

Parashat Yitro

Parashat Yitro is a canvas upon which many events of incredible importance in the life of our people, nay, of the world, are painted - most notably, of course, the revelation of Hashem at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah. Indeed, given the significance of these events it would be natural for me to concentrate on them in this message. After all, the Ten Commandments are central, to both Judaism and to a western civilisation that has been established on the Judeo-Christian tradition. As such, working out what these commandments mean, and what they might demand from us is vitally important. All of us, no doubt, firstly as Jews seeking to expand our understanding of our faith, and secondly as conscientious human beings seeking to make a positive contribution to wider society, will want to know how they relate to us, and we to them. One could, of course, like those who seek to climb a mighty mountain, set out to scale these great spiritual heights via a direct route. And yet, as those who, in the 1930s, first summited the North face of the Eiger discovered, while the direct route up a mountain might be the most obvious, it is also often the most impenetrable and unyielding. Often the best route to the summit is not straight up, but from the periphery. And that is why in order to shed some light on the Ten Commandments it is perhaps best for us to read around the periphery. In the case of our parashah that context is provided by Yitro's visit to the Israelite camp. Yitro is a character that we are familiar with, for it was he, that provided place of refuge to Moshe when the latter, in fear of his life, fled from Pharaoh. As we read, "Moshe fled from Pharaoh to live in the land of Midyan. One day, as he was sitting by a well, the seven daughters of the priest of Midyan came to draw water. They had filled the troughs to water their father's sheep, when the shepherds came and tried to drive them away. But Moshe got up and defended them; then he watered their sheep. When they came to Re'u'el their father, he said, "How come you're back so soon today?" They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; more than that, he drew water for us and watered the sheep." He asked his daughters, "Where is he? Why did you leave the man there? Invite him to have something to eat." Moshe was glad to stay on with the man, and he gave Moshe his daughter Tzipporah in marriage." As is apparent Yitro went far beyond simply giving succour to the fugitive Moshe, he actually allowed him to marry his daughter. Surprising isn't it, for a mere non-Jew? Indeed, Yitro's friendship toward the Hebrew fugitive who arrived uninvited on his doorstep is contrasted in the text against the hatred of the Egyptians. It thus usefully interdicts any negative stereotypes that we might otherwise be inclined to draw from the Exodus story about other peoples, about the non-Jews, about people of other religions. For, let us remember that Yitro wasn't just a gentile, he was the priest of Midyan - a man who was at the top of his own ecclesiastical ladder, from another, foreign, faith tradition - and yet there he was extending not only refuge and friendship, but the hand of his daughter in marriage to a fugitive Hebrew! The idea that non-Jews, people of other religions, can be wonderful human beings, exemplifying all the virtues that we might otherwise consider to be the preserve of Torah observant Jews, is sadly perhaps a disconcerting one for many of us. After all, non-Jews, those of other faith traditions, unquestionably get a bad report in many parts of Scripture. Concerning foreign gods, Moshe himself would later declare, that the Jewish people "roused

Parashat Yitro

[Hashem] to jealousy with alien gods, provoked him with abominations. They sacrificed to demons, non-gods, gods that they had never known, new gods that had come up lately." Moreover, in the Ten Commandments we are told, by Moshe's own mouth, that "You are to have no other gods before me. You are not to make for yourselves a carved image." The texts which inform us about the period of the Shoftim and the kings tell us all about the wicked gentiles and their evil gods, and of how time and again the Israelites were tempted to worship them and of how Hashem consequently judged our people. Given that this is so it would be natural for us to conflate gentiles with all that is undesirable and seek to separate ourselves from them. Indeed, this has been the prevailing opinion throughout long periods of Jewish history. That is why, for example, Ezra and Nechemyah caused Jewish men who had married gentile women to send their wives and children away. That is why in the Messianic Writings, we read of the approbation with which Kefa was treated after having visited gentiles and eaten with them. The apocryphal book of Jubilees, moreover, typifies the views of its period when it refers to the "Gentile sinners", "who have neither mercy, nor compassion, and who respect the person of none, neither old nor young of anyone, for they are more wicked and strong to do evil than all the children of men." Time and again Jubilees speaks of the evil gentile sinners, as if only gentiles could be sinners. Indeed, Rav Shaul references to this all pervading prejudice in Galatians 2:15, when he says, "We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinner." Naturally, these prejudices were reinforced every time the Jewish people suffered from persecution at the hands of non-Jews, so much so that even today, a negative view of non-Jews is apparently maintained in certain Chasidic circles, being derived from works such as the Tanya, which allegedly puts forth the view that since Jewish and Gentile souls are from different sources, the former being from God, the latter from animals, in comparison to the Jew, the gentile is incapable of noble thought or action. That might sound very harsh, but we should place such alleged prejudices in the context of thousands of years of persecution of the Jews by gentiles, all of which would apparently prove the point. After all, didn't Yeshua himself tell us that, "By their fruits you shall know them?"

Even so upon further study we find that not all that initially meets the eye in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Messianic Writings, or even in Chasidic writings, is as it seems to be. The events of this morning's portion are a case in point. The idea that a non-Jew, nay, a practicing adherent of another faith, can be as noble and God fearing as a Jew is advanced in the story of Yitro. The story of Yitro's kind, compassionate, welcome to Moshe is the Biblical counterbalance, not just to the negativity of gentile persecution of the Jews in the Exodus story, but throughout the rest of Scripture. As we have noted, Yitro's actions are thus contrasted wonderfully with that of the Egyptians. So too, for that matter, are the actions of the Egyptian midwives who defied Pharaoh's murderous decree and protected the Jewish baby boys; that of Pharaoh's own daughter, who, upon seeing the Hebrew baby Moshe, felt compassion from him and raised him in safety as her own son; and the mixed multitude of gentiles who decided to throw their lot in with the Jews and who, in our portion, find themselves standing together with born Jews at Sinai, witnessing the revelation of Hashem and the giving of the Torah. Indeed, in contrast to what we have noticed is the generally

Parashat Yitro

negative view of the gentiles in Scripture, we discover that there are very many other similar moments in the Scriptural narrative that actively disrupt the negative stereotype of the non-Jew. The Kenites, for instance, were a nomadic Midyanite tribe, who, being related to Yitro, and in contrast to the rest of the Midyanites whom Moshe sought to exterminate, are recorded in Shoftim as living in the region of Israel. One their women, Yael, is applauded for having killed the despot Sisera, with a tent peg, thus delivering Israel. In contrast to the vision of the Assyrians and Babylonians as evil, murderous, idolaters, Cyrus the Persian, who supplanted the Assyrians and Babylonians, and now ruled the known world, is thus applauded for his actions in reversing the Jewish exile and allowing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, in one of the few usages of the word in the whole of Scripture, the Tanakh even refers to Cyrus as "Mashiach" - Messiah or anointed one. As the Jewish Encyclopaedia observes, Deutero-Isaiah, in seeking to comfort exiled Israel, promised a Messiah: "The very fact that Adonai had carried out His prophecy in a wholly unexpected manner, by choosing a pagan to overthrow the idols of the nations, so that He alone might be acknowledged as the only true God, was accepted by the second Isaiah as the surest evidence of the divine government. This prophet, Cyrus, through whom were to be redeemed His chosen people, whom He would glorify before all the world, was the promised Messiah, "the Shepherd of Yhwh" (xliv. 28, xlv. 1). Having received the sovereignty of the whole earth as the ransom for Israel, Cyrus would now rebuild Jerusalem for them." Perhaps you are shocked by the idea that a pagan gentile could be called "Mashiach" in Scripture, but there it is, in Yeshayahu 45, "Thus says Adonai to Koresh [another name for Cyrus], his anointed, whose right hand he has grasped, so that he subdues nations before him and strips kings of their robes, so that doors open in front of him, and no gates are barred: "I will go ahead of you, levelling the hills, shattering the bronze gates, smashing the iron bars. I will give you treasures hoarded in the dark, secret riches hidden away, so that you will know that I, Adonai, calling you by your name, am the God of Isra'el. It is for the sake of Ya'akov my servant, yes, for Isra'el my elect, that I call you by your name and give you a title, although you don't know me. I am Adonai; there is no other; besides me there is no God. I am arming you, although you don't know me, so that those from the east and those from the west will know that there is none besides me — I am Adonai; there is no other. I form light, I create darkness; I make well-being, I create woe; I, Adonai, do all these things."

The story of Cyrus, Hashem's Mashiah or anointed one certainly, disrupts our binary ideas of good and evil, and their conflation with Jew and gentile. So too, in his own time, Yeshua HaMashiach, also sought to disrupt this binary presumption. To this effect I am confident that the story of the Good Samaritan, for instance, would most certainly have blown the minds of those who heard it. As we read, "An expert in Torah stood up to try and trap him by asking, "Rabbi, what should I do to obtain eternal life?" But Yeshua said to him, "What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?" He answered, "You are to love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your understanding; and your neighbor as yourself." "That's the right answer," Yeshua said. "Do this, and you will have life." But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Yeshua, "And who is my 'neighbor'?" Taking up

Parashat Yitro

the question, Yeshua said: "A man was going down from Yerushalayim to Yericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him naked and beat him up, then went off, leaving him half dead. By coincidence, a cohen was going down on that road; but when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levi who reached the place and saw him also passed by on the other side. "But a man from Shomron who was traveling came upon him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. So he went up to him, put oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them. Then he set him on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day, he took out two days' wages, gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Look after him; and if you spend more than this, I'll pay you back when I return.' Of these three, which one seems to you to have become the 'neighbor' of the man who fell among robbers?" He answered, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Yeshua said to him, "You go and do as he did."

To those who had bought into the binary paradigm of good and evil, Jew and gentile, there is no question that Yeshua's parable was provocative in the extreme - as of course he intended it to be. The characters in the parable were well chosen to this effect and he flipped the story as his hearers must have expected it to be told. Thus he contrasted the noble, compassionate actions of one who would normally have been portrayed as a villain, a pagan, with the callous lack of concern from those who one would normally expect to be the heroes, since the Levite and Cohen were supposed to be exemplars of Torah. Indeed, let us note that there were no non-Jews present when Yeshua told his story. In fact the story was not intended to disrupt the stereotyped idea that non-Jews were incapable of noble behaviour, but was intended to throw light upon a very Jewish topic - what does it mean to keep the Torah? This is the same question which faces us today as we read of the Ten Commandments. What do they mean? What do they require of us? Yeshua put this same question to his Jewish audience. "What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?" he asked. The very perceptive reply of one of those present effectively condensed not just the Ten Commandments but the other 603 down to two simple precepts: "You are to love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your understanding; and your neighbour as yourself." Yeshua commended this reply: "That's the right answer!" he declared. But as if getting a gold star from the Messiah wasn't enough the respondent pushed back, asking, "and who is my neighbour?" You know sometimes you've just got to know when to stick and when to twist! And it was this that prompted the parable of the Good Samaritan, and in so doing Yeshua not only disrupted the presumed binary paradigm of good and evil, Jew and gentile, but he used the noble actions of a pagan to illustrate the meaning, not just of the Ten Commandments, but of the whole of Torah! In speaking of the Good Samaritan of course Yeshua was evoking and enlarging the very disruptive tradition of noble gentiles of which we have been speaking today. The Good Samaritan thus stands alongside Yitro, the midwives, Sisera, Cyrus and countless others as exemplars of Torah observance. The fundamental point being therefore that Torah values are *human* values. When Yitro offered succour to Moshe he was keeping Torah. When the Egyptian midwives protected the Jewish baby boys they were keeping Torah. When Pharaoh's daughter had compassion on the Hebrew baby adopted him

Parashat Yitro

so as to protect him, she was keeping Torah. When Cyrus released the Jews from their captivity he was keeping Torah. This naturally challenges our conception of and relationship to the Ten Commandments. Torah values are not just human values, but since they are such we are not to possess them in a selfish manner, as if they are for the eyes of Jews only. On the contrary, since Torah values are human values we have a very Jewish responsibility to allow others to buy into them, a responsibility to export them and to seek their establishment wherever and whenever we can, and a responsibility to recognise them in and applaud them in others even, perhaps especially, when they are practiced by those who hail from a different faith tradition. As we have seen, that's what Messiah himself did. As our parashah relates, the Torah may have been given to us at the revelation at Sinai, but we are to understand that we Jews are merely God's stewards in this respect. Yitro, the midwives, the Good Samaritan and others, challenge us to consider that sometimes the best exemplars of Torah are not even Jews. As the Haggadah says, "Let *all* who are hungry come and eat."