BS"D

Dear Friends,

I'm sending you some of my thoughts on this week's parsha. If you'd prefer, you can watch a video of my drasha at baisabe.com/streaming.

What's Jewish About David Bowie?

This week, we read Parshat Yitro, which is made famous by the description of how we received the Torah at Sinai. However before that happens, we read about how Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, shows up with Moshe's wife, Tzippora, and their two sons. Yitro's arrival is of more than just personal familial significance for Moshe. On the day after his arrival, Yitro begins giving Moshe advice and instructions about the proper way to govern the people, telling him he's doing it wrong. It is indeed remarkable that the Torah portrays the greatest prophet in history, the greatest leader our people has ever known, who speaks to G-d face to face, and who just successfully led the Israelites out of Egypt, getting leadership lessons from a non-Jewish priest. What's more, these leadership lessons take place before we receive the Torah.

While commentators argue about whether the narrative is in chronological order, and some argue that Yitro actually showed up after the receiving of the Torah, either way, the Torah saw fit to record Yitro's leadership instructions to Moshe prior to the revelation at Sinai, possibly to highlight that only a prophet humble enough to listen to good advice wherever it comes from could merit to be the conduit of divine revelation.

The connection between Yitro's leadership coaching and the revelation at Sinai calls to mind the statement in the Midrash Eicha Rabba, "If someone says to you that there is wisdom among the gentiles, believe them, but if they say to you that there is Torah among the gentiles, do not believe them." The message being, that the Jewish people do not have a monopoly on wisdom—we can learn about science, philosophy, art, business from non-Jews, but that the Torah—the divinely revealed instruction for living a covenantal life, is unique, and belongs to the Jewish people alone. This dual

statement, reflective of the events that take place in our parsha, is an apt description of the tensions that define Modern Orthodoxy—between universalism and particularism, between engagement with secular knowledge and our loyalty to the Torah, between openness and tradition.

Five years ago, I was reflecting on this tension during the week leading up to Parshas Yitro. The week before, British rock musician David Bowie died of liver cancer, and the Forward had run an article called "The Secret Jewish History of David Bowie." The article was attempting to chronicle connection, however tangential, between the deceased rocker and Jews or Judaism. In spite of a Jewish manager here, a distant Jewish relative there: after several hundred words, a reader couldn't help to reach the unsurprising conclusion that there was nothing particularly Jewish about David Bowie.

That same week, I happened to attend the annual Zlatne Uste Balkan Brass Band Festival, during which dozens of bands from around the world gather for a weekend of music. I was standing listening to a musician play traditional Bulgarian accordion music, when a young man walked up to me, apparently noticing my kipah and beard. He told me he was Orthodox and asked me, "I'm just curious, what brings you here, as an Orthodox Jew?" I was sort of taken aback by the question. I told him I was there because I liked the music, but that didn't seem to satisfy him. He gestured to the accordionist, "Do you see something Jewish about this music?" It seemed to bother this young man that someone who was visibly Orthodox would go out of their way to go to a concert if there wasn't something Jewish about it.

This young man, like the author of the farfetched attempt to claim that there's something Jewish about David Bowie, seemed to be prodded by the assumption that as Jews, we should be drawn to Jewish culture, and if a non-Jewish artist happens to move us, we should look for something Jewish about them to justify our interest.

On one level, this is silly. On another level, I relate to that feeling. Part of me wonders if I should feel guilty that as an Orthodox rabbi, I find Balkan brass band music more beautiful than

klezmer. I wonder if it's a failure of my spirituality that I'd rather listen to recordings of David Bowie than of Chazanus.

From the very beginning, Judaism has learned and borrowed from the best of non-Jewish culture around us. It's not just that Yitro, Moshe's non-Jewish father in law, taught Moshe to delegate and empower a broad base of leadership among the Jewish people. Yitro was the first person in the Torah to utter that most frum of phrases "*Barukh Hashem*," Blessed is the L-rd. Of course Yitro is not the only non-Jewish source we learn from. The names of our months are Babylonian in origin. It seems that engaging with non-Jewish culture is not only inevitable, but also has the potential to enrich our Jewish culture. That said, can we articulate a model of how to go about engaging with non-Jewish culture in such a way that we don't lose our Jewish identity?

I once heard Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z"l, the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, speak. He said when we was a young man exploring the wisdom of spiritual traditions other than Judaism, he made a deal with G-d, telling G-d that wherever he went, no matter how un-Jewish it was he would keep his kipah on. So even when he was sitting in a Hindu ashram or participating in a peyote ceremony in the deserts of the southwest, he was there as a Jew. Now, as an Orthodox Jew, I consider some of the places that R. Zalman chose to wear his kipah to be *assur*, totally off limits, but I think Rav Zalman was correct about one thing: even when we venture into non-Jewish spaces, especially when we venture into non-Jewish spaces, it is important to remember to, metaphorically speaking, keep our kipah, to never hide or deny our Jewishness from ourselves or others. To remind ourselves, no matter where I go or who I learn from, to bring our Jewishness into the room.

There are a few ways to do this. On the most superficial level, we can literally wear our kipahs or other outward visible signs of our Jewishness. By ensuring that we are visibly identifiable as Jewish, we are reminded that we serve as representatives of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. This means there are places we simply won't go, places where it would not reflect well on Torah or

Judaism for a visibly Jewish person to be seen. Being visibly Jewish also means I have to ask myself, how am I comporting myself? Am I going with the flow because it's what everyone else is doing or am I making sure that actions align with Torah and Jewish values?

This idea of wearing our kipah addresses how I comport myself, and where I chose to go. But it doesn't tell me how to relate to the non-Jewish culture I'm engaging with or learning from. One way people engage with non-Jewish culture, is by seeking out lessons that they can bring back to a Jewish context. A Jew might go to a concert to learn melodies or singing styles that might enhance shul davening or the singing at our Shabbos table; we might read secular literature looking for literary techniques or ideas that might help us better understand the Torah. This approach justifies engaging with non-Jewish culture, while ascribing no intrinsic value to the experience, treating non-Jewish culture as being of instrumental value, in that it serve to enrich our Jewish culture.

However I would argue that the statement from Kohelet Rabba that there is wisdom among the gentiles means that non-Jewish culture (wisdom) has intrinsic intellectual, aesthetic, and even spiritual value. I can go to the concert, not only to keep an ear out for a melody that I might steal for *Adon Olam*, but because my Jewish *neshama* lights up when I hear that music. Even if I can't find a concrete way that this particular experience will enrich my Jewish community—I know that listening to brass band music makes me feel a little more spiritually alive, a little more connected to God.

We find that in the course of his Moshe's relationship with Yitro, Moshe employed all of these approaches. While dwelling with Yitro, Moshe named his eldest son Gershom meaning “I was a stranger there” so that neither he nor his family could forget that however long he might dwell in Midyan, his roots lay elsewhere. This is the approach of not taking off the kipah, of saying don't think just because I'm coming to your concert that I'm assimilating into your culture. I'm here as a Jew, as a representative of the Jewish people.

The second approach is the approach Moshe took in adopting Yitro's recommendations on how to administer the law; the approach of studying non-Jewish wisdom in order to apply it in a Jewish

context. This is showing up at the concert and saying, what can I learn here about music that I can bring back to the Jewish world?

The third approach is exemplified by the fact that Moshe's first encounter with God doesn't take place in Eretz Yisrael or among Israelites in Goshen—it takes place in Midian while he is tending the flocks of the non-Jewish Yitro. Even Moshe Rabbeinu was able to connect with God outside of a specifically Jewish context. This is the approach of attending the concert, not just as an emissary of the Jewish people, not just in search of material to bring back to the Jewish community, but because this non-Jewish musician's songs make my Jewish soul sing.

It requires a certain amount of rootedness in our own tradition to be able to look for wisdom, look for a connection to G-d in non-Jewish music and art without fear of losing my Jewishness. I think that's why sometimes we do feel uncomfortable when we engage with secular culture—because it does feel dangerous, we don't feel like we're so rooted that we can do so without sacrificing our Jewishness. And so we look for something Jewish about David Bowie or a Bulgarian accordionist so we can feel more comfortable with how they move us spiritually. But if we are rooted enough, grounded enough in Torah, and our own Jewish commitments, then we can safely appreciate the wisdom, the beauty and the spirituality of philosophy, music, literature and art, even if there's nothing Jewish about it.

Shabbat Shalom!

Garth Silberstein