

The Fine Art of Consulting Parashat Yitro

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A shepherd was herding his flock in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand-new BMW advanced out of a dust cloud towards him. The driver, a young man in a very expensive suit, Gucci shoes, Ray Ban sunglasses and Italian silk tie, leans out the window and asks the shepherd, "If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?"

The shepherd looks at the man, obviously a yuppie, then looks at his peacefully grazing flock and calmly answers, "Sure. Why not?"

The yuppie parks his car, whips out his Dell notebook computer, connects it to his AT&T cell phone, surfs to a NASA page on the internet, where he calls up a GPS satellite navigation system to get an exact fix on his location which he then feeds to another NASA satellite that scans the area in an ultra-high-resolution photo.

The young man then opens the digital photo in Adobe Photoshop and exports it to an image processing facility in Hamburg, Germany. Within seconds, he receives an email on his Palm Pilot that the image has been processed and the data stored. He then accesses a MS-SQL database through an ODBC connected Excel spreadsheet with hundreds of complex formulas. He uploads all of this data via an email on his Blackberry and, after a few minutes, receives a response. Finally, he prints out a full-color, 150-page report on his hi-tech, miniaturized HP LaserJet printer and finally turns to the shepherd and says, "You have exactly 1586 sheep."

"That's right. Well, I guess you can take one of my sheep." says the shepherd. He watches the young man select one of the animals and looks on amused as the young man stuffs it into the trunk of his car.

Then the shepherd says to the young man, "Hey, if I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me back my sheep?"

The young man thinks about it for a second and then says, "Okay, why not?"

"You're a consultant." says the shepherd.

"Wow! That's correct," says the yuppie, "but how did you guess that?"

"No guessing required." answered the shepherd. "You showed up here even though nobody called you; you want to get paid for an answer I already knew; to a question I never asked; and you don't know crap about my business

"... Now give me back my dog."

Consulting. My father tells me that when he was my age there were not many consultants. In fact, out of work or retired people were consultants. Today, many young people graduate college and become consultants. They get paid a lot of money to give advices to Fortune 500 companies.

[Story of my friend who is a consultant and our adventure when I joined him on the first day of his new job with McKinsey and Company in Chicago on Tuesday, September 11, 2001]

In this morning's Torah portion, Parashat Yitro, our people's preeminent leader is exhausted. Moses is making all of the judicial decisions for the people. He is hearing every single dispute, whether serious or inconsequential, and it is wearing on him greatly. It is emotionally and physically taxing. When his father-in-law Yitro, a Midianite priest, observes how Moses is handling his leadership role, he exclaims, *Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening? The task is too heavy for you and you will surely wear yourself out.*

So, acting as an "outside management consultant," Yitro gives some invaluable advice to Moses, urging him to reserve only the most important legal cases for himself, while appointing judges from among the elders of the people to rule on all other matters. Moses heeds his father-in-law's good counsel, putting the new legal system into practice; and in so doing, sets the Israelites on the right path toward becoming a nation. Our ancestors' journey toward peoplehood would not have been possible without Moses sharing the burden. Had Moses continued being the "be-all, do-all" leader of the people, where would we be today? It truly does take a village.

Yitro's message to Moses brings to mind Rabbi Tarfon's well-known teaching in Pirkei Avot: *Lo alekha hamelakha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimenah* – It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from the task. This mishnah is an important message that we cannot do it all ourselves. We need partners.

Kitchen cabinet. The Kitchen Cabinet was an informal group of unofficial advisers that U.S. President Andrew Jackson consulted in place of his official Cabinet. The primary members of this original Kitchen Cabinet were William B. Lewis, Amos Kendall, John Eaton and Duff Green, editors of the *United States Telegraph*. Also part of the group were Attorney General, Treasury Secretary, and future U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice, Roger Taney and Secretary of State Martin Van Buren, the most influential. After most of Jackson's cabinet resigned in the wake of the Eaton Affair the role of the Kitchen Cabinet was much diminished.

The phrase is used informally in modern times in reference to a President's or presidential candidate's closest unofficial advisers. Clark Clifford was considered a member of the kitchen cabinet for John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, before he was appointed Secretary of Defense. Robert Kennedy was considered a kitchen cabinet member as well as a Cabinet member while he was his brother's Attorney General. Ronald Reagan had a kitchen cabinet of allies and friends from California who advised him during his terms.

Behind every great leader—in fact, behind most successful individuals—you'll probably find at least one great advisor. Alexander the Great's tutor and counselor was Aristotle, ancient Greece's famed philosopher and scientist. France's King Louis XIII chose as his chief advisor Cardinal Richelieu, who became the architect of modern state government; and President Franklin D. Roosevelt benefited from the services of the great General George Marshall as well as the trustworthy Harry Hopkins.

Everyone needs a Yitro. Moses would not have been the leader that he was without his father in law's help and advice. Rabbis need advisors and kitchen cabinets too. None of us is beyond taking advice.

Shabbat Shalom.