

Jethro the Outsider: Where Does He Belong?  
Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Shabbat

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It seems appropriate that the Torah portion for this Inclusion Shabbat is named for an outsider. Yitro is a Midianite. He doesn't really fit in with the Jewish people. The Book of Numbers commands: "*tzaror et ha-midyanim*, Assail the Midianites and defeat them" on account of how they assailed you in the affair of Ba'al Peor. And Yitro is not just any Midianite. He's a Midianite priest. That might be the reason the text identifies Yitro as Moses's father-in-law no less than 13 times in this short passage. It's as if the Torah is saying: I know Midianites are normally our enemies; there are many instances and reasons why we want to keep outsiders away. But this Midianite priest, Moses's father-in-law, is special.

When Yitro proclaims, "*barukh Adonai*, Blessed be Adonai who delivered you from the Egyptians. ... *Atah yadati*, Now I know that Adonai is greater than all gods," the ancient Rabbis say he is actually converting to Judaism. Why is this outsider given such prominence in the Torah? Because he is really one of us.

And he contributes. Yitro sees how hard Moses is working to serve and judge the people, and he suggests a more efficient system. Moses should appoint capable leaders to handle smaller cases and more mundane issues, and assign himself only the most difficult matters. Moses listens to his father-in-law, and then we read in the last verse of chapter 18: "*va-y'shalah Moshe et hotno va-yelekh lo el artzo*, Then Moses sent his father-in-law away, and he went back to his own land."

The question is: if Yitro is one of us, if he sincerely and faithfully expressed his desire to join the Jewish people, why does Moses send him home? Rashi is clearly bothered by this question when he cites a Midrash that Yitro was only sent home temporarily, so he could convert more Midianites. Maybe. But it seems incongruous that Moses should send away this outsider-come-one-of-us. Is Moses suggesting that some people are just too different to be fully included?

It turns out that this is not the last we hear of Yitro or this plan to appoint deputies to assist Moses. In the book of Numbers (chapter 10), we read that in the second year, on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the second month, the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, indicating that it was time to travel. Moses speaks to his father-in-law (here he is called Hobab, but everyone agrees he is the same person) and says we are getting ready to leave, but I want you to come with me. "Please do not leave us," Moses says, "inasmuch as you know where we should camp and can be our guide." Most scholars, ancient and modern, understand this to be the same episode. The text is ambiguous; maybe Yitro went home; maybe he left temporarily; maybe he stayed. But the bigger inconsistency is that in Exodus, Moses sends the outsider away, while here Moses begs him to stay.

One more text. The first chapter of Deuteronomy. Moses recounts how difficult it has been to lead the people through all their bickering and complaining; and how he suggested, “Pick from each of your tribes men who are wise, discerning, and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads.” The people answer, “What you propose to do is good.” So, there’s an inconsistency. Whose idea is this? In Exodus, it is Yitro; in Deuteronomy it is Moses. Is Deuteronomy deliberately covering up Yitro’s involvement because he is an outsider?

Modern Bible scholars attribute the discrepancies to different sources. Exodus is E; Deuteronomy is D; and Numbers is the P source. And if we line up the sources in succession (most scholars believe D is actually older than P), we see different ideologies on how to treat people who are different. The Torah is dealing with a religious outsider, but I think advocates in the disability world can also relate. There was a time when individuals with severe intellectual or developmental disabilities would be sent away. Schools were not equipped to deal with certain children and they didn’t feel it was their responsibility. We created homes and facilities to house people; special schools and camps and alternate tracks to keep people with disabilities apart. It wasn’t malicious. Many of these separate institutions were loving places led by caring people who devoted their lives to creating wonderful experiences for these individuals.

But they followed the Exodus model. Bring residents from these homes to join everyone else for special events, but then send them away again – for their benefit as well as for the ableists who shouldn’t be held back. There was a certain logic to this approach. But as I hear again and again on the boards of JFGH and Camp Ramah, which I’ve been honored to serve, “separate but equal” is not the wave of the future anymore for individuals with disabilities than it is for those of different races.

Deuteronomy offers a different model. It just ignores the outsiders. Deuteronomy doesn’t say anything negative about Midianites or Yitro; it isn’t actively discriminatory. But it doesn’t say anything positive either. It just writes Yitro out of the story. We’ve seen the approach. It’s the one that says, “Little Johnny is *different* (whisper).” “She has *autism* (whisper).” They are *deaf* (whisper).” “So-and-so is *gay* (whisper).” Or “She’s dating a *Black person* (whisper).” Some people imagine that the kindest way to deal with differences is to ignore them, to proclaim that since we deal with all people equally, disabilities don’t matter. Build a ramp, install an audio loop, purchase large-print prayerbooks, and pay no attention to that person in the wheelchair. Everybody matters here, so the problem is solved.

But it isn’t. For one thing, if you ignore people with disabilities or send them away enough, they stop coming back. And when that happens, you can build all the ramps you want, hire all the learning specialists you want, but if people don’t feel welcome, what difference does it make. I hear a lot about the importance of person-centered language. We don’t call people “autistic kids” or “special needs children.” They are individuals with needs, *people* who have autism or visual or hearing impairments or mental illness. When we ignore disabilities, we are ignoring people. Disabilities are challenges, but these are individuals, created in God’s image, who deserve attention, choice, and opportunity. We don’t get there by pretending the differences and disabilities don’t matter.

Which leads me to the third approach, from Numbers. Hobab is still identified as a Midianite outsider. He volunteers that it’s time to go home, and Moses could just let him leave. “We don’t have

those people here so we don't have to worry about them; they prefer to go somewhere else." But Moses can't accept that the outsider should just go home. Moses chases him. He pleads with him. "I want you to stay;" and not just so you will be happy and share our good fortune. I want you here because I *need* you. Our community, my family is incomplete without you. We need your skills. We need your eyes so we don't end up wandering around the wilderness for forty years. (Oh yeah, that happened anyway.)

On our last congregational trip to Israel, we were introduced to a program called Special in Uniform, which integrates individuals with disabilities into the Israel Defense Forces. In Israel, the Army is more than just defending the country. It is a melting pot. It brings together individuals from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and creates networks that continue to serve people when they enter professions. To miss the army is to be cast aside by society.

Special in Uniform offers youth with disabilities the opportunity to serve, but not just to wear the uniform. The program finds jobs that take advantage of unique skills – think of the person with autism surveying detailed maps and processing information in a way no able person could do. That's the Numbers approach – don't just invite the outsider, but seek him out, understand him, and give him the opportunity to contribute.

For me, the message of Inclusion Shabbat is that tolerance is not enough. Acceptance is not enough. Equality is not enough. We can't just "welcome everyone" or say "all people matter." We have to actively seek out diversity of gender, diversity of race, diversity even of faith, and certainly diversity of ability. We have to welcome people for who *they* are. We must strive to learn from them, sometimes change because of them and – as Moses does for Yitro – remind them over and over again that we really want them to be here. Shabbat shalom.