

# How Open is Our Tent

**Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman**  
**April 2009**

What a pleasure it is to be here. I have known Sue for ten years. It's amazing what you don't know about someone: I didn't know that she could sing so beautifully. One thing I've known all along is that Sue is one of the most humble and understated, yet talented clergy I know. I'm honored to stand and share the pulpit with you this morning.

I'm going to start by reading from the Torah, specifically the book of Exodus, Chapter 18. I'm only going to read seven verses, first in Hebrew and then in English. I thought you might enjoy hearing it in Hebrew...

1] Jethro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out from Egypt. 2] So Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after she had been sent home, 3] and her two sons of whom one was named Gershom, that is to say, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land"; 4] and the other was named Eliezer, meaning, "The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." 5] Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. 6] He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." 7] Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent.

I just read what is called Parshat Yitro, the Portion of Jethro. It's actually quite famous in Jewish tradition, but not for those first seven verses. If we were to read a little further along, do you know what happens? Moses receives the Eseret Dibrot, The Ten Commandments from God on Har Sinai, Mount Sinai. So, most people just read through the first seven verses, to get right to one of the most important passages of the Hebrew Bible: the receiving of the Ten Commandments. In fact, that's what I did for many a year. I'm not sure why, but last year when it came time to read this section of the Torah I looked over those first verses, and I was astonished at what I found. I was stopped in my mental tracks. It's amazing how you can look at something a hundred times, but the hundred and first time you see it, you see something new, and something obvious that you had missed all along. That's actually a really great lesson about scripture and also about life. Beware of saying or thinking, "Been there, done that." Beware of that.

Judaism has the sense that everything can be found in scripture: Sheva Panim v'Torah, "the Seventy Faces of Torah. If you look into it deep enough, you can find what you need there. So, okay: I looked, and this time I saw something I had missed before. What came to me this time that I had missed all those other readings?

First let me remind you of what happened: Jethro, Moses' father in law, hears the news of "all that God has done for Moses and B'nei Yisrael" (the Children of Israel). What had God done?

You remember the plagues? Can you name a few plagues for me? (Audience responds “frogs”) The kids love the frogs. You know, at our seder table we get little plastic frogs, and bugs and stuff and we throw them all around. Seder is the celebratory meal when we celebrate Passover. So there are the plagues, and then the splitting of the sea, etc.

Now Jethro heard all about the many miracles God wrought for the Israelites’, and he was coming back to meet Moses and reunite him with his family. He gathers up his daughter, Zipporah Moses’ wife, and their two sons Gershom and Eliezer; and hits the road toward the Israelite camp. Now comes the part I just read. What is striking, if you read these seven verses carefully, is the repetition, especially of the fact that Jethro is coming with Zipporah and her sons in tow. In fact three times in seven verses the text makes this explicit. If you know anything about numbers in the Bible, both three and seven are special, magical, mysterious numbers. When they come up when reading your bible, you should wake up, because it’s telling you that there is something there that you will miss if you don’t read carefully. So, three times in seven verses it says, “Hey, I’m coming with Zipporah and your two sons.”

Verse two: “So Jethro, Moses’ father in law, took Zipporah, Moses’ wife, after she and her two sons had been sent home” and then, I’ll put parenthesis (before the revolution began), because it really is a story of a revolution, the exodus from Egypt. Verse five: He, that is Jethro, sent word to Moses, “I, your father in law, Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons.”” Now given the general economy of words in the Bible, this repetition is remarkable. Right? It’s there for a reason. It’s not just there because the guy or woman, most likely to be a guy, writing this wanted to be repetitive. It’s not there just for a literary device. There’s a reason why it’s there...

One would think that with all the buildup, there would be quite a reunion. After all, Zipporah and her sons had been apart from Moses for over a year. That they were sent back before the revolution began makes sense. It also stands to reason that they would meet up afterward “on the other sides”. Given all that happened and the time that had elapsed one could reasonably expect an emotional scene. You know, Moses running to greet his family, scooping Zipporah up in his arms, right? You could see that. And then you could hear the kids saying “Abba, abba!”, “Daddy, daddy!” Right? I could almost tear up, with the thought of the reunion after such a time apart, and such big things happening.

We even have biblical precedence for emotional homecomings or reunions. For example if you know your Bible: Jacob...what happens to Jacob when he reunites with his brother Esau, who by the way he stole the birthright and blessing from? They hug?! The Bible says they put their heads on each others’ shoulders and they wept! I mean, for the Bible to tell us that, when it gives us such little detail in other places....Abraham nearly kills his son on a mountain, and we know nothing about the emotion of the day, but here the bible tells us that Jacob and Esau wept on each others’ shoulders! How about Joseph and his brothers? After Joseph really messes with his brothers if you go back through the story you will see that he gives them a really hard time. Of course, they sold him into slavery, and nearly killed him. You know, if you want to study dysfunctional families you study the Bible. Okay, so they were tough on Joseph but finally when Joseph reveals himself, what does he do? He wails. He cries and cries. All of Egypt hears him crying, says scripture. And then we have Jacob and Joseph when they reunite. Of course, Jacob

thinks that Joseph is dead. But still when they reunite, it's quite an emotional reunion. But not this time! Moses does greet Jethro. Verse seven: "Moses when out to meet his father in law, he bowed low to the ground and kissed him. Each asked the others welfare, and then went into the tent." WHAT ABOUT ZIPPORAH!? Seriously, what about Zipporah? And what about his sons, Gershom and Eliezer? Where are they? Don't they count? Don't they matter? It's astonishing really.

As a Jew, as a rabbi I have this other body of literature that pastors don't really have so much. It's called the Midrash: Ancient, sacred Jewish legends that are almost as old as the Bible, and considered, really, almost as authoritative. They are legends that are attached and associated with the Bible that usually fill in the gaps. Usually if I have a question like this I can usually go to the Midrash and find the answer. So, I looked there, and I found nothing! As far as I can discern, sadly Jewish tradition is silent on this issue. It's simply not concerned. Zipporah and in this case her sons, are merely a means to an end, exchangeable property for cementing the bond between the men that poses them, Moses and Jethro. Ouch! That doesn't feel good. This doesn't feel good to me. This may not trouble the Tradition, but it certainly troubles me, and I think it also troubled the authorial voice of the Torah as well. "Authorial voice" is a fancy term for saying the voice that speaks through the Torah. Because I, like many, would assume that there is more than one writer, but I think that one voice comes through. And I am sure, well I don't want lightning to strike, I'm pretty sure... I'm sure with a small "s": that because of the way it is laid out here, because of these three references in seven verses, the Torah wants us to see this. You know sometimes the Torah teaches by what it says, and sometimes the Torah teaches by what it doesn't say, what's omitted.

It's troubling, and it begs us to address this question: how does it feel to be invisible? How does it feel to be brought from the wilderness to the very edge of the tent, to the very edge of the tent but not let in; to be left out, as it were, at the edge holding a heavy emotional bag. One can almost imagine, and hear Zipporah trying to reassure her sons..."Daddy is really important now, and very busy, but don't worry he really does love you." Even though he completely blew you off...didn't say a word after over a year, he really does love you. How does it feel to be brought to the edge of the tent and not be let inside?

This is a painful question and one that cries out explication. It can also be a very personal question, painful and personal. Because I bet that some of you feel like Zipporah and her sons right now in some way in your life. And I want to come back to the personal in a moment, but let's start with the community first.

Who is at risk in our community for this kind of treatment? Tizporah was a woman, and likely of brown skin. She was also a Medionite, not of the Tribe of Israel. She was in other words an immigrant, a resident who was not a citizen. I think it is fair to say that the large, mostly Latino immigrant population in our community is very vulnerable to this kind of treatment. Okay... you can mow my lawn, you can clean my house, you can empty my bed pan when I am in the hospital or the nursing home; but God forbid that you should get a drivers license so you can go to work for me. And if you get hurt on the job, or someone in your family is sick, who are you to think that you can come to the hospital and get good health care. Oh, and if you have kids, well your kids are really messing up our schools, why should we have to educate you? We'll look the

other way while you literally risk your life and the lives of your family to cross the desert to fill jobs we don't want to do. We will let you do our most menial tasks but the minute you ask for compensation and benefits for the services rendered...we'll send you packing because by the way you're "Illegal." Poor Mexico ... so close to the United States, and so far away from God!

How does it feel to be brought to the very edge of the tent, and not be let inside? Both our congregations are involved in community organizing through the North Bay Sponsoring Committee. We are really just getting started, but it has been very worthwhile so far, correct? It is great having Sue involved, and I hear great things about what you all are doing. Like for example, you finally met the church right around the corner. Isn't that unbelievable? And, you have some common cause, and your pantry is really going to get a boost from them. And of course the pantry is needed now more than ever. And then Sue has been talking about a garden that she has been developing and has gotten inspired for you all to create here, and I hear maybe the garden is actually going to happen. All thanks to this organizing effort.

It has been meaningful for us as well, and one benefit is getting to hear the stories from some of the Latino folk living in our community. I hate to generalize, but there is a large immigrant population, many of which are undocumented living in Sonoma County . We are in fact a mirror of the country as a whole where 15% of the workforce is immigrant and about 5% undocumented. We are talking millions of people, no one knows the numbers for obvious reasons...it's hard to count right? but we are talking millions of people. The result is a growing, very vulnerable group of second class residents without the rights and protections of citizenship. I want to repeat this because it is important to understand. The result is a growing, very vulnerable group of second class residents without the rights and protections of citizenship.

The stories are really troubling. Every joint house meeting, when we bring the groups together, I have sat with people for whom Spanish is their first language. And the stories are heartrending. First you should know that as hard as the economic downturn has been for us, it has been much, much harder for them. We're talking real poverty; we're talking not being able to feed yourself. We're talking about nowhere to go, no safety net for them. No healthcare, you know really scary stuff. Last week I sat with a group for a little while and heard a teen age girl my daughters age tell the group how afraid she was to walk to school...from home to school and back. Neighborhood safety for her is not a guarantee. But for my white kid on the other side of town...totally safe. But most troubling, and I would say complicated of all, are the stories of checkpoints and car impoundments. So I am going to tell you a little bit of the story. You've seen it in the news actually, or read it in the paper.

The Santa Rosa Police Department has set up check points for drunk driving, they say. And in some cases it seems really to be that. And they have caught a number of people who have been driving while drinking; and that is a good thing. I was almost killed by a drunk driver. I used to drive a motorcycle in San Francisco. I was hit at a stoplight, flew a block in the air and landed on my head, broke open my skull and was unconscious for 14 hours. So, I think that is great, catch all the drunk drivers you want. But there is another problem. Sometimes these checkpoints aren't set up when you would normally catch someone drinking and driving, like on a Friday night. Sometimes they are like four in the afternoon. This is for sure true in Petaluma, but it is not as clear what is happening in Santa Rosa. Although in my neighborhood I know that people have

been stopped in the middle of the day, and it is not because they think that the drivers have been drinking. What happens is you get stopped and asked if you have a license. If you don't then your car is impounded for 30 days, and in that 30 day time charges accrue and then there is thousands of dollars to get yourself out of this mess. It is complicated because one: we don't want people to be driving without drivers licenses; two: we don't want people driving under the influence; but three: we don't want to pray on a vulnerable minority and take advantage of things they can't do anything about. Do you see what I mean? They can't get a driver's license!

Now in one group I was with, a man went to Oregon, where he could get a driver's license. He has a driver's license from Oregon; he went to Oregon to get it! He still lives in fear, he has a family, he has to go to work, he has to have a car. The Oregon license won't work; they will still impound his car. It is a complex issue, not simple, but what is simple, is when we see a vulnerable group being exploited and persecuted, that's the simple part and the part we can do something about. You know, as a Jew, I am more than familiar with such treatment and where it can lead. And this is one of the things I hope we can work on together as we organize. We can see where the most vulnerable people are, whether it is in terms of immigration or health care, and see if we can find winnable issues to make them less vulnerable and give them more power through our collective power.

Okay, who else do we bring to the edge of the tent, but not let in. Well, how about the GLBT folk in our community? Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender. This is so painful. America ... the land of the free, the FREE. The place where religion and state are supposed to be separated. The place where the minority is protected from the tyranny of the majority...as long as you are heterosexual. So close to the very edge of the tent but not, God forbid, let inside. Imagine your life partner, your spouse of twenty years is critically ill and in ICU in the hospital. But you can't go and be with her because you are not considered "family." Imagine, you and your partner have a child. It is your child, you raised that child, and then God forbid your partner gets sick and dies. And now you have to fight for the right to keep your OWN CHILD! Imagine, imagine being the faithful minister of a church, for years, with a long term spouse (I'm gonna cry), and not being able to publically acknowledge that and sanctify your union. This is very painful and wrong. To the edge of the tent, but not inside!

How about here in this church? Who here is brought the very edge of the tent, but not fully and truly welcomed inside. Lucky for you guys, I don't know your church... so I can't speak for you. But see...I know who some of the folk that I serve are, and maybe by sharing that story a little bit it will touch you as well.

One challenge we have is welcoming republicans.... I knew you would laugh, but seriously: liberal churches and synagogues are often proud of how inclusive they are, but their doors do not in actuality open, truly welcoming people with more conservative political views than the majority of the community. There's a problem, because you can be a good progressive Jew, liberal when it comes to your approach to Jewish tradition, progressive when it comes to your approach to your religion (I would guess this to be true of Presbyterians also) and be a Republican as well. You can. And we have trouble honoring a true diversity of opinion in our community, and I am really unsettled by this. "Rabbi, you are so open and inclusive, except

when it comes to my views.” It hurts. We should listen to that voice, we should be cognizant of this weakness we liberals have.

In truth I have never known a church or synagogue that did not consider itself a warm and welcoming place. Have you ever met a church that said “Oh yeah, we’re nasty. We are really mean and we don’t like people much.” Every church and synagogue considers itself a warm and welcoming place. The leadership may wonder, they may have an inkling that there are problems, but the church or synagogue in general will say they have a warm culture. And the other truth is this, I have never known any group or community where it has not been true that some people were brought in to the very edge of the tent “Come on, join us, oh we are looking for volunteers on this committee” and then when you show up you were shut out in either subtle or not so subtle ways. Is that true here sometimes? Never true? I bet it is. So you should do some soul searching. I think that Shomrei Torah is a very warm and welcoming place, but I can list a half dozen examples of where we think we are, but then a certain kind of person shows up in a certain situation and they are not actually welcome.

That’s a little bit about church and synagogue. How about in your own family? How about in your own home? Maybe you feel like the outsider, right now. Are you the person in your family that never really gets welcomed inside, either to the whole family, or your parent’s hearts, or your brother or sisters home? Maybe you are the one with the closed door, or the closed heart. One of the great things about our organizing efforts is that it encourages us to truly and honestly be more inclusive by actually talking to and listening (that is the key part) to each other. See talking inclusivity is cheap, but actually engaging one another, that is the real thing. Because it is hard to shut someone out to leave them at the edge of the tent, and not welcome them inside, when you know their story, their pain, and you see our shared humanity (your pain, your story) in them. And it is not just their humanity that we recognize when we truly see each other. It’s God. It’s God in me and it is God in you. It is God in us, and it’s God in them. Remember Torah teaches that we are created B’tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. The image is grand, the challenge is actually living it and seeing it in the other every day.

We would all like to think that this text and what it teaches by omission speaks to anyone but ourselves. “Not me. Not my family. Not my church.” Yet we know deep inside that can’t be true. Always someone is on the outside, and someone is being left out, and someone is in! I wish the Torah and Jewish tradition hadn’t left Tziporah and her sons standing there at the edge of the tent ignored and alone. I wish the story was different. The text as it is, is an affront to my modern sensibilities. I don’t like it. Nevertheless, the picture of them just standing there, and the silence, the silence of the text is instructive on its own.