

SHABBAT SERMON  
Parashat Yitro  
5778

The Hebrew phrase *lo tov*, 'it is not good,' appears twice in the entire Torah. The first is in Genesis 2 when God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone." The second is in our parashah when Jethro says to his son-in-law, Moses, "What you are doing is not good." In both cases, the concern is about people being alone, doing things by themselves without the help or support of others. In both cases, it is a source of insight outside the Jewish community who delivers the message: In Genesis 2, obviously God is talking; in Exodus 18, a Midianite priest gives guidance to Moses. Two messages seem to be combined here:

- Isolation, living and doing things by ourselves, without others, limits our effectiveness and our growth. It is not what God wants for us.
- The other is that knowledge and wisdom are diffuse. They are even found outside the Jewish people.

The Torah does more than hint at these ideas in Parashat Yitro. It drives them home. It tells about Moses being forced to delegate leadership of the community at the beginning of the parashah. And it says that all Jews heard God's word at Sinai at the end of the parashah. Torah is not, as it says in Herman Hesse's book, Siddhartha, "Not for everyone." **All Jewish knowledge is for everyone.** As Ben Zoma taught in Pirke Avot (4:1): Who is wise? The one who learns from all people.

- Moses must learn from Jethro how to lead the people. The entire people hear Torah at Sinai. **Knowledge and insight are diffuse, and so we must live with, work with, and learn from everyone.**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells the story about a gathering of 2000 religious leaders from across the world at the United Nations. The only people not wearing robes were rabbis. The rabbis wore suits. Everyone else wore special robes.

I tell every visiting group of Christian high school students, “Rabbis are not ‘holy men.’ There is nothing that makes us any closer to God than our congregants. There is no *mitzvah* that I must do that my congregants do not. There is no *mitzvah* that they must do that I do not.

What makes me a rabbi are the books in my office. And even there, every Jew has the obligation to study Torah. We rabbis have just done a little more of that than the members of our congregations.” I’m not sure if they get this. I see very curious looks on their faces.

The lessons here are many: **One of them** is that most of us are inclined to say, “If you want to get something done quickly and right, do it yourself.” We should be very slow to say that. Things may get done more quickly if we do them ourselves. But we may find that there are very few or none joining us when we work that way.

**Another – especially in 2018** - is that we should read a newspaper or magazine or a website with which we disagree. We are not the source

of all wisdom. Our opinion is not the only good understanding of the truth.

**Finally**, we Jews must be in active relationship with our non-Jewish neighbors. It is good for the Jews – and everyone else – to learn from others, to understand their approach to God’s will.

To be religious is to be **humble**. It is to know that one is not the only source of truth; that one needs help in living and in doing the right thing; and that one is not completely self-contained. We cannot do it all on our own.

In Parashat Yitro, the Jewish people learn how to live from two sources outside themselves. That was true for us when we were wandering through the desert and it’s true for us today – as individuals and as a community.