



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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יתרו תשי"ף
Yitro 5780

**The
Universal
and the
Particular**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

**We must be particular in our identity,
but universal in our commitment to the human future.**



PARSHAT YITRO IN A NUTSHELL

The *parsha* of *Yitro* contains two main stories. In the first story, *Yitro* (Moshe's father-in-law, who is not Jewish) advises him to choose a large team of people to become leaders and advisers for the people, so he won't get worn out being the sole leader of the people, and so that the people will have less waiting time when they need help. Not only does the Torah show respect to *Yitro* and his wisdom, the Rabbis even named the *parsha* after him!

In the second story this week, the children of Israel prepare for three days, and then they receive the Ten Commandments, and the Torah at Mount Sinai. The

Torah contains all the laws on which Jewish society must be based. It is also a covenant between Israel and God. A covenant is an agreement between two people (or groups of people) where promises by both are made.

The people hear the voice of God Himself at Mount Sinai.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What message do you think we can learn from the respect and honour that the Torah shows to *Yitro*?



THE CORE IDEA

Baruch Hashem is the main Jewish expression of thanks and appreciation. It means "Thank God," or "Praise be to the Lord."

The words *Baruch Hashem* appear in this week's *parsha*. But they are not spoken by a Jewish person. The man who says them is *Yitro*, a Midianite priest and Moshe's father-in-law. *Yitro* returns to Moshe after the Exodus, bringing with him Moshe's wife and children, and after hearing the story of what happened in Egypt, he says, "Praise be to the Lord [*Baruch Hashem*], who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians" (Shemot 18:10).

Three people in the Torah use this expression – and all of them are non-Jews, people outside the Abrahamic covenant. The first is Noach, who says: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem" (Bereishit 9:26). The second is

Avraham's servant who is sent to find a wife for *Yitzchak*: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Avraham, who has not abandoned His kindness and faithfulness to my master" (Bereishit 24:27). The third is *Yitro* in this week's *parsha*.

Is this significant? Why is it that this praise of God is attributed to Noach, Eliezer and *Yitro*, whereas the Israelites, apart from their song of thanks after the splitting of the sea, seem to deliver constant complaints? It may be simply that this is human nature: we tend to focus on what is lacking in our lives, while others see more clearly than we do the blessings we have. We complain, while others wonder what we are complaining about when we have so much to be thankful for. That is one explanation.

It is possible that an even more important point is being made. The Torah is signalling its most subtle and least

understood idea: that the God of Israel is the God of all humankind, even though the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humankind. As Rabbi Akiva put it: “Beloved is humanity, for it was created in the image of God. Beloved is Israel, for they are called children of God.” (Mishnah Avot 3:14)



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Israel is a fractured society. At least it looks that way from the outside. So many divisions. So many communities that seem unwilling to integrate or even acknowledge the other. So much mistrust. But this is a superficial view from an outsider’s perspective. If you know where to look you can see the truth beyond the surface. In specific places in society, hidden in plain sight, you can see all the people of Israel in their glorious, vulnerable humanity.

One such place is the hospital ward in a children’s hospital in Israel. Especially on the seventh floor. Take a look around you. So many different kinds of people. So different from you. So many different languages contributing to the hubbub. Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, Amharic, French, English. So many different shades of skin colour, sitting right there alongside your own. So many different cultures and religious communities in that waiting room with you. Jews from lands so far away... Morocco, the Ukraine, Yemen, Ethiopia, France, and Britain. Are they really all from the same nation? Maybe they feel that way when they look at the others they share the room with - Muslim Arabs from Haifa, Christian Arabs from Nazareth, Druze Arabs from a village in the Galil, a refugee family from Eritrea.

Sitting there with your child, broken, in need of a miracle, you look into the eyes of the other parents, and the eyes of the other

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How can the God of Israel also be the God of all humankind?
2. If God is universal (the same for everyone), why do we need different religions to worship Him?

children, and suddenly those languages, and cultures, and religions, melt away. All you see is the same fear, the same pain, the same hope, and the same love. The same as you feel in your heart. All you see is humanity.

And then the miracles arrive. The angels sent directly from God Himself. Wearing their white coats, their surgical masks, with stethoscopes around their necks. Those doctors, nurses, and volunteers, the heroes that offer patients and their families help and hope. Under their white coats, you may not even notice this doctor was born in Russia, and that nurse is an Arab, and this hospital orderly has a different skin colour to yours, and that volunteer covers her hair with a wig because she is a Charedi Jew. You fail to notice all the distinctions between these people, because these angels work together as a seamless team, and subtly, they remind us that there are some things that are just more important than our differences.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What makes us all the same?
2. Do you think the things that make us different are good or bad?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

We believe that God is universal. He created the universe. He set in motion the processes that led to stars, planets, life, and humanity. His concern is not limited to Israel. As we say in the prayer of *Ashrei*, “His tender mercies are on all His works.” You do not need to be Jewish to have a sense of reverence for the Creator or recognise, as Yitro did, His hand in miraculous events. It would be hard to find another religious literature that confers such dignity on figures who stand outside its borders.

This is true even beyond the three notable figures who said *Baruch Hashem*. The Torah calls Avraham’s contemporary, Malkizedek, king of Shalem, a “Priest to God Most High.” He, too, blessed God: “Blessed be Avram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High who delivered your enemies into your hand” (Bereishit 14:19-20).

Consider the fact that our own *parsha*, perhaps the most important of all parshiyot because it contains both the Ten

Commandments and the most significant event in all of Jewish history, the covenant at Sinai, carries the name of a non-Jew. What is more, immediately prior to the revelation at Sinai, the Torah tells us how it was Yitro the Midianite Priest who taught Moshe how to delegate and organise the leadership of the people.

These are remarkable expressions of spiritual generosity to those outside the covenant.

Or consider *Tishrei*, the holiest month of the Jewish year. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, as well as reading about the birth of Yitzchak, we read of how an angel came to the aid of Hagar and Yishmael. “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation” (Bereishit 21:17-18). Yishmael was not destined to be a carrier of the covenant, yet he was rescued and blessed.

On Yom Kippur, in the afternoon, after we have spent most of the day fasting and making confession, we read the book of Yonah, in which we discover that the Prophet uttered a mere five Hebrew words (“In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed”) and then the entire population – Assyrians, Israel’s enemies – repented. Tradition takes this as the very model of collective repentance.

On Succot we read Zechariah’s prophecy that in days to come *all* the nations will come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of rain (Zechariah 14:16-19).

These are three stunning examples of universalism. They do not imply that in the fullness of time everyone will convert to Judaism. Rather, that in the fullness of time everyone will recognise the one God, Creator and sovereign of the universe. That is quite a different thing.

This idea that you can stand outside the faith and still be acknowledged by people within the faith as someone who recognises God, is very rare indeed. Far more common is the approach of one truth, one way. Whoever stands outside that way is Godless, unsaved, the infidel, unredeemed, a lower class of humanity.

Why then does Judaism distinguish between the universality of God and the particularity of our relationship with Him?

Answer: because this helps us solve the single greatest problem humanity has faced since earliest times. *How can I recognise the dignity and integrity of the ‘other’?* History and biology have written into the human mind a capacity for altruism toward the people like us, and aggression toward the people not like us. We are good, they are bad. We are innocent, they are guilty. We have truth, they have lies. We have God on our side, they do not. Many crimes of nation against nation are due to this propensity.

Which is why Tanach teaches otherwise. Noach, Eliezer and Yitro were people of God without being members of Israel. Even the people of Nineveh became an example of how to heed a Prophet and repent. God blessed Yishmael as well as Yitzchak. These are powerful lessons.

It is hard to think of a more compelling principle for the 21st century. The great problems humanity faces – climate change, economic inequality, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence – are global, but our most effective political agencies are, at most, national. There is a mismatch between our problems and the available solutions. We need to find a way of combining our universal humanity with our cultural and religious particularity.

That is what the Torah is doing when it tells us that Noach, Eliezer and Yitro said *Baruch Hashem*. They thanked God, just as we, today, thank God. God is universal. Therefore humanity, created in His image, is universal. But the revelation and covenant at Mount Sinai were particular. They belong to our personal story, *not* the universal story of humankind.

I believe this ability to be both particular in our identity and universal in our commitment to the human future is one of the most important messages we, as Jews, have to deliver in the 21st century. We are different, but we are human. Therefore let us work together to solve the problems that can only be solved if we work together.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What message does Judaism give to the world by having both a distinct identity and a commitment to working towards the human future?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“Not until chapter 12 [of the book of Bereishit] do Avraham and Sarah appear on the scene, and from then on the entire narrative shifts its focus, from humanity as a whole to one man, one woman and their children. They become an extended family, then a collection of tribes, then a nation and eventually a kingdom. In some obscure and unmistakable way – this is the Hebrew Bible’s fundamental theme – they were to become the carriers of a universal message. For the God they believed in was not a tribal deity, a God of this people and not that. He is the God of all, creator of heaven and earth, who, in love, set His image on all humanity.”

Future Tense, p. 75



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is Judaism's approach to non-Jews?
2. If Judaism is Divine Truth, why isn't it the religion of all humankind?
3. How does Judaism teach us to recognise the dignity and integrity in the 'other'?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. The Torah teaches us to see value in everybody, not only in members of the Jewish people. Judaism does not require or even encourage non-Jews to convert. Judaism is also open to learning from non-Jews, and Yitro is an example of this. Many Talmudic Sages argue that Yitro did convert to Judaism, thereby becoming our first convert at Sinai. Whether he did or not, he was first a Midianite Priest, and yet showed honour to God, and is thus honoured by the Torah, teaching us that we must not judge people as lesser because they have a different background, ethnicity or religion.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Although different religions and groups may have different names for God, and may even differ theologically in their approach, they are all worshipping the same God. The God of Israel is how the Jewish people relate to God, but nowhere in the Torah can the claim be found that God is only interested in a relationship with the Jewish people. There is one God and He loves all of His creations, and welcomes a relationship with all of humanity.
2. We are not all the same and so we do not all need to worship God in the same way. Each religion has their own approach to worshipping God. Judaism is the true religion for the Jewish people, but there is a need for other religions, for other people, each bringing something unique to the world.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The basic things that make us human are what we all have in common. In the language of the Torah, we are all created in the image of God. We each have a spark of divinity within us. This gives every human the potential for greatness and holiness. This story also highlights the vulnerability of all human beings. Everyone needs health, and love, feels fear and pain, and ultimately has hope in their heart. These things are all more profound than the things that separate and differentiate us. These are what we should focus on to create a unity of humankind.
2. The things that separate us are a source of beauty and dignity, and should be celebrated. They each bring to the world something unique. This is the "particular" of our identity and community, that we work hard to ensure brings a unique contribution to humanity. Seeing the beauty in every unique community is what Rabbi Sacks terms the "Dignity of Difference". It is a challenge to see this. Humans are tribal animals. They create communities based on these things, and that creates an "us and them" situation, where it becomes a challenge not to demonise or disparage the "them". Our challenge is to value the differences, and to ultimately realise we have more things in common where it really counts.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. We are all different. This is a good thing. There is dignity in difference. We should all be proud of the things that make us different. However, we are all part of a universal humanity, with one God above us. Judaism urges us to be different and yet the same. The sameness brings us to work together with the rest of humanity to build a better future for all. This dual model helps us solve the single greatest problem humanity has faced since earliest times. *How can I recognise the dignity and integrity of the 'other'?*

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Judaism has respect for non-Jews and non-Jewish culture. It sees value and dignity in those that are different. It does not demand those outside of the covenant convert or change their particular identity or ideas to join the Covenantal Community. Non-Jewish communities can create their own covenants and relationships with God, and join as partners with the Jewish people to work on the universal challenges that humanity faces.
2. Judaism is a Divine Truth for the Jewish people, not for the rest of humanity. There can be other Divine Truths for other peoples. The opposite of a truth is not necessarily a falsehood. It can be another truth. These multiple approaches to God must be within the theological framework of Ethical Monotheism. But beyond that they can have significant particular differences. There is not only one path to God for humanity.
3. Judaism teaches us that distinct identities are not necessarily in tension with each other, but rather parallel examples of connections and covenants to God. Particular communities can join together in their joint humanity to recognise the dignity and integrity of the 'other'. The examples in the Torah of the role of non-Jews in the history for the Jewish people, and the respect with which the Torah presents these characters, illustrate these ideas. By noting that Yitro worked with Moshe to set up a system of Jewish leadership, the Torah teaches us that cooperation and mutual respect are key factors.