

Parashat Yitro
Beth Shalom, Cambridge
6 February 2010

Our parashah this week is of course known for containing the first version of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. But my theme for this morning is rooted in the beginning of the *parashah*, chapter 18, which we heard read not long ago. The central figure, who gives the parashah its name, is Jethro, the Midianite priest, who many years earlier had welcomed an unknown asylum seeker from Egypt by the name of Moses into his community and into his household, giving him one of his daughters in marriage.

Now Jethro, having heard reports of strange events in Egypt and the wilderness, goes to pay a visit to his son-in-law and the people he is leading. After warm greetings, Moses brings Jethro up to date on what he has missed, presumably reciting to him the second half of the *parashah Shemot*, and all of the *parashot va-Era, Bo, and Be-Shallah* at one sitting. Jethro, convinced that Moses' God is more powerful than the others, brings a burnt offering and sacrifices to the God of Moses. (Not a single word in the biblical text is devoted to the reunion with his wife and his two sons.)

The following day, Jethro gives important advice to Moses about how to establish a system of adjudication for Israelite society that will implement a rule of law when there are conflicts among the people. The critical verse comes toward the end of the chapter:

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה לְקוֹל חַתָּנוֹ וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אָמַר

“Moses heeded his father-in-law and did all that he had said” (Exod. 18:24).

Now undoubtedly it is a good model to follow advice from one's father-in-law if it seems to make sense. But there is something more here. Jethro was a Midianite priest, giving advice to Moses about how to implement the laws of the legal system governing the Israelite people. And Moses, the greatest of the prophets, follows to the letter this advice from an outsider, a priest from another people, to the letter. This raises the important issue of Jewish attitudes toward wisdom that comes from non-Jewish sources.

Abraham Ibn Ezra makes an interesting point in his commentary. Chronologically, it would make much more sense if this chapter appeared *after* the description of the Revelation, when there was a set of laws to be applied. And indeed, ibn Ezra maintains that this was when Jethro actually arrived. Why then did the Torah place the chapter earlier, violating the actual chronology of the events?

Ibn Ezra's answer: Because the previous chapter ended with the verse, “The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages” (Exod. 17:15). In order to guard against the possible assumption that Amalek could be expanded to apply to all Gentiles, the Torah counterbalanced the account of the evil done by the Amalekites with the good done by Jethro the Midianite. The message is that the Gentile nations can be a source of good as well as bad, that we may well have something to learn from them.

This message brought me back to a related issue in a session I attended at Limud last December. It was the last of three sessions presented by a scholar with an academic position at the London School of Jewish Studies. The intriguing overall title was “Radical Talmud: Non-Jewish Bread, Intermarriage, and Unkosher Quotes.” Many of us

are familiar with halakhic restrictions against wine produced by non-Jews, and also with milk (some Jews will use only dairy products labelled *halav Yisro'el*, milk handled only by Jews). But there is also a rabbinic prohibition against eating bread home-baked by a Gentile (b. Avodah Zarah 35b). And that became the basis for the passage relevant to our *parashah*.

The relevant statement in the Talmud is simply, “Aivu used to bite and eat [Gentile] bread at the boundaries of the field. Rava—and some say R Nachman b. Yitzchak—said to [their students], Do not speak with Aivu—or, in an alternate reading, do not quote Aivu—for he eats Aramean bread.” Although this is presented in the Talmud as the view of one individual about another individual, a view with no clear halakhic status, the presenter went on to discuss this principle of refusing to quote a scholar who is not fully Orthodox as valid today.

He said, for example, that the London School of Jewish Studies is an Orthodox Institution under the United Synagogues and Chief Rabbi, so it obviously could not have anyone non-Orthodox teach—or give a lecture— there. I thought to myself, that’s a bit strange. Yeshiva University is the flagship institution of higher education for Modern Orthodox Judaism in the US, yet I was invited to offer two courses in the MA programme in Jewish Studies at its Revel Graduate School, to substitute for my colleague Haym Soloveitchik when he was on sabbatical—at his initiative. They knew that I am a Reform Rabbi, but this was totally irrelevant; they invited me for my academic role, because they wanted a course for their MA students on Jewish sermons as historical sources, and in their judgment I was the best person to offer the course. Wonder of wonders, there were no reports of students who became heretics as a result of my teaching there.

The Limmud presenter then said that an Orthodox rabbi should not quote a book by a Reform Jewish thinker with the name of its author, because someone in the congregation might be curious, find the book, and read it. I thought to myself, how insecure does that make them seem, afraid lest one of their congregants might read a book by a non-Orthodox thinker—including Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Emile Fackenheim! The presenter even a problem about whether the Orthodox rabbi might cite Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, not because of any questions about his own observance, but because he taught at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary.

During the presentation, someone asked, “What about Maimonides: didn’t he use Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* as the basis for his own ethical theory, incorporated into his Code of Jewish Law?” Yes, was the response, “but the Rambam never mentioned Aristotle as the source.” This was the model that was held up at the end: you may use material from a non-traditional thinker, but you must not mention the name of your source.

I thought to myself, Is this really a model that you want to present and defend for Orthodox students at Oxford and Cambridge, at UCL and KCL? You can use material from a suspicious author, but be sure to conceal the name of the author?

And I further thought to myself, Hang on a moment. Maimonides did not cite other philosophers by name, but many other fully observant Jews did so in their sermons and other writings. Here is a passage I once published from a sermon by Isaac Aboab, perhaps the greatest Talmudist in the generation from the Expulsion from Spain, “On this matter, Thomas [Aquinas] said in the Commentary on the Seventh Book of the Meta-

physics in the name of Ibn Rushd [the Arabic philosopher Averroes] that [Aristotle] held the position that the essences of species and their definitions reside entirely in the form.” Or the following passage from Judah Moscato, the greatest preacher in 16th-century Mantua: “Very close to the meaning of this point of ours is what Plato recounts in his book called *Phaedo*: His teacher Socrates, who was one of the righteous among the Gentiles, was slanderously accused of not worshipping their god. . . .”

Taking seriously the principle of not citing non-Orthodox Jews is a relatively recent practice in Anglo-Orthodoxy. If you look in the index of the Hertz *Chumash* under “Joseph, Morris”, you will find that Chief Rabbi Hertz cited this Reform Rabbi of the West London Synagogue 6 times. If you look under Montefiore, C.G., you will find that Hertz cited this founder of the Liberal Jewish Movement 10 times. (Someone in the audience asked about the Hertz *Chumash*, but the question was ignored.) I have not made a full search, and I would be happy to be proven wrong about this, but I doubt you would find any of these names—or John Rayner or Tony Bayfield—cited in publications by the current Chief Rabbi.

An even more disturbing example pertains to the Singer Prayerbook, the standard of United Synagogue Liturgy. As the late Rabbi John Rayner once pointed out. The Rev. Simeon Singer acknowledged in his original 1890 preface to the Prayer Book the contribution of Claude G. Montefiore to the improvement of the translations. This was included in all re-issues of the Siddur until the 1962 edition, when the original Preface was kept, but the reference to Montefiore, the Liberal Jew, was eliminated as apparently “unkosher”, as it has not appeared in any subsequent editions.

There is one stream of the Jewish tradition which holds that all truth is contained in traditional Jewish texts, and that there is nothing to be learned from external sources, whether emanating from the Gentile culture or from Jews who are not fully part of the Torah world. The other stream is represented by the wonderful statement of Maimonides: “one should accept the truth from whatever source it proceeds.” (*Reader*, p. 363). This principle was expanded in a sermon by Jacob Anatoli, a 13th-century philosopher from southern France, triggered by the verse from Psalm 119:98, *Your commandment enables me to gain wisdom from my enemies*: “This is the desired diligence with regard to wisdom: to seek it from everyone, whether esteemed or scorned, *whether a believer or a heretic*. . . . That is what Moses our teacher did when he was raised as a son by the king’s daughter. Many scholars were there, as was common in the courts of ancient kings, and Moses learned as a youth from every sage he encountered, both those from his own people and those from other nations” (*Jewish Preaching 1200–1800*, p. 114).

According to our *parashah*, Moses continued this pattern, learning practical wisdom from a Midianite priest. Moses listened to his Gentile father-in-law, judged that there was wisdom and truth in his words, and adapted his behaviour accordingly. May such openness to wisdom and truth, from whatever source it proceeds, be the model that we will continue to follow.