

DEBAR TORAH *by* RABBI ROHDE

All Israel Must Acknowledge Ideal Justice as God's Alone

Had there been no Jethro, would there have been a Torah or a Ten Commandments? If Moses was "before God" before Jethro comes and Moses will again be "opposite God" following Jethro's suggestion to appoint judges, what will change? Why was there this terrifying Mount Sinai experience?

Ostensibly, the Jethro story comes to explain the necessity for the giving of the Decalogue and the Laws of the Torah which follow. Before Jethro comes, how does Moses know to sit deciding cases by bringing them individually before God? The answer would appear to be from the verses at the end of the Song of the Sea, when Moses sweetens the bitter waters: "...There He made for him [Israel] a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved him. And He said: 'If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His eyes, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon thee, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD that healeth thee. (Ex. 15:25-26) The context there is rather strange: Was Israel taken out of Egypt in order to avoid diseases? Indeed, the whole connection between Egyptian liberation and the Giving of the Torah's Laws is poorly explained.

Of course, the answer is that the Torah is trying to answer an unsolvable paradox which persists throughout the ages down to our very own day: We seek liberation and freedom from "oppressive" political regimes and orders, and wish to replace them with something fairer and more idealistic. But what to replace the old regime with and the success of that replacement is something we only have vague ideas of at first, and takes some time and experience to clarify. And even after a new regime is established, the spirit of liberation persists, often igniting questioning and revolt against the authority of the new regime. This problem extends from the lead-ins to the rebellion of Korah, through the Age of Revolutions, and unto today. Moses at first insists upon bringing each case individually to God because the lesson he took after Pharaoh's despotism was that the only truly fair leadership must come from God. Only God is the True and Fair Judge. Moses, after he smote the Egyptian, already had had his authority questioned by a fellow Israelite. When Moses was in sparsely-populated Midian, he actually needed far less complex legal systems and regulations than in population centers like Egypt to treat people fairly and keep people healthy. Moses' experience in the wilderness isolation of Midian where the basic Law needed was from the God of Nature heightened his belief that only God should be Israel's Judge and Ruler. I note that Elohim is the term for God as Judge as well as the original term for the God of Creation; in other words, true order and justice among men is in accord with the order and balance God created in the Natural Law of the Created World. This is perhaps at the root of why the Torah is so markedly negative in its attitude towards human monarchy. The truest human leadership should be prophetic, receiving instruction and decision directly from God, either through a prophet-leader or through many of the people becoming prophets.

However, in the absence of true prophets among the rest of Israel's leaders, Jethro's suggestion provides for the promulgation of a code of Laws through Moses' prophetic instruction and for the appointment of non-prophetic magistrates to administer an ideal fair and true justice based upon those Laws. The simplest implementation of Jethro's plan would have been for Moses to then go up upon the Mount all by himself, receive the Torah's Laws, and give it to the judges to administer. But as soon as Jethro leaves there follows this Divine Manifestation to all of Israel and the Decalogue accompanied by thunder, lightning, and a booming Voice of God. One reason for this is to create a fear and reverence for God's Rulership which would dissuade Israel from disobedience. But another reason is tied to Moses' insistence upon his original principle that the only True Rulership must be the Ideal Justice and Rulership exerted by God Alone and mediated through Divine Prophecy. Moses and God thus accept Jethro's suggestion, but modify it by having all of Israel first experience prophesy in receiving that Law which will be the basis of their administration. And they must agree to accept such a Law based upon that Prophetic experience of Sinai. All Israel and their judges in following the Torah must appreciate that it is meant to reflect an Ideal of Justice, Morality, Rulership, and Leadership which is Divine. The magistrates and the public of Israel, even when they derive their rulings and rulership from an organized code and administration of laws, must appreciate that True Judgeship belongs to God Alone. And therefore they must strive to approximate Divine Justice as a prophet or oracle would direct. Even when basing their decisions upon a Law Code, and not upon direct prophecy, the magistrates of Israel must attempt to administer an Ideal form of Justice. They must think of themselves, similar to Moses, as sitting in judgment "opposite God" – but still in His Presence.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Yithro

February 6-7, 2026 | 20 Shebat, 5786

SCHEDULE

Hertz: Parasha: 288 | Haftarah: 302
Kaplan: Parasha: 344 | Haftarah: 1114

Candle Lighting | 5:02 pm

Evening Services | 5:00 pm | Main Sanctuary

Friday Night Lights | following services | Rabbi Soloveichik | *5786 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

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Rabbi Soloveichik's Penultimate Semiquincentennial Lecture | after services

Kiddush | following the lecture | *Kiddush supporter: Faith Fogelman, in memory of her mother, Miriam Watkin, on the occasion of her nahala*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 4:15 pm | Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Teen Shiur | 4:15 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

Evening Services | 5:00 pm

Habdala | 5:51 pm

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday: 5:15 pm

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

IN CELEBRATION OF THE US SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL

And 250 Years of Jewish Life in the United States



Rabbi Soloveichik's Major Lectures

Penultimate Session: THIS Shabbat, February 7

After Morning Services

A Philadelphia Story:

James Madison, Haym Salomon,
and the Legacy of a Revolutionary City
Stay up to date at shearithisrael.org/us-250.

Faith for Food

The Masbia UWS Food Annex at Congregation Shearith Israel

Learn more & contribute at shearithisrael.org/giving/faith-for-food

This year-round weekly kosher food pantry provides ample and nutritious grocery staples to our neighbors each Tuesday.

To Help Someone in Manhattan with Food Insecurity

If someone you know in Manhattan could benefit from this program, email **CSIAnnex@masbiarelieff.org** with a name and cell phone number. A trained Masbia representative will reach out regarding enrollment.

Thank you to our faith partners: The Jewish Center, Masbia, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

YOUTH CORNER

To win a raffle ticket at kiddush, find Dalya & Jake with the answer to this riddle:

*High on a mountain, with thunder and sound,
Hashem gave laws as the people stood round.
These special rules were heaven-sent,
Guiding our lives...*

POSTPONED: Parent-Child Learning

Final session with Baruch-Lev is postponed due to inclement weather forecast

Registration Open: Purim Palooza!

Purim night, March 2 | 6:00 pm, during Megillah reading

Crafts, prizes, Purim story, and more! Come dressed in your best costume for a Purim Costume Contest! Sign up or sponsor at shearithisrael.org/purim5786.

THIS SUNDAY

SOLD OUT: Sisterhood Culinary Continuity: BOUREKAS!

Sunday, February 8 | 10:00 am-12:00 pm | At Shearith Israel | \$25

Registration is closed, but if you are still interested, contact Rose Edinger at rgedinger@gmail.com and Rivka Shoulson at rlsvet@gmail.com.

Shearith Israel League Super Bowl Party

Sunday, February 8 | 6:00 pm | At Shearith Israel | \$12

Sunday Matinee Virtual Film Festival with Sisterhood

FINAL DISCUSSION: Sunday, February 8 | 4:00 pm | The Testament (2017)

COMING UP

Register at shearithisrael.org

Special Presentation from the Sisterhood & Shearith Israel League

Cinematic Memorial Event: Arthur Cohn

Sunday, February 22 | 2:00 pm | \$20

We will host a cinematic memorial lecture by Arthur's son, Emanuel Cohn, who will celebrate his father's Academy-Award-winning legacy with a talk on his life and work, including a selection of clips from his films.

BOOK LAUNCH: *The Grand Worldview of Rav Uziel*

with Rabbi Marc Angel

Presented by the Habura in collaboration with the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

Tuesday, February 17 | 7:00 pm (after 6:30 pm Evening Services)

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

We welcome the following new members to our growing Shearith Israel family:

Nicole & Ari Adut | Agnes Veto & Marc Epstein | Canan & Samuel Milstein

Thank you to **Arthur Tenenholtz** for sponsoring a Breakfast this past week.

Condolences to **Alene Schneierson (& Morris Krimolovsky)**, upon the passing of Alene's mother, Charlotte Schneierson.

Congratulations to CSI Touro Affiliate, **Dr. Henry Spencer**, upon the acceptance of his artwork *A Flowering* into the Newport Art Museum's 2026 Members' Juried Exhibition. This digital inkjet-on-canvas collage reimagines a verse from the Song of Songs, exploring the interplay between nature imagery and Jewish tradition. The exhibition is on view through May 31. To learn more, visit newportartmuseum.org.