

Appreciating Jethro

Jethro, the namesake of our Parasha, had been present in Egypt generations earlier, according to the Midrash, when he was one of the Wise Men Pharaoh consulted regarding how to “deal wisely with the “threat” of Israel’s multiplying population. He was the only Sage who objected to the suggestion to drown Israelite sons in the Nile, and stood up and protested against that and other cruel orders of Pharaoh against the Israelites in Egypt, forecasting Egypt’s doom. As a result, Jethro himself had been banned from Egypt generations earlier, settling in Midian, where he fathered seven daughters. Generations later, he there gave refuge to the fleeing Moses and became his father-in-law. This renowned deep thinker had spent his life in search for the proper theological system, and had tried practicing all the religious systems of his day, according to the Midrash. When he heard of the miraculous salvation of Israel from the Egyptians at the Sea under the leadership of his son-in-law, he was truly impressed. What finally spurred Jethro to pick-up to go visit the Hebrews’ camp was the battle against Amalek. Amalek’s attack so irritated and angered him that he decided to assist the Israelites. Jethro viewed Amalek negatively; they represented to him the worst of human traits. Jethro particularly detested the latter’s attempt to incite the evil inclinations of individuals among the Hebrews. He must have appreciated the way they fought against Amalek by turning their attention upwards, invoking man’s divine qualities to battle evil. We may count Jethro as the first in an enumeration of “the thirty-six righteous people” who sustain each historical generation. Indeed, The Zohar (Part II 67 B) declares that it was due to Jethro that the Torah was given to the Israelites. He was the first who declared God’s Uniqueness and was able to explicate how to think of Him and as well as how to worship Him properly.

Moses left Egypt as a young man and went to rescue Israel in his old age. This means that Moses lived with his father-in-law some sixty years, during which Jethro, his household, and their desert milieu profoundly shaped Moses’ character, opinions, and practices, although the Torah does not provide details about the life of Moses in Jethro’s house or the conversations they had. Jethro must have spoken with Moses about a singular Divine Entity, one he considered to be the Ultimate Divine Being to whom man must turn, the Creator of the World, which Jethro had experienced as being somehow a Holy Presence upon Mount Horeb, the “Mountain of God,” in their vicinity.

After hearing about the drowning of the Egyptians at the sea, Jethro realized that his speculations have been born out. The drowning of Pharaoh’s forces he sees as the meting out of measure-for-measure punishment for Pharaoh’s drowning of the Israelite babies against which he had inveighed as Pharaoh’s counselor so many years previously. The confirmation of his speculations and the fulfilment of his forebodings caused Jethro to declare to his hosts during his visit, “Now I know that God is greater than all the gods.” This man who, according to the opinion of the sages, was doubtfully a Hebrew or a Israelite, was not afraid to admit that all other religious beliefs until then were erroneous and that now he has learned the truth. Moreover, Jethro taught the Children of Israel that one must be grateful and thank the Lord for all the favors and good that He bestowed on all mortals, and the proper way to do this (at least in those days): “And Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, took and offered sacrifices to God,” sitting sat down with the Israelite sages of his time for a thanksgiving meal, something the Hebrews themselves did not do on their own.

More of Jethro’s remarks in our Parasha reflect a figure whose magnitude of influence goes beyond the needs of the moment and points to his greatness of spirit from which Moses drew. Jethro suggests Moses change the system of governance from a case-by-case oracular system, in which each instance required bringing the case before Moses and God for a decision, to a legal system in which decision-making authority is delegated to a cadre of judges and a standardized code of law to which all can refer. Yet Jethro points out to Moses that he must attain God’s agreement first: “If you do this thing and God will command you, you would be able to stand and also all this people will settle in their place in peace.” One should have expected Israel to have accorded Jethro the highest regard and gratitude. But Jethro must have gleaned some of the gossip about the family life of Moses evidenced in the conversation between Miriam, Aaron and Moses (in Numbers 12) “And Miriam and Aaron spoke of Moses about the Kushite woman whom he took for a wife because a Kushite woman he took.” Jethro must have listened to his daughter’s feelings with deep inner pain for which he was not prepared, unable to understand how a people who only yesterday were foreigners enslaved in Egypt cannot find a place in their hearts to reflect a little compassion for strangers living among them. Moses, who was well-experienced with this hard-nosed people who made his life miserable, must have spoken with Jethro about such subjects. In the telling of Numbers 10, Moses implored Jethro: “Do not leave us, for that you know our trek in the desert, go forth and be our eyes...all the good that God would bestow on us we would share with you.” But Jethro, who understood Moses’s difficulties, decided that he would not be able to bear the lack of elementary politeness among this people, and certainly not their use of insulting language laced in epithets whose sole purpose is to humiliate the listener! Jethro decided that he himself would return back to his own camp, although he does not prevent his descendants from joining Israel. This was, unfortunately, not the only time Jethro and other non-Jews from whom Israel learned a great deal were disparaged in the history of Israel. Every time I read this Parasha, I am filled with deep feelings of guilt for the attitude of those who reflect a negative attitude towards this important figure Jethro. Mr. Bentsi Cohen’s book “Call me Jethro,” attempts to restore a proper appreciation of this important non-Israelite figure whose call for the appointment of judges and a fixed body of law according to which legal cases could be adjudicated was responsible for God’s promulgation of a Torah. We ought to abide by the adage quoted by Maimonides that we must “hear the truth from whomever says it” and give them the proper credit they deserve.



Shabbat Yithro

February 14-15, 2025 | 17 Shebat, 5785

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 288 | Haftarah: p. 302 / Kaplan: p. 345 | Haftarah: p. 1114

Candle Lighting | 5:12 pm

Evening Services | 5:15 pm | Main Sanctuary

Friday Night Lights | Baruch-Lev Kelman | following services | *5785 Season sponsored by the Julis Romo Rabinowitz family*

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Youth Groups & Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Kiddush Luncheon | following services | Levy Auditorium | *Sponsored by Nicole & David Cohen, in honor of Sam becoming a Bar Mitzvah*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 4:20 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

Teen Shiur will return next week.

Evening Services | 5:05 pm

Habdala | 6:02 pm

Presidents Day is on Monday. Our office will be closed for the legal holiday.

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday & Monday (Presidents Day): 8:05 am

Tuesday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday (Minha & Arbit): 5:15 pm

Monday-Thursday (Arbit only): 6:30 pm

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

Film Screening

Kidnapped: The Abduction of Edgardo Mortara

With remarks from Baruch-Lev Kelman

Saturday Night, February 22 | 7:00 pm | \$12.00 per person

Presented by the Sisterhood & the League

Join us for this award-winning Italian film from one of Italy's most revered directors, Marco Bellocchio, telling the story of a young Jewish boy forcibly taken from his family by the Pope to be raised Catholic. Our Rabbinic Intern, Baruch-Lev Kelman, who worked at the Vatican in the past, will provide additional remarks and context for us to better appreciate the history behind this sadly true story.

The Sisterhood presents

"Let's Get Organized" with Bohne Leah

Sunday, February 23 | 4:00 pm | On Zoom | Link provided upon registration

Have you ever wanted to organize an area in your apartment? In need of organization tips? Then this is the event for you! Professional organizer Bohne Leah will introduce customized solutions to your organizational problems and get you jumpstarted on that organization you've been putting off.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Sam Cohen**, upon becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Congratulations as well to his parents, **Nicole & David Cohen**, grandparents, **Bentsi & Naomi Cohen**, and the entire Cohen family.

Mazal tob to **Amalia Berg**, upon becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Congratulations as well to her parents, **Shana & Louis Berg**, and grandparents, **Esme & Roger Berg**.

Mazal tob to **Ellen & Robert Kapito**, upon the birth of a granddaughter, Josephine "Joie" Shai (Shai Zissa), born to their children, Kayla (Kapito) & Elias Lebovits.

Thank you to **Arthur Tenenholtz** for sponsoring our Tu B'Shebat breakfast.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) unanimously elected **Rabbi Soloveichik** as its Vice Chair. Soloveichik was appointed to the Commission in 2024 by Senator Mitch McConnell for a term until May 2026. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

PURIM AT SHEARITH ISRAEL

View the full schedule & offerings at shearithisrael.org/purim5785

Your Purim Checklist

- Order Sisterhood Mishloah Manot - **Deadline extended to 11 pm, Tues, Feb 18!**
- Become a Women's Megillah Reader
- Sign up for our Purim Dinner & Mini Show!
- Give Matanot L'Ebyonim
- Sponsor Purim Breakfast
- Purim Night, March 13 - Come hear Megillah Reading

Kids' PurimPaloosa!

Featuring Froggles!

**Thursday Evening, March 13 | During 7:00 pm Megillah Reading
Dropoff in Fidanque Youth Room at 6:45 pm**

Get ready for a fabulous Purim celebration filled with laughter, magic, and nonstop fun! Our action-packed kids' entertainment extravaganza for kids aged 2-12 will feature comedy magic, puppetry, party games, music, and dancing! Watch in amazement as bubbles float through the air, and chase after soaring rocket balloons!

Children under the age of 5 must be accompanied by an adult.

PLUS: Families who sign up for the Purim Dinner (see below) will enjoy an exclusive balloon twisting session while they eat!

Registration Now Open!

Early Bird Pricing Until February 24!

Purim Dinner — and A Mini Show!

Thursday Evening, March 13

Following Megillah | Levy Auditorium

This Purim, we journey back to 16th-century Mantua, city of love, intrigue, and...rabbis! All while enjoying a relaxed dairy dinner.

Shearith Israel's own theater troupe Los Bilbilicos – led by Baruch-Lev Kelman, Adams Kornblum, and Shearith Israel League President Laurent Nahon – will offer a sneak peak of their upcoming production of *A Wedding Comedy*, adapted from Leone de Sommi Portaleone's hit play *Tsahot Bedibuta de Kiddushin* (c.1550).

This unique Jewish twist on the classic Romeo & Juliet starcrossed lovers' tale definitely won't be like anything you've seen before!