

A scant three months out of Egyptian slavery, the Israelites are continually buffeted between the dizzying heights of the miracles that continue to ensure their existence and the trials and tribulations of everyday life on the move through unfamiliar territory. And Moses, who has taken on the gargantuan, and highly unrealistic, task of being sole arbitrator of the people's disagreements, has unwittingly helped them settle into an unhealthy and potentially disastrous routine, as his father-in-law Yitro points out. Before teaching Moses about healthy leadership, Yitro, with Moses's wife and sons in tow and one simple sentence, offers some timely advice on what we today call work-life balance. "I, Yitro, your father-in-law, am coming to you, and [also] your wife and her two sons." (18:6) Midrash Mechilta de Rabbi Yishmael explains: "Do it for me; and if not for me, then come out for your wife. And if not, do it for her sons." In other words, along with your responsibilities toward the people, you still have family responsibilities, and you have sorely neglected them, ultimately setting a bad example for the people whose leader you are. As the many midrashim and legends about Yitro indicate, this erstwhile pagan priest has a long lifetime and a whole world of leadership wisdom to impart to Moses. And he wisely begins with juxtaposing Moses' roles as head of his family and leader of his people. The individual needs of the family members are far easier to meet than the multiple needs of an entire group of people, and Yitro finds Moses unable, or perhaps even unwilling, to transition to this new reality. Even doing his level best to equitably judge all the cases the people bring him, he is serving neither the people nor himself. The task has simply grown too large for one person to handle, and Moses must learn to delegate responsibility. "But you shall choose out of the entire nation men of substance, God fearers, men of truth, who hate monetary gain ..." (18:21) "Men of substance," אֲנָשֵׁי-חַיִל is a multifaceted term. חַיִל implies valor, strength, military might, and wealth. But these attributes must be founded on fear (awe) of HaShem (actually, the basis of all the attributes), scrupulous honesty, and strict resistance to bribery. Midrash Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael defines men of substance as wealthy men who do not have to flatter or show favoritism, and haters of monetary gain as those who are prepared to lose their own money in judgment. "If they "hate" their own money, how much more so (are they solicitous for) the money of others." Talmud Tractate Bava Batra 58b further explains: "Any judge who is summoned to judgment and money is lawfully taken from him is not considered a judge." People who sit in judgment of other people must be held to the highest standards, which means that anyone who has engaged in crime is automatically disqualified. The leadership prerequisites laid out by Yitro in everyday terms for everyday life are a real world encapsulation of the *aseret ha-dibrot* (Ten Statements, i.e., Commandments), which are the basis of our Torah, as well as the basis of many judicial and governmental systems today. Once again, Yitro models good leadership by prefacing his suggestions with a gentle admonition: "The thing you are doing is not good [*lo tov* in Hebrew]." (18:17) The expression *lo tov* appears only one other time in our Torah, "It is not good that man is alone ..." (Genesis 2:18). In this second creation narrative Adam, the first human, is the only creature with no peers, and thus no ability to procreate until he receives a mate. Digressing down a mystic rabbit trail, I marvel at the "coincidence" of the number 18 appearing both times. In Hebrew gematria, the practice of finding meaning in the numerical value of the letters that spell a word, *chai*, the Hebrew word for life, is 18: ח is the 8th letter and י is the 10th letter; 8+10=18. It is impossible for one person to be all things to all creatures at all times, and those who try – even if they succeed for a season or two – ultimately leave destruction in their wake. From the pharaohs to the inglorious parade of despotic autocrats throughout the ages, absolute power wielded by one individual has always culminated in immense tragedy and loss of life. In various midrashim Yitro is either a counselor or a magician in Pharaoh's court, which puts him in an excellent position to advise through experience. "You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people who are with you, for the matter is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." (18:18) The root בלה means to wear out, decay, wither, age, i.e. to lose interest in life. And we have seen how כבד, the word for heavy, pertains to Pharaoh's increasing stubbornness, which destroys all firstborn life and ultimately plunges him and his army to the bottom of the Sea of Reeds, leaving Egypt devastated. Moses cannot hope to represent HaShem to the people if he insists on judging the people's disputes by himself. There are simply too many people with too many issues for one person to handle with the equity expected of HaShem's people. The inevitable backlog of cases waiting to be judged will eventually bring out the worst in people desperate to have their cases heard. Corruption, inequality, and discord will destroy this nascent society before it has a chance to develop. It is noteworthy that the infrastructure of Yitro's judiciary system is in place before the events at Sinai, and equally remarkable that when Moses tells Yitro that in judging "between a man and his neighbor, I make known the statutes of God and His teachings (18:16) the word for God is *elohim*, not יהוה – HaShem. This word only appears when they reach the Sinai desert and Moses ascends the mountain to receive further instruction from HaShem. And with a viable structure in place to adjudicate worldly disputes according to the laws of *elohim*, i.e., on a level that people will understand, the Israelites are ready for the laws and precepts outlined in the Ten Commandments uttered by יהוה and transmitted by Moses to be enacted by the people and for the people. Yitro was indeed a wise man and Moses was wise to heed his advice.

Shabbat shalom!