

Jewish-Adjacent

Shabbat Yitro 5782

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This week's Torah portion is called *Yitro*, or "Jethro." Like all weekly selections, the name comes from the first significant word in the portion. It's not a title like a novel might have. If it were, this week's reading would be called, "The Ten Commandments," since those immortal injunctions are found in the portion. I plan to read the "big ten" tomorrow.

Jethro is Moses's father-in-law. He is also the Priest of Midian. We may well ask: "How can a portion that includes the most important *mitzvot* in Judaism be named after a non-Jew?"

Perhaps the answer is that Jethro is a convert to Judaism. After hearing about what God has done to free the Children of Israel, he proclaims, "Now I know that Adonai is greater than all gods."¹ Does the Priest of Midian accept the one God of Israel to the exclusion of the Midianite cult that he has led?

Seven years ago, when we read this portion, I discussed a disagreement among our sages about whether Jethro may rightly be considered a convert. Now, though, I'm not so sure it matters.

In 2015, I had not heard the term "Jewish-adjacent," but I did know and treasure many people who fit the category. Our Temple membership includes spouses who were not raised Jewish and have never formally converted. Some practice other faiths. For many others, Congregation B'nai Israel is their only religious home. They may not technically be Jewish, but they are valued members of our Jewish community.

Others are not members but are belovedly close to us all the same. I think of parents, grandparents, and in-laws of our members who eagerly celebrate with us, particularly but not only when their family members are marking a life cycle moment. A very special category among them are parents and grandparents who do more than their part to bring their Jewish children and grandchildren to Religious School and B'nai Mitzvah lessons.

Still others are faithful Christians, or people of other faiths or no faith, who participate with us regularly in Torah Study, worship, or both. We lovingly revere the memory of Carolyn LeMaster, author of the definitive history of Jewish Arkansas, *A Corner of the Tapestry*. Carolyn was a devoted member of her Baptist church who joined us at least weekly us to learn Torah. She was not a member of

Congregation B'nai Israel, but she was very much part of our community, as others are to this day.

And let's not forget the folks who are contemplating conversion, people who become part of our community before they formally join the Jewish people and our congregation.

Chris Harrison writes eloquently about the value of all these Jewish-adjacent folks in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*: “When I think of...Judaism,...I think...of an every-living people and an ever-loving people. I think of the countless interfaith and multifaith households that make our Jewish communities vibrant, beautiful places that keep the spirit of Judaism alive. I think of the spouses, partners, and children of Jews who may not be Jewish themselves, yet or ever, but who contribute so much to Jewish life through their presence and their questions and their ideas. I think of all the people who are looking into becoming Jewish, especially people...whose Jewish lineage may have an asterisk next to it yet who would thirst to join *Am Yisrael*[, the people of Israel].”ⁱⁱ

Jethro, the namesake of this week's Torah portion, is a tremendous example of how we benefit from embracing Jewish-adjacent folks among us.

Praising God isn't all that Jethro does in the Israelite camp. He observes Moses in action and offers advice about how Moses can be a better leader.

You see, Moses doesn't delegate. Instead, when the Israelites have a dispute and seek Moses's judgment, they come and hang around, waiting all day for Moses to get to them. He is exhausting the people and burning out himself. Jethro suggests that Moses appoint leaders to handle routine matters, with Moses deciding only the toughest cases. Moses enacts this plan, benefitting the community and improving his own life, all now better off because Moses listened to a person who would best be described as “Jewish-adjacent.”

Moses, of course, knows Jethro when the latter arrives at the desert encampment. Our present-day reality, though, is that we may not recognize the next “Jethro” when they show up at our doorstep. Only a minority of our worshipers grew up in our congregation or are known to us before they first arrive at our doorstep. Admittedly, in our current Zoom environment, we may get to know new attendees, some of them even in depth, before the first time we meet in person. Historically, though, people who have added much to our congregational community have first arrived unknown.

In “normal times,” which admittedly we haven't had since March 2020, a new person is greeted warmly, especially but not only by Trudy Jacobson. We are

eager to get their name and make a name tag. We often ask what brings them to us. We do not ask, “Are you Jewish,” which would signal that only Jewish people are welcome among us. Still, our first-time attendees usually do say something that tells or signals us as to whether they are a Jew, Jewish adjacent, attending an occasion, or simply eager to experience a Jewish service. Not infrequently, a newcomer will tell us that they are considering conversion.

We all have concerns, and some may understandably have fears, after last Shabbat, when an armed antisemitic terrorist took four hostages at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas for ten hours, until Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker heroically freed himself and the two other remaining hostages. One had been released earlier.

We know, because Rabbi Cytron-Walker has told the world, that the terrorist came to the door unknown to the congregation. He appeared to be cold, perhaps homeless. Rabbi Cytron-Walker invited him in and made him a cup of tea, not only for the warmth, but also to get to know this newcomer and assess the situation. The congregation appears not to have had a guard, as we do whenever we gather in person for worship or Religious School, so the rabbi was the sentinel.

Several of us, particularly our congregational leaders, have attended webinars this week about synagogue security. Yesterday, Eileen Hamilton and Carol Parham, Chair of our Security Committee, met with our FBI contacts and our regular guards from the Little Rock Police Department, an appointment made weeks ago.

In a webinar that Annabelle Tuck attended, she received a document entitled, “The Power of Hello Guide for Houses of Worship,” explaining how, when a newcomer arrives, we should be aware of our surroundings, initiate a “hello,” navigate the risk—and, if necessary, obtain help. Rabbi Cytron-Walker had a great deal of training, and he appears to have done exactly what the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency suggests in the document I am describing.

The person who appeared at Congregation Beth Israel’s door that day could have been the next conversion candidate or the next Jethro, a Jewish-adjacent individual who would bring untold blessing to the Jewish people. But he was not. And nothing Rabbi Cytron-Walker could have done differently would have changed that, unless he and his congregation had decided to bar entry to all unknown newcomers.

In the weeks and months ahead, particularly as we gather in person once again, we will be guided by our Security Committee, which will doubtless

recommend new ways of keeping us safe. I pray that one route we do **not** take would be to close our doors to all first-time visitors not previously known to us.

Just as Jethro brought blessing to Moses and the Children of Israel, many and varied are the blessings that have come to Congregation B'nai Israel because a person we did not know showed up to worship among us. I know that we will always be vigilant. I pray that we will also continue to open our doors to blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 18:11.

ⁱⁱ Chris Harrison, "A Covenant of Peace for All Who Enter Jewish Spaces," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 259.