The Priests that God Seeks

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Rabbi Uzi Weingarten teaches a weekly no-charge class, via Zoom, titled "To Walk with God: An exploration of the moral and spiritual teachings of Tanakh." The class is open to all, Jews and non-Jews. It meets Sun evenings at 7:30 PM, EDT, and repeats Tues evenings at the same time. He can be reached at uziteaches@gmail.com

THE PRIESTS THAT GOD SEEKS
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An interesting aspect of the Jethro account is where it appears in the Torah. Already in the
Talmud, some sages claim that although the story appears here, it actually occurs after the
giving of the Ten Commandments.

It is quite acceptable in the Jewish tradition to posit that the Torah's accounts are not
sequential. The Talmud teaches that "there is no 'earlier' and 'later' in the Torah" (Pesachim
6b). Applied here, even though the story of Jethro appears before the Ten Commandments, it
could have happened later. The question we do need to ask is: why does this section appear
here if it actually occurred later?

It seems to me that this story, in addition to everything else that it teaches, serves as an introduction to the Ten Commandments and the other laws and statutes that follow, and here is why. Jethro is introduced as “the Priest of Midian” (18:1). In the next chapter, God calls the Israelites to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6). But what kind of priests are we called to be?

Our ancestors, like much of the ancient Near East, were heavily involved in animal sacrifices, believing that this was the preferred form of worship. Upon hearing the call to be “a kingdom of priests,” they may have imagined that they would be officiating at the altar. Some of them may have even been delighted at this prospect.

God, however, has other ideas. One of the great innovations of the Hebrew Prophets is that animal sacrifices are NOT the worship that God prefers. This polemic against animal sacrifices, and certainly against their centrality in worship, is a core theme of the Prophets.

To quote one of the better-known of these teachings:

Shall I come before [God] with burnt offerings, with year-old calves?...
He has told you what is good
and what does God ask of you:
ONLY
To do what is just and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:6, 8).

In this week’s portion, one way the Torah makes this point is by not including animal sacrifices in the Ten Commandments. They are mentioned only in the postscript (20:21-23). The Decalogue itself--“God’s covenant” (Deut. 4:13)--does not contain a word about sacrifices. This was quite a revolution.

Another way our portion focuses people on the essence of serving God is by redefining the
meaning of ‘priest.’ The Torah does this by placing the account of Jethro, priest of Midian,
immediately before the call to become “a kingdom of priests,” even though chronologically it
might have happened later. That is because Jethro models how a priest ideally behaves.

Jethro sees people waiting long hours to get to Moses’s court. Since “justice delayed is justice
denied,” Jethro intervenes to correct the situation. He sees people in distress—litigants waiting
in line all day, Moses shouldering an unbearable load—and acts to alleviate their suffering.
Jethro is practicing Micah’s first two principles, “to do what is just and to love kindness.”

When he offers advice, Jethro does so with wisdom and humility. Even though he knew that
there was only one solution, namely, for Moses to delegate, Jethro listens first, asking Moses
why he is doing things in this way, and only then offering his ideas. And even then, Jethro
advises rather than commands. He does not insist on Moses taking his advice, but rather tells
him to consult with God (See Exodus 18:19 and Rashi there; compare this to Rebecca

‘commanding’ Jacob, Genesis 27:8). This is Jethro practicing Micah’s third principle, “to walk
humbly with your God.”

By placing the account of Jethro’s visit immediately before the invitation to be “a nation of
priests,” the Torah illustrates the kind of priests that God calls us to be: people who act with
wisdom, justice, compassion and humility. And this kind of priesthood does not require an altar
in Jerusalem. We can practice it at any time and in any place.

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