

Who Is a Jew
Shabbat Yitro 5783

February 10, 2023

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In December 1987, I was among a quarter million people gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to demand that Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union, free that nation's persecuted Jewish community. Throughout the seventy year history of the Soviet Union and for centuries before that in Russia and other countries that composed the U.S.S.R., Jews had faced appalling antisemitism. Specifically under communist rule, teaching and practicing Judaism were often outlawed. Some believe that, had the Soviet Union lasted another generation, the Jewish community would have begun to die, with parents increasingly lacking the knowledge to transmit our heritage to their children.

Blessedly, the Soviet Union did not last; and Israel, the Jewish State, stood ready to receive all who were able to leave the republics of the former communist empire. From 1970 to 2018, over a million and a quarter Jews and their relatives immigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union or its successor republics. While about a half million came to America,ⁱ I needn't tell you that immigration to the U.S. is hard. By contrast, throughout Israel's history, its Law of Return has enabled any Jew to immigrate to the Jewish State expeditiously.

The Law of Return includes any person who has a Jewish mother or is a convert to Judaism, and who has not adopted another religion. It further facilitates the immigration to Israel of family members of Jews—currently defined in the law as anybody with at least one Jewish grandparent or the spouse of a Jew, whether that grandchild or spouse is Jewish or not. In practice, many Jews from the Former Soviet Union also immigrated to Israel with their parents-in-law, often the Russian Orthodox parents of a Jew's spouse.

In this week's Torah portion, we get to know a remarkable man, Jethro, Moses's father-in-law—and, as the Priest of Midian, a religious leader presumed to be idolatrous.ⁱⁱ Upon seeing his father-in-law, Moses recounts all that God had done to free his people. Torah continues: “And Jethro rejoiced over all the kindness that Adonai had shown Israel when delivering them from the Egyptians. ‘Blessed be Adonai,’ Jethro said, ‘who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh... Now I know that Adonai is greater than all gods.’ ...And Jethro...brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These words led some Talmudic sages to consider Jethro to be a convert.^{iv} After all, he extolls and serves the God of Israel by name. Moreover, Jethro goes

on to provide a valuable service to the Israelite community, convincing Moses that he does not need to bear all the burdens of leading the people alone. Jethro does not remain with the Children of Israel as they receive the Torah at Mount Sinai and journey toward the Promised Land, however. Jethro is therefore best understood as a righteous gentile. Had he joined the Children of Israel, he would have remained among them. He is, instead, a foreigner who loves our people and reveres our God.

Jethro is also Jewish-adjacent: His son-in-law and grandchildren, and presumably his daughter, are Israelites. We at Congregation B'nai Israel are blessed with scores of Jewish-adjacent members—that is, spouses of Jewish members of our congregation who have never converted to Judaism, though many are raising or have raised Jewish children. For some, our congregation is their primary house of worship. Many more who aren't members are the loving parents, parents-in-law, grandparents, and adult children of Jewish members and children in our congregation.

Therefore, we can relate to the tens of thousands of “Jethros” living in Israel today. Professor Rebeca Rajman of the University of Haifa writes that, by 2006, fewer than half of those immigrating to Israel from the Former Soviet Union as members of Jewish families were not Jewish by traditional religious standards. While they “are encouraged by the state to convert to Judaism,” Rajman writes that “just 5 percent...have undergone conversion, which is long, difficult, and monopolized by the Orthodox religious authorities.” Nevertheless, she continues, “several findings suggest that most non-Jews arriving under the Law of Return are socially integrated.” Some scholars have even “coined the term ‘sociological conversion’ to describe the integration of non-Jewish [immigrants] in Israeli society that is not dependent on adopting the Jewish religion but on embrace of the culture, identity, and practices of the Jewish” State.^v

Now, tragically, the future for these “Jethros” in Israel is threatened. The new governing coalition is committed to restricting the Law of Return so that only those who are Jewish according to *halachah*, Jewish law—in this case, as interpreted by Orthodox Jews—would be eligible. That would cut out the substantial portion of our Temple members who are Jewish by virtue of having been raised in our tradition by Jewish fathers or who have converted to Judaism here at Congregation B'nai Israel. The greatest concern, though, isn't for American Jews who may wish to move to Israel—but, at the moment, for Ukrainian Jews and their families who may **need** to emigrate, with Israel as the most feasible destination.

Just this week, Katya Kupchik, wrote in the Jerusalem *Post*: “I made *aliyah*[that is—immigrated to Israel] 23 years ago” as the grandchild of a Jew. I

“never imagined, even in my darkest nightmares, that an Israeli government would actively promote such a fundamental change to the Law of Return and seek to render it meaningless...Subordinating immigration laws to religious ones will nullify Israel as the state of the Jewish People. Canceling the grandchild clause and allowing the Rabbinat to decide who is Jewish and who can make *aliyah* has painful consequences.” Then, Kupchik personalizes the danger of the proposed change: “My parents made *aliyah* from Ukraine at the beginning of the war, and it is terrifying to think what would have happened if standing at the gate to Israel was someone...showing them the way out,”^{vi} which is exactly what could happen if the government does what it threatens, the law is changed, and Jewish refugees and especially their non-Jewish family members seek safety in Israel.

As it happens, I’m not the only Block giving a sermon tonight. My twenty-year-old son Daniel is preaching to the Reform Chavurah at Brandeis University. He is reminding his community that, as God articulates the Ten Commandments in this week’s portion, God reminds them, “I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.”^{vii} Daniel’s point is that we must read all other laws of Judaism—including, I would add, laws about who is a Jew—as Children of Israel who were slaves in Egypt and persecuted in so many lands across the millennia, even if we happen to live in freedom today.

The current threat to the Law of Return is not the first. In decades gone by, advocacy from the North American Jewish community has made all the difference in preventing the dilution of this most sacred of Israel’s laws. We must do that again, assuring that our people remains a *kehillah k’doshah*, a holy community, inclusive of all. Perhaps one of them will be the next Jethro—a person who did not start off Jewish, but who comes to love our people, joining us in one way or another, for a time or forever, bringing blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ Mark Tolts, “A Half Century of Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union: Demographic Aspects,” Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University, November 20, 2019, [A Half-Century of Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union: Demographic Aspects | Davis Center \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.daviscenter.harvard.edu/publications/a-half-century-of-jewish-emigration-from-the-former-soviet-union-demographic-aspects).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Rashi to Exodus 18:11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 18:10-12.

^{iv} See, for example, B.T. Zevachim 116a.

^v Rebeca Rajiman, “A Warm Welcome for Some: Israel Embraces Immigration of Jewish Diaspora, Sharply Restricts Labor Migrants and Asylum Seekers,” *Migration Policy Institute.org*, June 5, 2020, [Article: A Warm Welcome for Some: Israel Embraces .. | migrationpolicy.org](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/a-warm-welcome-for-some-israel-embraces).

^{vi} Katya Kupchik, “Israeli Law of Return revision is another step to halachic state,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 8, 2023, [Article: A Warm Welcome for Some: Israel Embraces .. | migrationpolicy.org](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/a-warm-welcome-for-some-israel-embraces).

^{vii} Exodus 20:2.