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Yisro – Good is Great

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

"It came about on the next day that Moses sat down to judge the people, and the people stood before Moses from the morning until the evening. When Moses' father in law saw what he was doing to the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you sit by yourself, while all the people stand before you from morning till evening?" Moses said to his father in law, "For the people come to me to seek God. If any of them has a case, he comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and I make known the statutes of God and His teachings." Moses' father in law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not good. 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. Now listen to me. I will advise you, and may the Lord be with you. [You] represent the people before God, and you shall bring the matters to God (Exodus 13-19)."

Yisro made the journey from Midian to come and join the Jewish people as they traveled through the desert to the Promised Land. The reunion was emotional. Moshe greeted his esteemed father in law and was reunited with Tzipora and their sons. But by the next morning it was back to business as usual for the Jewish leader. He sat in judgement, resolving the disputes and disagreements of the nation. Yisro saw this "one-man show" and told Moshe that such a system was unsustainable, "you can't do it alone." Yisro advised Moshe to set up a court system. Moshe accepted the *mussar* and the suggestion.

But why did it take Yisro's observations and suggestions to address this issue? The problem was obvious. One man (even Moshe Rabbeinu) can't serve as the sole judge for an entire nation. The solution was seemingly straightforward and obvious; create a judicial framework. Why didn't Moshe realize this idea on his own? Why was Yisro's prodding necessary to bring the Judaic judicial framework into existence?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994) provides an incredible insight. Moshe received the Torah with incredible understanding and spiritual luminescence. This was a result of having it transmitted directly from God to him. This level of clarity is called *re'iah* (literally - *sight*). Moshe understood the Torah with the clarity of someone who had seen something with his own eyes. The Jewish people didn't receive the communication directly from God, instead they chose to receive the Torah from Moshe (after the first two commandments). Their understanding was through the mechanism of *shmiah* (*listening or hearing*). Moshe wanted to convey the Torah to the people with the clarity with which he received it. His experience was the pinnacle of spiritual perfection and he wanted to share this experience with the people by adjudicating their cases, settling their disputes and teaching them through the prism of his clarity. He wanted it to be **perfect**. Yisro tells him, "my beloved son-in-law, your intentions are so good and pure. But if it is perfection you seek, *navol tibol gam ata gam ha'am ha'zeh* (you will surely wear yourself out both you and these people who are with you). The goal can't be perfection, the goal must be 'good.'" As the French author Voltaire wrote, "The perfect is the enemy of the good." Perfection is rarely achievable and if by some miracle it is achieved, it cannot be sustained. "Moshe, you will ruin yourself and the people if you pursue the 'perfect.'"

Yisro's judicial framework idea was not new and novel to Moshe. Moshe must have thought about it many times. But in Moshe's mind, the idea of a judiciary framework that was "good" but not "perfect" was not acceptable. Yisro came along and explained – the pursuit of perfect will run you and the nation into the ground.



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Who is correct? Do we pursue “perfection” or “good?” At the end of the day, Moshe accepted Yisro’s advice and established a system of judges and courts. This “dispute” is something we struggle with each and every day. We all want perfect. We want a perfect marriage; we want perfect children and we want a perfect career. We want our friends to do exactly what we need when we need it and for life to follow our predetermined, chartered course. And when desires and aspiration don’t materialize perfectly, we become frustrated and upset. The goal should never be perfection. The goal is great (or even good depending on circumstance). If I expect a perfect marriage – that requires a perfect spouse. There is no human being who can deliver in that way. If we expect perfect children, we are setting them up for failure. If we wait to take advantage of life’s opportunities until the perfect one arrives, we will miss out on all the great opportunities which present themselves every single day. If we expect perfect results from ourselves, we become disillusioned, aggravated and ultimately, give up.

Perfection is alluring but not realistic. We must resist the temptation of perfection and embrace the good, great and excellent. Moshe was fortunate to have a Yisro to whisper in his ear. We are privileged to have a Torah which lights our way. May we find the strength to see the goodness in our loved ones, the greatness in our opportunities and the beauty in ourselves.