

Useful Advice from Unexpected Places
Parashat Yitro
By Rabbi Jason Miller

This past summer, I worked as a Chaplain in a large hospital outside of Detroit. As much as I enjoyed the interaction with future clergy members from many other faiths, and learning about pastoral counseling, the most rewarding aspect of this internship was actually the time I spent visiting with patients. I recall a particular visit in mid-July with much affection.

It was a very sunny, gorgeous Friday afternoon when I met Phyllis. Phyllis is a heavyset woman with red hair, and I remember that she smiled throughout our entire visit together. She smiled from the moment I entered her hospital room, until she bid me goodbye some forty minutes later. Phyllis was the first Jehovah's Witness patient I visited, and to the best of my knowledge, the first Jehovah's Witness individual I had ever met.

After some brief introductions, Phyllis and I started talking about each other's religion. She was quite knowledgeable about Judaism, and eager to share her insight into the Jehovah's Witness tradition. Our conversation then changed course; and we began discussing how she would be transferring to a rehabilitation clinic later that day. Phyllis told me that her husband was currently at the prospective rehab location checking it out to make sure it would be acceptable to her. When I remarked that this was a very nice gesture, Phyllis' eyes lit up and she told me that her husband is a real mensch. She asked me if I was familiar with the term... and I said I was.

She asked if I was married, and I told her that my wife and I had just celebrated our first wedding anniversary only a few weeks prior. Phyllis explained that wedding anniversaries are the only occasion that Jehovah's Witnesses celebrate, and that she and her beloved husband have celebrated forty-six such anniversaries. She then spent the next twenty or so minutes giving me some of the most cherished and meaningful advice I have ever received – Advice about relationships, life, and happiness. "Unselfishness is the most important attribute for a happy marriage," she told me. "Do not force religion on your children." "Greet everyone you see with a smile; especially the ones who ignore you." At the end of our time together, as I was exiting her room, Phyllis waved goodbye and wished me a "Good Shabbos."

When I entered Phyllis' room on that sunny afternoon, I did not expect to receive any advice from her. In fact, if anything, I was prepared to dispense some counsel and guidance to her – I was the chaplain after all.

This morning we read from Parashat Yitro, the only Torah portion in Exodus named after an individual – and a non-Israelite at that. We heard how Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, comes to pay our leader and the Israelites a visit. Yitro brings Moses' wife Tzipora and the couple's two boys along with him. They were apparently staying with Yitro to be safe until the Israelites were freed from Egyptian slavery.

On the first day of Yitro's visit, Moses recounted everything that the Lord had done for the Israelites. Yitro was obviously impressed and thus, the Midianite priest offered a sacrifice to God, and then became the first recorded person to utter "Baruch Hashem!" Interesting stuff, but I actually want to focus on the second day of Yitro's visit to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness.

Like any caring father-in-law, Yitro wants to see his son-in-law in action. So, the next day Yitro comes down to Moses' "office" to see him magistrating among the people. And when he sees how much Moses had to do for the people, and how exhausted he was, Yitro exclaims:

ma ha-davar ha-ze hasher atah oseh la-am? Maduah atah yoshev l'vadecha v'chol ha-am nitzvav aleicha min-boker ad-arev?

“What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” Yitro cannot believe that Moses is attempting to solve every dispute among the Israelites by himself. Yitro explains to his son-in-law that it is not good what he is doing – “the task is too heavy for you,” he tells Moses, “you will surely wear yourself out.”

Yitro, acting as an “outside management consultant,” then gives extremely caring and useful advice to Moses. He recommends that Moses reserve only the most difficult legal cases for himself, while appointing judges from among the people to rule on all other matters. This “delegating of responsibility,” he tells Moses, “will not only be more bearable for you, but will allow the people to go in peace as well.” Yitro explains the logistics of this new endeavor to Moses, who heeds the good counsel and selects capable men from the nation to become judges.

Yitro’s observation of the impracticality of Moses serving as Israel’s only judge leads to the creation of an efficient judicial system. It also helped Moses and the entire Israelite nation attain a measure of peace. And Moses would probably never have thought of this successful solution on his own, but to his credit, he was able to accept the advice of another, and learn from it. This story of Yitro’s suggestion to Moses teaches us that foreign influences define who we are as a people and can make us better Jews as well. This is the lesson of our Torah Portion this week.

There is a midrash that states, “One hears and gains. Another hears and loses.” For many situations, the advice is there, the question is whether or not we will hear the advice, and then gain from it.

Like Moses, our own leaders also seek the advice of others. No individual can be successful making all of his or her decisions independently. And just as the spiritual leader of the Israelite community took counsel from an unexpected source – a Midianite priest – our leaders today are also wise enough not to discount valuable guidance from unexpected sources. In fact, it has been to our nation’s advantage that so many of our presidents have surrounded themselves with able-minded and competent advisors. Advisors whose influence defines us as a country, and makes us a better nation.

When I chose to embark upon my rabbinical school journey three years ago, I presumed that I would be receiving advice on how to be a good rabbi in the twenty-first century. And, I imagined this guidance would come from faculty members – my professors and rabbis who roam the hallowed halls of JTS. And, I do get much valuable direction from the Seminary faculty, as well as from my classmates; but, perhaps more important is the useful advice I receive from non-traditional sources at and around the Seminary during the course of my studies each day.

Whether from the cashier in the lunch line, a maintenance worker, or visitors on a Seminary tour I am leading; I am frequently receiving practical guidance – not only for becoming a Jewish leader, but also for being a mensch. With the Seminary’s location only blocks from Harlem, adjacent to a Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and down the street from a prestigious Ivy League university, you can imagine the endless opportunities to receive advice from sources outside the JTS walls. And I am confident that I am not the only one in the JTS community who is a beneficiary of such advice from external resources. It is the influence of those external resources that helps make the Seminary what it is today.

It is a community of devoted Jews, made up of rabbis, cantors, professors, students, educators, and others, who invite God to be a part of our lives on a daily basis. JTS students, like myself, are planning and building for the future each day by holding on to our traditions – studying Judaism’s holy texts, grappling with personal theology, and preparing to bring more vibrancy to the Jewish community in the coming years.

JTS continues to experience dramatic and accelerating growth – our enrollment, our faculty, and our programs are increasing both in number and in strength. With successful schools and programs, like the Graduate School, the Miller Cantorial School, the Davidson School of Jewish Education, the List College

Undergraduate Program in conjunction with Columbia, and the Rabbinical School... Our student body increased by 25 percent during the 1990s.

JTS continues to reach Jews all over the world, not only with campuses in Argentina and Israel, but also with Project Judaica — the Seminary's pioneering program in Jewish studies in Moscow. And, as many of you undoubtedly know, the Seminary now extends its reach into Cyberspace. In fact, it was through the Distance Learning Program on the Internet, that I began learning with some of the Seminary's most revered professors even before I began my Rabbinical School studies three years ago. I feel extremely fortunate to be part of a community where good advice is a common commodity, and no one group has a monopoly on its distribution.

In an age when people are willing to pay a lot of money for spiritual gurus, motivational coaches, and self-proclaimed experts on living; we really only need to keep our ears open. Good advice might be lurking in the most unexpected place. And it is important to remember the lesson of Yitro – That useful advice can come from sources external to our own community. From a Midianite priest in the Sinai wilderness, from a Jehovah's Witness in a hospital bed in Detroit, from the cash register lady at work or school. Where the advice comes from is not always significant; what is important is whether we are attentive to the advice, and then use it to our advantage. When we allow the foreign influences to help define us; we will become a better people.

Shabbat Shalom.