

Jethro's Righteousness

Shabbat Yitro 5786

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

This week's Torah portion is called "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. Samuel plans to read the "big ten" tomorrow.

Jethro was Moses's father-in-law. He was 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, or worse, an idolatrous priest?"

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."ⁱ Does the Priest of Midian accept the one God of Israel to the exclusion of the Midianite cult that he has led?

Our tradition calls converts, גֵּרִי צַדִּיק, literally "righteous" individuals who have made the journey to our Jewish faith. Some would argue that the Ten Commandments are given in the portion that bears Jethro's name as a reward for his conversion. Nobody could better exemplify observance of the first commandment, "I am Adonai your God," than one who has left polytheistic priesthood behind to worship one God.

The medieval commentator Rashi is skeptical: "From these words," he writes, "we know that there was no form of idolatry that Jethro hadn't tried."ⁱⁱ Even though Jethro bows down to Adonai, we don't hear him say that he renounces the gods of Midian. Moreover, after his encounter with Moses, Torah tells us that Jethro "went his way [back] to his own land," returning to Midian and presumably to its idolatry, before the Torah tells us about the Ten Commandments.

The argument that Jethro isn't a convert is strong. The fact that Jethro bows down to God doesn't mean that he has accepted the faith of Israel to the exclusion of all other religious faiths and practices, as Krysten did when she took the formal step of joining our covenant years ago—and as Sandy, of blessed memory, did decades earlier.

Jethro's remaining outside the Children of Israel, though, is an even better reason for the Ten Commandments' being given in his name. After all, the Ten Commandments are revered today by Jews and Christians alike, with other

religions embracing similar obligations. Perhaps Jethro's name is on the Ten Commandments to indicate that these immortal words are not meant to be the private possession of the Jewish people. Instead, we share the Ten Commandments with the world, even as Moses shared faith in Adonai with the idolater Jethro.

A better reason for the Ten Commandments being recited in his name is Jethro's righteous. His actions in this week's portion demonstrate his goodness.

Jethro arrives at the Israelite camp to reunite Moses with his family. When Moses went to Egypt at God's command, he had left Zipporah, his wife, and their young children, with Jethro, to protect their safety. However, after liberation, Moses doesn't go back to get them.

Having "heard all that God had done for Moses and Israel—God's people: how Adonai had brought Israel out of Egypt,"ⁱⁱⁱ Jethro took Zipporah and his grandsons back to their father, saying to Moses: "I, your father in law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons."^{iv}

To his credit, Jethro's goal is to reunite the family. Perhaps he could have kept Zipporah and his grandsons at his side, the secret desire of many a grandparent. He could have introduced them to his own faith. Instead, he praises God and offers a sacrifice. We read, "And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law."^v There can be no mistaking that Jethro is participating in Israelite ritual.

Jethro's actions remind me of the righteousness of members of Congregation B'nai Israel who are not formally Jewish themselves, some of them actively faithful to another religion, but who nevertheless participate in our services and treasure their connection to our community. They may have a Jewish spouse or partner, and many are parents of Jewish children. Just as Jethro makes a sacrifice by surrendering his grandchildren to the service of Adonai, many of these non-Jewish parents of Jewish children raise their children with a religious identity they do not personally share.

That righteousness is replicated, too, by parents of גרי צדק, beloved converts. Some are deeply devoted to the faith in which they raised their children who are now leaving it for Judaism. Among them are committed Christians, some of whom fear that their children risk eternal damnation. Others embrace a multiplicity of paths that lead to God. Whatever their theology, when these parents and grandparents come to their child's or grandchild's conversion ceremony, to their Jewish wedding, to a grandchild's Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and the like, they demonstrate a righteousness like Jethro before them. Krysten's parents, Samuel's

maternal grandparents, of blessed memory, were such חסידי אומות העולם, righteous, loving individuals who supported Judaism and the life of the Jewish people.

Jethro takes a further step. Observing Moses in action, he offers advice about how Moses can be a better leader, for Moses's welfare and the people's good.

You see, Moses doesn't delegate. Instead, when the Israelites have a dispute and seek Moses's judgment, they have to wait all day for Moses to get to them. He is exhausting the people and burning out himself. Jethro suggests that Moses appoint trustworthy leaders to manage groups of Israelites. That way, most of the people's issues don't need to come before Moses, who will now decide only the toughest cases. Moses agrees to this plan and puts it into action as his father-in-law goes on his way.^{vi} Jethro does not merely support his daughter and grandsons in their participation in the Covenant of Israel, he does what he can to make life better for his son-in-law, the Israelites' leader, and for all the people.

We at Congregation B'nai Israel are similarly blessed. Tonight, we have a powerful symbol in front of us—much more than a symbol, of course, a person, Josiah Wheeler, a faithful Episcopalian, very much a part of our congregation with his Jewish husband, regularly enhancing our congregation's holiness with his magnificent voice. He is far from alone among Temple members who, like Jethro before them, are not Jewish, but who contribute significantly to the wellbeing of our congregation and the depth of our community.

If Jethro's righteousness does not come easily to him, we do not see that. He sacrifices joyfully. He receives an extraordinary reward—for all Jewish history, the Ten Commandments will be recited in a Torah portion that bears his name—but he, of course does not know that. Let us celebrate Jethro this Shabbat as we read the Ten Commandments, and let us always rejoice in Jethro's many spiritual descendants among our congregants and their families.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 18:11.

ⁱⁱ Rashi on Exodus 18:11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 18:1.

^{iv} Exodus 18:6.

^v Exodus 18:12.

^{vi} Exodus 18:13-25.