

You Simply Cannot Do It Alone  
Jaclyn Fromer's Fourth Year Sermon  
Thursday January 31, 2013 - Parshat *Yitro*

Picture if you will a Broadway stage.

The setting: the women's block of the Cook County Jail.

Smoky. Mysterious. Two women alone in a large dark room.

One woman – the blonde ingénue Roxie Hart – sits at the end of a long table, one hand perched beneath her chin.

The other woman – the vixen Velma Kelly, seasoned actress and performer – is making her absolute *best* effort to convince Roxie to be her new partner in the “perfect double act.”

Velma, dark hair bobbing, red nails flailing, is singing wildly and dancing circles around Roxie. Velma is *desperate* to return to the spotlight and sees this young recruit as her ticket there. Roxie, however, is less than thrilled, for *she* seeks a *solo* spotlight.

At the number's conclusion, an exhausted Velma, huffing and puffing, sings these words to Roxie:

*Now you see me going through it  
You may think there's nothin' to it  
But I simply cannot do it ... alone.*

(pause)

Our familiarity with the Kander and Ebb musical “Chicago” aside, how many times have we witnessed this very scene play out in reality? When have we been the recipient of or engaged in our *own* version of an elaborate song-and-dance number ... to get someone or *something* on our side?

Cold calling potential donors whose faces we've never even seen ... canvassing for the Human Rights Campaign on a crowded street corner ... organizing a community *one* conversation at a time ...

We all have our tactics for drawing others *in*.

Yet – we also have our reasons for *why* we should – perhaps – go it alone.

One need look no further than the first chapters of Genesis to see that we humans are *supposed* to partner up. We are not intended to be alone – personally, professionally. There are so many benefits to working and playing and learning with others.

(change tone)

But – partner with whom, and how, and ...why? What if we're better off alone? What if, like Moses in this week's *parsha*, we've based our *reputation* on going it alone? What if we're certain we've figured it out – and the addition of another, or a small group, a whole team, or an entire tribunal, just doesn't fit our vision?

Jethro, Moses' Midianite father-in-law, makes a bold statement in the *parsha* that bears his name. He meets up with the Israelites post-Exodus on their way to Sinai and observes Moses working long hours, ineffectively serving the people Israel on his own. Jethro offers the following advice to his son-in-law: "*The thing that you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.*"<sup>1</sup>

Jethro sees something that Moses does not, or cannot, see. And Moses takes his suggestion almost immediately. Moses needed no song-and-dance number, no big Broadway production to convince him that he *simply could not do it alone*. He needed an outsider's perspective to help set him on a more intelligent path.

But Jethro wasn't *just* an outsider. He wasn't *just* an observer. He was a priest of Midian: a non-Israelite, a non-participant in the Exodus. Though related through marriage to God's trusted partner Moses, Jethro was *completely* outside the bounds of the community.

And yet – his wisdom, his advice, and his influence on the continually unfolding narrative of the people Israel ... are immeasurable.

(pause)

How often do we engage with, let alone listen to, those outside the bounds of our community? It's human, and natural, to seek out those who hold our common interests. We find comfort in shared experience and gravitate towards those who remind us of ourselves.

We know on some level that *we simply cannot do it alone*, but those with whom we choose to collaborate are often found within our own circles.

It's uncomfortable – maybe painful – to reach beyond the barrier that separates "us" from "them." "Me" from "the other." "Israelite" from "Midianite." "Jew" from "everyone else."

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<sup>1</sup> TAWC Translation: Eskenazi/Weiss, editors, p. 411

(pause)

In *Yitro* we witness this beautiful model – not only for a successful “in-law” relationship – but also of what is possible when we reach outside the circle we know... and listen to the voices of those well *outside* the bounds of our community.

(pause)

My sophomore year of college, I participated in an “interfaith progressive dinner” run through my Hillel House. I had no idea what that meant when I signed up – only that someone other than *me* was cooking my dinner. The evening turned out to be an incredibly meaningful set of presentations by the faith houses on campus. We shared food, learned with one another, and began to cultivate relationships.

That night sparked what would become my passion for interfaith engagement – one of the pillars of my evolving rabbinate.

(brief pause)

It hasn’t always been easy, explaining the conflation of my desire to become a rabbi and my interest in learning about religious practices outside Judaism. One particularly memorable Pesach, a family friend said to me after I led the seder in his home: “*So – I hear you’re converting to Islam. Tell me what that’s about.*”

I politely informed him that I had no plans to convert, but that I had long maintained the belief that we engage more deeply in our own faith, our *own* religion, when we are exposed to the beliefs and practices of others.

It’s a motto that has colored my time here at HUC, carrying me through class discussions, pulpits and internships, two years on the InterSem retreat, my Rhea Hirsch curriculum guide, and this newest endeavor: NewGround.

(brief pause)

About three months ago, I was accepted to the NewGround Fellowship. NewGround, founded in 2006 as a Muslim/Jewish partnership for change, is a project of the City of LA; a model for collaboration, engagement, and social change between American Muslims and Jews. It’s also run by my friend and our colleague, Rabbi Sarah Bassin.

As a Fellow, I engage in dialogue, conflict resolution, and relationship building with other young professionals: twelve Muslims, twelve Jews. Together, we will collaborate on a shared project that will positively impact the city of LA.

This experience – this fellowship – is its own tap dance starring twenty-four separate dancers. Each of us comes with our own expectations and stories and styles ... they meld

into a *shared desire* to create something positive and lasting and meaningful in this diverse landscape we call home.

Back in December, on our first retreat, we Fellows brainstormed ideas for our final project. It happened to be the first night of Hanukkah. We began by lighting candles together, teaching our Muslim fellows the blessings and their melodies and how to spin dreidel.

As we binged on gelt and jelly donuts, the twenty-four of us discussed what we could create *together*: a Muslim/Jewish arts festival, a High Holidays and Ramadan learning series, a documentary film about Muslim and Jewish women at prayer.

The success of this endeavor – whatever it turns out to be – *depends* on our relationships. Our relationships will create lasting partnerships. And those partnerships ... will produce something extraordinary.

*Now you see us going through it, you may think there's nothing to it, but we simply cannot do it alone.*

(pause)

The Talmud teaches us in tractate Brachot that we Jews are *supposed* to pray in synagogues with windows. (Pause and look around the room) No comment on our current surroundings.

We are *supposed* to pray in rooms with windows so that we may *see* the world around us. Not *only* to glance at God's creations, or be reminded of our fixed gaze towards Jerusalem ... but so that we remember that we are not alone in this world. We inhabit it with those outside the walls of our synagogues; outside the bounds of the community.

Rabbi Menachem Creditor, a Conservative rabbi in Berkeley, offers a poignant take on Yitro in his submission to Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible.

Rabbi Creditor posits that Jethro actually serves as a *window* for Moses. It is Jethro, he argues, whose “outsider perspective and wisdom saves the day, inspiring Moses to set up the system of judges that became a hallmark of Jewish justice. Moses *does not look within* for his solution. Instead, he relies on the “window” of Jethro to help him see that which he might otherwise have missed entirely.”

(pause)

As Brachot encourages us to pray in synagogues with windows, Jewish tradition also tells us we are *not* permitted to pray before a *mirror*. We can become distractions to ourselves. We might think we are *praying* to ourselves. That fixed internal gaze can be unhealthy and dangerous – and so, we are taught to look outward, beyond ourselves, to the greater world.

(pause)

No offense to Walt Disney, but it is a pretty *big* world, after all. It's a world filled with egos and anger, mistrust and missed opportunities. It's a world filled with difference, but in that difference there is *so* much to be learned.

Moses took a leap of faith when he accepted Jethro's advice. He had no idea how things would turn out; he could have failed, he might have had to start over. After all, Jethro didn't know the community. Jethro hadn't been through the Exodus. He didn't witness the great moment of triumph at the Sea.

But Jethro saw what Moses could not see. And that outside vision resulted in something extraordinary.

(pause)

What leaps of faith will we take in our lives and throughout our careers? What will we embark on that is different and challenging and maybe painful? What doors will we open, or conversations will we spark; what partnerships will we create, and what relationships will we build?

*Where will we begin?*

We can start by looking out beyond our windows and *walking across the street* to the Caruso Catholic Center to introduce ourselves to Father Lawrence or Minister Rosie.

We can connect with ONE LA, with Sister Maribeth Larkin or Tom Holler, and ask how *we* can become an active part of a greater community effort.

We can attend the worship services of our friends at the church or the mosque nearby and stay to ask questions; to introduce ourselves to the congregation.

Or – we can simply knock on the door of that neighbor we've yet to meet, invite him or her to join us at our Shabbos dinner table, and take that leap of faith that might lead to something extraordinary.

(pause)

It might take the energy of a Broadway show. Or - it may only require a smile and a handshake. But the partnerships we build – inside *and* outside the community – must start somewhere.

We do not know where they will lead. We cannot know who will be our Jethro or when their voice might offer that invaluable piece of wisdom.

But we can remember to keep our eyes out that window: open to the potential of those on the other side.

*Now you see us going through it.  
You may think there's nothing to it.  
But we simply cannot do it. Alone.*

Boker tov.