Hugs and Kisses: Thoughts for Parashat Yitro

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Yitro

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"And Yitro came with his [Moses's] sons and his wife unto Moses into the wilderness where he was encamped at the mount of God; and he said to Moses: I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her. And Moses went out to meet his father- in-law and bowed down and kissed him, and they asked each other of their welfare, and they came into the tent" (Shemot 18:5-7).

Moses had left his family for an extended time to go to Egypt to liberate the Israelite slaves. Upon his return, his father-in-law, together with Moses's wife and sons, came to greet him. The Torah's report of the reunion is jarring. Moses greeted Yitro, bowed and kissed him…but there is no mention of Moses greeting or kissing his wife and sons. The men went off to a feast and Moses's wife and sons vanish from the scene.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167, Spain), in his Torah commentary, notes that Moses was simply following the usual protocol of those times. When respected high-ranking leaders met, they did not get wives and children involved.

Others have suggested that Moses had a strained relationship with his wife and sons. The Torah specifically describes Gershom and Eliezer as *her two sons*, rather than *his two sons.*

Yet others have opined that Moses must have had a warm reunion with wife and sons but that public demonstrations of affection are generally omitted in the Torah. The narrative is interested in Moses's relationship with Yitro, not with Moses's personal life with his family.

One line of Midrashic interpretation points in a different direction. Moses was so busy leading the Israelites that he had little time to devote to his family. His public responsibilities were overwhelming. His spiritual relationship with God was lofty and all-consuming, leaving him little emotional strength to cope with everyday family life. It must have been very difficult to have been Moses's wife or children.

In the book of Judges, we are told of a battle by the tribe of Dan in which they conquered a town in the upper Galilee and installed a cult with an idol to be led by "Jonathan son of Gershom son of Menashe

and his descendants" (Judges 18:30). The name Menashe is spelled in the text with the letter Nun above the line. Without the Nun, the name Menashe is Moshe i.e. Moses. It has been suggested that in fact this idolatrous leader Menashe was a grandson of Moshe/Moses, but that the Nun was added to shield Moses's good name from that of his idolatrous grandson.

It is shocking to imagine that Moses's own grandson could have been an idolater and there is no actual proof that this was the case. But the Midrash is pointing to a larger issue: if parents do not give enough time and devotion to their children and grandchildren, negative results may ensue. If even Moses, the greatest of all prophets and teachers, failed in his family responsibilities then any of us could face the same consequences.

It has been said that no one on their death bed says they wished they would have spent more time at the office! People tend to regret that they devoted so much time and energy to their work and social obligations that they shortchanged their own families. We need to put our lives in perspective: our responsibilities to our families must be prioritized. Even if our other responsibilities are very important, we must always make as much quality time as possible for our loved ones.