



## Re'eh

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### ***Sustainability in the Headship: Lessons from Calev and Yitro***

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Late one evening in April of 2020, I got a panicked call from a parent at my school who is also a close friend. “Rabbi,” she said, “the pre-school parent chat is blowing up. They are starting a petition to demand a refund. The chatter is nonstop.” It was the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and tensions were already high; the last thing we needed was a parent coup. Reflexively, I took the chatter personally and reacted defensively.

In my heart, however, I knew that they had a point. These parents were paying tens of thousands of dollars for education and child-care, and suddenly neither was being offered to them optimally. Their

perspective was totally justifiable, whether or not I agreed with it.

The problem, of course, was not in the message but in the messaging. I became defensive instantaneously upon hearing the word “petition.” It wasn’t their request, per se, but rather the public nature that was so grating. It felt like a provocation rather than a partnership.

Fortunately, through a series of transparent and honest conversations, we were able to land on a resolution that felt fair and just to everyone. My happy ending, however, was not a given. I have been blessed with an incredibly strong relationship with both my board and my community, which has allowed our school to thrive. But, as both a head of school and a coach for new heads, I regularly hear peers identify board-relationships as the foremost source of

stress and burnout. As a community, we need to consider this relationship and what we can do to ensure its success.

Fortunately, I believe that two recent *parashot* offer a paradigm for functional governance, as well as a warning about the perils of dysfunction. Our community would be well served to take this advice seriously.

In consecutive *parashot*, we learn about dramatic, coordinated efforts to challenge Moshe's leadership. In *Parsahat Shelach*, the *meraglim* (spies) conclude that entering Israel, the ultimate promise guiding Bnei Yisrael's journey, is untenable. In *Parsahat Korach*, Korach challenges the very morality at the heart of Moshe's leadership. In both cases, there exists a counter-example that identifies a similar problem, but offers a framework for a radically different resolution.

Much can, and has, been said about the spies leadership failure. Perhaps their report went beyond the scope of their original assignment, and, certainly, they failed to have faith in G-d's ability to navigate the difficult terrain. Beyond this, however, their failure was quintessentially a failure to support their leader, even in the most difficult times.

Understanding the spies leadership failure from this perspective requires a close read of the text. In Numbers 13:18-20, Moses instructs the spies to inspect the land. In verses 21-25 they appear to follow his instructions, and in verses 27-29 they seem to deliver a mixed report. Nothing until that part appears particularly remarkable, until, in verse 31, after Calev's impassioned dissent, they proclaim: **"We cannot go up against this people, for they are stronger than He!"**<sup>1</sup>

While that seems to be a damning report, one defined by a lack of faith in God and Moshe, realistically it was a response to Calev, who followed their initial, somewhat unemotional, recap. Certainly they could have had more faith, but they could equally be praised for their willingness to offer an honest assessment.

I believe, however, that their greatest failure occurred in an easily missed word in verse 26: "They brought back a report to them **and to the entire community**, and they showed them the fruit of the land." Here they engaged in what I like to now call *WhatsApp Advocacy*.<sup>2</sup> Under the guise of looking out for the whole community, they amplified a problem. They gave Moshe no chance to assess, or discuss with G-d. They went public, and created pandemonium. They could have pulled Moshe aside and expressed their unbridled

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<sup>1</sup> An alternate translation is "for they are stronger than we."

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, there was no actual WhatsApp in the desert. I refer to it as WhatsApp advocacy due to its similarity to

contemporary examples where individuals use WhatsApp to popularize their cause, rather than speaking directly to people in positions of authority, similar to the example offered above.

hesitations. Instead, they went to the entire community.

Yehoshua and Calev react to this pandemonium. They insist that the Israelites can prevail, but they never directly disagree with the spies. Had the spies nurtured a closer relationship with Moshe, one built on trust and cooperation, perhaps Calev and Yehoshua would have seconded their hesitations. But once there was communal shock, they understood that their role was to stand by their leader and support him. Perhaps privately, they, too, told Moshe about the giants, but publicly they supported him and prepared to fight with him.

We can see this dynamic even more strikingly if we compare the stories of Yitro and Korach. Both Yitro and Korach challenge Moshe to adopt a more democratized model of leadership.

Yitro asks Moshe (Shemot 18): **“What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why are you alone seated, while all the people stand around you from morning until nightfall?”** Korach similarly asks, **“You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire community—all of them—are holy, and God is in their midst. Why do you raise yourselves above God’s assembly?”** Why is one to be celebrated, and one disdained?

Korach had made sure to gather 250 people around him. He wanted attention. He didn’t want to fix the problem; he wanted to be the hero. Yitro, on the other hand, conducted his conversations

privately. There is no mention of anyone besides Moshe or Yitro. They spoke, person to person.

My teacher, Judy Klitsner, writes that “the biblical sequel, which is often subversive in nature, takes the original story back to its beginnings. It then challenges the very premises on which the story is built and reworks many of its conclusions.” If Yitro is Korach’s subversive sequel (or prequel), and Calev is the sequel to the meraglim, the message is clear: support does not mean forgoing pushing a leader. Support means doing so, but from a place of trust, faith, and partnership.

In his new book, [\*10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People\*](#), David Yeager powerfully echoes this point. He describes the power of what he calls “the mentor mindset.” The mentor mindset, as opposed to what he terms the enforced or the protector mindsets, is one that still challenges another person, but does so with a deep commitment to their success. It simultaneously validates and holds accountable. Though Yeager’s research focuses primarily on interactions with younger people, I believe the stories of Yitro and Calev exemplify how it is true of adult leaders, too. Leaders will falter when they experience enforcement in the absence of protection, or protection in the absence of enforcement.

These are not stories of blind obedience opposing thoughtful challenges. These are cases of supportive feedback opposing public shaming. These are stories about how we must push our leaders, but we must do so from a place of love

and support. If we can internalize this message, I believe we can transform sustainability in the headship.

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### **Legal Fictions: A Narrative Reflection on Yevamot 16:6<sup>1</sup>**

*Dovid Campbell is the creator of NatureofTorah.com, a project exploring the Torah's role in revealing the moral beauty of the natural world.*

**Legal Fictions** is a new creative project that explores how Mishnaic law shapes human experience and provokes deep existential questioning. Through the lens of storytelling, it seeks to deepen readers' appreciation for the wisdom, beauty, and complexity embedded in the Mishnah's implicit worldview. Readers interested in supporting or contributing to the project are warmly invited to contact the author.

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<sup>1</sup> "One of the most striking features of the Torah — and of the Judaic heritage generally — is insufficiently commented on, namely its combination of law and narrative. ... Why then does the Torah contain both? The answer goes to the heart of the Judaic enterprise. Law is not, for Judaism, a series of arbitrary rules even though it comes from God himself. Nor is Judaism a matter of blind obedience — obedience, yes, but blind, no. Law is rooted in history and cosmology. It reflects something other and older than the law itself. It speaks to us out of the heart of the human situation."

— Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [Covenant & Conversation: Numbers](#) (Maggid, 2017).

"Most legal texts tend to favor a single literary form or a small set of forms. These texts thus implicitly advocate a single position along the spectrum from narrative to apodictic approaches to law. The Mishnah, on the other

"And there was **another incident in Tzalmon**, a city in the Galilee, **where a particular man said: I am so-and-so, son of so-and-so. A snake bit me and I am dying. And they went** and found his corpse **but could not recognize him, yet they went** ahead and **allowed his wife to marry** based on what he said in his dying moments."

— [Yevamot](#) 16:6; Steinsaltz translation and commentary

These nightly walks through the hills of Tzalmon had become essential for Yosef, the last strong thread in a life quickly unraveling. The distance seemed to quiet the ghosts of all the things he could not mend. Just one step up the hill, and his wife's barbed words, sharpened by hunger and frustration, began to lose their edge. Another step, and his children's pale lips and plaintive eyes faded like figures in a fog. If he walked long enough, he could almost return to the life he'd once imagined, before poverty had claimed his family's happiness and his tattered self-respect.

hand, is one of the few legal texts that actively and aggressively mixes literary forms. This creates an open dialog between the various approaches to law. The Mishnah insists that law must emerge both from fundamental universal principles and at the same time from the idiosyncratic demands of a particular case relating to specific people and a particular time and place in history."

— Moshe Simon-Shoshan, [Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah](#) (Oxford University Press, 2012), 227.

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That night, Yosef found himself on an unfamiliar hill. He stepped around brambles and loose rocks, unable to find a path in the deepening darkness. His wife's voice was still with him: *I had so much more before I met you!* Yosef began to walk faster, and then, suddenly, he felt fire. He jumped and scanned the ground, certain he had stepped on a smoldering coal. But he could see no embers in the dust, only the thin shadow of a long tail, disappearing beneath a rock.

The searing pain rapidly gave way to numbness as the venom traveled up his calf. Yosef stumbled to the ground. His leg felt like wood, and his diaphragm began to spasm as if something had been cut loose inside him. He was stunned by how quickly it was happening, but he felt strangely unafraid. The creeping numbness felt almost like slipping into a bath, the warm water climbing towards his chest.

He stared up at the sky, where the stars were beginning to swirl in undulating rhythms. His mind was unusually clear, his entire reservoir of memory pried open to his conscious mind. Yosef was surprised by what rose to the surface. It was not his childhood in a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem, where his father had been a successful carpenter. Nor was it the day his father had been murdered on the road by bandits, and Yosef was forced to enter the family business, with little success. It was not even the day he arrived in Tzalmon, when the locals greeted the young carpenter with enthusiasm — an enthusiasm that quickly waned once his poor craftsmanship became known.

What he remembered was the day he finished building their new home. Yosef had blindfolded his young wife, then pregnant with their first child. He led her carefully into the tiny structure as she laughed and felt her way along the warm clay walls. The roof had not yet begun to leak, and sunlight poured into the room through a well-placed window, illuminating his wife's face. She removed the blindfold and turned slowly around. *Do you like it?* Yosef asked. Her eyes filled with tears as she wrapped her arms around her husband. *I feel like I have everything,* she whispered. *I really do have everything.*

And with the memory came a painfully lucid realization. He was dying, here, where the wolves and ravens would certainly find his body before his townsfolk could. His wife would be left an *agunah*, a woman incapable of remarrying because her husband's death could not be confirmed, and there was nothing Yosef could do to save her.

It had become almost impossible to swallow, but Yosef somehow forced the saliva down his throat. There was one chance, he realized, but it would require him to free himself from the numbing waters that had enveloped his body. Yosef closed his eyes. He could still feel his wife's arms around him, the morning sunlight warming his back. Somehow, Yosef rose to his feet.

He looked down at the small village of Tzalmon, a few fires illuminating the otherwise empty valley. The fires twisted and swirled just as the stars had, and Yosef wondered whether he was actually gazing at the heavens or the earth. But it no longer

mattered. Drawing all the breath he could, Yosef shouted into the night:

**“My name is Yosef...**

**...son of Dan!**

**A snake has bitten me, and...”**

Yosef swallowed hard.

**“...and I am dying!”**

Below, in Tzalmon, two young men heard the ghostly voice booming out from the darkness. They assembled a search party in the morning, but it was two days before they found the body, mangled by animals and decay. The case eventually reached the ears of the generation's great rabbis, who permitted Yosef's wife to remarry based on her husband's dying words. She married a wealthy tailor within the year.

One day, the tailor said to his new wife, “My dear, would you like me to have your old home repaired? If we fixed the roof, we could use it for guests. Or storage. I'm sure you must still feel some connection to the place.”

“Oh,” said his wife, considering. She looked around her new home. It was well-lit and beautifully furnished. Her three young children had eaten a full breakfast, and they now played happily on the floor. She turned to the window, where the sun was just rising over the surrounding hills, and

began to pick at her sleeve until a thread broke loose.

Over the years, Yosef's abandoned home sank quietly into the flourishing village of Tzalmon.

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