

Parashah Yitro is a study in contrasts. The first part is entirely about human beings interacting with, and learning from, other human beings. Upon hearing about the Israelites' miraculous escape from Egypt, Moses' Midianite father-in-law Yitro visits the Israelite camp with Moses' wife and two sons in tow – a poignant reminder that Moses has personal, as well as communal, responsibilities. After a tender reunion, Moses tells Yitro how HaShem defeated Pharaoh and is now protecting and sustaining the people on their journey. Yitro, a pagan priest, acknowledges HaShem's preeminence and performs sacrifices, after which Aaron and the elders dine with him. The next day, Yitro sees that Moses sorely needs to learn how to delegate and gives him some excellent advice. Moses heeds his words and obeys, and then sends him off. At first glance nothing out of the ordinary – except Yitro's organizational plan is the basis of many judicial and governmental systems today, and most importantly, Yitro is an outsider. Wisdom – *chochmah* is universal. The wisdom of Adullamite Tamar and Moabite Ruth flow into David haMelech. Yitro's wisdom is a lesson for us all. Torah scholar Nachum Sarna states, "Before Moses departs to receive the Torah, he first learns "torah" from other nations." In this sense, Judaism is universalistic, both encouraging and benefiting from the cross pollination of ideas from all of humanity.

But in another sense, Judaism is particularistic. In Midrash Eicha Rabbah 2:9 we read: "If a man should say to you: 'There is wisdom among the nations,' believe it. ... If a man should say: 'There is Torah among the nations,' do not believe it." Or as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l puts it, "The God of Israel is the God of all humanity, but the religion of Israel is not, and is not intended to be, the religion of all humanity." The covenant HaShem made with Noah is universal, but the covenant at Sinai, which is the continuation of the covenant HaShem made with Abraham, is particular to us Jews. Here, it is HaShem, not a temporal power, who is legislator and sole supreme arbiter. Yitro teaches us realpolitik, but HaShem establishes for us the ethical limits of the power that is ours to employ. This is a difficult lesson with which humanity still grapples. If even some of us for whom this covenant was forged have still not understood, how can the Israelites, coming out of Egypt, where Pharaoh is deified and his power is unlimited, possibly be expected to grasp the unique concept they are about to receive? Their enthusiastic promise to do all that HaShem commands is naïve, of course. They are poised to undergo a monumental transformation, and in order to galvanize their attention, they first must be prepared and instructed. Then, as their world is rocked by the full force of HaShem's creative power, they see the voices and the sound of the shofar as all of their senses are united in one visceral experience that is impossible to verbalize. It transcends wisdom; it is revelation, and we have no words that can begin to adequately describe the concept of an invisible, omnipotent Being Whose name we cannot even pronounce. We can only reflect it in our actions, which brings us down from the mountaintop to our own world of here and now, where only our behavior can express the revelation we have received. It is noteworthy that the commandments are addressed to each of us individually, just like the first paragraph of the Shema Yisrael. The collective responsibility we bear is contingent upon our individual participation.

Our covenant is unique in that it legislates behavior rather than dictating belief. Our "belief" is defined by the opening words of our commandments: "I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Other than this affirmation, we have no strict dogma to which we must adhere. Halachah – how we interpret and enact our mitzvot – is by its very name, which derives from the verb *to walk*, flexible. Which brings us full circle to a delightful notion within a notion. Particularistic Judaism itself encompasses a wide world of universalism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and everything in between, along with a hefty portion of secularism and downright atheism! We are all Jews, eternally and irrevocably bound together in an exclusive covenant which, by limiting our power, empowers us to accomplish great things together. Looking inward to grasp the full impact of our particularistic covenant, we develop the tools to work for the good of the world at large. Our particularistic covenant radiates outward in concentric circles from the individual to our fellow Jews to *kol yoshvei tevel* (all who dwell on earth) and to the universe itself. But as Moses had to learn, we cannot do it by ourselves. We interact with others within the many different circles to which we belong, and these circles interact in turn with each other, because their / our common axis is the Supreme Being, Who, as Rabbi Sacks says, is the God of all humanity. From the particular to the universal, it is upon us first of all to honestly monitor our own behavior, and then to exercise wisdom in choosing our associates and our causes, so that by our actions in the larger world we honor the eternal covenant given to us on the mountaintop and renewed each day of our lives.

Shabbat shalom!