

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Jews, Gentiles, and Other Animals

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Jews, Gentiles, and Other Animals: The Talmud After the Humanities by Mira Beth Wasserman (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017)

The most controversial tractate of the Talmud is undoubtedly Avodah Zarah, which discusses non-Jews and their religious practices. Most of the Talmudic passages in Justinus Bonaventura Pranaitis's 1898 anti-Talmudic screed, *Christianus in Talmud Iudaeorum (The Christian in the Talmud of the Jews)* are drawn from this tractate. A surface reading of Avodah Zarah can be a demoralizing experience for modern Jews. Even though the Talmud is replete with more broadly humanistic statements, most of us would be scandalized by the provincial and xenophobic attitude toward non-Jews that one could take away from a rapid read through Avodah Zarah.

It is precisely for this reason that Mira Beth Wasserman's new book is so important and liberating. With a deep grounding in traditional and academic Talmud study, she brings the text into conversation with the humanities. Her engagement with the burgeoning field of animal studies is particularly enlightening. Her book begins with an interpretation of the discussion of animals under Jewish and non-Jewish ownership in Avodah Zarah as a way into larger questions that the Talmud seems to pose about being human.

The Talmud is a resistant text, one that does not give up its secrets easily. Wasserman shows how what appears to be a digression can be central to the questions that the Talmud is really asking. The Talmud can focus on an odd detail as a way into a larger topic, one that might be too difficult (or perhaps too emotionally challenging) to confront directly. Wasserman does an admirable job making this tractate relevant in the twenty-first century, and to present it as attempting to answer broader questions about the relationship of human beings to animals and to each other. It is also a compellingly well-written work, one of the most accessible academic books I have read in a while. I urge you all to read it as soon as you can.

Yitro 5778

יתרו תשע"ח



Where Do We Look to Find Our Center?

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We Jews read the Torah bit by bit, or parashah by parashah, over the course of a year. As a result, traditional Jewish interpretation of the Bible tends to focus on small units such as individual verses or short passages. But the Torah sometimes uses overarching structures in longer units to convey key themes. An important example occurs in this week's parashah.

At the beginning of Exodus 19, we arrive at Mount Sinai—and we will remain there for the rest of the book of Exodus, for all of Leviticus, and for the first third of Numbers. Although that time period lasts nearly a year, it takes up nearly half of the Pentateuch, and is situated smack-dab in its middle. This section of the Torah is central thematically as well: while we are encamped at Sinai, we receive the Ten Commandments; we build the Tabernacle and God takes up residence there; we receive civil, criminal, ritual, and ethical laws; we learn about the structure of Israelite society.

This large block of text is delineated as a literary unit by bookends. This week's reading records a conversation between Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro, right before it tells us that the people arrive at Sinai (Exod. 18). And in the book of Numbers, a concise exchange between Moses and his father-in-law (there called Hovav) is the first thing that happens once the Israelites begin to move forward after their stay at Sinai (Num. 10:29–32). The entire encampment at Sinai is bracketed by Moses's conversations with Jethro.

This is all the more remarkable when we realize that this set of literary bookends creates an impression that is not strictly chronological. In this week's parashah, Jethro visits Moses "at the mountain of God" (Exod. 18:5), even though this story is recounted immediately *before* the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai. Similarly, Numbers first narrates the departure of the Israelites from Sinai (Num. 10:12), and

eighteen verses later it tells us that Moses told Hovav, “We are about to leave [Sinai].” It follows that the Israelites had not yet departed yet when this conversation takes place, even though the Torah records it immediately after it tells us of their departure.

Why does the Torah go out of its way to have stories about Jethro bookend the whole Sinaitic experience of the Israelites?

First, these stories remind us that Exodus 19 through Numbers 10 is really one long literary unit, covering what is most central in the Torah. The earlier narratives about creation, the patriarchs and matriarchs, and the exodus are just preparatory to the main event of the Torah, which is Sinai. What comes in the last parts of Numbers and in Deuteronomy second and reinforce the laws and ideas that were revealed at Sinai.

Second, the Jethro material foreshadows major themes of the experience Israel is about to undergo. When Moses tells Jethro about what happened to the Israelites in Egypt, Jethro says, “Blessed be the LORD who saved you from Egypt and from Pharaoh” (Exod. 18:10), anticipating a cornerstone of the theology revealed at Sinai: God’s authority is linked to the fact that God rescued the people from slavery in Egypt. Echoes of Jethro’s statement will recur in God’s message at the beginning of chapter 19: “I bore you on wings of eagles and brought you to Me,” and at the beginning of the Decalogue: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (20:21). As Israel’s stay at Sinai continues, God repeatedly invokes these credentials (see Exod. 29:46, 32:11–12; Lev. 19:36, 25:38, 25:42, 25:55, 26:13, 26:45). This is familiar phrasing in Judaism, and it is important to note that a non-Jewish priest uttered it before God said it at Sinai. (To be sure, God had used similar phrasing back in Egypt, in Exodus 6:7 and following.)

The encounter between Moses and his father-in-law continues with Jethro’s presentation of sacrifices (Exod. 18:12). This vignette anticipates the sacrificial laws that constitute much of Leviticus and the rules for the construction of the sanctuary where sacrifices will take place that constitute the second half of Exodus.

The discussion between Jethro and Moses in our parashah also includes Jethro’s detailed advice about constructing a judicial system (Exod. 18:13–26). While setting up judges before they have laws by which to judge seems to put the cart three chapters before the horse, Jethro anticipated a key aspect of what Israel learns at Sinai: the legal collections of Exodus 20–23 and Leviticus.

The final verse describing Jethro’s visit recounts him returning to his land (Exod. 18:27), and in Numbers Hovav will insist that he must return to his homeland (Num. 10:30). Heading toward a homeland is a fitting conclusion for Jethro’s visit, as the Israelites begin their journey towards their promised homeland in Numbers 11.

The passages describing Jethro’s visit to the Israelite camp are not long. We might easily miss the connections between them, especially since we read the second one four or four-and-a-half months after the first. (We will read Parashat Beha’alotekha this year on June 2.) But the Torah is careful to present narratives about this non-Jewish priest as the frame for the central experience of the Torah, and indeed of all Jewish history. Jethro introduces both Moses -- and us -- to the major themes of Sinai: God as the redeemer of Israel from Egypt, ritual as God’s chosen form of communion with Israel, and a detailed collection of laws that allow us to express our identity as Jews in our actions.

What do we learn from this foreshadowing? It is revealing that such crucial themes about salvation, law, and ritual are first introduced to us from the outside—not directly from God, but from a wise gentile, the priest of Midian. Today’s parashah provides an early example in which we learn important truths from those outside our own camp. Indeed, the Torah highlights this case by using it to frame the entire Sinai narrative. To get to Sinai, to our own revelation, sometimes it can help to learn from those on the outside.

This remains the case in later Judaism. The neo-Platonist philosophers of late antiquity had a profound effect on the way Kabbalists perceive the presence of God in the world. The greatest Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, is deeply influenced by Aristotle, whom he cites reverently in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. The influence of Immanuel Kant on the modern Orthodox thinkers Joseph Soloveitchik and Yeshayahu Leibowitz is evident throughout their philosophical writings. The enormously influential modern Jewish thinkers Franz Rosenzweig and for Will Herberg took significant detours on their route to Jewish learning and Jewish teaching. Sometimes we need to travel abroad to be able to see what is waiting for us at home.

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