

## **In and Out**

Behaalotecha 2016  
The Jewish Center  
Rabbi Yosie Levine

The title of an article in the *Economist* recently caught my eye. It was called: “Reading the Torah in Abuja.”

“As sun sets on a Friday in a smart new suburb of Lagos, Harim Obidike dons his *kippah* and opens up a prayer book. It is the start of *shabbat*, the Jewish holy day, and as he croons through the psalms, a gaggle of youngsters sing along. “We are Israelites,” he says after bread has been broken and the candles lit.

“Nigeria is a devout country split loosely between a Muslim north and a Christian south: two halves which were brought together by colonialists and still butt heads today. A couple of decades ago, modern Judaism was almost unheard of. But this household is one of a growing number that are taking to the Torah. In Abuja, the capital, there are at least four small communities of Igbo-speakers that have opened synagogues.”

It goes without saying that even in the far reaches of Nigeria, everyone needs at least one shul that they won't daven at....

Thinking about this story, I was reminded of the Midrash from our parsha. Moshe asks his father in law to remain with the Jewish people, but Yitro declines.

ויאמר אליו לא אלך כי אל ארצי ואל מולדתי אלך

*No: I'm not going to the Promised Land. I'm returning to my land – to my birthplace.*

And the Midrash jumps in and says: You know why he was going back to Midian?

הריני הולך לארצי ואגייר לכל בני מדינתו ואביאם לתלמוד תורה ואקרבם תחת כנפי השכינה.

*I'm going to go back to my land and convert all the citizens of Midian. I will bring them close to the Torah, under the wings of the Divine Presence.*

Who would have guessed that 3500 years later, Judaism would be alive and well in the provinces of Western Africa?

The questions of who is a Jew and who's qualified to perform conversion are back in the public discourse. They're difficult questions and we would be kidding ourselves if we thought there were easy solutions.

But it's also worth zooming out for a moment and noticing that the whole world is grappling with some version of this very challenge: Who's on the inside and who's on the outside?

How extraordinary that Britain has decided to leave the European Union. And it boiled down to a question of identity. If you live in Leeds or Liverpool in 2016, to whom do you belong? Who's in and who's out?

The Supreme Court just reached a landmark decision on immigration. And it's a different form of the same question. Whom do we allow in? And whom do we keep out?

And of course it's all over our presidential politics. The walls and the profiles.... How does a country or a religion – or any group for that matter – preserve its own identity and at the same time embrace an ethic of inclusivism?

Of course we know *וְאֶהְבֶּתֶם אֶת הַגֵּר* is the most oft-commanded Mitzvah in the Torah. But there's something much more nuanced than this. Because while the Torah appreciates that someone may be an outsider in his or her own eyes, it actually wants us to conceive of them very differently. The goal is not just to support the *Ger* because the *Ger* needs support; but to peer beneath the labels and the facades and appreciate how the outsider can raise up those on the inside.

So allow me to share with you three observations from our Parsha about this issue. Because *בְּהַעֲלוֹתְךָ* is also about outsiders and their relationships to those on the inside.

The first outsiders I want to bring to your attention are a pair of prophets, two characters called Eldad and Medad. They are prophesying in the camp and Yehoshua considers it a great affront to Moshe. He wants to incarcerate them, but Moshe lets it go.

What were they saying that was so upsetting to Yehoshua?

משה מת ויהושוע מכניס את ישראל לארץ.

Maybe Yehoshua had his own doubts and anxieties about leading the Jewish people. But more importantly, Eldad and Medad were conveying a different canon – a different orthodoxy. Here was a story of the Jewish people with a very different ending. And the first impulse is: *They're not like us. They're too different. They'll upset the apple cart. So let's lock 'em up.*

Except Moshe says this is exactly the wrong solution:

ומי יתן כל עם ה' נביאים

*I wish everyone would be that way! We need more dissension, not less.*

This, then, is the first commentary on outsiders. They're not bound by the norms and expectations of the in-group. They have the capacity to challenge us in ways that no one on this inside can.

The next outsider we meet is Tzipporah.

She is the paradigmatic outsider. She's different in every imaginable way:

- She's a Midianite
  - She comes from a different background and a different culture
- She's described as a *כושיה* – she looks different – or as *הז"ל* say she was exceptionally beautiful – which would set her apart no less.
- And by virtue of being married to the greatest prophet in history, she's the only married woman in the Torah who cannot have a normal married life.

So how is it that Miriam knew? Who told her that Moshe and Tzipporah had separated? How would she know anything about the private lives of her brother and sister-in-law?

To answer this question, Rashi cites an extraordinary Midrash that fills in the narrative gap in the story. Eldad and Medad didn't just generate a reaction from Yehoshua and Moshe. Tzipporah also had a reaction. She said:

אוי לנשותיהן של אלו אם הם נזקקים לנבואה, שיהיו פורשים מנשותיהן כדרך שפירש בעלי ממני.  
*I feel so bad for the wives of those prophets – for it means that they're going to have to separate from their husbands just as my husband separated from me.*

It was this comment that Miriam overheard – Tzipporah's own confession – that led her to question her brother's behavior.

Tzipporah reminds us that the outsider is uniquely positioned to be empathic.

When she hears about Eldad and Medad prophesying, her first thought is – what will that mean for their wives? The conclusion she reaches isn't even the correct one. But it's not Tzipporah's conclusion that's important; it's the process by which she arrives at it.

By recognizing what makes her different from other people, she's instinctively sensitive to what might make others feel equally different. Her experience as the outsider – her experience as the other – has allowed her to cultivate this capacity for empathy – this capacity to appreciate those who are undergoing challenges of their own.

This, then, is the second commentary on outsiders. If you let them in, they'll sensitize you to things you would never know or see on your own.

Finally, I want to return to Yitro.

In the course of trying to persuade him to stay, Moshe says: והיית לנו לעניים. And it's an enigma. What does Moshe mean that you'll be our eyes?

The continuation of the narrative reveals the answer. As soon as Yitro leaves, the Jewish people start complaining and they say: בלתי אל המן עינינו! – all we see is the man!

Those on the inside become inured to the riches in their lives. The most valuable food product in the history of the world had become valueless to those who consumed it daily. It's when we have a fresh set of eyes that we're reminded just how fortunate we are. As soon as Yitro leaves, the Israelites become blind to the blessings they enjoy.

Moshe wanted Yitro to stay because he was the foreigner who heard about Hashem and His miracles and gravitated to the Jewish people. Here was a man who never lost his sense of his wonder.

This, then, is the third and final commentary on outsiders. They teach us to appreciate what we too often take for granted.

Judaism has a very complex understanding of how to navigate the question of who's in and who's out. We're small and tribal. We're particularistic and familial. And yet we don't believe that we have a monopoly on truth: Which is why – unlike other religions – we don't fight holy wars and we don't proselytize. We're comfortable with people not like us.

Every headline these days is wrapped up in the question of who belongs. I'm not saying these aren't hard questions. They're very hard. But whereas so many others see the world in black and white, the Torah allows us to see it in color.

The answer is not to circle the wagons or close all the literal or figurative borders; but neither is it to tear down all the walls and discount one's particular identity.

The survival of the Jewish people is the best evidence that it really is possible to find a middle ground: To remain unabashedly loyal to one's particularist values even while maintaining a healthy sense of universalist idealism.

If we lead by example, we can help the world affirm the abiding value of the stranger. We reach out to the Ger not just because he needs more support, but because we recognize that he has a significant contribution to make.

- Unmoved by a precedent to which he's not been privy, he contributes a new voice and a new perspective to our communal conversation;
- Educated by his own experience of alienation, he reminds us how to see the other and empathize with their challenges;
- And untainted by cynicism, he teaches us how to appreciate the myriad ברכות in our lives.

Moshe pleads with Yitro and says, “Don't go.” לך עמנו והטבו לך. והיה הטוב ההוא אשר ייטיב ה' עמנו והטבו לך. *It'll be so good for you if you stay.*

And the Midrash writes:

והיה הטוב ההוא  
ואי זה הוא הטוב ההוא?  
אותו הטוב בימי בראשית.  
שנאמר וירא אלקים את האור כי טוב  
וגנז זה הטוב לצדיקים

What was the *good*? It was the good referred to back in the days of creation. As it says, *And God saw that that light was good.* He took some of that light and stored away in the world to come for the righteous.

There is a special place in Gan Eden set aside for the stranger. We can be sure there's a special place, too, for those who embrace him.