

Our *parsha* is named after Moses's father-in-law, Jethro. Having heard of Israel's going out from Egypt, Jethro visits Moses. The two sit and converse. Jethro offers a sacrifice, and he, Moses, and Aaron eat together. The Torah reports that the following day, Moses set himself up as a magistrate for the people. Given that the Torah indicates that 2 million people left Egypt, Moses's assumption of the role of sole judge is clearly too great for even a person like him to bear.

Jethro approaches Moses and suggests that he set over the people "chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens and let them judge the people at all

times” (18:21-22). In short, rather than just having a Supreme Court with one judge, Jethro suggests setting up a whole system of courts with numerous judges arranged hierarchically. Moses will only judge the most challenging cases. “Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said” (v. 24).

No doubt Jethro’s proposal was eminently wise. What I’d like to focus upon is something other than the wisdom of Jethro’s proposal. What interests me is that Jethro is a Midianite, a fact that the Torah does not try to conceal. In sum, the judicial system that Moses adopts for the people of Israel during its wanderings in the wilderness is a non-Jew’s idea.

I believe this is important because the Torah is our supreme text. If a practice can be traced to the Torah, then it is most sacrosanct. One would think that the Torah would go to extreme lengths to make clear that everything in it originated with Jews, was developed by Jews, and was implemented by Jews. What is the significance of a non-Jew making such an important proposal, a proposal that touches not upon a marginal issue in the life of the people but one that is at the center of every society?

The Torah must be saying something to us here about our relationship to the non-Jewish world.

By this point in my service from the JJC's pulpit, you may have realized that I am a partisan of the Conservative movement. Not only am I a Conservative rabbi, I firmly believe that Conservative Judaism is the correct form of Judaism – the one that is most consistent with the teachings and traditions we have inherited. I'm aware that not every Conservative Jew thinks this way. Many decide to join a Conservative synagogue for more practical reasons: They want a service that is exclusively in Hebrew; they need to be able to drive to synagogue; they want to be able to sit next to their spouse. Many Conservative Jews in the pews don't

have the opportunity to visit or spend time at the Seminary in Manhattan. The Seminary is where a person develops a more theoretical affiliation to Conservative Judaism.

Note that I said that Conservative Judaism is the most “correct form of Judaism.” I didn’t say it was the most authentic. That not because it isn’t. I didn’t say that because I don’t prize authenticity. To understand why I don’t, I’ll try to describe how I believe authenticity became the craze in our world.

Authenticity is primarily an artistic category. It is connected to expression and expressiveness.

Works of art are acts of creation. When we describe

an artistic achievement as authentic, we are saying that it captures and transmits reality. In our modern world, art, or more specifically entertainment, plays an important role. What dominates the modern world are science and commerce. Art is the antidote to both. It complements these realms. Without entertainment, we would be overwhelmed by the logic of science and commerce. Think of this past Sunday – the Oscars. The Academy Awards is one of the central events in American life. Watching movies – a form of artistic entertainment – is one of the most popular activities in our country.

My contention is that from art, authenticity became a barometer in our society in other realms, too – including shockingly religion.

If you ask most Jews which denomination is most authentic, they will likely say Orthodoxy and even *charedi*, or ultra, Orthodoxy. At this time, I want to speak about our fellow Jews. If I am successful, I will be kind but firm. If I'm not, I'll come across as polemical.

The error is not that *charedi* Jews are not the most authentic; the error is in using authenticity as a barometer at all for religious life. I am a Conservative Rabbi not because I want a service that

is in Hebrew; I am comfortable praying with people who drive to synagogue on Shabbat; and I want to be able to sit next to my spouse. While I do want all of these, my allegiance to Conservative Judaism is because I think it is true – not authentic, but true, correct.

Jethro's suggestion, which Moses accepts, speaks volumes about what Judaism is. Judaism is not meant to be apart from the world; and Jews are not meant to be isolated from our fellow human beings. We are meant to be integrated into general society.

Not only the Torah, but the Mishna also makes
this point in Avot:

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים
קיט) מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך שיחה לי

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from
every man” And he quotes Psalm 119:99: “From all
who taught me have I gained understanding.”

The book we use for Torah readings, *Eitz Chayim*,
states: “...while the Israelites learn about holiness
from God, they do not hesitate to learn science,

civics, and commerce from their...neighbors” (p. 434).

These messages clearly speak to the importance of integration, of having friendships with non-Jews.

That likely means living in the same towns and going to the same schools as they, which is how we in the Conservative movement choose to live.

In American life, we have achieved a degree of integration that is unprecedented. We must acknowledge that this integration also entails an intermarriage rate – outside of Orthodoxy – of 70%.

My view of intermarriage is as follows: We can

never treat the intermarried – in our families or our congregation – as a statistic. Both the Jew and the non-Jew in the relationship should feel our warmth, for the Torah is a teaching of love. That said, we know that Judaism teaches endogamy – in-marriage – and we have to objectively acknowledge that a 70% intermarriage rate outside of Orthodoxy is unsustainable.

We now see a dilemma. Being Jewish means being in the world with our fellow human beings, not apart from them; but it also bringing our heritage forward, which demands endogamy.

If American Jewry was alone in facing this dilemma, we would likely falter before it. But we are not alone. We have the state of Israel. Israel was created for a number of reasons, but one of the reasons was to serve as a bastion against outright assimilation. Yet, Zionism and Conservative Judaism are alike in that they both acknowledge that we learn from the non-Jewish world, that Judaism derives from revelation at Sinai and our interaction with our non-Jewish neighbors – like Jethro – over the centuries. Zionism has roots in the ancient longing to return to the land of Israel, but what gives Zionism its zest is the burgeoning of nationalism

among European peoples in the late nineteenth century. Zionism is grounded in the spirit of Judaism and the Jewish people. The Tanakh itself anticipates Zionism – namely the way that it adopts a non-Jewish practice to further a Jewish objective.

In the Book of Samuel I chapter 8, the people say to Samuel, “...appoint a king for us to govern us like all other nations” (v.5). Samuel is distressed. He turns to God, but God replies, “Heed the demand of the people...for it is not you they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king” (v. 7).

Zionism speaks to the same idea. Having a state, exercising sovereignty, may be a non-Jewish

practice – as the *charedim* contend to this day since the Messiah has not come – but that does not mean that God disapproves of it. We may not be the authentic Jews, but we are the Jews who carry forward a teaching and a tradition that is closest to the ways of God, which are the ways of truth.