

Mental Health Shabbat
Parashat Yitro (Exodus 18:1-20:23)

We hope that you will consider using the wisdom of *Parashat Yitro*, read on Mental Health Shabbat, to discuss the theme of self-care.

As we trudge towards the 2-year anniversary finish line of life with COVID, mental health statistics emerge that reflect a profound impact on our minds, bodies, hearts, and souls. Depression, suicidal ideation, and anxiety have all increased among adults and adolescents, and nearly 25% of those with a mental illness report an unmet need for treatment.

Self-care, how we care for our own physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs, is an important way that we can exercise choice, self-love, and action at a time when many feel isolated, fearful, and a loss of control. Engaging in a self-care routine has been clinically proven to reduce or eliminate anxiety and depression, reduce stress, improve concentration, minimize frustration and anger, increase happiness, improve energy, and more. From a physical health perspective, self-care has been clinically proven to reduce heart disease, stroke, and cancer. Spiritually, it may help keep us connected with our higher power as well as a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

The following passage from *Yitro*, provides an opportunity for thoughtful reflection on self-care, intervening to help, and empowering others. Ideas for relevant concepts embedded in the wisdom of the text appear italicized, in parentheses next to the text. Additional questions at the end can be incorporated into your remarks or afterwards.

Yitro (Exodus 18:13-23):

“Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. But when Moses’ father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” (*Yitro - choosing not to be indifferent to suffering; taking action by intervening*). Moses replied to his father-in-law, “It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God.” (*Moses – feeling responsible; taking on too much; the importance of the task becomes more important than his wellbeing and those who he serves; heading for compassion fatigue and burnout*).

“But Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “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.” (*Stress management - taking on too much is “not right”, neither for you nor those in your care; self-care as an essential practice in caring for others; how can you lighten the load?*) Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be

with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied.” (*Delegate, empower others by sharing responsibility; use the metaphor of putting on your own oxygen mask first in an airplane before helping others; ask for and accept help; why does Yitro say to Moses that “God so commands you” to share the burden?*).

Like Moses, have you ever found yourself taking on too much?

- Why do we take on too much?
- Does the impulse to “do” provide a sense of meaning and purpose in our own lives?
- What thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes contribute to the impulse to take on more when we are already stressed?
- How do you discern the difference between doing and contributing and doing *too* much? What are the clues that you are doing too much? What did Yitro observe that led him to intervene?

Why didn’t Moses ask for help until Yitro intervened?

- Do you sometimes feel resistance to asking for help? Why or why not?
- What role does humility play in asking for support and help?
- Why does “God so command (Moses) to share the burden?” *Yitro* (Exodus 18:23)

Are the values in each of the 10 Commandments supportive of mental health?

- Consider each of the 10 Commandments and how each supports an aspect of mental health. For example, Thou Shalt Not Kill teaches restraint and discernment in managing anger; Thou Shalt Not Covet invites us to explore feelings of envy. Both anger and envy can lead us to impulsive, destructive, and harmful behavior directed at ourselves and others.

What actions and activities restore and replenish you?

- What do each of those activities share?
- Engaging in recreation supports mental health and wellbeing. When does recreation become re-creation?