

D'var Torah on Parshat Yitro

By Erica Frankel, Wexner Alumni Institute, February 3rd, 2026

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I'm eleven years old.

My family is wrapping up a visit in the small log cabin of my parents' friend, Patrick McMurray, outside Arlee, Montana. It's 10pm, and there are maybe two or three homes within ten acres. We step outside into an all-encompassing darkness — just us, the dirt path, and a canopy of planets and constellations.

Our own cabin is a five-minute walk away. As we prepare to head out, Patrick nods to my parents and says casually, "Let me put on my shoes so I can join you. As they say in Liberia — **we carry our strangers halfway.**"

At the time, I don't think about how unusual it is that an Irish-American man in rural Montana is quoting West African custom. After all, this is our family tradition. It's not as much about hospitality as it is about *chevra*. Of course you don't let your people disappear into the dark alone.

Fast forward fifteen years.

I'm twenty-six, fording a river with my family in a carved wooden canoe in coastal Liberia. We're headed to Grand Cess, a village where no one knows we're coming and no one is expecting us. The last time my mother lived here, more than thirty-five years ago, there were no cell phones. There has been no advance notice. We are hoping that someone might remember her from her Peace Corps service decades earlier.

We step onto shore: clay huts, thatched roofs. My parents ask the first people we see—in Liberian dialect—whether my mom's host mother is still alive.

She is.

So is her daughter, who was a child when my mom lived there and now has children of her own.

What follows is one of the most memorable days of my life. We sit under plantain trees my mother planted as saplings. We drink fresh coconut water split open by machetes on the beach. And we are escorted—everywhere—by the family my mom lived with all those years ago. Not as hosts performing hospitality, but as companions rekindling a relationship.

We protest, politely. "Please, just show us the way. You must have other plans."

And they wave us off.

"You already know this place," our host says. "**Here, we carry our strangers halfway.**"

One year later, I'm in Jerusalem for Shabbat, an unlikely guest in a Haredi neighborhood with my then-boyfriend, now-husband, Dimitry.

We're at the table of Yanky Singer, a yeshiva instructor who clearly believes he has struck *kiruv* gold. It's after 1am when he finally lets us leave. We are facing a ninety-minute walk from Sanhedriya in the north to Talpiot in the south.

Yanky puts on his streimel. He insists on walking with us, at our pace. "At least halfway," he says.

And thank God he feels that way, because that night I am introduced, unexpectedly, to my first Hasidic tish. Yanky pulls us into shtiebel after shtiebel in *Me'ah Shearim*. I'm ushered into women's balconies, peering through slatted blinds at elderly Rebbes pounding tables and singing wordless melodies deep into the night.

As we finally part around 3am, I laugh to our host: "You know, Rabbi Singer, you walking us this far—that's actually a Liberian custom. In Liberia they say, **we carry our strangers halfway.**"

He cracks a grin. "Maybe so," he says, "But this idea is also from the Torah."

Three continents. Three very distinct cultures. But one, shared instinct: when a relationship matters, you don't just welcome someone — you walk with them.

In the middle of this week's Parsha, Yitro, we see the idea of 'carrying one's strangers' in a moment so quiet we almost miss it. It comes *after* Yitro gives Moshe his now-famous leadership advice — delegate, share the burden, don't burn yourself out. And it comes *before* the fire, thunder, and synesthesia of Sinai.

It's this: Yitro leaves.

No drama. No big speech. Just one verse:

“Vay'shalach Moshe et chotno, vayelech lo el artzo.”¹

Moses sent his father-in-law off, and he went his way to his own land.

The commentators, of course, ask *why*. Why would Yitro leave after witnessing miracles? Before revelation itself? The commentators offer all manner of explanations.

Maybe he needs to go home and convert all of his family to join the Jewish people.

Maybe this part of the story is actually out of order! Maybe Yitro doesn't leave until after the Ten Commandments are given after all, because how could he miss *that?!*

But Ha'amek Davar, writing from the Volozhin Yeshiva in the mid-1800s, shifts the question. Not *why* does Yitro depart — but *how*.

He argues that Moshe didn't dismiss Yitro. He escorted him.² He accompanied him home.

Not out of a sense of obligation to his wife. Not because Yitro had been useful to him. But because *chevra* does not expire when the visit ends.

Our tradition goes out of its way to tell us this matters. Rambam describes in Hilchot Avel that—even though welcoming guests is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence—escorting a guest after a visit is **even greater**.³ And the Zohar teaches that escorting another person causes the Shechinah to accompany and protect them.⁴

So what does that look like in practice?

The Gemara in *Sotah*⁵ answers with a startling degree of specificity. If escorting were only about protection, we'd accomplish that by walking a mere **dalet amot**—about seven feet.

Seven feet.

But the Gemara goes on to legislate that if you are escorting a friend, you walk *two thousand amot*. We need more time with our friends. Perhaps the Gemara anticipates that—when it comes to those with whom we share deep social connections—we need time to talk. To be in each other's presence. To be in each other's rhythm.

To physically walk alongside someone is to be in step with them. To go shoulder to shoulder. To match their pace.

Escorting someone is companionship in motion. It's "*where you go, I'll go a bit too.*"

¹ [Exodus 18:27](#)

² [Ha'amek Davar on Exodus 18:27](#)

³ [Mishneh Torah, Avel 14:2](#)

⁴ [Zohar, Vayera 10](#)

⁵ [Sotah 46b](#)

This is what Moshe models with Yitro when he walks him home before Sinai. Not obligation. Not utility. *Chevra*.

Chevra is about knowing how to walk together — not only when commanded, not only when needed, but simply because no one should have to take the next stretch alone.

As they say in Liberia, "*We carry our strangers halfway.*"

In a room like this one, we may often find that a colleague can help us see our work or our lives in a new way. Their thoughtful question, or their knowing nod, or their unexpected inquiry spins us into a new way of seeing a challenge we've been trying to solve for so long! Or we come understand a roadblock we've been facing as a beautiful opportunity to swerve. Or we begin to understand our projects differently because a colleague took a moment at lunch or in the hallway to express interest, care, or intrigue.

Ultimately, that colleague isn't responsible for helping us *fix* that challenge. They won't be removing the roadblock for us. And they get to step out of our world and back into their own as soon as we get up from the table.

But they can bring us halfway. For one meal, or one conversation, or even one walk down the hallway, they can show up for us as *chevra*. We get to carry each other halfway.

Those of us in this room, working for the sake of the Jewish people, here is our charge in these last hours together: Not to be helpers. Not to be witnesses. Not to be leaders. We do those things in all the other spaces where we work and live.

But to be *chevra*. To notice whose pace we can match. And to walk with each other—just a bit farther—on our way.