

New Narratives for This Moment (Exodus 18:1-27)

Evan Traylor, CBE Rabbinic Intern

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Shabbat Shalom! Four months ago, on October 2nd, I made my way to the Upper West Side for a Sukkot event. I was gathering with other board members and supporters of Encounter, an educational organization that I've been blessed to serve on the board of for the last two years. Encounter's mission is to empower Jewish leaders to act courageously and resiliently on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to be a positive force in bringing this entrenched, brutal conflict to a peaceful resolution that supports the dignity of all people. I first became involved with Encounter when I traveled with them in 2019 to the West Bank for a four-day intensive with other North American Jewish leaders. Over the course of four days, we spent time in East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Ramallah hearing from Palestinian leaders in politics, education, business, and civil society. Our goal on this intensive was not to bring together North American Jews and Palestinians to somehow carve out a solution to the conflict.

Our goal was to listen. To listen to the realities of life for Palestinians living in the West Bank, to hear their pain, to hear about their hopes for their children. Our goal was to encounter them and their lives, and then take back those stories, those new narratives we heard, and bring them into our leadership in Jewish communities across North America.

And so on October 2nd, I was doing something very similar. Our group huddled together in a sukkah to hear from Mahmoud Muna, a Jerusalemite who goes by the “Bookseller of Jerusalem.” With his family, he owns and operates the Educational Bookshop in East Jerusalem, a bookstore and community center filled with books about Palestine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When I lived in Jerusalem for a summer during school, I would try to make it to this bookshop as often as I could, talking with Mahmoud and his family about which books to read next, trying to add new narratives to the ones I already had about that place.

On this day in the sukkah, surrounded by trees and vibrant decorations, Mahmoud shared with us his thoughts and feelings about everything Israel-Palestine at that time, a time before October 7th. We talked about the extremism of Israel's government, Palestinians feeling alienated from the ongoing protest movement, and expanding violence in the West Bank. Mahmoud, a Palestinian from East Jerusalem, was more than generous with his time, and had given all of us Jewish New Yorkers his insight and wisdom, a new narrative about Israel and Palestine. But bound up with that wisdom was relationship, the true gift of staying connected to one another.

In our Torah this week, we witness the power of relationship, especially with someone who is not an Israelite. Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, is a Midianite priest that we met earlier in the Exodus story when Moses escapes from Egypt. When Moses saves Yitro's daughters from a group of shepherds, Moses marries one of them, Tziporah, and joins their family. It is while tending to the community's sheep that Moses encounters the burning bush, beginning his return to Egypt to lead the Israelites to freedom. In our current Torah portion, named for Yitro, we are on the other side of the Sea of Reeds and will soon receive the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. But before that climatic moment, we get a glimpse into the Israelites trying to set-up a society.

מִן־הַבֹּקֶר עַד־הָעֶרֶב, “From morning to evening”, Moses would sit before all the people as a judge, deciding all kinds of conflicts that the Israelites were already having with one another. Seeing this system play out, Yitro provides some advice, a new narrative for how the Israelites could function: לֹא־טוֹב הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה: “The thing you, Moses, are doing is not right!” With enormous concern for Moses, Yitro explains: כִּי־כִבֵּד מְמֹךָ הַדְּבָר לֹא־תוּכַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדְּךָ: “For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.” Chizkuni, one of our commentators from the 13th century, notes that Yitro is really saying, “In my eyes, from my perspective as someone who loves you, but doesn’t know the Israelite people as much as you, the thing you’re doing is not right.” Upon receiving this unsolicited feedback, Moses has many options on how to respond, including with anger and rebuke. However, rooted in deep relationship and appreciating this new narrative that allows him more freedom, we read: וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה, “And Moses listened”. From there, Moses instituted Yitro’s new system of judgment and governance. A new narrative emerged from Yitro having a profound impact on Moses and the Israelites.

לֹא־תוּכַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדְּךָ

, “You cannot do it alone.” And yet, since October 7th, many of us have felt a sense of loneliness. Whether it’s intense disagreements with family members, feeling betrayed by close friends, or isolated from co-workers, the last four months have made many of us reconsider our relationships. It’s made us ask many questions: Why don’t they understand my pain? How do they not see things the way that I see it? Can our relationship overcome this argument? From these challenges in our relationships, we may have felt ourselves turning inward as well, maybe especially from people who aren’t Jewish. Maybe we’ve stopped talking to a friend or co-worker who didn’t understand how painful October 7th was for us. Or unfollowed certain celebrities on social media because of their hurtful posts. Or stopped engaging with organizations or supporting political candidates because of their reactions to that day.

This initial response, to turn inward, to distance ourselves from relationships, to not seek wisdom and understanding from people who aren't like us, makes absolute sense. And yet, as this war now stretches into February, it's important for us to ensure that we don't stay inward forever. We must find ways to listen, to partner, to engage, to find new Yitros, who bring us new narratives to help navigate this moment. Because the stakes are too high for us to not engage: day after day of the hostages still being held captive, Palestinians going without food or being killed, each day of this war is an absolute disaster. And, please God, when we've reached a negotiated end to this war, we will need new narratives and ideas and relationships to guide us into the future. We cannot do this alone; we must find the relationships and wisdom that help move us through this intense moment.

In a little more than 24 hours, I will be flying to Israel. I'll join other Encounter board members for 5 days of meetings with Israelis who have participated in Encounter programs, as well as our Palestinian partners in East Jerusalem; I'm hoping that includes Mahmoud from the Educational Bookshop. My goal for this trip is to listen as much as possible to more fully understand the situation there for both Israelis and Palestinians. To hear directly from them about their experiences over the last four months, and their ideas and hopes for what could come next to ensure the safety and dignity of all people between the river and the sea. I hope to bring their stories back with me, and to share them with you all here so we can continue learning through relationships. I hope to shake as many hands, to give as many hugs and pats on the back as possible. I hope to look as many people in the eye and say, "I see you. I see you in all your pain and hurt, as well as your hope for something better." I hope that in these small bursts of relationship that *they* know, they are not in this alone.

וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה, “Yitro said, Blessed be Adonai”, who delivered you and the people from the hand of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Baruch Adonai, Blessed be Adonai, God who loves all of their creatures. May all those in that holy land, and all of us who care deeply for that place and its peoples, witness an end to this war and a future filled with freedom, safety, and dignity. Shabbat Shalom.