence toward a visible, tangible representative of God.

The Israelites needed Moses to lead and teach them, but that leadership and teaching couldn’t give them Moses’ intimate sense of Hashem’s presence – indeed, it may have made them feel more distant, shut out from a face-to-face relationship with God they could see but couldn’t share. As the Torah tells us, no one else ever has or will be as intimate with God as Moses. But the sense of God’s presence in our hearts and lives is the basis of the *halachah* God was about to entrust to the Jewish people, as we are taught by the famous midrash that explains how Abraham, centuries before Moses brought down the Torah from Sinai, was able to keep all the *mitzvot*: whenever Abraham acted according to *halachah*, his sense of God’s presence intensified, and when he didn’t, God seemed more distant.

For Abraham, keeping *mitzvot* was an intuitive expression of his love for Hashem. For Moses, as for Abraham, every question and problem – even those presented by others – inspires him to seek Hashem’s intimate, answering presence. But as long as the people could bring their problems and questions to Moses, their sense of God’s presence remained underdeveloped, because Moses satisfied the needs that would otherwise have driven them toward God.

Now we can see why the sublime events of this *parshah* are introduced by Yitro’s mundane bureaucratic intervention. Once Moses sets up the system of judges, he ceases to be a blocking figure standing between God and the people, clearing the way for the kiss that is the climax of every great love story – the revelation at Sinai.

Knowing that a nation of recently freed slaves won’t know how to prepare for a date with the Master of the Universe, God tells Moses to tell the people to “sanctify themselves” – and (timeless dating advice) to wash their clothes.

Moses, transformed from go-between into a matchmaker, who can’t resist putting in his own two cents. “Do not draw near a woman,” he adds, as though God was only interested in meeting heterosexual men and gay women. But everyone is invited to Sinai: male and female, gay and straight, foetuses staring through wombs that had suddenly become transparent, and every soul that ever had or would be joined to the Jewish people. Everyone is there, pushing toward the mountain, so hungry for God’s presence that volcanic smoke, earthquake and armed guards with orders to shoot on sight can’t keep them from crowding so dangerously close that God has to send Moses back down the mountain to reinforce the boundaries.



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This is, after all, a first date – and, metaphysically at least, the first recorded instance of safe sex.

Conversation is rather limited. Hashem does all the talking, and the people are so overwhelmed by meeting the God who is betrothing them that it's hard to tell how much we understood. Some commentaries say we heard everything, all the *mitzvot*, combined into a single superhuman utterance; some that we heard only the first one or two of the Ten Commandments. I hold with those who say that we heard only the very first word, *anochi*, "I am." That "I am" was all we needed, because, as the midrash about Abraham tells us, the sense of Hashem's presence contains the entire law within it, because every mitzvah grows from, leads toward and expresses that presence.

Like the words through which God created Heaven and Earth, Hashem's "I am" wasn't merely a symbol, a semantic sign pointing toward reality: it was reality itself, an act of creation, planting in each of us, in the deepest recesses of the souls that join us to our Creator, the intimate, inescapable sense of God. "I am," God said, to and through each of us; "I am," God is saying now, in a voice utterly strange and strangely familiar, waking us, summoning us, to love. "I am," God says, in every heart, at every moment, and because of that "I am," we are.

Shabbat shalom.



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