

Jethro and the Ten Commandments

February 6, 2015

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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. Isabella plans to read the "big ten" tomorrow.

Jethro was Moses's father-in-law. He was also the Priest of Midian. We might 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." 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 *gerei tzedek*, 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 behind leadership of an idolatrous cult to become an Israelite.

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." 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. Do you know what's good about polytheists? They are typically tolerant. After all, if one worships many gods, what's one more? 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 Dina did when she took the formal step of joining our covenant on Tuesday night.

Jethro's remaining outside the Children of Israel may actually be a stronger 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.

Praising God isn't all that Jethro does in the Israelite camp. He observes Moses in action, and offers advice about how Moses can be a better leader.

You see, Moses doesn't delegate. Instead, when the Israelites have a dispute and seek Moses's judgment, they come and hang around, waiting all day for Moses to get to them. He is exhausting the people and burning out himself. Jethro suggests that Moses divide the camp, appointing trustworthy leaders to manage each smaller group. That way, most of the people's issues don't need to come before Moses, who can decide only the toughest cases. Moses agrees to this plan, and puts it into action as his father-in-law goes on his way.

We aren't told how Moses felt about Jethro's offering unsolicited advice. Whether he welcomed the suggestion or not, Moses followed it. For such a great leader to change his entire administration of justice can't have been easy. Most men of Moses's stature don't invite outside guidance and aren't eager to change their ways. Imagine the humility required for an outspoken monotheist like Moses to take advice from an idolater such as Jethro, particularly given that the subject is the administration of God's justice. Moses, though, summons the humility to change his ways, to benefit the community and improve his own life.

Similarly, in the earlier passage, Jethro displays humility, when he confesses: "Now I know that Adonai is greater than all gods." Jethro has spent his entire life serving the idols of Midian, and yet he now acknowledges that the one God of Israel is greater than them all.

Perhaps the Ten Commandments are given in a portion named after Jethro as a reward for his humility, and also for Moses's humble acceptance of Jethro's advice. Indeed, humility is required if one is to observe the "big Ten" or any commandments.

If we imagine that we are the best judges of right and wrong, more sophisticated than any sacred text and more ethical than any ancient religion,

than we won't observe any religious obligations. We will lack the humility to acknowledge sincerely that Adonai is God, the first commandment; and we certainly won't put God before all others, the second. Making graven images or using God's name for false purposes won't matter to us if we so arrogant as to think we are the ultimate arbiters.

If my personal needs and the desires of my flesh are my most prized consideration, then why should I rest on a Sabbath day ordained by God? Wouldn't I be the best judge of when I should work and when I should rest? And about those carnal urges, a man who lacks humility will give into any temptation that makes him feel better, however temporarily, even adultery.

If a woman views her place in this world as her own achievement, why would she need to honor the parents who incidentally gave her life and nurtured her to adulthood?

If a man isn't humble, he will imagine that all the riches in the world ought to be his. Few of us would rob the nearest convenience store, but cheating on our taxes, hiring employees under the table, and using another person's ideas without attribution are also stealing.

Mussar, Jewish ethical guidance, teaches that humility is a trait that we all need to cultivate in balance. We are not called upon to be self-effacing. We all deserve to experience joy, to experience success, and to have our voices heard. A person who denies her own value is humiliating herself, not humble.

A person whose humility is in balance will, like Moses, feel worthy of worshiping the one God of Israel, and will not seek out the false gods of wealth or power. A person with a sense of her own self-worth, like Jethro, will understand that her own observance of the commandments does make a difference. Her honoring the Sabbath and refraining from stealing really do build a better world.

One commandment in particular seems based on humility's being in balance. In the tenth commandment, we are taught not to covet, not to harbor a self-defeating desire for the blessings of other people's lives. A person with an inadequate sense of self will always be looking at what other people have, and will constantly judge his own lot inadequate. A person with an inflated sense of self, on the other hand, will believe that he deserves what others have. As we are taught in *Pirke Avot*, the Sayings of our Sages: "Who is rich? The one who is content with what he has.

Let us all learn from the examples of Jethro and Moses. Let us be humble enough to find wisdom in others and to admit when we have been wrong in the past. Let us also recognize that both Moses and Jethro hold their humility in balance, neither of them debasing himself or negating his own needs in order to accommodate the other. However different their backgrounds or positions, they meet each other as equals, with humility and respect.

Then, let us all embrace the humility that permits us to acknowledge the one God, and let us joyfully observe God's most exalted commandments. Then, may our humility facilitate our living by these Ten Commandments and many more, as we humbly submit to Adonai our God.

Amen.