

“Jews know a lot about having enemies, but how adept are we at having friends?”

Parashat Yitro 5774

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I thought that after the spectacular Shabbat we had here at Har Shalom *last* week, that *this* Shabbat, and any subsequent one would be hard to beat. But Sheldon, I must say, we are all so deeply moved, and so filled with joy and nachas witnessing this incredible milestone in your life. So what happened last Shabbes that was so wonderful, you may be wondering, if you were not here? Well, right here on this bimah, we were all captivated by the beautiful singing of the Tufts University a capella choir—they sang in Hebrew, in Yiddish, in Russian, and even a little bit in English...they had all of us singing along with them at certain times...it was awesome, and so inspiring to see a whole group of college kids so interested in Jewish music, and in sharing it all over the country! I think the most surprising and unexpected part of their visit came when they each came up to the microphone to introduce themselves. They all had cute little jokes about their majors and other details of their lives...

There was Nirvana Lildharrie, Nirvana being not only the Sanskrit name for ‘bliss,’ but also one of the names of the Hindu god Vishnu, who told us that they had order forms for their CD’s but not the actual CD’s for sale *in deference to Shabbat*.

There was the very Irish Lisa Meehan, one of the “sultry sopranos,” who stood right over here, from Los Gatos, CA.

Also from Anglo-Saxon extraction, there was Paige Lucas of Portland, ME who I believe was one of the “amazing altos, not a “sultry soprano.”

And then of course there was the President of Shir Appeal, who not only explained the Hebrew pun of the group’s name but also led the whole congregation in a three-part harmony to *Hinei Mah Tov*. That was the baritone political science major from Massachusetts, Tony Lombardi—who described himself as a “totally Catholic.”

A couple of people pulled me aside after the show on Friday night and again on Saturday and said, “Rabbi, don’t you think it’s strange that there are all these non-Jews singing Jewish a

capella songs?” “Rabbi, they’re Hebrew pronunciation is better than some of our own members! What do you think of that Rabbi?!”

Before I answer, I want to tell you a little bit more about my week.

On Sunday evening I was having a discussion with a group of our high school students at Keshet. We were talking about an article in the journal *Inside Higher Ed.* about a number of universities that are actively and intentionally recruiting Jews.¹ Now I’m not talking about Brandeis ...I’m talking about Allegheny College in Pennsylvania; Elon University in North Carolina—a school founded by the United Church of Christ that just hired its own Hillel Director! I’m talking about Washington & Lee in Virginia which recently dedicated a \$4 million Hillel building, and Franklin & Marshall in Lancaster which just instituted a full kosher meal plan. Vanderbilt has long been recruiting Jews who now make up 14% of the entire student body as has Muhlenberg, which is 34% Jewish! The article said that Jews tend to take education seriously; they tend to get good grades, enhancing a school’s academic profile; and perhaps most important to these schools, Jewish families tend to pay their bills, which is always nice! So they work hard to get Jews into these schools, but building up the infrastructure and amenities that a Jewish kid would look for on campus. Yet, some Jews balked at this kind of outreach—some feel that they’re being used to bring in money and prestige to these campuses, and that’s the only reason they’re valued in those places. But I’ll get back to that too in a moment.

Perhaps you’ve been following this feckless boycott by the American Studies Association against Israeli Academics. The American Studies Association, a group of professors and scholars in that field in their recent Annual Meeting voted to boycott Israeli Academics and institutions as way of protesting Israeli occupation of the Palestinians. While the BDS, boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement against Israel has been gaining steam in Europe, many American Jews were horrified to see a scholarly organization here publicly sanction Israel—particularly since Israel is a society of robust academic freedom, and Palestinian counter parts are far from it. But then, something interesting happened. You know college campuses get a bad rap these days...Tuition are skyrocketing, professors are intolerant of views other than their own, there is rampant anti-Israel pro-Palestinian activity on many of them...But what happened

¹ “Why More Colleges Want Jewish Students,” insidehighered.com, 10/29/08

in response to the ASA was nothing short of extraordinary, and I didn't see one media outlet, Jewish or secular really point this out. University presidents from across the country: large state schools, Ivy League schools, private universities, church-affiliated schools, community colleges one after another began publicly rejecting the ASA's boycott. With impassioned letters to students and alumni, these distinguished educational leaders completely repudiated the idea of an academic boycott. 207 colleges and universities have rejected the boycott, another 11 universities issued public denials of membership in the ASA despite being listed by the association as institutional members. One of my favorite public statements came from the president of Trinity College in Connecticut (a school, mind you, of Episcopalian heritage) who said:

“In this strange case, why the ASA would propose an academic boycott of Israel and not, for example, of Syria, the Sudan, North Korea, China, Iran, Iraq, or Russia escapes rational thought. Trinity has participated in the Rescue Scholar program since its inception; we have welcomed scholars from some of the most repressive countries on the planet, and it is inconceivable to us that we would ever be welcoming a Rescue Scholar fleeing Israel for political reasons.”

Isn't that the truth!

One more vignette from this past week...

As many of you know, a week ago today, former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon died after 8 years in coma. Sharon was petulant and bullish and tough. He was a hardnosed general and an unapologetic defender of the State of Israel. He knew plenty of controversy in his life and career. Of course, toward the end of his life and perhaps his lasting legacy is the unilateral withdrawal of every single Israeli from Gaza. Thousands of homes, schools, synagogues, farms, greenhouses, communities...all uprooted and relocated, some not all that willingly, in order to pursue peace. It was a decision that is still debated and critiqued but was an epic one by any standard. I was shocked to see Sharon's face and Israeli flag draped coffin on the cover of countless newspapers the world over. I was in awe of the coverage and the expressions of respect and admiration on editorial pages in print and on line for someone who was—like him or not—a pretty controversial leader.

So what links all of these episodes from Tony Lombardi and Shir Appeal, to the active recruitment of Jews on far-flung campuses, to the massive rejection of the ASA boycott, to the tributes to Ariel Sharon the world over?

Well, let me tie it all together by referencing our parasha. Because the story of Moses's father-in-law Yitro really says it all. Moses comes hustling back home after the Exodus to see his wife and kids who stayed at home while their dad went to work smiting Egypt and freeing its slaves. Except when he comes back home to his family in Midian, he runs right into the arms of not his wife Tziporah, but her father, Moses's father-in-law, Yitro. Now I've got a father-in-law that I absolutely love, adore, and respect, and I always want to tell him all my news and share all kinds of things with him, so I get why Moses does this. But what's so interesting is that Yitro, who is the pagan High Priest of Midian becomes so inspired and moved by the story of the Exodus from Egypt that he is the first person in history to say "Baruch Hashem!" You've heard people say this right...How are you? *Baruch Ha'shem!* How was the wedding, the bris, the bar mitzvah...*Baruch Hashem!* How is your elderly mother doing, Baruch Hashem, she's okay...

Baruch Hashem literally means, Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord who did all these miraculous things! Praise the Lord who is so great and mighty. And the pagan priest proceeds to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the God of Israel...not to his own indigenous pagan gods, but to the God of the Israelites! Now some, including the great medieval commentator Ibn Ezra believe that Yitro actually converted to Judaism. *Ki ata yachel li'hiyot lo Ha'Shem ha'nichbad le'Elohim*, now the God of Israel became his God, Ibn Ezra wrote. The midrash explores in depth Yitro's conversion from Midianite priest to Jew-by-Choice. And perhaps that is what happened. But I also think it's entirely plausible that Yitro did not convert...but instead became the forerunner to people like those I mentioned earlier...that is to say, non-Jews who became enamored with the Jewish narrative, genuinely respectful of the Jewish people, Jewish culture, and even Jewish faith.; Non-Jews who appreciate and revered the Jewish community, and perhaps have even grown stronger in their own faith because of their exposure to ours.

If there's any expertise that we Jews have cultivated over the years, then it is this: We Jews have become very skilled at having enemies. We have memorized the names of all the bad guys in our history...Amalek, Goliath, Haman, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus...***name a biblical story or holiday and I'll tell you who the bad guy was!*** We have even developed rituals to

shame their memory, like the grogger on Purim. And we are no less familiar with our more modern villains. There are countless books, and studies, and articles about anti-Semitism. The Jewish community is very good at identifying and warning us about and alerting us to enemies in our back yard and all over the world. It boggles my mind to think that the average Jewish kid is more familiar with life of Adolf Hitler than the life of Rabbi Akiba. Perpetuating these memories are important, but it's become more like an obsession. *And the result is that we're frankly very adept at identifying or trusting friends.* Think about it, our first response to non-Jews who seem to show affinity or support for us is to be skeptical. The term that is used to describe the opposite of anti-Semitism is philo-semitism, meaning the affinity for Jews. Now of course there's a joke about philosemites, that goes like this: "Which is preferable—the antisemite or the philosemite? A: The antisemite—at least he isn't lying." We have a hard time trusting people who claim to be our friends. They must have an ulterior motive or some kind of hidden agenda...to convert us or to get us all to move to Israel. I want to suggest to you, my friends, that while some amount of self-protection is understandable, the obsessive preoccupation with victimization is deeply unhealthy. If you believe that what the Jewish people have stood for and taught and role modeled for all these centuries is wise and meaningful and beautiful, than it shouldn't surprise you that others might as well! If you think that our survival and stamina are remarkable historically, then why wouldn't others? And if you think that the collective knowledge, experience, and sensitivity that our people have developed over many centuries and circumstances is remarkable, than don't be surprised when others do too. I don't want to raise my kids to think that the entire world is out to get them or that we are the perpetual victims. I want them to know that in many quarters and by many people we are admired, respected, and esteemed. I want them to know that if they live in a way that expresses Jewish pride; that if they live joyfully as Jews; that if they honor their tradition, than other people will too. The next time a Yitro or a Nivanna or a Tony Lombardi appears to elated with Jewish life and culture; the next time a historical philo-semite and supporter of Israel like Martin Luther King Jr., whose memory we honor this weekend; or Pope Frances, who recently invited all of his Argentinian friends to the Vatican for a glatt kosher meal, let's welcome them without skepticism and second-guessing, and celebrate the fact that our beautiful tradition is indeed a light unto the nations.