

**Parshat Yitro**  
**February 2, 2013**  
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I would like to take a few minutes this morning and speak to you on behalf of Gentiles.

Now you might think with more than 7 billion non-Jews in the world and only an estimated 13-14 million Jews - you might think that non-Jews are doing ok by themselves and really don't need me to speak on their behalf. Nonetheless I hope you will humor me as in fact I do just that this morning. I am a big fan of Gentiles and I want to tell you why I think you should be as well.

This is that shabbat that we read *Parshat Yitro*. It is the day we read the Torah portion that contains the Ten Commandments, arguably one of the most important sections of the entire torah. This makes my choice of topics only more curious.

There was an old Saturday Night Live skit - back in the days when Saturday Night Live was required television - but there was a hilarious skit - some of you may remember it, called "Jew? Not a Jew?" The setting was a game show, where contestants were shown pictures of famous people and whoever guessed properly "Jew" or "Not a Jew" would be rewarded with points to win the game. And the harder the question, the greater the reward. For example, it would take greater skill to know that Kirk Douglas was Jewish than to know that Whoopie Goldberg was not. If we were playing it this year - we might ask - "Dear Abby - Abigail Van Buren - who just passed away - Jew or Not a Jew? Right, she and of course her sister Ann Landers, were born to Jewish immigrant parents. How about Patty Andrews - -the last of the Andrews sisters who died this week at 92! Jew or not a Jew? No - not a Jew - even though one of their early hits was *By mir bis du shouen* - a Yiddish song - the Andrews Sisters were not Jewish. See - isn't this a fun game?

So, please imagine that you're playing that game show right now. The game is tied, and if you get the right answer to the next question, you win the game and that magnificent five piece sectional sofa that you've dreamed about all of your life.

I'm going to say the name, and you tell me if he was a "Jew" or "Not a Jew?": Yitro: Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. "Jew" or "Not a Jew"? Who wants to guess?

Okay, someone said "Jew" and someone else said "Not a Jew". And the answer is .... "WE'RE NOT SURE". (Sorry, no winners. I get to keep the sofa.) We do know that originally he was not a Jew. In fact he was an idolater of renown, the great Priest of Midian. But did he convert? Some authorities believe that he did, and others maintain that he remained "Not a Jew" for his entire life.

For our purposes this morning, I would like to posit that Yitro was, indeed, "Not a Jew", not because I have any incontrovertible facts to support that contention, but because he is a much more compelling figure to me, and perhaps to you, if he remains a Gentile.

And I'm not alone in that contention. Many years ago, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, of Efrat, Israel, wrote an insightful article in the Jerusalem Post, which highlights some of the most amazing

relationships that Moses had with non-Jews, and particularly with his father-in-law Yitro, or Jethro. Think about it! Who drew Moses out of the water and raised him as her child? Pharaoh's daughter! "Jew?" or "Not a Jew?" Of course, NOT A JEW!

But there were other non-Jews, who also made an impact on Moses' life. Which non-Jewish women were directly responsible for Moses' survival as well as the survival of other male Israelite children? Midwives, Shifrah and Puah, also non-Jews. (Actually some debate about this – they are called Hebrew Midwives and this leads many traditional sources to see them as Jews – but some scholars read it as meaning midwives *to* the Jews and suggest they were Egyptian – so it is not clear.

But there is no debate about Jethro. In this week's *Parasha*, Jethro becomes his son-in-law's efficiency expert. He helps Moses establish a system for administering justice. Only after this system is in place, is Moses able to take the next step by receiving the Torah, the Law in its entirety, at the peak of Mount Sinai. Yitro, was the one who felt his son-in-law had taken too much upon himself, that he was working too hard. It could be said that Jethro was responsible, therefore, for initiating the "rabbi's day off," for which I, for one, am eternally grateful.

So Yitro was no typical father-in-law. He helped pave the way for the zenith of Moses' career, and for the giving of God's most precious gift to the Jewish People - the Torah. We read about the revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments in this very portion, named after a non-Jew.

There's a part of us that mistakenly thinks that our greatest benefactors, our best friends, are those nearest and dearest to us: Our relatives, our neighbors, our acquaintances, are the ones that give us the most - we assume. But such is not always the case. Many times - too many times - we are dependent on the kindness of strangers, to paraphrase Blanche Dubois from "A Streetcar Named Desire".

Once upon a time not so very long ago, we lived in a world where ethnic groups pretty much kept to themselves and distrusted everyone else. Jews lived with Jews, Italians lived with Italians, Greeks lived with Greeks and the list went on and on. But that is not the world we live in today. And although the world has changed – some of our beliefs – the old distrust remains – and it is not at all helpful as we try and make our way in this new – integrated, connected world we live in today. Maybe once – not long ago – our world did not extend very far beyond the front stoop; maybe there was a time when family ties, ethnic ties, religious ties were the most determinative in our life. But today learning how to relate to the Yitros in our lives – the others, the ones not like us; the ability to figure out whether they are friend or foe - is a crucial element for survival in the modern world. Moses' openness to Yitro, the Midianite Priest; his willingness to marry Yitro's daughter, makes this one of the most fascinating episodes in the torah. And certainly deserves a closer look.

There seems to be two very different camps in contemporary Judaism with respect to our attitude and relations with non-Jews. If I were to do a survey here – today – I suspect most of you have nothing against non-Jews. "Some of my best friends..." many of you would say -- In fact I would imagine that most of *you* have many friends who are non-Jews – business associates who are non-Jews – that most of us, sitting here have integrated ourselves into a

non-Jewish world very successfully.

It is hard for us to believe – “they all hate us” or “scratch a non-Jew and you’ll find an anti-Semite” – because while we have no doubt that anti-Semitism still exists and many of *them* do not like us – for most of us – we just know too many non-Jews for whom this stereo-type does not fit to believe they all hate us.

But, there are segments for the Jewish world that are not as well integrated as we are. In 2013, there are Jews whose interactions with non-Jews is limited and so minimal that there can be found in these communities a distrust and a widespread belief that *they* – *any of them, all of them*, are not to be trusted.

Some of the recent coverage of the sexual abuse cases in the Satmar Hassidic community in Williamsburg is illustrative. The unwillingness to trust civil authorities; the pressure on members of their community not to speak to the police or the District Attorney’s office – the assumption that they are wrong and we are right – even when the evidence is overwhelming to the contrary – is all a product of a community whose distrust is so deep and so fundamental it colors everything they believe and do.

In medieval Poland and in the shtetls of Russia – *they* did hate us – and the protective mechanisms that Jews developed to cope with these realities were necessary and effective. But while we no longer live in those shtetls and ghettos many of these Ultra-Orthodox Jews still do. In some of these communities they do not allow any social interaction with non-Jews, any intrusion from television or newspapers or the outside world and so when their leaders tell them that non-Jews are not to be trusted – they have no basis for disagreement, no information to the contrary.

By the way – if you ask these Jews about Yitro, how do they deal with such a blatant example of Moses trusting and welcoming a non-Jew? They will probably tell you that it is not a problem because Yitro converted to Judaism! He was a Jew – that is why Moses could trust him and marry his daughter! Poof, problem solved. Even though there is no basis for this belief – not one iota of evidence in the torah that even hints at such a possibility – I think we can all understand that without some re-writing – this story stands as too much of a challenge to their way of thinking. I also find it fascinating that this same community that insists we read the first chapters of creation literally, allow themselves to be so liberal in their reading of this section when it suits their beliefs to do so.

But ultra-orthodoxy is not the only segment of our community that is isolated from the non-Jewish world. Israel increasingly is falling victim to paranoia as it feels itself to be more and more isolated from the world. You know that old joke – even paranoids have enemies – well – there is no doubt that many European countries and most of the third world has proved itself to be reliably anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic. But there is a big leap from: “much of our contemporary world is anti-Israel,” to: “*all of them* hate us.”

I think much of the political right’s, over the top condemnation of the Obama administration also falls in to this category of being more than a bit excessive. I have stated many times that I think this administration has made mistakes in its handling of the Middle East in general and Israel in particular – but I do not feel that it is necessary to conclude that they are anti-Semitic

or anti-Israel. I just think they are wrong.

The recent dust up over a political cartoon that appeared in London – and whether we should label it as anti-Semitic is also illustrative. The problem is that once we call someone or something anti-Semitic all possibility for further conversation ends and the shouting begins.

When we label everyone who disagrees with us as anti-Semitic we do them a disservice and a disservice to any hope of moving the conversation forward. Sometimes haters need to be labeled for what they are – no doubt about it – but when we paint all those who disagree with us as the enemy this is not helpful and we should know better. I understand when Israel, due to its isolation, falls into this trap – but I am not sure what *our* excuse is when we succumb to these generalizations. Sometimes I suspect it is easier to dismiss those we disagree with by saying they hate us – and then doing the much harder work of engaging the argument – entering the debate, the battle of ideas, which taking them and their complaints seriously requires. I am proud that we are starting a five week program this Monday night at our Machon Beth Shalom Hebrew High School. It is open to all High School 10<sup>TH</sup>, 11<sup>TH</sup> and 12<sup>TH</sup> graders and taught by Professor Mark Rosenblum, Chair of Queens College Jewish Studies Department. We want our High Schoolers to be able to participate in the debate, not in the name calling when they go off to college.

You know what I find fascinating. The one group of Jews who has the most reason to hate – is the one that is least likely to. When you speak to Jews who are survivors of the holocaust very few of them hate all non-Jews. I find this intriguing – for if ever there was a group of people who suffered at the hands of non-Jews – it was these *seriday hashoah* – these Holocaust survivors. How do we explain this?

Every single Jew who did survive the holocaust survived because of a righteous gentile who made a conscious choice to resist evil. If you don't believe me - ask them. Ask any survivor and each one will tell you their personal story - of someone who at a critical moment - did an act of kindness that saved their life. It may have been a farmer who hid them in their basement and fed them at risk of death. It may have been a Schindler or a Russian soldier or an American soldier who risked their lives to defeat the evil that was Nazi Germany. But, it was these simple beautiful souls who just chose to do the right thing – and in so doing – stood up to evil - they saved us, and the world, from the darkness that threatened to engulf it. Yes there was a Hitler – and too many who followed him and believed his hatred – but there were righteous gentiles as well. If only there would have been more. But because there were those who did the decent thing, the right thing, it is hard for most survivors to speak in categorical terms – that they *all* hate us.

Precisely as our world is becoming more and more interconnected, it seems to be becoming increasingly insular. More and more people come to see the world in terms of us, and them. Republicans vs. Democrats; Red states vs. Blue states; America vs. the rest of the world; Sunnis vs. Shiites; Moslems vs. Infidels; Jew vs. Arab; Religious vs. Secular - and on and on the divisions go - the us'es and thems may change - but the dynamic is one of polarization and division.

*Parshat Yitro* speaks in a very different language and a very different tone. It speaks of a world where not every one of "them" was opposed to every one of "us" - where dialogue and exchange - where sharing and good will was still possible.

On this *Shabbat Parshat Yitro*, let us affirm that the world is a bigger place than most of us think it is. Let us recognize that while we have a special kinship with family, with friends, and with fellow Jews, that sometimes, SOMETIMES those who help us the most are not even one of us. And those people are special, wonderful people.

I do not share John Lennon's vision of a world without countries or religions – a world where there is no us, and no them. I do not think that is a vision of a better world. I think there is beauty in culture and religion and ethnicity and nations – as long as we are willing to learn from each other, talk to each other – respect each other.

Jew or Not a Jew? It was a funny shtick on Saturday Night Live and I have no objection to playing the game. Just remember – Yitro – Not A Jew! And still a pretty good guy.