

Yitro 5784

February 3, 2024

17 weeks since October 7

Responding to Ruth Mindlin and Jack Clendaniel

Thank you, Ruth and Jack, for your excellent and thought-provoking divrei Torah.

Jack, you asked us to focus on Yitro, the title character of this parasha. Not an Israelite and yet vital to the reorganization of the people, Moses's father in law, a priest of a different people and religion who could see and respect that the Israelites' G-d has done amazing things and who chose to accompany them to their encounter with G-d at Sinai. You want us to take from this parasha the indispensable role of non-Jews in the Jewish community. And as you probably know, your dad is in great company, including many, many members of our congregation. You want us to see that relationships with non-Jews are vital to the Jewish people. I could not agree more.

And Ruth, you focused on the moment when Moses, and Moses alone, was called up the mountain to meet G-d in our parasha, and you asked about hierarchical versus egalitarian aspects to divine encounter, determining that overall the Torah has an extraordinarily egalitarian and unmediated vision of our relationship with G-d. You expanded from there to consider what this means for us when it feels like G-d is absent, then explored the changing nature of covenant, and finally urged us to enact our part of the covenant by relating to our people, by taking the initiative in addressing the problems of our world, and in so doing rousing G-d to bring about the redemption of the world.

In essence, you both talked about relationships: relationships with non-Jews, relationships between individual Jews and the Jewish people, and relationships with G-d.

We're in a moment, 17 weeks since October 7th, when all of these relationships are undergoing change. Since October 7th, the relationship among Jews is both closer and more divided than at any time in our lifetimes. What I mean is that many Jews who had felt distant from Judaism or organized Jewish community have felt a centripetal force, inward, toward Jewish community, but it's also a time when our people are deeply divided in numerous ways. Meanwhile, our relationship as a Jewish people with the non-Jewish world has been shaken in a way that has shocked many of us, and it feels precarious. The antisemitism that's been on display and the lack of empathy for Israel and Israelis has made many Jews retract from relationships with non-Jews, in fear, in distrust. And finally, Ruth, your d'var Torah has been one of several in recent weeks that asked about G-d's absence in the face of massive Israeli and Palestinian suffering.

Two of the most important 20th century Jewish thinkers, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, centered their philosophies around relationships. Buber felt that relationships, I-Thou encounters – are where we find G-d, and Levinas wrote that human ethics are based on the face-to-face encounter with the Other. For both Buber and Levinas, G-d is the ultimate Thou or the ultimate Other.

In this week's parasha, as you said, Ruth, Moses is called up the mountain to meet Gd. Verse 19:3 tells us

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה מִן־הַהָר

Moses went up to God , and Adonai called to Moses from the mountain

The construction of this verse is strange. First of all, it has Moses going up before he's called up. Second, he goes up to Elohim and then is called by Adonai. Medieval commentators ibn Ezra and Ramban disagree about how to understand Moses going up the mountain first and then getting called from the mountain second. Ibn Ezra says that despite the phrasing he was actually called first and then went up second, Ramban says he only went partially up until he was called and then went all the way up, but neither of

them address the fact that he goes up to Elohim and then is called by Adonai. Leave that to Likutim Yekarim, an early collection of Hasidic teachings by the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezrich among others. According to Likutim Yekarim, the calling by Adonai (YHVH) in this verse matches the calling by Adonai in Exodus chapter 24, when Moses re-ascends the mountain after the Ten Commandments and all of the mitzvot of Parashat Mishpatim (the next parasha) have been given. Then “To Moses, God said, **עֲלֵה אֶל-יְהוָה** ‘Ascend to Adonai’” You see, according to the Rabbis, Elohim is God’s name or aspect of judgment or fear or awe. Whereas Adonai (which is the four letters YHVH) is God’s name or aspect of love. Both fear or awe and love are important qualities in the relationship with God. Likutim Yekarim tells us, “The verses mean that first Moses went up to God in the quality of fear or awe.” He did that, moving through his fear, through great effort. Once he was there he was told to ascend to the place of love. The first gate, the more difficult gate, the Rabbis say, is the gate of fear. But once you have the strength and courage to make it through the gate of fear, then the inner gate, the gate of love, is easier to enter. Just as this is true with God, the Rabbis say, so too is it true in the human kingdom.

Israel cannot survive without its relationship with the United States, and without building a new relationship with Palestinians. It is extremely difficult after October 7th, during a war with Hamas, for many Israelis to consider opening to the idea of an independent, self-governing Palestinian state next door. It is terrifying, but so is continued occupation, or annexation, or one state. And so is losing the support of the United States and even many American Jews. It is long past time for a Palestinian state. Tom Friedman advocated in the New York Times this week for what he called the Biden doctrine, by which the United States would simultaneously stand up against Iran and its proxies (that’s happening now), make an unprecedented effort to establish a Palestinian state, and secure an alliance with Saudi Arabia. This combination would make Israel significantly more secure, while also granting Palestinians the freedom and self-determination they need and

deserve. Such a plan would require everyone to reinvest in relationships. I pray that the negotiators arrive at an agreement immediately to release the hostages, halt the war, and establish the conditions necessary for this very doctrine.

For those of us here in the United States who retracted from relationships with others after October 7th, naturally reacting to pain and fear by pulling inward like a turtle in a shell, it's time to start turning outward again. Some of us have avoided contact with people who might not understand how we were feeling. Some of us have avoided contact with those we don't agree with. But we cannot survive without strong relationships, not as individuals and not as a people. If you, like I, turned away from relationships because you feared what the other might say or not say, it's time to have those hard conversations, and to not assume that we know what anyone else is thinking.

Here at CBE not everyone agrees with one another. We have a wide range of perspectives, and we have room here for that wide range of perspectives. To make that clear, we are holding three listening circles: one in February, one in March, one in April. Each circle will be capped at 50 people. Each person will have a minute or two to speak about their perspective on what's happening in Israel and Gaza. Everyone else will listen, and then the next person will speak. The hope is that in every circle every person will hear from at least one other who shares their views. And in every circle every person will hear from at least one other who doesn't share their views. Everyone will emerge knowing that they're not alone. Everyone will emerge a little more able to be in the discomfort of disagreement, and still be in community together. There will be music, there'll be havdalah, there'll be food and drink afterward for schmoozing. And out of it, we will emerge as a community who are more able to listen to one another and more able to be heard. The first of these circles is next Saturday evening from 6-7:30 pm. CBE members can register on the website or through the advisory, and I hope that every one of you will do that.

It's time for this kind of listening not only at CBE but among many of our relationships with Jews and non-Jews. As Jack taught us today, "it is important for Jews to have relationships with non-Jews as a way of addressing the root causes of the war and finding a peaceful solution for all.....It really does make all of us stronger." As Ruth taught us today, "...we can decide to define the Jewish people as expansively and inclusively as possible, putting Jewish peoplehood first. We can value having a Jewish relationship to God alongside a Jewish relationship towards each other, collectively acting in a way that calls upon God to bring the redemption that is so deeply needed in our world."

If we can get past that first gate of fear, we might even sometimes find an inner gate of love.

Shabbat Shalom.