

My first year at Temple Emunah was a busy one. There was lots to do and I spent as much time as I could doing it. My hours were long and I was not spending enough time away from the *shul*. My family was concerned.



My father came up to visit for a few days to “observe” me. He followed me during my day; sat in on some meetings when appropriate and, generally, watched me work.

A few weeks later, I received a letter in the mail – you know, the kind that comes in an actual envelope. Snail mail!

I opened it and found this letter: “Dear Dahveed (yes, he still calls me by my Hebrew name), Enclosed are my reflections and suggestions based on my visit to you a few weeks ago. I hope you will find them useful and that you will incorporate some of these suggestions into your work week. Love, Abba (Dad)”



And then, he enumerated several pages of helpful suggestions: from trying to shorten my meetings to finding time to exercise. He encouraged me to take breaks, to get out of the building more and to try to attend fewer evening meetings.

He proposed creating a system of lay *mashgihim* – *kashrut* supervisors to help ensure that the synagogue is kosher. That idea was implemented with the help of Rabbi Jacobs and Rabbi Fel and has been a huge boon to us.

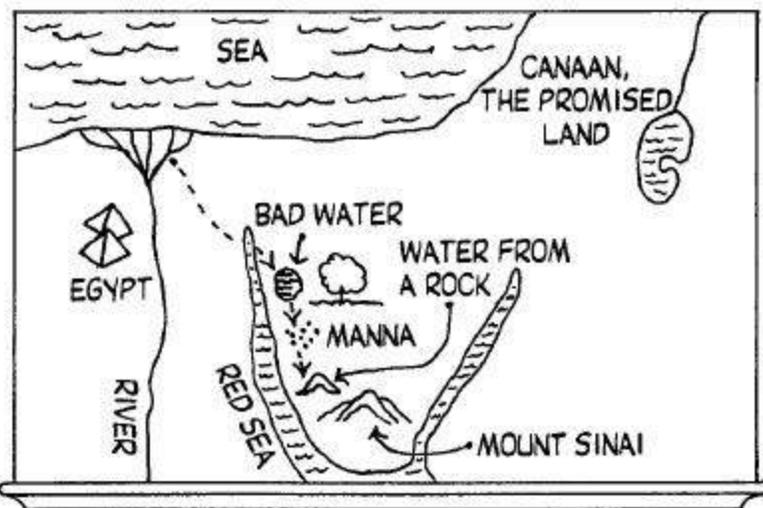
In fact, reviewing this document from 2005, I have been able to follow many of my father’s astute suggestions, although I still have a way to go.

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Looking back on my father's visit and letter, his "intervention" if you will, I realized that not only was he right, but he was also following in the footsteps of another great father or father-in-law: Yitro.

While we most commonly associate this week's Torah portion, this week's *parashah*, with the Ten Commandments and Mount Sinai and God's revelation and that would be natural, there is another important vignette in the text that occurs just before Sinai. Moshe continues his leadership of the Jewish people and things are not going well.

While, with God's help, Moshe had managed to get the people out of that tight squeeze between Pharaoh's army and the sea, since then things have been getting more challenging.



There are logistical problems – there is not enough food and so, arrangements for *manna* are made, and then there is not enough water, it's not so easy to get drinking water in the desert!

Moshe never thought he would be running a large food commissary!

And then – Amalek, a terrible enemy attacks his people from the rear where the elderly, the young, and the infirm were congregated. This necessitated a major battle where Moshe got so tired he needed help keeping his arms up.

After all this, Moshe’s father-in-law, Yitro shows up for a visit. Moshe makes time for him and is reunited with his family. But like my father, Yitro is not shy about pointing out some problems as he sees that Moshe is on his feet working all day.

He declares to Moshe “The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone!”



But Yitro does not stop there – he offers Moshe a concrete way to organize a judiciary, a system that will allow Moshe to deal with more complicated matters, but not every small detail. Delegation and organization of the judiciary – this basic system – is the foundation for most judiciaries in the world to this day!

It is fascinating to note that Yitro, who is not an Israelite; in fact, he is a Midianite priest, shapes the Israelite judiciary system. He ignores the more common system known at that time of having the tribal elders adjudicate matters, preferring that Moshe “seek out from among ALL the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain.”

But beyond defining what the “ideal social, spiritual and moral qualifications for judges” (*Etz Hayim*) should be, Yitro shapes a major part of Israelite society.

And he is not even a member of the Israelites!

That, to me, is what is so striking. It is Yitro, an outsider, who comes in as a consultant and offers astute insights. And not only does he offer them, but they are accepted and they work!

But there is something else: our tradition does not minimize this; in fact, it does the opposite. We highlight that Yitro – someone who was not part of our people – plays such a central role. And all this occurs just before God’s revelation at Sinai – the peak moment of the Torah.

By starting a new *parashah* at a point where Yitro’s name is introduced, the rabbis, effectively named the *parashah* for him. Thus, every time we read this account of the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, we are reminded of the significance of the Midianite priest: Yitro.

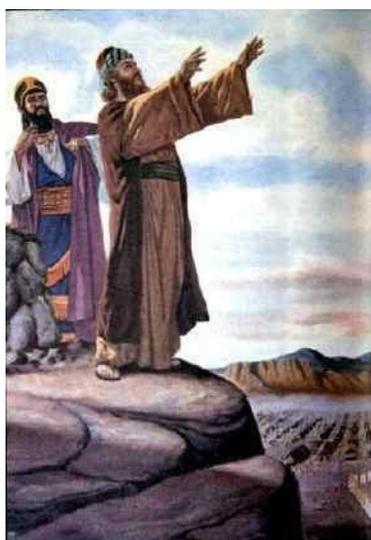
Moshe’s non-Jewish father-in-law gets the honor – the most central reading in our Torah is named for him.

To me, this is no accident. Our tradition wants us to welcome and learn from all people.

In fact, not only is this reading named for someone who is not part of the Jewish people, but we find that other readings are as well.



One of these readings, Balak, contains the narrative of how the non-Jewish



prophet Bilaam was assigned to curse the Jewish people. As he surveys the Israelite encampment, he offers words of praise: “*Ma tovu ohaleikha Ya’akov; mishkenoteikha Yisrael* – how good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.”

This line is not ignored; it is celebrated. In fact, our tradition places this line as the first line we recite when we enter a synagogue.

Let’s stop and dwell on that for a moment.

When we enter a specifically Jewish place, when our focus is narrowed toward our more particular experience of being Jews, we pause and recite words of goodness, words of praise, written by someone who is not Jewish.

That contains a central message – even when we are in a Jewish setting, when we have our own more parochial concerns, we do not shut out the outside world, but we let it in.

Entering a specifically Jewish place begins with words composed by someone who was not part of our people and the reading about Sinai and God’s revelation to the Jewish people is named for someone outside the Israelite people.

These two examples are not accidents. They are part of a deliberate strategy. Judaism asks Jews to be an *or lagoyim*, a light unto the nations – to share our ideas with the world and we are supposed to be open to learning from them as well.

That has been part of our great strength and resilience – that we are distinct enough that we can maintain our own identity, even in places where we are a small minority, and that we are open enough to learn and take the best ideas from all people.

Our tradition has been that way for millennia. It is not always easy to find that balance, but it is critical to work at it.

Here, at Temple Emunah, we should be thankful that we are so open and welcoming to members of our community and beyond who come from other faiths or no faiths. They are our parents, they are our partners, they are part of our community. In our synagogue, we are proud to have people from many different backgrounds who walk with us in our community.

While their families have made a commitment to raise a Jewish family, they may or may not have made the same commitment for themselves. Members of our synagogue who are not Jewish are embraced with the term: *Krovei Yisrael*, “close to the Jewish people,” since that is what they are literally and metaphorically.



Many of them devote themselves to this community in incredible ways and we honor them on *Rosh Hashanah* by having them lead the Prayer for our Community – a powerful symbol of our inclusivity and their generosity of time and heart that gives so much to us!

This did not just happen – our *Keruv* (Welcoming) Committee has been working



diligently for over two decades to help this community be as welcoming and as accepting as it can be. I thank the incredible work of our *Keruv* Committee, its past and present leadership and my predecessor, our Rabbi Emeritus, Bernard Eisenman, for having developed such a forward thinking vision.



Rabbi Fel and I follow in his footsteps building a community that is home to many interfaith families. For the last four years, I have been working on *Keruv* and interfaith family issues with the Rabbinical Assembly,



the International Association of Conservative Rabbis and I am excited to report that a new ceremony that I developed for interfaith couples will be released in the coming weeks. It is my fervent hope that it will create even more space for interfaith couples and families within our community and many other synagogues.

I look forward to sharing it with you soon.

In the meantime, let us continue to build the most welcoming and inclusive community that we can – one that highlights and honors the contributions of people from various backgrounds, wherever they are on their spiritual journeys. Like our tradition that celebrated Yitro and Bilaam, may we celebrate *Krovei Yisrael* and others whose presence enriches our community.