When Nations Choose Good Over Evil



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The whole beginning of Sefer Bamidbar prepares us collectively and individually to this special moment when the Torah says: "These are the travels of the children of Israel according to their hosts; and they traveled" (Bamidbar 10:25).

Suddenly then, we have an interaction between Moshe Rabbeinu and his father-in-law Yitro. (Here he goes under the name Hovav.) Moshe urges and appeals with this priest of the Midianites that he should travel with them, and that he and his descendants will be given a portion of the land. Yitro politely declines the offer and says that he needs to return to his home—where he belongs. To this Moshe responds that he is extending this offer not only for the sake of Yitro, but that it would be beneficial for the Israelites in their journey. So, this is what we would today call "a win-win situation."

The Torah leaves us up in the air regarding the outcome of this interaction. However, we do know that part of Yitro's family known as the Rechabites and Kenites travelled with the Israelites to the land and received their portion of the land.

According to our Druze brothers, Yitro himself must have accepted the offer, because he is revered as the forefather of the Druze in their tradition, the Kenite shepherd, a priest of Midian who assisted his son in law Moshe and the Israelites in their journey through the desert, and he is buried near Tiberias, which is a holy place for all the Druze in the world.

The one basic Midrash about Yitro that has always intrigued me is the Aggadic reference to the three great non-Jewish prophets who act as advisors to Pharoah. Pharoah needs to decide what to do with the Israelites—if he really should kill their new-born boys. One prophet Bilaam says to him: Go along with this evil plan. Yitro, according to the Aggadah, is seen in a heroic light. He strongly opposes the whole plan and therefore immediately needs to flee. The third prophet Job, who could have been righteous like Yitro, decides to stand by and abstain—thereby being guilty by omission.

The commentators debate whether this meeting of advisors could have actually taken place. The discussion is strengthened by the Rambam's statement that Job never really existed, which must lead us to the conclusion that the midrash wishes to teach us about three archetypes:

1. Bilaam the wicked—who was killed.
2. Job the bystander—the indifferent who was punished with afflictions in many ways worse than death.
3. Yitro—who was merited by his descendants sitting in the Sanhedrin.

Yitro's archetype leads my thoughts to one of the very few beacons of light during the Shoah, which I believe also can be an important message to all of humankind, as well as to us in Israel and the Jewish people today. For me this is also a personally important story because it is the reason that I am alive and can write to you this *Parashat Shavua*. My thoughts go to the rescue of Denmark's Jews in October 1943. The German occupation of neighboring Denmark had been less cruel than in most of the places, and the Danish government, under certain restrictions, was allowed to continue to function. One of the conditions from the side of the government was that the small Jewish community of 7,700 Jews would not be touched or discriminated against. Many stories have been told about this period. Actually, the true stories are more powerful than the fictitious ones.

In the summer of 1943, the Danish underground escalated their efforts against military installations of the occupier, which eventually led the Danish government to resign. On August 29, leading personalities in Denmark—including the leaders of the Jewish community—were arrested, and many felt that it was just a question of time before something bad would befall the Danish Jews. On Tuesday evening, September 28, there was a knock on my grandfather's door and a woman, sent by the former ministers of the government, told him that they had been tipped by the German Marine Attaché, Georg Duckwitz, that the Danish Jews would be arrested the following Friday night, and deported to camps on the continent. The order had come from the leaders in Berlin and needed to be followed. This was the week of Rosh Hashana, Rosh Hashana being Thursday and Friday, immediately followed by Shabbat. Early Wednesday morning was a relatively well-visited week-day service because of the special *selichot* the morning before Rosh Hashana. My grandfather, the acting Chief Rabbi, stopped the services and told the around 100 men assembled, what was to happen. He said that everyone should get out the message to as many Jews as possible, that this information was fully reliable, that people should go into hiding with non-Jewish friends, and that under no circumstances should anybody be at home on Erev Shabbat, Friday night.

No phones could be used as they were likely to be tapped, but the snowball was rolling, and an unbelievable number of 95% of the Jews were warned in such a short time, and went into hiding with non-Jewish friends and acquaintances. Hundreds of thousands of Danes were involved and became heroes overnight, willing to risk their lives for their fellow-Jewish brothers and sisters. My grandfather, his wife, and four of their children—including my 14-year-old father—went into hiding with a priest, about 100 kilometers north of Copenhagen. When this hiding place where they were offered to stay throughout the war became too dangerous, they moved to hiding in the south, where they finally could find a route to cross the sea to neutral Sweden. My family's relief, after much turmoil, to walk on solid ground and be received with open arms in Sweden cannot be described. They were refugees, they had nothing with them: no possessions, no money, nothing besides the clothes on their back and my father succeeded in bringing with him a math book and his tefillin. They were, however, the one pro mille of Jews who had been saved not by individual righteous among the nations, but by a righteous nation who would not be bystanders when their fellow citizens, in this case Jews, were at risk.

I was born a decade later. But the story of the rescue and the way the Danish Jews were received back in Denmark was a constitutive story in my upbringing. Much later in life I had the honor and burden of becoming a Cabinet Minister in the Israeli government. One day, a brilliant legal expert, former Supreme Court Justice Gavriel Bach, came to my office unannounced, sat down and began a conversation. Bach was one of the two prosecutors at Adolf Eichmann's trial in 1961. My uncle, Werner David Melchior, was a witness at this trial.

Bach asked me if I fully comprehend why the prosecution wished to have my uncle as a witness, telling the story of the rescue of Danish Jewry. On the face of this testimony I could not add to the case.

To understand this fully, you need to understand Israel in 1961. Most Israelis were not concerned with, did not know about nor even speak about what happened during the Shoah. The survivors were silent. The only ones mentioned were the fighters in the ghettos. This was for sure for the young generation that grew up knowing nothing about the darkest chapter in Jewish and human history. And then came the trial. Witness after witness came forward disclosing what had happened in the ghettos, in the concentration camps and in the death camps, and how Eichmann was a key figure in organizing the "Final Solution." Schools, universities, and workplaces, young and old were glued to radio transistors from morning to night, listening to the horrifying stories of the survivors.

Gavriel Bach said to me: We were afraid for our young generation. Having heard about the Nazis and all their collaborators this generation could be led to believe that when people have a choice, they will always choose evil or indifference, to be silent. Therefore, the testimony about the Danish story was so crucial for us. We needed to tell, especially the young generation, that people always have a real choice, like the Danish people collectively chose good, even when their lives were at stake. I might add to that, on a certain level, this also strengthened the prosecutors' case against Eichmann who claimed that he was "just following orders." Besides the falsehood of the facts of that statement there is no such thing as just following orders. We always have a real choice.

Today, too, we can choose to be a Bilaam, a Job, or a Yitro. Jew or non-Jew, Yitro showed us how to stand up and be willing to risk your life for others. It is so understandable why Moshe Rabbeinu would want him at his side.