

*D'var Torah*  
*Parashat Yitro*

**Rabbi Michael Stanger**  
**Old Westbury Hebrew Congregation**

Like many Americans last week I was tuned into President Barak Obama's State of the Union address, as he spoke live, before both sessions of Congress, the Justices of the Supreme Court, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, his Cabinet, and what appeared to be just about every other Washington insider within twenty miles of the Beltway. And as far as how the President spoke, and what he said, some I liked, some I agreed with, some I am not sure about, but one thing I was very glad for as I watched him address so many politicians, law makers and leaders in one room, and watched the myriad of reactions that his speech elicited –I am sure glad that I don't have his job right now!

And speaking of leadership –this parasha is a veritable field manual for leadership in the trenches. At the outset of the Sedra, Moses' father in law, Jethro, the Priest of Midian, has traveled to the Israelite camp to reunite Moses with his wife and children, and as a result he is warmly received. The very next day Jethro proudly watches his son in law at work, and is horrified by what he sees ---Moses as solo judge over all the people –hearing and deciding all the cases by himself –an exhausting and unwise process! And

Jethro states as much: *“The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well! For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone...”*(Ex 18: 17-18) The Rabbinic commentators have pointed out that not only would the unilateral approach that Moses has put in place overburden him unnecessarily, but it would prove to taxing for the Israelite citizens as well. By having to potentially stand in line morning until night, they would lose faith in Moses and the whole legal system, and attempt to settle (or worse yet, not settle) their claims out of court –this could lead to feelings of confusion, feuding, vengeance and even vigilantism. Jethro then wisely advises Moses to delegate, appoint additional magistrates to preside over several courts that would convene simultaneously in order to decide the smaller cases, and only having the largest and most baffling cases brought to Moses –a system not dissimilar from our own, with smaller courts, district and state courts, appellate divisions, and finally the Supreme Court to rule on matters of law.

Fittingly, this parasha also contains the monumental event of the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai –first the Ten Commandments, then additional laws and provisions, in fact according to rabbinic belief all 613 commandments of the Torah, plus the Oral law was handed down at this time. And the connection between the two events is obvious: God saw the

need for all leaders, not just Moses, but those whom were delegated with responsibility, to have a system in place to turn towards for guidance. As Americans we have the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, as Jews we have the Ten Commandments and the Torah. In other words, there is the legal system in place, and then there are those who are entrusted and enacted to both interpret and carry out the laws, helping to govern our system and keeping it ever ethical as our society advances.

Now in the case of our country, and our President, and the tough job he has in front of him, I would like to argue that just as in the case of Moses, it is not his role alone to govern the people, and our country towards advancing us out of the economic malaise and political challenges we currently find ourselves mired in. We all must do our part, from communicating and cooperating with our elected officials, to standing on that line when necessary, making sure that our voices are heard. Either we complain, or we connect –one may be easier to do than the other, but one can have a far more gratifying effect than the other. From our country to our community to our school to our synagogue, from the macro to microcosm, we must involve ourselves, in a positive way, if we want to effect better change. And we should look to the laws already in place for proper guidance as to how better our society, and ourselves, in the process!