Why Jethro Gets Credit for the Giving of the Torah
——Hazzan Rabbi Ira Rohde——

Exodus 18:18-21: “You will surely weary other, both you and this people that is with you, for this thing is too heavy for you; you will not be able to do it yourself alone. Hearken now my voice, and I will give you counsel, and God shall be with thee: You should face God for the people, that you might bring matters unto God. And you shall admonish them in the statutes and laws, and instruct them the way wherein they must go, and the deeds that they must do. And you shall identify men of ability from among all the people, those such as fear God, men of truth, hating gain, and put such over them...”

The episode of the visit of the non-Israelite Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, bringing Zipporah and Moses’ two sons, marks a low-key break in a story-line filled with high-action drama before it: there is a miraculous escape from slavery; being lead miraculously through the desert; then the drowning of the Egyptian pursuer’s army; escape from thirst in the hot desert; and a miraculous defeat of the Amalekites. It follows and continues the escape, the drowning, the lightening and thundering of Sinai. And, in between, we get this little scene of Jethro’s visit, his questioning of Moses, and Jethro’s advice. It certainly gives some needed relief in the build-up of the action’s tension.

But the episode also serves to make a crucial link to the leading story at Mount Sinai which follows. It serves to explain the place of civil laws and a code of law within this narrative. Moses had asked to lead the Israelites to their own land to worship their own God at a festival of sacrifice and worship in the wilderness. So, that is where the laws are first heard as the next step would be to proceed to God and to worship. But there is in fact, what is legal in the desert is over; they have a festival at an altar near Sinai first, and then they get instruction on building the Tabernacle. But first we get all these laws given at Mt. Sinai, many of which don’t have that much to do with worship. And it will be remembered that when Moses first came to Mount Sinai and saw the Burning Bush, God told him: “When I have brought the People of Egypt, you shall worship God upon this mountain” (Ex. 3:12). It doesn’t say anything about legislating then; just worship. So, had it not been for this episode of Jethro, we might have only expected worship, not legislating, at Sinai, as that may be where it is to go, and we might have been in a loss to explain the legislating. The Jethro-episode explains why there had to be law, along with worship. Moses’ plan for Sinai seems to have evolved, seems to have changed. And it seems that only Jethro could have brought about this change, this evolution.

This was finally, because, after all, it was while tending Jethro’s flock that Moses had his vision of the Burning Bush at Sinai in the first place. Therefore, if Moses’ vision of Sinai was now evolving or was being reinterpreted, only someone who had been with Moses at the beginning could have understood that evolution. Secondly, Jethro respected his father-in-law Jethro’s position as a political-religious leader and an elder of his tribe, with experience in keeping order among the people and keeping a society functioning. And thirdly, Jethro had particular knowhow in regard to life in wilder-ness or desert conditions, which Moses respected. Jethro does not tell Moses to set up a kingship. Jethro, like Moses, valued the relative freedom of desert life, in close contact with God of nature, where only God was the True Judge, but even in the freedom of the wild, Jethro says, order and justice is necessary. So Jethro’s suggestion of a system of Divine Law administered in a decentralized fashion is accepted and adopted as part of Moses’ vision, as Jethro had adopted Moses earlier. Originally, one could think of nothing but how to escape from slavery into the freedom to worship God and keep God directly, led by God alone. Each man and woman would be the judge, and each man and woman would be the judge. But it was unchangeable. Jethro’s warning that “this thing is too heavy for you” recalls the immediately preceding battle with Amalek where, in order to keep the Israelites winning, the weight of Moses’ hands literally requires support. Only a Divine Law and a tribal system of justice like that suggested by Jethro could preserve the freedom and the immediacy of God in the Wilderness. And combine it with the order and stability a people needs to survive and thrive. In Jethro’s native desert, where almost everything withers and dies, his sagacious warning that “you will surely wither” (תֵּכַנַּת נַעֲרֵךְ) must have seemed strikingly silent. Only a Code of Law could give them stability that could last. This was only one of the many Lessons which the Wilderness would have to learn for the future.

CHOIR SELECTIONS THIS SHABBAT

Friday Night
V’Shameru (p. 166) | Samuel Naumbourg
Psalms 23 (p. 174) | Leon Kramer

Shabbat Morning
Mischeberkh (p. 208) | Leon Kramer
Tebilat (p. 216) | Jonathan Koch
Ubnhuo Yomar (p. 218) | Leon Kramer

At last week’s Shabbat Shiria Sing-Along Luncheon, Rabbi Rohde taught the Azharat for Shabu’ot. He specifically chose this melody because we will use it as the musical theme this Shabbat for Shabbat Yitro and the ten commandments. This melody will be used this Shabbat for Kaddish, Yigdal and Adom Olam. In many homes it is also sung for En Kelobenu before Birkat haMazon specially for this Shabbat.

Candle Lighting: 4:47 pm
Evening Services: 4:45 pm

Morning Services | Main Sanctuary | 8:15 am
Tot Shabbat | Ages 0-4 | 10:00 am
Fidanceh Youth Room
Youth Groups | Ages 5-12 | 10:00 am
Elias Room
Junior Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue
Talk | Rabbi Soloveichik | “The Shofar of Sinai in the 20th Century”
Kiddush | Levy Auditorium

Shabbat Afternoon Shur | Rabbi Soloveichik | 3:40 pm
“The Twenty Commandments” | Levy Auditorium
Evening Services | 4:40 pm
Habadla | 5:34 pm

Weekday Services Times
Mornings:
Sunday: 8:00 am | Monday-Friday: 7:15 am
Evenings (Arbik only):
Sunday-Thursday: 6:30 pm

Hertz Pentateuch: p. 288; Haftarah p. 302
Kaplan Living Torah: p. 344; Haftarah p. 1114

Save the Date
Special Guest Speaker: Author Ruby Namdar
Wednesday, March 6 | 7:00 pm
Hailed by the New York Times Book Review as “a masterpiece of modern religious literature,” Ruby Namdar’s debut novel, The Ruined House, tells the tale of the collision between tradition and contemporary life through the story of Andrew Cohen, a professor at NYU whose happy, meticulously-arranged world begins to mysteriously unravel, disrupted by visions of an ancient religious ritual.

Ruby Namdar was born and raised in Jerusalem to a family of Iranian-Jewish heritage. The Ruined House won the Sapir Prize, Israel’s most prestigious literary award. He currently lives in NYC with his wife and two daughters, and teaches Jewish literature, focusing on Biblical and Talmudic narrative. The English edition of The Ruined House was published in the US by Harper Collins in November 2017.

Hamburg Synagogue
Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Yitro
January 25-26, 2019

Congregation Shaarei Tefila
Year of Years Celebration

Central Park West at 70th Street, New York City • www.shaareithisrael.org
New Youth Initiative:

Knitting for Teens
Presented by the Shearith Israel Sisterhood
On three upcoming Saturday nights | 7:00 pm-8:30 pm
This week, January 26 [SESSION IS FULL]
February 2 | February 16
Held at a private home on the Upper West Side
Our member, Karen Daar, an accomplished knitter, will instruct the basics of knitting—how to cast on, the garter & purl stitch, how to increase, decrease, and bind off—everything one needs to know to create a knitted project.

All teens are welcome to try their hands at this new activity. The first session is full, but if you’re a teen or have a teenager who is interested in future sessions, contact Karen at kdaar@cloud.com for location information and other questions.

Note: There will be a nominal fee (about $15) for materials (knitting needles and yarn).

The Shearith Israel Sisterhood Presents
Wrapunzel
Sunday, February 3 | 11:00 am - 2:00 pm
Proceeds will benefit Sharsheet, an organization dedicated to helping Jewish cancer patients and their families.
Want to give your creative side a twist?
Looking for an elegant solution to a bad hair day?
Tired of shivering, windblown, as temperatures drop? Intrigued by well-priced soft silk scarves and a side order of technique?
Know a cancer patient who might benefit?
Join the Shearith Israel Sisterhood, Wrapunzel, and Sharsheet at this special event, featuring demonstrations, one-on-one tutorials, plus scarves, accessories, and specialty gear for sale.
To register, visit shearithisrael.org/wrapunzel.
Only $5 in advance; $10 at the door.
Light refreshments will be served. Women only, please.

Jewish Education Alert
• Rabbi Silber’s new class on the Book of Judges will begin on Sunday, February 3. To learn more and register (FREE for Shearith Israel members), visit shearithisrael.org/silber-judges.

UPCOMING FILM SCREENING
Wednesday, February 6 | 7:00 pm
The Last Jews of Baghdad
Marking the anniversary of the Baghdad Hangings
With opening remarks from producer Carole Bassi

Today, only 5 Jews remain in Iraq from a population of 160,000. This film asks, “Why did the Iraqi Jews leave?” The answer is found in the discriminatory laws and policies enacted by Iraq’s government and leaders against these former members of Iraqi society who still consider themselves “Iraqi Jews.”

Register at shearithisrael.org/baghdad-screenings.
Only $5 per member/$8 per non-member in advance, $10 at the door.
This screening is part of our many Year of Years, 35th Anniversary events, showcasing the extraordinary diversity and heritage of our congregation.

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Mitzvot Workshops with Shamash, Z. Edinger
For Children Aged 5-12
Select Sunday Mornings at 10:00 am
Sunday, March 3 | Sunday, April 14
These Mitzvot Workshops are a wonderful opportunity for our elementary school age youth - both boys and girls - to learn to sing the melodies of selected prayers from the Shabbat and holiday services as well as learn about the parts of the Torah service, and receive training in the hands-on parts of the service.
Sign up for March 3 (it’s FREE) at shearithisrael.org/mitzvot-workshop.

Brunch & Learn with Rabbi Soloveichik
For Elementary School Aged Children & Their Parents
Sundays, 10:30 am - 12:00 pm
February 10 | March 10
On several Sundays over the course of the year, children and their parents start the day together with morning services after which they will proceed to a topical “Brunch and Learn” with Rabbi Soloveichik.
Register at shearithisrael.org/brunch-learn.

Meldaura of Reverend A. L. Cardozo
THIS Monday, January 28
Following 6:30 pm Evening Services
All are welcome to join us at the Meldaura marking the 13th naḥalā of Reverend Abraham Lopes Cardozo.
Services begin at 6:30 pm with Arbit in the Little Synagogue.

Parent-Child Learning & Pizza
Final Session:
Saturday Night, February 9 | 7:00 pm—Led by Z. Edinger
For Children Aged 5-12 & Their Parents or Grandparents
A wonderful opportunity for parents (or grandparents) to study Torah with their children together with Shearith Israel’s clergy.
Pizza and prizes help make this a fun-filled evening of inter-generational learning.
Register for the February 9 session (only $5 per person) at shearithisrael.org/parent-child-learning.

Community Announcements
We mourn the passing of our member, Margot (Mendes) Oppenheimer.

Condolences to our devoted member, Mrs. Lisa Rohde, on the passing of her father, Herbert Brun.

Public Tours
Our next public tour is
Wednesday, February 13, at 11:00 AM

Parnas Office Hours
Louis Solomon would be delighted to meet with you. Please schedule a visit at parnas@shearithisrael.org.