

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Yitro
February 15, 2020 ***20 Shevat, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

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Yitro in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/36271/jewish/Yitro-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles which G-d performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the Israelite camp, bringing with him Moses' wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people. The children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah . G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend.

G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

Hatarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah discusses Isaiah's vision of the Heavenly Chariot (the merkavah), a revelation that was experienced by all the Israelites when G-d spoke the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai—an event recounted in this week's Torah reading. Isaiah perceives G-d sitting on a throne surrounded by angels. Isaiah vividly describes the angels and their behavior (in anthropomorphic terms). During the course of this vision, Isaiah volunteers to be G-d's emissary to transmit His message to the Israelites. He is immediately given a depressing prophecy regarding the exile the nation will suffer as punishment for their many sins—and the Land of Israel will be left empty and desolate, though there will be left a "trunk" of the Jewish people that eventually will regrow.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Universal and the Particular (Yitro 5780)

<http://rabbisacks.org/yitro-5780/>

The quintessential Jewish expression of thanks, gratitude and acknowledgment is Baruch Hashem, meaning “Thank God,” or “Praise be to the Lord.”

Chassidim say of the Baal Shem Tov that he would travel around the little towns and villages of Eastern Europe, asking Jews how they were. However poor or troubled they were, invariably they would reply, Baruch Hashem. It was an instinctive expression of faith, and every Jew knew it. They might have lacked the learning of the great Talmudic scholar, or the wealth of the successful, but they believed they had much to thank God for, and they did so. When asked what he was doing and why, the Baal Shem Tov would reply by quoting the verse: “You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Psalm 22:4). So every time a Jew says Baruch Hashem, he or she is helping to make a throne for the Shechinah, the Divine Presence.

The words Baruch Hashem appear in this week’s parsha. But they are not spoken by a Jew. The person who says them is Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law. Rejoining Moshe after the Exodus, bringing with him Moshe’s wife and children, and hearing from his son-in-law all that had happened in Egypt, he says, “Praise be to the Lord [Baruch Hashem], who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians” (Ex. 18:10).

Three people in the Torah use this expression – and all of them are non-Jews, people outside the Abrahamic covenant. The first is Noach: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem” (Gen. 9:26). The second is Avraham’s servant, presumed to be Eliezer, whom he sends to find a wife for Yitzchak: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Avraham, who has not abandoned His kindness and faithfulness to my master” (Gen. 24:27). The third is Yitro in this week’s parsha.[1]

Is this significant? Why is it that this praise of God is attributed to Noach, Eliezer and Yitro, whereas from the Israelites, with the marked exception of the Song at the Sea, we seem to hear constant complaints? It may be simply that this is human nature: we see more clearly than others what is lacking in our lives, while others see more clearly than we do the blessings we have. We complain, while others wonder what we are complaining about when we have so much to be thankful for. That is one explanation.

It is, though, possible that a more fundamental point is being made. The Torah is signalling its most subtle and least understood idea: that the God of Israel is the God of all humankind, even though the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humankind. As Rabbi Akiva put it: “Beloved is humanity, for it was created in the image of God. Beloved is Israel, for they are called children of God.”[2]

We believe that God is universal. He created the universe. He set in motion the processes that led to stars, planets, life, and humanity. His concern is not limited to Israel. As we say in the prayer of Ashrei, “His tender mercies are on all His works.” You do not need to be Jewish to have a sense of reverence for the Creator or recognise, as Yitro did, His hand in miraculous events. It would be hard to find another religious literature that confers such dignity on figures who stand outside its borders.

This is true not only of the three notable figures who said Baruch Hashem. The Torah calls Avraham’s contemporary, Malkizedek, king of Shalem, a “Priest to God Most High.” He, too, blessed God: “Blessed be Avram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High who delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen. 14:19-20).

Consider also, the fact that the title of our own parsha this week, which contains the Ten Commandments as well as the most significant event in all of Jewish history, the covenant at Sinai, carries the name of a non-Jew. What is more, immediately prior to the revelation at Sinai, the Torah tells us how it was Yitro the Midianite Priest who taught

Moshe how to organise the leadership of the people.

These are remarkable expressions of spiritual generosity to those outside the covenant. Or consider Tishri, the holiest month of the Jewish year. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, as well as reading about the birth of Yitzchak, we read of how an angel came to the aid of Hagar and Yishmael. "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation" (Gen. 21:17-18). Yishmael was not destined to be a carrier of the covenant, yet he was rescued and blessed.

On Yom Kippur, in the afternoon, after we have spent most of the day fasting and making confession, we read the book of Yonah, in which we discover that the Prophet uttered a mere five Hebrew words ("In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed") and then the entire population – Assyrians, Israel's enemies – repented. Tradition takes this as the model of collective repentance.

On Succot we read Zechariah's prophecy that in days to come all the nations will come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of rain (Zech. 14:16-19).

These are three stunning examples of universalism. They do not imply that in the fullness of time everyone will convert to Judaism. Rather, that in the fullness of time everyone will recognise the one God, Creator and Sovereign of the universe. That is quite a different thing.

This idea that you can stand outside the faith and still be acknowledged by people within the faith as someone who recognises God, is very rare indeed. Far more common is the approach of one God, one truth, one way. Whoever stands outside that way is Godless, unsaved, the infidel, unredeemed, a lower class of humanity.

Why then does Judaism distinguish between the universality of God and the particularity of our relationship with Him? Answer: because this helps us solve the single greatest problem humanity has faced since earliest times. How can I recognise the dignity and integrity of the 'other'? History and biology have written into the human mind a capacity for altruism toward the people like us, and aggression toward the people not like us. We are good, they are bad. We are innocent, they are guilty. We have truth, they have lies. We have God on our side, they do not. Many crimes of nation against nation are due to this propensity.

Which is why Tanach teaches otherwise. Noach, Eliezer and Yitro were people of God without being members of Israel. Even the people of Nineveh became an example of how to heed a Prophet and repent. God blessed Yishmael as well as Yitzchak. These are powerful lessons.

It is hard to think of a more compelling principle for the 21st century. The great problems humanity faces – climate change, economic inequality, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence – are global, but our most effective political agencies are at most national. There is a mismatch between our problems and the available solutions. We need to find a way of combining our universal humanity with our cultural and religious particularity.

That is what the Torah is doing when it tells us that Noach, Eliezer and Yitro said Baruch Hashem. They thanked God, just as we, today, thank God. God is universal. Therefore humanity, created in His image, is universal. But the revelation and covenant at Mount Sinai were particular. They belong to our story, not the universal story of humankind.

I believe this ability to be both particular in our identity and universal in our commitment to the human future is one of the most important messages we, as Jews, have to deliver in the 21st century. We are different, but we are human. Therefore let us work together to solve the problems that can only be solved together. [1] There are two other oblique examples. Laban calls Avraham's servant, "You who are blessed by the Lord" (Gen. 24:31). Avimelech king of Gerar says of Yitzchak, "You are blessed by the Lord" (Genesis 26:29). Again note that neither of the speakers is part of the covenant.

[2] Mishnah Avot 3:14.

Expanding the Circle of Revelation by Daniel Nevins

<http://www.jtsa.edu/expanding-the-circle-of-revelation>

Are women Jews? This shocking question, first phrased by the feminist scholar Rachel Adler, is linked by Judith Plaskow to our portion in her 1990 book, *Standing Again at Sinai*. When Moses descends from the mountain to prepare the people for revelation, he tells them, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman” (Exod. 19:15). Sexual contact makes one temporarily impure, and God wanted the people to receive the revelation in a state of purity. As Plaskow notes, Moses could have said, “men and women do not go near each other,” but instead he addresses only the men. She writes, “In this passage, the Otherness of women finds its way into the very center of Jewish experience.” (25)

Because of the significance of this passage, it becomes paradigmatic of later Jewish writings in which women are often discussed as objects rather than speaking as subjects in their own relationship to the divine. The Talmud contains an entire division called “Women.” Much of it relates the actions taken by men to marry, divorce, or otherwise control the bodies of women. In the Jewish canon, women are rarely addressed by God, their voices are seldom heard, and their status is dependent, much like domestic servants, or even children. They are not required to study Torah and are relieved of responsibility for many positive commandments.

JTS professor emerita Judith Hauptman has persuasively argued that this exemption reflects their social subjugation. She writes, “A woman’s exemption from these acts has nothing to do with her household and child-rearing chores. She is simply a lesser person in the grand scheme of things, subordinate to her husband and ready to take orders from him” (*Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice*, 237). If the definition of a Jew is someone who serves God through the study of Torah and the practice of mitzvot, then women are assigned an auxiliary status, not their own independent standing as Jews. This arguably confirms Adler’s provocative question.

There is profound truth to this critique of the Bible and its rabbinic exegesis, and yet Plaskow quickly acknowledges that it is an incomplete account of women in Jewish tradition. First, there is tension between the “holes in the text” and the lived experience of Jewish women, who have long felt and have been recognized as full members of the Jewish people. Second, even the ancient Rabbis were troubled by the implication that women were excluded from revelation. In fact, the Rabbis developed two substantial lines of interpretation specifically to include women in this formative event.

A few verses earlier, in 19:3, God tells Moses, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel.” This verse contains a doubling or parallel structure typical of biblical poetry. Aren’t “house of Jacob” and “children of Israel” synonymous? Not according to the Rabbis. In the collection of Midrash Mekhilta Derabbi Yishmael, “house of Jacob” refers to women, while “children (lit. sons) of Israel” refers to men. This Midrash claims that God spoke doubly and differently at Sinai: With the women God spoke in a gentle tone, while the men received a stern lecture. Elsewhere in midrashic literature the Rabbis propose other differentiations in the tone, but not content, of revelation for the old and young and other categories. We may or may not like this account of gender differentiation, but it asserts inclusion of both women and men in the Sinai revelation.

Another midrashic collection, *Shemot Rabbah* (Yitro 28), continues the theme of gender differentiation and adds that God took care to address the women before the men. Last time, when God spoke first to Adam, and only later to Eve, it didn’t work out well. God, as it were, learned from experience and included women from the outset at Sinai.

While it is common to portray women as kind or merciful, and men as strong or judgmental, the medieval Kabbalah reversed this pattern. In the *Zohar* (Yitro 79b) the feminine aspect of God (Shekhinah) is associated with judgment, while the masculine aspect of God (Tiferet) is associated with mercy. As Daniel Matt writes in his *Zohar*

commentary, "at Sinai, each group was addressed accordingly" (Vol. IV, 432). Are women Jews? Yes, and they were first to hear the divine word, infused either with gentleness or strength, according to the Midrash or Kabbalah.

A second path of rabbinic interpretation about women at Sinai returns us to that line of Moses, "do not approach a woman." True, Moses was addressing the men, but why? According to classical Jewish law, after coitus men may return to a state of purity after washing and waiting a day. Women, however, might excrete live "seed" as late as the third day, and thus need more time to become pure. In verse 10 God told Moses to keep the people pure only for two days, but Moses added a third day so that the women would also be pure in time for revelation (Avot Derabbi Natan A, Ch. 2).

Why then did Moses address the men? Because he feared that they would be selfish, caring only about their own purity, and not that of their wives. In other words, the men required a warning not to keep the Torah for themselves, but to make sure the entire people was included. This midrash, which is restated by Rashi, inverts the exclusion of women, making their experience central to the timing of revelation. It does not undo the Otherness described by Plaskow, but it does show that at least the ancient Rabbis considered the presence of women at Sinai essential.

Just over a century ago, a Jewish seamstress in Krakow named Sarah Schenirer founded a school, and then a network of schools for Orthodox girls named Bais Ya'akov. This title refers to our verse in which women ("the house of Jacob") were addressed by God at Sinai. Schenirer was alarmed by the secularization of Jewish women and approached the most prominent Orthodox rabbis of her time, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagen, and the Hasidic rebbes of Belz and Ger, for their support. Even though women were traditionally exempted from Torah study, these rabbis recognized the same problem that Adler and Plaskow would later state so forcefully. Without a Torah education, Jewish girls and women were indeed in danger of not remaining Jews. They too needed to hear the divine voice, reverberating still from Sinai.

To be sure, the Bais Ya'akov schools do not educate girls in the same fashion as Haredi boys. They are not, in general, taught Talmud. They do learn with rigor, however, and in non-Orthodox settings women and men have learned the same material for many decades. Likewise, in modern Orthodox settings many of the most proficient teachers of Talmud and other rabbinic literature today are women. This shift in Jewish education has resulted in an "expansion of the palace of Torah," as phrased by Tamar Ross. When the Torah is studied and taught by a broader portion of the Jewish people, when the experiences of people of different genders are included, then the conversation becomes enriched for everyone.

As we prepare to stand again at Sinai, to hear the revelation recited in our own communities, we recall the divine instructions to Moses, and then his own expansion, which were intended for the same purpose. We should stand together, expanding the circle of revelation until it includes every person who is prepared to study and to practice the holy ways of Torah. (*Daniel Nevein is the Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and the Division of Religious Leadership*)

Blesser of the Israelite God by Rabbi Dr. Menachem Pitkowsky

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=8646750f-da8e-4289-a239-8971a92b129e>

Much has been written by commentators about Yitro, the Midianite priest who is the eponymous character of our parashah. This should come as no surprise as Yitro was not only Moshe's father-in-law, but also someone who had a lasting influence on the organizational and judicial structure of Israel. I would like to focus on a different aspect of Yitro's interaction with Moshe and the Children of Israel that can be found at the beginning of the parashah.

9) And Yitro rejoiced over all the kindness that the LORD had shown Israel when He delivered them from the Egyptians. 10) "Blessed be the LORD," Yitro said, "who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from

under the hand of the Egyptians. 11) Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, yes, by the result of their very schemes against [the people]." 12) And Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aharon came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moshe's father-in-law. (Exodus 18:9-12 [all trans. from sefaria.org unless noted])

Much of the discussion about these verses has been about the sacrifices brought by Yitro and the reaction of Aharon and the elders of Israel. How could Yitro bring these sacrifices? Was the reaction of Aharon appropriate? But I would like to offer some thoughts on Yitro's blessing that is found in v. 10, "Blessed be the Lord..." It shouldn't be a surprise that Yitro's blessing is seen as a paradigm for the future:

"From where are these matters [derived that one is required to recite a blessing on a miracle]? Rabbi Yohanan said: The verse states: "And Jethro said: Blessed be the Lord, Who delivered..." (B. Berachot 54a)

While other sources also praise Yitro, at the same time they criticize Moshe and the Children of Israel, focusing on the use by Yitro of the word barukh:

"And Yitro said: 'Blessed (barukh) is the Lord'": R. Pappis said: Scripture speaks to the discredit of Israel, six hundred thousand men having been there and not one of them having stood up to bless the Lord until Yithro came and did so, viz. "And Yitro said: Blessed is the Lord, who rescued you, etc." (Mekhilta Tractate Amalek, chapter 3, see also B. Sandhedrin 94a)

While Moshe and the Children of Israel did sing praise to God after crossing the Reed Sea, they didn't use the word barukh.

Rabbi Natan Tzvi Friedman, a Hungarian rabbi and Holocaust survivor who later became a rabbi in Bnei Brak, understood Yitro as an example of someone from the outside who was able to see the importance and glory of something that insiders, the Children of Israel, were unable to see and appreciate. (Parperat LaTorah, 96-97) Rabbi Friedman also saw this phenomenon in relation to the founding of the State of Israel. He felt that sometimes it takes someone from outside of the community, for Rabbi Friedman, outside of the Jewish community specifically, to fully appreciate the monumental importance of the establishment of the State of Israel.

Let us all learn how to put on a different pair of lenses from time to time, to maybe see and appreciate those things around us that we have been unable to see until now. Not only that, but let us be open to outsiders who may be able to understand things about ourselves and our communities that we haven't been able to before. (*Rabbi Dr. Menachem Pitkowsky is Rabbinics Curriculum Coordinator & Lecturer, The Academy for Jewish Religion & Conservative Yeshiva Alumnus*)

[Choosing to See and Hear by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein \(Conservative Yeshiva Faculty\)](#)

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Isaiah chapter 6 marks Isaiah's introductory prophecy. It is familiar to most of us because it contains the famous refrain from the Kedushah section of the Amidah (the standing prayer): "Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh - Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Host, the whole earth is filled with His glory". What is less familiar is the content of the message which follows this vision of the angelic praise of the Divine. This prophecy marked troubled times where both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were in the process of disintegration due to external pressure and internal rot. God entreated Isaiah to deliver a disturbing message to the people: And He said: "Go and say to this people: 'Indeed, you must hear but you will not understand, indeed you must see but you will not know.' Make the heart of this people obtuse and block its ears and seal its eyes. Lest it see with its eyes and with its ears hear and its heart understand and it turn back and be healed." (verses 9-10)

This message bears similarity to God's hardening Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh's behavior was beyond repair and the resulting consequences were there to be seen. The doors of repentance seem to be closed for him. Similarly, God has judged Isaiah's people to be sinful and on account of their recalcitrance, punishment seemed inevitable. In context,

Isaiah's message is a result of his profound awareness of what is happening around him. He knows the score and discerns that if nothing is done the results will be tragic. For them, too, the doors seemed to be closed.

The difference, though, is that this message is directed to the people. Its intent, according to Rabbi Mordechai Breuer (20th century Israel), was to warn them that the consequences of their actions were in their hands. If they chose to lack the basic discernment of their situation, the results were obvious. The purpose of God's message was to shock the people into awareness so that they might take the measures necessary to save themselves. (Pirkei Yishayahu, pp. 236-7)

Isaiah's prophecy is carefully crafted to remind us to pay attention to what goes on around us - to "hear" and to "understand"; to "see" and to "know". He alerts us to be aware of what goes on around us, lest we face the results brought about by lack of discernment, as did Isaiah's generation.

[Yitro by Rabbi Berel Wein](https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2267.html)

<https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2267.html>

We once again see in this week's Torah reading the Torah's penchant to use outsiders and their ideas to advance the welfare of the Jewish People. After the granting of the Torah on Sinai, Moshe attempts to institute a one-man – himself – system of justice for the Jewish people. In theory, this is the ideal system, for everyone would wish to be heard and judged by Moshe. There cannot be anyone better or wiser to hear disputes and render clarifications of Torah ordinances and values than Moshe Rabbeinu. Yet, like many, if not even the greatest ideas in theory, do not usually work out in practice in the messy world of everyday human behavior and life.

It is the complete outsider, Yitro, who immediately grasps the danger to the people and to Moshe that is inherent in his role as the sole judge of the Jews. Yitro cautions Moshe that under such a system, Moshe and the people will wither away because of the impossible physical, emotional and organizational strain. Yitro proposes an alternate system of justice, more bureaucratic and cumbersome but infinitely more workable than the one Moses proposed. And Heaven agrees with the outsider, and Yitro's proposal becomes the accepted norm for justice for that generation of Jewish people. Moshe himself agrees with the wisdom of Yitro's words. The fact that Yitro is a complete outsider in Jewish society of that time in no way disqualifies his observations and suggestions.

Generally, people ignore and even resent the comments and opinions of outsiders on internal or domestic matters. What can an outsider possibly know about how we should behave or how we should run our home, business or society? Yet, as the professional fields of counselling in all sectors and disciplines in our society continue to grow and expand, we are witness to the value of outside guidance. It is their 'outsiderness' that provides a perspective that the person or society cannot achieve by itself.

The rabbis of the Talmud phrased it succinctly and correctly: "A prison inmate cannot free himself by himself from his incarceration." As it was in the case of Yitro, it is the outsider – oftentimes the ultimate outsider – who may be the key to progress and who offers a better perspective on the challenges facing us. We should never deliberately close our ears to what is being said about us or to advice given, even if it is not requested.

The great unmatched humility of Moshe allowed him not only to accept the words and advice of Yitro, but also to cherish them, and even openly credit Yitro for his insight and wisdom. Moshe will say to Yitro later in the Torah, "you have been to us our guide and eyes," Only outsiders can free us from the bonds of our own self-imposed subjectivity. This is one of the great subliminal teachings that fill the Torah and instruct us about life.

[Yitro by Shaul Rosenblatt](https://mailchi.mp/facc1cb80c80/weekly-davar-yisro?e=e0f2ca6c0d)

<https://mailchi.mp/facc1cb80c80/weekly-davar-yisro?e=e0f2ca6c0d>

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, joins the Jewish people in the desert, advises Moses on the best way to serve and judge the people - by appointing a hierarchy of intermediaries - and then returns home to Midian. Moses is humble enough to listen to his father in law

and the Jewish People benefit greatly from his sound advice.

The Ten Commandments were famously written on stone. The medium itself is a message. Torah, generally, is written on parchment. Because Torah is essentially wisdom. And, like parchment, coming from the hide of an animal, which grew over time, so too human wisdom develops along with human society. The Tablets of stone, however, point to something different. Stone is the very ground that we stand on, solid and unchanging, giving us the stability to build our lives and our societies. So too, the Ten Commandments, which represent human values. They need to be solid and unchanging. I believe that the world used to understand this. The US Constitution begins, after its preamble, 'we hold these truths to be self-evident'; the French Declaration of the Rights of Man also 'proclaims in the presence, and under the auspices of, the Supreme Being, the following rights of man'. The values of these two great documents are based on eternal and unchanging truths. Though written on paper, they are both, so to speak, written on stone.

This was a big part of the revolutionary nature of the Ten Commandments. They were values, not convenience and convention. They were absolute, not changing with the times. I would suggest that only such values have the ability to underpin the moral fibre of a society. Only values written on stone, are able to provide the foundation for a stable, safe and decent world.

Today, unfortunately, I do not see that our societies have values written on stone in the way that 18th Century America or France did, or, indeed, the way that Torah did and does. Today, we have moved into the realm of convention and convenience. Rights over responsibilities. Personal autonomy as our new 'truth', but very much with a lower-case 't'.

And I worry that, as a result, the fabric of our society will begin to erode.

Will Herbert, the 20th Century American philosopher described this in his Cut Flower Theory. He wrote that, 'the attempt made in recent decades by secularist thinkers to disengage the moral principles of western civilization from their scripturally based religious context, in the assurance that they could live a life of their own as "humanistic" ethics, has resulted in our "cut flower culture." Cut flowers retain their original beauty and fragrance, but only so long as they retain the vitality that they have drawn from their now-severed roots; after that is exhausted, they wither and die. So, with freedom, brotherhood, justice, and personal dignity — the values that form the moral foundation of our civilization. Without the life-giving power of the faith out of which they have sprung, they possess neither meaning nor vitality.

I disagree that values need to come from a religion (although I obviously believe that they can!) But I do believe that values need to be 'self-evident' Truths (with the upper-case 'T'). They need to be something that we recognize as coming from a deeper universal wisdom, not simply the convention of the times. Because, given human fickleness, human ego, human self-interest and human ability to rationalize, it's just too easy for our values to change as the existing ones become less and less convenient.

It shocks me to look at how the values of our society have changed so much since my youth, not all that long ago. And they are still changing. Rapidly. Shifting values do not provide the stable bedrock that values written on stone do. This the key significance of Ten Commandments that are given by God, a Supreme Being, rather than made up by self-interested human beings. I believe that we must have values and stay true to them even in changing times; especially in changing times. Values must inform how we behave, not the other way around. Woe to the society that changes what it believes to be true based on what suits the desires and whims of the times.

Yahrtzeits

Stan Klughaupt remembers his father Charles Klughaupt (Elchonon) on Mon Feb 17 (Shevat 22)