



Parashat Yitro  
Rabbi David Silverberg

The first section of Parashat Yitro tells of the visit of Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, and pays particular attention to the judicial system that Moshe established in accordance with Yitro's recommendations. In describing his plan, Yitro tells Moshe that the appointed judges "shall judge the people at all times" (18:22). The *Mekhilta* explains this verse as referring to "people who are idle from their work and involve themselves in Torah, and they would judge the people at all times." It seems, at least at first glance, that the *Mekhilta* describes a group of people who, instead of working for a livelihood, would study Torah throughout the day and avail themselves to those in need of a judicial hearing.

As noted by Rav Menachem Kasher, in his *Torah Sheleima* (vol. 15, appendix 7), this passage in the *Mekhilta* likely provides the background information for the famous ruling of the Mishna in Masekhet Megila (1:3) concerning the *Megila* reading on Purim. Although Purim is observed on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar (except in walled cities), the Sages enacted a special provision allowing villagers to read the *Megila* earlier. Small villages often could not conduct their own *Megila* reading, and were dependent upon the people in the larger cities. The Sages therefore allowed them to read on the Monday or Thursday before Purim, when they would go to the city and find somebody there to read the *Megila* on their behalf (see Rashi, Megila 2a). For the purposes of this *halakha*, the Sages defined a "village" as a town that did not have "*asara batlanim*" – ten "idle men." Though the Mishna does not explain how these "idle men" were, we may reasonably assume that it refers to the group described in the *Mekhilta*, namely, men who did not work but rather spent their time studying and serving as the local judges. Indeed, the Yerushalmi in Masekhet Megila describes these *batlanim* as "ten who are idle from their work, in the synagogue."

Maimonides, in one of his responsa (*Pe'er Ha-dor*, 10; in some editions, 13), addressed the question of to whom exactly the Mishna refers, and whether or not these men indeed did not perform any work. In response, he expresses the view that even the *asara batlanim* worked for a living:

This means that there is in that place ten people available for community needs, such that when a matter involving a *mitzva* or some communal need arises, they would leave their work and come to the synagogue. They therefore said, "ten who are idle from their work," rather than "ten idle men who have no work."

Maimonides takes note of the fact that the Sages speak of men who are idle "from their work," implying that they do, indeed, have an occupation. In his view, these people worked in flexible jobs and made themselves available at any time to come to the synagogue whenever an important communal matter arose that demanded attention, such as when a *minyan* was needed for the prayer service.

It should be noted that Maimonides here does not follow this interpretation he offered in his commentary to the Mishna, in Masekhet Megila, where he writes, “*Asara batlanim* means that there would be in the synagogue ten people who had no work, other than the needs of the community and Torah study, and they were permanently in the synagogue.” Clearly, in this passage he expresses the view that the *asara batlanim* indeed had no occupation and spent the entire day studying Torah and engaging in communal needs.

Leaving aside his remarks in his commentary to the Mishna, Maimonides’ view in the aforementioned responsum is consistent with his well-known, vehement opposition to accepting public funds to study Torah. Both in Hilkhot Talmud Torah (3:10) and in his commentary to Masekhet Avot (4:7), Maimonides condemns in the harshest of terms the practice of receiving public support for full-time Torah study, rather than supporting oneself through employment or trade. Expectedly, then, he did not wish to identify the *asara batlanim* as people supported by the public to refrain from work and spend their time involved in Torah.

We must also consider Maimonides’ stance in the specific context of the *Megila* reading. The Mishna discusses the qualifications of a “village” with regard to the special provision allowing people to read the *Megila* earlier than the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar. It stands to reason that any town that has ten men “on call” to come to the synagogue to ensure the presence of a *minyán* is deemed independent and not reliant on the nearby city, and they would thus be required to read the *Megila* at the proper time. Even though these ten men are not permanently in the synagogue, their constant availability suffices to render the town self-sufficient enough that it does not depend upon the city for *Megila* reading.

More broadly, Maimonides’ definition of *asara batlanim* demonstrates that what sustains a Jewish community is not necessarily the salaried public employees, but rather a membership that is prepared to make time for pressing communal needs. Hiring public servants is no substitute for the volunteer service of each community member. Every community needs its core group of *batlanim*, ordinary laymen who, though involved in their respective occupations, make themselves available to deal with the community’s needs. This nucleus of dependable, devoted volunteers constitutes the cornerstone of a successful community and is what ensures its sustained success and ongoing growth.